

**Women, Institutions and the Politics
of Writing: A Comparative Study
of Contemporary Anglophone
Irish and Indian Poets**

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PhD

University of York

English

September 2017

ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s there has been a shift in social and cultural perceptions of women in Ireland and India which resulted in a proliferation of women's writing in English and other languages. Among the writers who came into prominence in the last fifty years, Anglophone poets Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and Paula Meehan from Ireland as well as Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado and Sujata Bhatt from India have achieved national and, for some, international acclaim. Their publications and careers as editors, translators, educators and activists attest to the significance of female voices in shaping a contemporary poetic canon, yet the work of these writers remained largely unexamined until the last two decades. Contributing to the fields of Irish studies, Indian studies and comparative feminist research, this dissertation demonstrates parallels in women's texts, experiences and personal histories that extend across cultural and geographical borders. Irish and Indian poets who began publishing between the 1960s and 1980s have faced similar challenges in their careers due to institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry, yet, the intersections of each poet's sex, ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, class, caste and socio-economic background has led her to respond in ways that differ from her contemporaries. Using case studies of seven poets writing in English—Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt—I create a transnational comparison of the personal, social and cultural pressures placed on women's poetry and their careers. This project examines poetry and book history through historical and political narratives, archival research, interviews, creative industry practices and feminist theories to explore how Irish and Indian women poets respond to and challenge the politics of writing in their home countries and abroad.

CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Contents	3
List of Figures	4
Acknowledgements	5
Author's Declaration	7
Introduction	8
Chapter 1. Representations of Women and the Nation-State in the Poetry of Sujata Bhatt and Eavan Boland	48
Chapter 2. Searching for 'Maeve': An Archival Examination of Medbh McGuckian's Publishing History in Ireland, the UK and the US	88
Chapter 3. 'The battle is to validate the material': Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado as Poets and Editors in the Global Literary Market	129
Chapter 4. Poets as Activists: The Public Poetry of Paula Meehan and Kamala Das	171
Conclusion. Reflections on Contemporary Anglophone Irish and Indian Women's Poetry	223
Bibliography	229

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>On Ballycastle Beach</i> proof, first exchange between Wake Forest and OUP	106
Figure 2. <i>On Ballycastle Beach</i> proof, second exchange between Wake Forest and OUP	107
Figure 3. Book cover of Eunice de Souza's first collection <i>Fix</i> (1979)	144

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Professor Matthew Campbell and Dr. Claire Chambers for their unwavering support, encouragement and critical readings of my work throughout the development of this project. I am grateful to Matt who saw the vision for the thesis and for his engaging and thought-provoking discussions of the comparative and critical aspects of the poetry itself. I am indebted to Claire for her enthusiasm and encouragement throughout the most challenging moments of the PhD and for pushing me to expand my understanding of the South Asian and feminist perspectives. Without her critical eye and meticulous readings of the work, the thesis would not have reached completion. Words cannot express my gratitude for their incredible support, patience and diligence over the years.

I would like to thank the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York for creating a rich learning environment, for giving me opportunities to teach and for their financial support in undertaking archival research for this project. I am indebted to several archival institutions and individuals for their time and permission to use their materials. I am grateful to Kathy Shoemaker and the archivists at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University for accommodating my numerous visits and requests to view the materials on Medbh McGuckian and The Gallery Press; to Dr. Martin Maw who obliged my requests to read through the documents on McGuckian's early career with Oxford University Press and to Fran Baker and the team of archivists at The John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester who kindly accommodated my requests to view the Carcanet Press materials on Sujata Bhatt, Paula Meehan and Eavan Boland. I offer my sincerest thanks to Professor Guinn Batten and Professor Dillon Johnston who welcomed me to St. Louis and shared with me their memories of working with McGuckian during their time as editor and publisher of Wake Forest University Press. I am particularly grateful to Guinn for her generous responses to my questions about her work as an editor and for finding old letters and documents on McGuckian's *The Soldiers of Year II* (2001) for use in the thesis. I would also like to thank Peter Fallon, who kindly agreed to be interviewed by me in 2012 and wrote a detailed letter about McGuckian's long-standing career with the Gallery Press for reference in this project. I am also thankful to Medbh McGuckian herself who

generously agreed to be interviewed by me in 2012 and who inspired me to examine the life of the woman poet.

There are many people whose encouragement and kindness have made it possible for me to complete this project—too many to acknowledge here. By name, I would like to thank my friends Jamie Khoo and Manogna Gopajaru whose love, laughter and encouragement carried me this past year and to Andriannah Mbandi and Tabitha Kabora for cheering me on. I am grateful to Roderik Smits for his care and support, Kimberly Campanello for the inspiring conversations, friendship and advice and to Hannah Kershaw and Indrani Karmakar who have walked with me and encouraged me since the beginning of this project. I also thank my dear friends Bijal Patel and Erin Anderson for their love and encouragement from across the Atlantic. Many thanks to Claire's family who offered their help at a time when I needed it. So much love and gratitude to my cousin Azalea Moses Ingole and her family for being my home away from home in the UK.

No words can express my gratitude to my parents Dr. Vasanth Bethala and Seema Bethala who have always supported me as I chased my wildest dreams. Their love and encouragement have lifted me up all my life, and I would not be where I am today without them. My sisters Shalini, Serena and Liana have been pillars of love and strength who constantly inspire me with their hopes and dreams. I would also like to remember my late grandmothers Grace Singh and Mary Bethala whose memories I cherish as I explore my literary heritage. There are no words good enough to thank my mother Seema for being everything for me. She is my counselor, my strength in the darkest hours. She walked with me in the most difficult days and months of the past four years and believed in this project before it began. I dedicate this thesis to her.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, Melony Bethala, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s there has been a shift in social and cultural perceptions of women in Ireland and India which resulted in a proliferation of women's writing in English and other languages. Among the writers who came into prominence in the last fifty years, Anglophone poets Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and Paula Meehan from Ireland as well as Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado and Sujata Bhatt from India have achieved national and, for some, international acclaim. Their publications and careers as editors, translators, educators and activists attest to the significance of female voices in shaping a contemporary poetic canon, yet the work of these writers and other women remained largely unexamined until the last two decades.¹ Contributing to the fields of Irish studies, Indian studies and comparative feminist research, this dissertation compares the ways that contemporary Irish and Indian women poets respond to and challenge institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry. There has been a resurgence of literature on Irish women poets since the early 1990s, and Indian women have also become more widely published and included in anthologies of Indian English literature since the turn of the twenty-first century.² However, no comparative analysis of women poets from these countries has been done to date.

The aims of my project are two-fold. By examining the poetry and publishing histories of seven Anglophone writers—Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt—I demonstrate parallels in the subjects of women's poetry and their motivations for writing that extend across cultural and geographical borders. Secondly, I consider how the intersections of sex, nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, caste and socio-economic background influence each poet's career and the political choices she champions in her work. By comparing texts and personal histories against the backdrop of political and social developments in Ireland and India, I create a parallel between the institutional pressures Irish and Indian women

¹ Margaret Kelleher, 'Literary connections: cultural revival, political independence and the present', in *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*, edited by Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes (Dublin: Folens, 1997), 112–113.

² Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole, eds., *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), 1–3; Rajul Bhargava, *Gender Issues: Contestations and Attestations* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), 2–3.

poets face in the development of their careers so as to emphasize the individual strengths of each poet that warrant her place in a global literary canon.

Ireland and India: Histories of Gendered Nationalism

Ireland and India are compared in this collateral study of women's writing because of historical and political parallels that have shaped women's lives and are represented in poetry by several of the writers included in this study. Ireland's engagement with cultures of the East dates back to the twelfth century, but the most pre-eminent relationship between Ireland and India was born out of British imperialism.³ Both countries were colonized over a long period of time with direct control established in Ireland in 1800 and India in 1858. Their participation as actors in and subjects of imperial networks brought individuals into contact with one another that might not have happened were it not for colonial history.⁴ Éamon de Valera, Irish nationalist and a commander of the 1916 Easter Rising who later became a President of Ireland, was known to have respected and admired Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Independence movement in India who later became the country's first Prime Minister. There is also evidence to suggest that anti-colonial strategies were passed between leaders and individuals for nationalist causes during this period of history.⁵ Comparative research on Ireland and India is rich in historical and social critiques of colonialism and nationalism and, more recently, studies have examined literary engagements such as the friendship between W. B. Yeats and Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore which inspired comparable representations of nationalism, mysticism as well as portrayals of rural Ireland and Bengal in their work.

My own interest in comparing contemporary women poets from Ireland and India derives from parallels in gendered nationalism that have shaped women's lives in these countries, a subject to which several writers in this thesis—Boland, Meehan, Das and Bhatt—respond openly in their work. As a result of colonialism, nationalist

³ Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 5–8, 67–68.

⁴ Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Louise Ryan, 'Mother India/Mother Ireland: Comparative Gendered Dialogues of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Early 20th Century', *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 3 (2002): 301–302.

⁵ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, 'Mother', 302; Sarmila Bose and Eilís Ward, "'India's cause is Ireland's cause": elite links and nationalist politics', in *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*, edited by Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes, (Dublin: Folens, 1997), 52–73; Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12–18.

discourses developed along similar trajectories and can be seen most overtly in the symbolic representation of Ireland as Mother Ireland and India as *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India.⁶ The rhetorical conflation of woman and nation influenced cultural perceptions of women's rights in the nation-state, and all of the poets selected for this project are acutely aware of the political and social contexts out of which they write. Eavan Boland (b. 1944) published her first collection *23 Poems* in 1962, only twenty-seven years after the establishment of the Irish state in 1937 and sixteen years after its declaration as a Republic in 1948. In poetry and prose Boland critiques literary and political representations of women in Ireland which has led her to become one of the most important Irish poets writing today. Kamala Das (b. 1934) published her own first collection *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965 eighteen years after Indian Independence in 1947, and she was one of the only women in a group of Indian English poets to publish during this period. Although her work is often read as confessionalism, Das responded to social concerns in her home state Kerala through poetry, prose and an attempt at politics, eventually becoming one of the most acclaimed Indian English poets to date.⁷ Boland and Das were followed by younger generations of poets including Meehan, Bhatt and many others, who wrote about political developments in Ireland and India and how practices of their respective nation-states shape women's lives in these countries. In this section, I outline a brief history of gendered nationalism in Ireland and India to bring into focus how sexualized representations of the nation affected women's lived experiences. This historical context shadows forth the way that writers selected for my project engage with and respond to representations of women and the nation-state in their poetry.

Gendered nationalism in Ireland and India became engrained in nationalist discourse in the wake of imperial rule. In 'Family Feuds', Anne McClintock summarizes gender dynamics within nationalism in the following statement:

All too often in male nationalisms, *gender* difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of *national* difference and power between *men*. Excluded from direct action as national citizens,

⁶ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, 'Mother', 305–306.

⁷ Devindra Kohli, *Kamala Das: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), xii.

women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit.⁸

Because women were not seen as actors in anti-colonial resistance but were instead subjects on whom power dynamics played out, women became representative of the nation whose metaphoric female body was violated by the colonial ruler.⁹ Through processes of nation-formation that solidified a sexualized discourse of statehood, women were idealized through the symbol of the nation as a female figure, and this national identity impelled women in Ireland and India to preserve national traditions and ideals. In *Woman – Nation – State* (1989), Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis explore several roles which women tend to occupy within the nation-state that help us to unravel this complex relationship. Anthias and Yuval-Davis argue that women are biological reproducers as well as participants in the reproduction and transmission of a national culture. Women also signify ethnic/national differences because the female body becomes the symbol of ideological discourses that construct and maintain practices of the nation-state, and finally women can act as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.¹⁰ Much can be said about women's participation and influence in nationalist struggle in Ireland and India, but for the purposes of my own comparative analysis of poets and representations of women in their work, I focus on the rhetorical discourse of the nation as woman and how this representation has influenced women's roles in the reproduction and transmission of national cultures.

The trope of the nation as a female figure is central to both Irish and Indian nationalisms. Representations of Ireland as a woman 'victimized by the colonizing English male' dates back to Gaelic poetry of the eighteenth century. The nation was symbolically portrayed as 'Hibernia, Mother Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen', and by the mid-nineteenth century, this sexualized national identity was affixed by gender constructs that reflected Catholic doctrine.¹¹ Following the example of the Virgin Mary, 'women

⁸ Anne McClintock, 'Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family', *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 62, emphasis hers.

⁹ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, 'Mother', 305–306.

¹⁰ Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Woman – Nation – State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 7.

¹¹ Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 7.

were to be passive embodiments of Irish virtue’, while men were seen as sons of Mother Ireland who sacrificed their lives for the sake of independence. Nationalist symbols had material consequences for Irish people in that ‘certain female behavior, based on chastity and purity, guaranteed the purity and alterity of the Irish nation’.¹² The conflation of woman and nation was compounded by religious discourse that idealized the Virgin Mary, and the effects of that pervasive metaphor have engendered very real consequences for women’s rights in contemporary Ireland. The Constitution of the Republic of Ireland reinforces women’s roles in the nation-state by dictating women’s ‘duties in the home’ and the right to life. Article 41.2 of the Constitution details gender roles in Irish society. It states that a woman’s duty is to care for children and elderly, and that ‘the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives support to the State without which the common good cannot be achieved’, suggesting that it is a woman’s place to preserve national traditions and social values of the Irish nation-state.¹³ This law is no longer observed in custom, but the social values and roles implied by the Constitution remain. On similar grounds, the Eighth Amendment which dictates the right to life of a foetus has become highly contested in the last thirty years leading to the UN ruling in 2017 that ‘Ireland’s abortion laws have subjected women to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment’.¹⁴ Boland politicizes representations of motherhood and female sexuality in her work, often adopting the image of the nation as Mother Ireland to challenge sexualized representations of the state and women’s roles in Irish society, a point which I examine at length in Chapter 1. In Chapter 4, I look at how Paula Meehan (b. 1955) critiques the politics of abortion and female sexuality in her poetry and how she questions the repercussions of religious ideologies on women’s lives.

Comparable developments in the conflation of woman and nation have unfolded in Indian nationalism, although the effects of such representations differ in both countries. Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Louise Ryan examine in their comparative analysis of gendered nationalism ‘Mother India / Mother Ireland’ that nationalist

¹² Ingman, *Twentieth*, 7.

¹³ Josepha Madigan, ‘The Irish Constitution still makes reference to woman’s place in the home’, *Journal.ie*, March 8, 2017, Accessed August 16, 2017, <http://www.thejournal.ie/irish-constitution-womans-place-3275347-Mar2017/>.

¹⁴ Henry McDonald, ‘UN repeats criticism of Ireland’s “cruel and inhumane” abortion laws’, *The Guardian*, June 13, 2017, Accessed June 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/13/un-denounces-ireland-abortion-laws-as-cruel-and-inhumane-again>.

movements in both countries conflated the nation as a female figure which enforced traditional values but, more importantly, differentiated ‘between the indigenous culture of the nation and the influence of the alien imperial culture’.¹⁵ Partha Chatterjee determines that, in India, the home became the ‘principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture’.¹⁶ Women were held largely responsible for caring for children and the home, and they were expected to preserve and pass on values of the national culture.¹⁷ The desire firmly to assert specific roles for women in society aligned with nationalist discourse of the nation as *Bharat Mata*, literally translated as ‘Mother India’, in that women maintained their responsibilities as mothers to conform to values of the nation-state.¹⁸ As in the case of Ireland, *Bharat Mata* was the ultimate mother who when in danger, ‘could summon her “countless” children to her aid’.¹⁹ This rhetoric of the nation as a mother figure was accentuated by Hindu ideologies of Sita, ‘the Mother Goddess’, whom Anita Desai argues in ‘A Secret Connivance’ was not merely the ideal mother but also the ideal woman, the loyal wife, meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving.²⁰ Sita goes by several names—Draupadi, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi and others—but all of these representations led to the same idealization of Indian womanhood and the expectation that women should accept traditional roles in the home and family which, in turn, influenced cultural standards of motherhood and sexuality.²¹ Indian laws dictate regulations on women’s bodies that are corroborated in recent cases where child victims of rape were refused terminations of pregnancy due to restrictions in abortion laws.²² The laws were created to prevent sex-specific abortions which have increased

¹⁵ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, ‘Mother’, 305.

¹⁶ Partha Chatterjee, ‘Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India’, *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 627.

¹⁷ Neluka Silva, *The Gendered Nation: Contemporary Writings from South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 21.

¹⁸ Suruchi Thapar, ‘Women as Activists; Women as Symbols: A study of the Indian Nationalist Movement’, *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 88.

¹⁹ Thapar, ‘Women’, 88.

²⁰ Anita Desai, ‘A Secret Connivance’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, September 14, 1999, 972.

²¹ Desai, ‘Secret’, 972.

²² Medhavi Arora and Manveena Suri, ‘India: Court grants 10-year-old right to abortion in rape’, CNN, May 16, 2017, Accessed July 30, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/16/asia/india-underage-abortion/index.html>; Sauma Rai and Sajid Sheikh, ‘India’s Abortion Laws Need to Change and in the Pro-Choice Direction’, *The Wire*, May 11, 2017, Accessed July 30, 2017, <https://thewire.in/134182/abortion-pregnancy-law-india/>; Agence France-Press, ‘Indian supreme court rejects child rape victim’s abortion request’, *The Guardian*, July 28, 2017, Accessed July 30, 2017,

in recent decades due to cultural preferences for sons. Although the introduction of the abortion law is well-intentioned, its limitations prevent women from having control over their bodies when it comes to biological and cultural reproduction.

Sujata Bhatt (b. 1956), whose work I compare with Boland in Chapter 1, politicizes representations of her own childhood memories, motherhood as well as female sexuality in Indian society—even portraying a case of sex-specific abortion in one of her poems—in ways that align with or, at times, challenge social constructs of Indian womanhood. In Chapter 4, I explore Das’s personae as a poet and public figure, and how her social roles and lyrical personae indicate a desire to depict the diversity or multiplicity of women’s roles in Indian society, a subject which I compare with the political efforts of Meehan. I do not specifically examine representations of women in Irish or Indian societies in the work of McGuckian, de Souza and Silgado because I am interested in looking at their publishing histories to examine the politics of publishing poetry as a woman in Ireland or India. Historical as well as literary representations of women certainly exist in the work of these three poets, but the most valuable aspect for this project was each woman’s story of becoming a published writer. The histories of gendered nationalism discussed here were established in the mid-twentieth century as Ireland and India came to define their respective statehoods though, as will be discussed throughout the thesis, the representations of women that emerged from national discourses have played out in very different ways. Ireland achieved statehood in 1937 and India in 1947, but the political and social constructs of gendered nationalism and women’s roles in society linger in national discourses of these countries. The poets whose work I examine in response to practices of the nation-state are adamant about politicizing historical, cultural and personal representations of women in their poetry.

Critical Developments in Contemporary Irish and Indian Women’s Poetry

By examining the poetry and careers of seven women writers from Ireland and India, I aim to demonstrate a relationship between national developments that have shaped women’s experiences in these countries and the effects of such changes on women’s publishing practices and political engagements as writers. Literary criticism in the

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/28/indian-supreme-court-rejects-child-rape-victims-abortion-request>.

fields of contemporary Irish and Indian women's poetry has evolved along similar trajectories in the years after national independence with significant developments occurring in the 1980s and 1990s, the historical period of focus for this project. As Éllís Ní Dhuibhne explores in *Voices on the Wind: Women Poets in the Celtic Twilight* (1995), women in Ireland were publishing poetry and engaging politically in the nationalist movement and the Literary Revival of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³ Women's involvement in the production and formation of Ireland's literary culture continued through the 1970s when Boland, McGuckian and others began their careers, yet the accomplishments of many women writers were largely unacknowledged until the 1990s.²⁴ The publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* edited by Seamus Deane in 1991 marked a transitional moment in the trajectory of the Irish literary tradition because of the anthology's omission of several important women writers in history as well as texts related to Irish feminism. Seen as an 'intellectual force' of the late twentieth century because of its breadth of literature that spanned the history of the Republic and Northern Ireland in three volumes, *The Field Day Anthology* was anticipated to 'open new forms of literary and historical analysis' of Ireland's culture prior to its publication.²⁵ Yet, the editors' oversight of women's contributions to literature yielded an unprecedented response from writers and critics who called for a revision of the national canon. The responses to *The Field Day Anthology* led not only to two additional volumes dedicated to *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (2002) but also to an outpouring of critical research on poets, novelists and dramatists which examine the many ways that women work within and change the literary tradition from which they write.²⁶

As will be discussed in the chapters concerning McGuckian's, de Souza's and Silgado's publishing histories, literary and critical anthologies have played an

²³ Éllís Ní Dhuibhne, ed., *Voices on the Wind: Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1995).

²⁴ Lucy Collins, ed., *Poetry by Women in Ireland: A Critical Anthology 1870–1970* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 1; Margaret Kelleher, 'The Field Day Anthology and Irish Women's Literary Studies', *Irish Review* 30 (2003): 82.

²⁵ Catriona Crowe, 'Testimony to a Flowering', *The Dublin Review* 10 (2003), <https://thedublinreview.com/article/testimony-to-a-flowering/>, Accessed September 18, 2015.

²⁶ Deane, Seamus, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Volumes I, II and III* (Dublin: Field Day, 1991); Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather; Maria Luddy, Margaret Mac Curtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd and Claire Wills, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Volumes IV and V, Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002).

important role in the creation of both Irish and Indian contemporary poetic canons. My examination of these poets' careers in Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrates that anthologies are particularly important for women poets; such texts situate women in a literary tradition because of the highly selective nature of the editorial process and because anthologies tend to represent current trends of a national canon in the global literary market.²⁷ In the case of Ireland, several critical and literary anthologies published in the last thirty years have contributed to a growing field of criticism on Boland, McGuckian, Meehan and their contemporaries in the Republic and Northern Ireland. In her 1996 publication *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh introduces the text with an anecdote about her search for books on Irish women poets, a challenging task due to the fact that poets were even less widely published than women who wrote fiction, nonfiction and drama. Recalling her search for books in the years following the publication of *The Field Day Anthology*, Haberstroh writes:

Down on my knees to reach books buried on the lowest shelves in bookstores, through the tunnels to the dust-covered Early Printed Books at Trinity College, on to the National Library and to the University College at Belfield, all over Dublin, and then beyond, I went hunting for books by women poets. It was not easy. Quickly I dismissed the major presses; women poets had not made too many of their lists. Searching for out-of-print volumes and out-of-the-way presses, I began to get some sense of what any person who wants to read Irish women poets, even contemporary ones, was in for. I would ask poets for names of others to read; some passed on volumes to me, but too often I was told, 'This is out of print,' or 'A collection of hers hasn't been published yet.'²⁸

Haberstroh's narrative about looking for books 'buried on the lowest shelves' of national libraries and archives may now seem anachronistic because work by women poets can be found in major bookstores and libraries throughout Ireland today, but it is interesting to consider the implications of her search on the critical progression of

²⁷ Neelam Srivastava, 'Anthologizing the Nation: Literature Anthologies and the Idea of India', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 2 (2010): 151–152.

²⁸ Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 1.

research on Irish women's poetry. If primary sources, poetry collections, biographies and other books by or on women poets in Ireland were difficult to obtain well into the 1990s, then it is understandable why a national canon, represented by *The Field Day Anthology*, would be established without the inclusion of many women writers. The predicament also suggests that literary criticism on women poets would have been quite limited during this period despite a growing interest in their work. The biographical essays and interviews in *Women Creating Women* examine themes of identity, language, the domestic space, motherhood, myths and legends in the poetry of Eithne Strong, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill as well as Boland and McGuckian, and Haberstroh builds on this study in her 2001 publication *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art* which adds Mary O'Malley, Joan Newmann and Moyra Cannon to its compilation of poets' reflections on their writing practices.²⁹

Other anthologies published in the last thirty years have helped to establish an Irish national canon that includes women poets. Peggy O'Brien's *Wake Forest Anthology of Irish Women Poets: 1967–2000* (1999) highlights the accomplishments of several well known poets and includes poems by working-class writers Rita Ann Higgins and Paula Meehan, yet O'Brien's own introduction to the text acknowledges that the gap between publications by men and women writers in Ireland was far from being filled, even at the turn of the twenty-first century.³⁰ Alexander Gonzalez approached literary criticism on women's poetry from an important position in his critical anthology *Irish Women Poets: Some Male Perspectives* (1999), which was published the same year as O'Brien's text. In this timely book, Gonzalez compiled essays by several male poets and critics which examine concerns of language, feminism and identity in the poetry of several women writing in Irish and English.³¹

Since the turn of the century, literary criticism in Ireland has broadened to examine the history of women's poetry in Ireland, has compared Irish women poets with their contemporaries in Europe and has focused on the literary development of individual poets. Lucy Collins' recent anthology *Poetry by Women in Ireland: 1870–*

²⁹ Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, ed., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

³⁰ Peggy O'Brien, *Wake Forest Anthology of Irish Women Poets: 1967–2000* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1999), xx-xxi.

³¹ Alexander Gonzalez, *Irish Women Poets: Some Male Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing, 1999).

1970 (2012) explores a long history of women's poetry, and significantly, the book draws attention to poets Alice Milligan, Susan L. Mitchell, Emily Lawless and Eva Gore-Booth, among others, whose contributions to the creation of a national canon were not well known before the anthology's publication in 2012.³² In *Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets* (2009), Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo create a compelling comparison and engagement between women poets in Ireland and Galicia, Spain. The edited collection of essays by Galician critics on women poets from Ireland and northeast Spain explore connections between the cultures such as the regions' shared Celtic history and myths as well as the responses to Catholicism and other social concerns. *Writing Bonds* is the only major publication to date that compares Irish women poets with contemporaries from another country. The text and related criticism by Palacios and Lojo focus on European and national connections between Ireland and Galicia in its comparison of individual poets, yet *Writing Bonds* fails to outline major parallels and contrasts between writers aside from the feminist nature of their work.³³ Turning to literary criticism on poets included in this project, a number of critics have dedicated their careers to the study of Boland's and McGuckian's poetry, a trend that continues as criticism on Irish women's poetry broadens. Jody Allen Randolph and Pilar Villar-Argáiz have published books on Boland's creative development as a poet, and Shane Alcobia-Murphy, Leontia Flynn and Borbála Faragó have expanded literary criticism on McGuckian's poetry through their studies of her intertextuality and early publications, respectively.³⁴

The historical absence of women's voices in the poetic canon also has led to a revision of the national literary tradition in India. Though not as extensive as the response to the publication of *The Field Day Anthology*, a comparable call for reflection on the Indian poetic canon occurred when poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's anthology *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* was published in 1997. A scrupulous selection of English-language poets publishing in the post-

³² Collins, *Poetry*.

³³ Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo, *Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

³⁴ Jody Allen Randolph, *Eavan Boland* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2014); Pilar Villar-Argáiz, *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 2008); Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006); Leontia Flynn, *Reading Medbh McGuckian* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2014); Borbála Faragó, *Medbh McGuckian* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014).

Independence period, the anthology was the result of Mehrotra's attempt to 'shift the emphasis' in a growing canon of Indian English poetry by placing the work of established writers such as Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, Keki Daruwalla and Arun Kolatkar alongside a 'younger generation' of poets including Dom Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Adil Jussawalla, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, Manohar Shetty and Eunice de Souza who were first published by the small collectives in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁵ In his desire to reinvigorate the canon by leaving out acclaimed poets R. Parthasarathy and Kamala Das in favour of introducing the work of younger poets to international audiences—a point Mehrotra addresses in his introduction to the anthology—he failed to establish parity between the sexes and included the work of only one woman in the book.³⁶ His omission of many significant women poets writing in English led de Souza, though she was published in *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, to take up the work of editing anthologies of Indian literature so as to revise the national canon and acknowledge the literary contributions of women throughout Indian history. As I discuss in my examination of her career in Chapter 3, de Souza's Oxford anthologies of women's literature are widely distributed abroad and are accessible in the UK, Europe and North America, which indicates the growing interest in women's writing in India on a global scale and the importance of anthologies in revising a national canon.³⁷ The publication of Mehrotra's book, though it was smaller in scope than *The Field Day Anthology*, indicates comparable trends in Ireland and India when it comes to the publication of male and female poets; the occasion also underscores women's roles in changing their respective literary cultures.

Several anthologies published in the 1980s and 1990s have helped to shape the critical field of contemporary Indian women's poetry in English. Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1987) and the revised edition published in 2001 serve as a starting point for understanding the history of post-Independence poetry in India, as well as the connections among poets and the processes through which writers of the 1950, 1960s and 1970s became widely published and read. Produced by Oxford University Press in the UK, this detailed history of Indian English poetry has become

³⁵ Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

a point of reference for poets and critics outside of India who are interested in understanding developments in India's various publishing scenes during the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, King's critical analysis falls short of creating parity between the sexes in the scope and analysis of poetry which is evidenced in the fact that the book's 1987 edition confines women poets to a single chapter, and King's analysis of Das's, de Souza's and Silgado's poetry gravitates towards simplistic, unsubstantiated readings of their work. The 2001 edition of *Modern Indian Poets* extends the analysis of women's poetry to two chapters, but once again women are grouped together rather than placed in relation to their male peers, and women's literary achievements are largely unnoticed.³⁸

In 1991, the year that *The Field Day Anthology* was published in Ireland, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita expanded the possibilities of criticism on Indian women's literature with the publication of *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Early 20th Century* which showcased an extensive range of poetry, fiction and prose written in English and translated from vernacular languages. Speaking about their process of creating the ambitious anthology, Tharu and Lalita offer the following reflection:

Confident that there was a great deal more to be discovered, we began to travel through different parts of the country meeting scholars, women writers, and feminist activists—and it was only as we talked to these people that the project actually took concrete form. We found ourselves slipping past the disciplinary gatekeepers we had first come up against, and searching out, or being directed to, a whole range of other people: historians, sociologists, activists, as well as writers and critics outside the mainstream, who shared information about little-known writers, told us about major works, and discussed what they considered dimensions of cultural history that helped us understand both the cultural economy in which women write and the politics of canon building as it affected women.³⁹

Tharu and Lalita's experience of finding literature by women in India could not be more different to Haberstroh's experience of searching for books of poetry by women in Ireland, but it is important to consider that both processes of editing these

³⁸ Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, 2001).

³⁹ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present: Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early 20th Century* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), xix.

anthologies of women's literature required extensive and unconventional searches and were completed with the support of other critics, writers and activists interested in the projects. We might also note that Tharu and Lalita's anthology includes women's writing from all genres. Had they been looking specifically for biographical information and work by women poets on the subcontinent, their search may have been less rewarding.

In recent decades, critical anthologies have drawn attention to the importance of Indian English poetry in a national canon, though these texts do not always focus specifically on the work of women poets. Additionally, there is quite a lot of literary criticism on Das and de Souza with more work coming out on Silgado, Bhatt and younger generations of writers, but many published articles on women poets focus on close readings of specific poems and offer generalized arguments that are not supported well by other sources. Among the critics who offer important contributions to the field of Indian English women's poetry are Jaydipsinh Dodiya who begins his compilation *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2006) with two essays on Kamala Das—one which looks at various motifs in Das's poetry and another that compares Das with Canadian writer Alice Munro—yet he does not include any other women poets in the study.⁴⁰ Kanwar Dinesh Singh's critical anthology *Feminism and Postfeminism* (2006), published the same year as Dodiya's text, goes a greater distance in placing contemporary women poets within the social and historical context in modern India. Grouping poets together under the themes of 'feminism' and 'postfeminism', Singh places specific writers including Meena Alexander, Imtiaz Dharker, Bhatt and others in conversation with their male and female contemporaries, but he does not explore individual motivations for writing or draw out a range of themes arising from their work.⁴¹ In contrast to these publications from the early 2000's, Renate Papke's *Poems at the Edge of Differences: Mothering in New English Poetry by Women* (2008) offers comprehensive case studies of Das, de Souza, Silgado, Bhatt and Dharker, placing their work in comparison with women poets from the Caribbean, Africa and the diaspora.⁴² Papke's critical anthology examines

⁴⁰ Jaydipsinh Dodiya, *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006).

⁴¹ Kanwar Dinesh Singh, *Feminism and Postfeminism: The Context of Modern Indian Women Poets Writing in English* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006).

⁴² Renate Papke, *Poems at the Edge of Difference: Mothering in New English Poetry by Women* (Göttingen, University of Göttingen, 2008).

poetry of motherhood and mothering in particular, but I found her that biographies on the Indian poets' backgrounds were an informative starting point for my own examination of Das's, de Souza's, Silgado's and Bhatt's literary careers.

Published in 2016, Rosinka Chaudhuri's anthology *A History of Indian English Poetry* provides a range of critical perspectives of poetry written during the nationalist movement in India and the post-Independence period. Chapters are dedicated to Toru Dutt and other women writing in colonial India, and critics including Anjali Nerlekar, Jeet Thayil, Sharanya and Laetitia Zecchini examine publishing presses in the 1970s as well as poetry by women I have included in this thesis.⁴³ Like Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian, Kamala Das has also been studied extensively in her own right in texts such as *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum* (2007), edited by Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco and *Kamala Das and Her Poetry* (2007) by An. N. Dwivedi.⁴⁴ Yet, as in the case with many texts on Indian women poets, these studies explore the merits of Das's work, but the analysis of her poetry is quite general and tends to take a strictly biographical reading which limits the possibilities for understanding her motivations for writing. New publications such as the Penguin edition of Kamala Das's *Selected Poems* (2014), with its lengthy introduction by Devindra Kohli, have gone a long way in expanding new research on Das's poetry and career.⁴⁵

The concurrent movements in Ireland and India to revise the poetic canon and include women's voices in the literary and historical fabric of the nation offer important reasons for comparing contemporary Irish and Indian women poets and their literary careers. My focus on poets' engagement with institutional practices of the nation-state and women's publishing histories during the late twentieth century are inextricably connected with movements in literary criticism and social research to recover lost works by women writers and acknowledge women's rightful places in the national literary traditions. Developments in the critical trajectories of women's poetry, particularly during the period of the 1980s to present, which I have discussed

⁴³ Rosinka Chaudhuri, *A History of Indian Poetry in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴⁴ Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco, eds., *Kamala Das: A Critical Spectrum* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2001, 2007); A. N. Dwivedi, *Kamala Das and Her Poetry: Second Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1983, 2000).

⁴⁵ Kamala Das, *Kamala Das: Selected Poems*, Introduction by Devindra Kohli (New York: Penguin, 2014), xi–xciv.

here, align with feminist and national movements in Ireland and India. My case studies of Boland's, McGuckian's and Meehan's early careers in the 1980s and 1990s unfold against the backdrop of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and national debates around institutional practices affecting women's bodies, pregnancy, marriage and the right to work. These decades were also a period of significant cultural and economic transition in India as the country expanded international trade and technological advancements in the global market. Even after Partition in 1947, the subcontinent was wrought with religious and caste differences in the late twentieth century which is most evident in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh nationalists in 1984 and the beginning of a twenty-five-year civil war in Sri Lanka caused by ethnic and religious differences between Buddhist Sinhalese groups and the Hindu Tamil minority, experiences which Das explores in her poetry from the 1980s. Throughout the thesis, I attempt to align women's personal developments as poets with cultural and historical changes in their respective countries, creating parallels in women's experiences and responses to cultural and national transitions in ways that extend across geographical borders.

The relationship between publishing processes, literary criticism and representations of women in literature are intricately connected as Margaret Kelleher expresses in her essay 'Literary Connections' published in Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes' comparative study *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts* (1997). She summarizes the relationship in this way:

These projects of recovery [of women's writing] now underway in both Irish and Indian cultural studies inevitably prompt a revision of the past, reinspecting its dominant representations and exploring what has been, in consequence, obscured. The female figure, and its role in the national tradition, is the subject of particular attention, coinciding with, and consolidating, a renaissance in women's own writings.⁴⁶

As Kelleher examines, women have played an important role in the creation of the nation-state but have only begun recently to be viewed as actors in and critics of the national literary tradition from which they write. All seven poets included in this project—Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt—began publishing poetry at different moments within their respective national histories, but

⁴⁶ Margaret, 'Literary', 117.

by focusing on their collections published during the 1980s and 1990s, I aim to place their achievements as poets, editors and activists within the context of political and literary developments occurring simultaneously on national and global scales.

Given the critical trajectories I have outlined here, I would like to draw attention to some prominent differences in the fields of Irish and Indian women's poetry which I examine in greater depth throughout the thesis. Although both Irish and Indian women faced comparable historical silences and obfuscations within their respective literary traditions, it appears that the efforts to recover and commemorate the work of women poets is more urgent in contemporary Ireland than in India. As I have stated in my comparison of *The Field Day Anthology* and Mehrotra's *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, publications that create disparities between the sexes certainly exist in both countries, but the case in Ireland appears to happen on a greater scale with the inclusion of women in a national literary culture progressing at a slower rate, a point to which I return in the next section. Other obvious differences in literary criticism can be seen in the concerns that arise from the subjects of women's poetry. As I explore in Chapter 4, many of Meehan's early collections depict experiences of class difference and dispossession, but in India, we might see more literary portrayals of caste than class, though these subjects are not immediately obvious in the poetry of Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt. Finally, it is significant to note that for both Irish and Indian women poets, concerns surrounding language—whether it is to write in Irish, English, Hindi, a vernacular Indian language, or even a woman's language—can be seen in the work of many women poets from these countries. As my focus was on Anglophone poetry, I touch upon the question of language only where appropriate, but throughout the thesis I attempt to elucidate the poets' motivations for writing and concerns about language that have shaped their literary careers.

Women Poets and the Politics of Writing

In her critical autobiography *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995), Eavan Boland reflects on the politics of writing in Ireland and her own journey to becoming a poet. Interrogating the intricate relationship between women and the nation-state that had placed the female figure as the object of the poem rather than the voice of its drama, Boland discusses her dilemma of entering a literary tradition that had allowed women a place of passivity. She believed, as a young poet, that her experiences of caring for children and a home were completely removed from

the political channels of the Irish poetic tradition.⁴⁷ With empathy for women coming to the craft, Boland examines the politics of what it means to be a woman poet, which she summarizes in the following statement:

[T]he sense of power a woman speaker might have in an Irish poem today will not just be political; it must be politicized. In other words, her sense of power inside the poem must be flawed and tempered not just by a perception of powerfulness outside it but also by the memory of her traditional and objectified silence within it.⁴⁸

A woman who writes poetry faces a literary tradition that historically silenced the realities of her life; writing, then, is a political act for any woman who brings her own subjectivity into the poem. The politics of her work lies in the pervading silences of the tradition and a woman's desire to articulate an experience which was heretofore unheard.⁴⁹ When Boland began publishing poetry in the 1960s, few women had produced collections in modern-day Ireland and even fewer were widely known. Yet, by the time *Object Lessons* came out in 1995, the literary scene in Ireland had begun to change. Medbh McGuckian (b. 1950) had published several collections of poetry by this time, and her book *Captain Lavender* (1995) was published simultaneously that year with the Gallery Press in Ireland and Wake Forest University Press in the US. Meehan, too, published four collections by 1995 with her forthcoming *Mysteries of the Home* (1996) being brought out the following year.

Notwithstanding the achievements of these women and many others writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, the politics which Boland articulates in *Object Lessons* was real for these poets. Women have achieved greater parity in terms of publications as well as more visibility on reading lists and anthologies since the 1990s, but questions regarding the inclusion of women in a national canon continue. As in the case of *The Field Day Anthology* in 1991, a new debate among writers and academics has gained momentum in recent months in response to the publication of Gerald Dawe's *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017). A critical study of thirty poets in Irish history, the text dedicates four chapters to women poets and

⁴⁷ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 66–67, 80, 183.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

includes four female contributors.⁵⁰ *The Cambridge Companion* was published in November 2017, but written responses to Cambridge University Press and plans to promote readings by Irish women writers were underway across the country since September, an effort that substantiates the growing debate on social media which has played an important role in giving impetus to this initiative.⁵¹

National Partitions and Women's Poetry

The politics of women's writing in Ireland is implicated not only by gender disparities in terms of publication but also by the partition of the island into the Republic and Northern Ireland. Both Boland and Meehan are from Dublin, and although they come from different class backgrounds—Boland having spent her childhood in Ireland, the UK and the US as the daughter of a diplomat and Meehan in tenement flats in Finglas, North Dublin—these poets depict comparable politicized representations of women in their poetry and share a literary kinship. Boland selected Meehan and Mary O'Malley for the critical anthology *Three Irish Poets* which was published by Carcanet Press in 2003 and has written critical research on Meehan's poetry; in 2014 Meehan, along with Jody Allen Randolph, a close friend and critic of Boland's work, edited and launched *Eavan Boland: A Poet's Dublin* in celebration of her seventieth birthday.⁵² Meehan sees Boland as a literary foremother who created a space for women poets in a national tradition as she expresses in the following sentiment from a 2009 interview with Randolph:

Eavan Boland gave a very practical and powerful example of how to integrate what was outside the poem, and troubling it, with the poem itself. Her way of making certainly, but especially her articulation of the pressures she came under as a young poet has made a huge

⁵⁰ Gerald Dawe, *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), Table of Contents, forthcoming November 2017, <http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/literature/irish-literature/cambridge-companion-irish-poets?format=PB#4EAoCTQ04F05OPEP.97>.

⁵¹ Group email exchanges including author and Maria McManus, Christine Murray, Mary O'Donnell, Ailbhe Darcy, Kathy Darcy, Kimberly Campanello, Elaine Bolger, August 10–September 19, 2017.

⁵² Eavan Boland, Mary O'Malley and Paula Meehan, *Three Irish Poets: An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2003); Eavan Boland, 'Unfinished Business: The Communal Art of Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts* 5, no. 1&2 (2009): 17–24; Eavan Boland, *Eavan Boland: A Poet's Dublin*, edited by Paula Meehan and Jody Allen Randolph (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014).

influence—she outlined pitfalls I was able to avoid, though no doubt there were others I stumbled into in the dark, so to speak, or that were of my own making.⁵³

Boland's influence among contemporary women poets in Ireland is also seen in her current role as editor of the *Poetry Ireland Review* where she has full discretion in the publication of poetry by new and established writers from Ireland and other countries, and Meehan has gained national recognition for her poetry and activism as the Ireland Professor of Poetry, a role which she held from 2013–2016, the centenary year of the Easter Rising.⁵⁴

McGuckian's career has been shaped by different factors to that of Boland, Meehan, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and her other female contemporaries in the Republic because she writes from Belfast in Northern Ireland. As a Catholic in the North, McGuckian experienced a sense of otherness because of her religious identity and isolation from the cultural and social discourses of life in the Republic, a concern which I examine at length in Chapter 2. She describes her sense of dislocation from an Irish national identity during the Troubles in her essay 'Drawing Ballerinas' published in *Wee Girls: Women Writing from an Irish Perspective* (2003):

I had no feeling of being 'Irish' whatsoever. What I most categorically was, was a Roman Catholic, first and foremost. [...] It was a very narrow, dark, confined world, symbolized by the narrow, dark, confined gardens terrace house where the barricades erected early in the Troubles as a 'Peace Line', have not yet been removed.⁵⁵

For McGuckian, political, social and cultural barricades continue to shape her experience as a writer in Northern Ireland. Her poetry has reached European and as well American audiences because of her fluid, elusive writing style, and she also gained fame as the only woman in her generation of Northern poets to publish broadly in the 1980s at the height of the Troubles. McGuckian's career with Irish, British and

⁵³ Jody Allen Randolph, "The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan," *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts* 5, no. 1& 2 (2009): 247.

⁵⁴ 'Poetry Ireland Review: Current Issue', *Poetry Ireland*, 2017, Accessed August 16, 2017, <http://www.poetryireland.ie/publications/poetry-ireland-review/current-issue/>; 'Professor Paula Meehan', *The Ireland Chair of Poetry*, Undated, <http://irelandchairofpoetry.org/previous-professors/paula-meehan/>.

⁵⁵ Medbh McGuckian, 'Drawing Ballerinas', in *Wee Girls: Women Writing from an Irish Perspective* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2003), 186–87.

American publishers emerged from the currents of political conflict and her sense of otherness as a Catholic poet from the North. My archival examination of her publishing history traces McGuckian's political trajectory through the lens of her professional development as a poet. Largely disconnected from literary developments in the Republic, McGuckian's early career was informed by friendships with her male colleagues in Belfast, particularly with her mentor Seamus Heaney and her close friends and former classmates Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon.

The politics of national partition is certainly a comparative aspect that carries across this transnational study of Ireland and India.⁵⁶ The Indian writers I have selected for this project represent different cultures, religions and regions of India, and themes of dislocation and divisions of self and home exist in their work. Das comes from Kerala in the southern-most part of India and was born into a high-caste Nair background, but she converted to Islam in her later life. Das was a teenager during Partition, and she witnessed the Sri Lankan conflict first-hand because she traveled to Colombo to visit her husband who was working there when violence broke out between the Sinhalese and Tamil groups in 1983. Das wrote about the violence she witnessed in what came to be known as her 'Sri Lankan poems', that were published in her award-winning *Collected Poems* in 1984. Eunice de Souza (b. 1940) and Melanie Silgado (b. 1956) are Catholic poets from Goa, a state on the western coast of India which was a Portuguese colony until 1961. Both poets spent much of their time in Bombay where de Souza taught in the Department of English at St. Xavier's College and Silgado was her student.⁵⁷ Both poets express a dislocation from between their cultural and religious identities and the communities in which they live. Silgado eventually moved to London where she continues to reside. Born in 1956, Bhatt comes from a high-caste Brahmin family from Gujarat, a state located on

⁵⁶ T. G. Fraser, *Partition in Ireland, India and Palestine: Theory and Practice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Rajeev Patke, 'Partition and its Aftermath: Poetry and History in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 1 (2010): 17–30.

⁵⁷ I use the name 'Bombay' rather than 'Mumbai', the official name of the city since 1995, for two reasons. First, during the 1970s at the height of the growing poetry scene that surrounded St. Xavier's College and other universities in the area, the city was still referred to by its British designation, 'Bombay'. Second, the renaming of Indian cities in the post-Independence period was, and continues to be, a highly contentious issue in that the return to an 'Indian' name was assumed to be a reassignment of local and cultural identities to a specific Hindu, nationalist identity. In biographies that accompany their publications as well as in interviews, de Souza and Silgado refer to the city as 'Bombay', and I honour their decisions to do so here.

the border of what is now Pakistan and India. Members of Bhatt's family were close friends with Gandhi, and as I examine in Chapter 1, her mother experienced the violence of Partition first-hand. Although these writers represent vastly different Indian cultures, religions and social backgrounds, they share the aftermath of the division of British India in 1947 which has carried over into cultural memory in the subcontinent. The outpouring of stories, family memories and cultural criticism in response to the seventieth anniversary of Partition in August 2017 indicates the consequential effects of a national history on individual lives on either side of the divide.⁵⁸

The Question of Language

Women writing poetry in India face comparable disparities between the sexes in terms of publication, a point which I discussed in the previous section and expand upon in Chapter 3, but the politics of women's writing on the subcontinent is more significantly shaped by a poet's decision to write in English as opposed to one of the vernacular languages. Ammu Joseph et al. articulate the problem faced by Anglophone Indian writers in *Storylines: Conversations with Women Writers* (2003) in which they state that, because of the diversity and multiplicity of languages in India, those who choose to write in any one language 'more or less closes herself off from ninety per cent of the country' when it comes to finding a readership for her work. Women who write in regional languages procure only a 'regional'—rather than national—readership even though their work might be very popular, and in like manner, those writing in English might also find a limited readership because the language is spoken by about five per cent, and is 'known' by as much as ten per cent, of the country's population which estimates to between fifty and hundred million people in a national population of one billion.⁵⁹ In the last fifteen years, English has become more widely used in educational, financial and health sectors, but the problems of writing in English were very real for Das who began publishing in the

⁵⁸ Pankaj Mishra, Salman Rushdie, Kamila Shamsie et al. 'Partition, 70 years on: Salman Rushdie, Kamila Shamsie and other writers reflect', *The Guardian*, August 5, 2017, Accessed August 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/05/partition-70-years-salman-rushdie-kamila-shamsie-writers-reflect-india-pakistan>.

⁵⁹ Ammu Joseph, Vasanth Kannabiran, Ritu Menon, Gouri Salvi, and Volga, eds., *Storylines: Conversations with Women Writers* (Delhi: Women's World, 2003), 2; Rashmi Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14.

immediate post-Independence period in the 1960s through the 1970s when de Souza and Silgado began publishing and helped create a community of Indian English poets in Bombay. As a form through which poets in new India expressed subjectivities that demonstrated the diverse voices of a national canon, poetry was a particularly contentious form because Anglophone writers appeared to espouse the language of the oppressor.

Finding a readership for one's work was even more problematic for poets writing in English than it was for novelists and short fiction writers of the post-1947 period. The marginalization Anglophone poets experienced because of their choice of form, but also language and limited distribution of books, led poet Smita Agarwal to respond, quite vehemently, to the problems of publication in her critical anthology *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* (2014). Agarwal argues that Indian English poets are marginalized in a national tradition because of the contested colonial history of English on the subcontinent and because publishing houses in India see poetry, especially that which is written in English, as 'unprofitable' for the industry.⁶⁰ Even though English-language poetry is far less profitable than fiction, we cannot disregard the great potential that Anglophone writers of both poetry and prose possess in reaching an international audience when compared to publications by writers in vernacular languages whose work may never be translated.⁶¹ Das gained popularity in India and abroad because of her portrayals of contentious topics that were written in English and Malayalam. Das passed away in 2009, but even well before her death, she was seen an internationally acclaimed Anglophone writer who spent the last years of her life attending readings and conferences around the world. Expressing exasperation with the question of writing in English, Das responds formidably in her poem 'An Introduction' from *Summer in Calcutta* (1965):

Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like?⁶²

⁶⁰ Smita Agarwal, *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014): 3–5.

⁶¹ Joseph et al., *Storylines*, 2.

⁶² Kamala Das, *Summer in Calcutta* (Kottayam, Kerala: D C Books, 1965, 2004), Kindle edition, 'An Introduction'.

De Souza and Silgado, writing in the 1970s and 1980s as Goan Catholic poets, were educated in English-medium schools which likely influenced their decisions to write in English. Unlike Das, neither de Souza nor Silgado has published in a vernacular language. Still, these poets co-edited an important recent anthology of Indian literature *These My Words: The Penguin Book of Indian Poetry* (2012) published in India and abroad, which includes translations of poems from many vernacular languages as well as English-language poems. Both writers express the singularities of Indian English idiom in their poetry—de Souza through her integration of dialogic speech and conversations in her poems and Silgado through ephemeral language that can rarely be pinned down to a particular narrative or image.

Bhatt is perhaps the most enigmatic of the four Indian poets in terms of language because she integrates Gujarati translations and transliterations into her English-language poems. Bhatt's engagement with languages differs from her contemporaries in that she has lived in the US and now resides in Germany. Having published all of her collections with Carcanet Press, a leading poetry publisher in the UK, Bhatt's publication history and readership can hardly be compared to those of Das, de Souza and Silgado whose work was first and, for some, only published in India where texts do not always reach an international audience. Bhatt's tri-cultural heritage permeates the language of her poems and can be seen in her representations of personal and familial history. She includes Gujarati words in several of her poems and sometimes transliterates words or creates her own definition within the poems themselves. Bhatt invites the reader to experience her dislocation through the integration of Gujarati words—indecipherable to most of her European and American readers—into the text. In one of her English-only poems, ironically titled 'The Multicultural Poem' from *Augatora* (2000), Bhatt urges us to consider the limitations of language in expressing the varied and contrasting dimensions of a person's life:

The multicultural poem does not expect
the reader to 'understand' anything.
After all, it is used to being misunderstood.

It speaks of refraction.
It wants more dialogue
between the retina and the light.
It says, 'get rid of that squint'.

It lives the chapter in history
they can't teach you in school.⁶³

Bhatt's movement between languages and cultures also emerges in her work as a translator in Germany which she does alongside writing and teaching poetry. Her intermingling of English, Gujarati and, at times, German in her poems is an aspect of her work that is worthy of its own transnational cultural study, but for the purposes of my comparative project, I turn our attention to representations of Bhatt's dislocation from her upbringing in India and how she writes back to her cultural heritage through representations of familial and national history.

The Lyric Form and Feminine Writing

For Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt, the act of writing is politicized 'by the memory of [women's] traditional and objectified silence' within the poem, but also by each poet's subjectivity as she creates a space for herself within a national tradition.⁶⁴ Lyric poetry lends itself to a reading that emerges from, and is inherently connected with, the writer's own feelings and experiences, an aspect which differs from the way we typically read fiction and drama. For women poets, the lyrical 'I' is politicized by her entrance into a literary space as its voice and actor rather than the object of the poem onto whom its story is played out. Each of the poets I have selected for this project writes mainly in the lyric form as a means of expressing her own or other women's experiences, and the lyrical personae are politicized in the poet's portrayal of realities that are largely under-represented in the Irish and Indian poetic canons. By taking on the subjects of exile, motherhood, the domestic space, memories of family traditions, depictions of parturition, abortion, religious difference and civil war, the women poets whose work I examine in this project engage poetically and politically with the culture and national history from which they write. The lyric form is dominant in contemporary literary culture, and it is one used by both men and women writing poetry in Ireland and India. Among women poets in both countries, the lyric form is particularly appropriate because it voices not only an individual experience that is not often expressed in literature but also because the perspective

⁶³ Bhatt, *Augatora*, 101.

⁶⁴ Boland, *Object*, 186.

evidenced in the poem can be seen as indicative—or representative—of experiences which are often marginalized in mainstream literature and culture. The poems I have selected from the poets' oeuvres portray each woman's intersectional differences that make her experience as a poet unique to that of her contemporaries. The intersectional differences of each poets' gender in relation to her nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, class and caste and other aspects of her identity influence the subjects of her poetry and literary career; these intersections also distinguish her place in a national literary canon.

Throughout the thesis, I problematize the lyrical personae of the poems by attempting to understand each writer's decision to speak and how she politicizes her subject matter in the first place. However, the subjectivities of women's poetry are difficult to completely separate from the writer's lived experiences, especially because for most of the poets—with the exception of McGuckian—the 'I' of the poem closely correlates with their own personal backgrounds as well as a woman's place in her respective national history. My largely autobiographical reading of the poems is supported by 1970s theories on female subjectivity in writing such as Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, or 'feminine writing'. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous argues that language was created by and for men which makes it difficult for women to write into a literary tradition because it was not made with her history and consciousness in mind.⁶⁵ Cixous states that in order for a woman to write in a way that expresses her own reality, she must 'Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth'.⁶⁶ Writing in a distinctly feminine language which articulates her own lived experiences, memories and motions of female body creates a literature by women for women. A feminine way of writing will open a space for women in a national canon, as Cixous determines in the following statement:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women

⁶⁵ Hélène Cixous, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 1, no.4 (1976): 875–76.

⁶⁶ Cixous, 'Laugh', 880.

should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.⁶⁷

It is only by 'seizing the occasion to speak', by entering into the poem as its voice and actor, that women create a space where they are able to represent their own experiences and realities.⁶⁸ For every woman who places her subjectivity at the heart of the poem, she politicizes her work and creates a language and form to which other women might relate.

Of the poets in this project, Medbh McGuckian is most often read as *écriture féminine* because her poetry resists any singular persona or narrative and moves fluidly from one idea or image to the next. These 'flitting' personae are revealed in many of her poems, such as in the following lines from 'She Which Is Not, He Which Is' from *Marconi's Cottage* (1991):

My words will be without words
Like a net hidden in a lake,
Their pale individual moisture.
My eyes will not be the eyes of a poet
Whose voice is beyond death;
This face, these clothes, will be a field in autumn
And the following autumn, will be two sounds,
The second of which is deeper.⁶⁹

In one of McGuckian's many meta-poems, she articulates the problems of coming to language—'My words will be without words', but also acknowledges that whatever is said in the space of the poem will carry on 'beyond' its life.⁷⁰ While McGuckian's work more obviously creates a 'feminine writing' and language, I believe that just by the act of writing, by attempting to create a space that expresses her own reality and perceptions of the world, every poet included in this thesis can be seen as a 'political

⁶⁷ Ibid., 881.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 881.

⁶⁹ Medbh McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991), 93.

⁷⁰ María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia and Cristina Fernández-Méndez, "'Longer and longer sentences prove me wholly female': Medbh McGuckian and Feminism(s)", in *Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets*, edited by Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 35-55; Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, 'Medbh McGuckian', *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 123-160.

poet'.⁷¹ In discussing women's need to write subjectively—to write 'the self' into her work—I attempt to address how poetry lends itself to the possibilities of subjectivity and offers us an understanding of the writer's perplexities, ingenuities and personal history in a way that other genres might not.

Intersectionality

As I examine the politics of writing poetry as a woman in Ireland or India, I am particularly interested in the intersections of each woman's identity, and how her sex, race, class, caste, religion and socio-economic background, among many other factors, determine her response to institutional practices of the nation-state or publishing industry. Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrates the importance of looking at the intersections of women's lives in order to understand their lived experiences in her studies of racial discrimination against black women in the American judicial system. Crenshaw's argument in 'Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex', published in 1989 which was later expanded upon in her 1991 essay 'Mapping the Margins', is that black women experience different forms of discrimination based on their sex and race, which leads to marginalization from two different avenues. Although white women can claim discrimination based on the grounds of sex, black women do not fit neatly into this category as they share disadvantages of the black male group who are often discriminated against based on race. The result of these inadvertent forms of discrimination in criminal cases leads to more extreme consequences for black women than black men or white women might experience.⁷² As one observes in a traffic intersection where an accident occurs because of 'cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them', black women experience 'double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex', and sometimes not as a result of these forms of discrimination, but just as black women.⁷³ Bringing this theory into the framework of my own project, I read poetry through the intersections of each

⁷¹ Boland, *Object*, 183.

⁷² Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 42–3; Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.

⁷³ Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing', 43.

woman's identity as a poet in Ireland or India but also in the way that her social and cultural backgrounds rub against the institutions that affect her career. For each writer, some intersections are more definitive and influential than others—McGuckian's religious identity, Meehan's working-class background, Bhatt's privilege as a Brahmin woman, as some examples; yet all the poets express a sense of otherness within their respective communities because of their intersectional differences. There are certainly different social and cultural pressures placed on women writers from Ireland and India, but I have chosen to compare the poets based not only on institutions that affect their careers but also based on the intersectional differences they experience, as I discuss in the synopsis. The otherness that each poet experiences is engendered by her particular upbringing, religion and social background, and the intersections of these parts of her identity inform her response to institutional practices of the nation-state or publishing industry.

Contribution to Knowledge, Methodologies and the Comparative Mode

This project contributes to a burgeoning field of research on historical, social, literary and political connections between Ireland and India. Comparative studies of these two countries tend to take two specific directions: those which examine parallels in histories and culture that cross continental divides and those which explore personal as well as collective interactions between people in Ireland and India, observed most frequently through relationships created by British imperialism. Joseph Lennon's *Irish Orientalism* (2004) offers an important starting point for considering just how deeply entwined Ireland is with cultures of the East. Lennon traces a genealogy of Irish language and culture back to a Scythian heritage in the East whose elements of language and myth carried forward into Irish legends and language and also can be found in aspects of contemporary Celtic culture. The second half of the book turns to Lennon's analysis of the Revival period as a culmination of Irish writers' responses to the East. Lennon examines Yeats's friendship with Tagore and his engagement with Celtic Orientalism; he also considers political influences drawn from Indian cultures in the work of George Russell and James Stephen, both Irish nationalists engaged in theosophy and politics. Lennon analyzes ancient and more recent history by taking into consideration Ireland's influences from British India and closes with further avenues of research on this shared history. *Irish Orientalism*, though evocative in tracing long established influences that Ireland has drawn from Eastern cultures

demonstrates effects that are, for the most part, one-directional as opposed to an equal exchange between cultures.⁷⁴

Similar studies on the collateral relationship between Ireland and India are found in comprehensive texts such as Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes' book *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts* (1997), which traces historical, literary, political and even economic influences between these countries. Chapters in the book focus on the friendships and political influences between de Valera and Nehru while other essays consider comparative findings in Irish and Indian women's roles in the struggle for independence and a comparison of literary revivals of the twentieth century.⁷⁵ Another politically-oriented parallel to consider is T. G. Fraser's *Partition in Ireland, India and Palestine: Theory and Practice* published in 1984, which places the partitions of Ireland into the Republic and Northern Ireland alongside the division of British India in 1947 and the partition of Palestine at the end of the British Mandate. Setting out chapters that examine the legal processes of partition and studies of individuals involved in nationalist movements in these countries, the book acknowledges the effects of colonial histories in shaping contemporary nation-states.⁷⁶ Similar efforts towards historical correlations are found in Joe Cleary's article 'Amongst Empires: A Short History of Ireland and Empire Studies in International Context' which offers an extensive critique of Ireland's place in colonial history and examines interactions between nationalists in India and Ireland during imperialism. He closes the article with a consideration of Ireland's ambiguous place in postcolonial and Empire studies. Cleary has also written a comparative study of partition and the nation-state but examines this history in Ireland, Israel and Palestine.⁷⁷ Other comparative parallels have been made by Clair Wills who examined Irish attitudes towards India after the Second World War and created analogies between Indian and Irish political struggles and discourses in "And Then There Was India". More recently, Wills examined Indian migration to England in the 1950s–

⁷⁴ Lennon, *Orientalism*.

⁷⁵ Holmes and Holmes, *Connections*.

⁷⁶ Fraser, *Partition*.

⁷⁷ Joe Cleary, 'Amongst Empires: A Short History of Ireland and Empire Studies in International Context', *Éire-Ireland* 42 no. 1&2 (2007): 11–57; Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

1970s which she parallels with the Irish migration to England in her article ‘Passage to England’, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in August 2017.⁷⁸

Many studies in this field of comparative research have considered the interactions between individuals from Ireland and India who came into contact with one another via British imperialism. Given the breadth of work on this topic and the fact that interactions between individuals are only tangential to the aims of my project, I discuss important texts on imperialism in brief. In *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial 1890–1920* (2002), Elleke Boehmer considers the ways that individuals living in Ireland, England, India and South Africa interacted with one another and passed ideas for resistance and assimilation across borders during the height of Empire.⁷⁹ Similar efforts in finding cross-cultural interactions can be found in Tadhg Foley and Maureen O’Connor’s edited collection *Ireland and India: Colonies, Cultures and Empire* (2007) which explores shared histories, religious interactions, literary overlaps and administrative work by participants of British imperialism. In a similar vein, I draw attention to Kate O’Malley’s study of interactions between participants in national revolution such as in *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections 1919–64* (2008) and Michael Silvestri’s *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory* (2009).⁸⁰ In terms of comparative research of imperial history that has informed my own understanding of women’s experiences in Ireland and India, I consider Thapar-Björkert and Ryan’s article ‘Mother India / Mother Ireland’, which examines comparisons of national discourse and its effect on women during the countries’ independence movements, to be an important text that compares nationalists struggles in Ireland and India and how discourses of the nation-state continue to shape women’s lives today.⁸¹

A great deal of research has also been done literary connections between Ireland and India that stemmed from colonial and postcolonial history. Julia Wright’s *Ireland,*

⁷⁸ Clair Wills, “‘And Then There Was India’: Imagining India and Ireland in the 1940s’, *Media History* 15, no. 4 (2009): 423–437; Clair Wills, ‘Passage to England’, *Times Literary Supplement*, August 30, 2017, Accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/punjabi-immigrants-stories/>.

⁷⁹ Boehmer, *Empire*.

⁸⁰ Tadhg Foley and Maureen O’Connor, ed., *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); Kate O’Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections 1919–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁸¹ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, ‘Mother’, 301–313.

India and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature traces a range of social and political connections, and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford examines W. B. Yeats's understandings of Hindu theosophy as well as his friendships and influences shared with Tagore and theosophist Mohini Chatterji, of whom Yeats wrote in the eponymous poem from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* published in 1933.⁸² The book also examines Yeats's interest in Indian culture as part of the Celtic Revival in Ireland.⁸³ In a similar line of inquiry to that of Cullingford, new research on the friendship, contrasts and engagements between Yeats and Tagore is underway in comparative Irish and Indian studies, such as in Ragini Mohite's recent doctoral thesis on nationhood and domesticity in their work.⁸⁴ More closely related to the efforts of my comparative study is the recent doctoral thesis by Tara Harney-Mahajan titled 'Queering Inheritance in Irish and Indian English Contemporary Fiction' which, like my own project, parallels case studies of contemporary women writers from Ireland and India to create a comparison of women's creative endeavours in these countries.⁸⁵

Scope and Contribution to Knowledge

The thesis creates a parallel between contemporary Irish and Indian poets in the ways that women respond to and challenge institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry. Previous studies in the field of comparative research on Ireland and India examine political, economic and historical parallels relating to imperialism, or they uncover interactions between people as well as ideas born out of colonial history. The only major exception to this line of inquiry is Lennon's *Irish Orientalism* that considers influences drawn from the East back to Ireland rather than connections and movements going in both directions. Aside from Harney-Mahajan's thesis which is not yet published, few studies I have discussed here draw comparisons specifically between women or women writers in Ireland and India. In the last fifteen years, Manuela Palacios, Laura Lojo, Mina Surjit Singh and Nidhi Mehta have undertaken

⁸² Julia Wright, *Ireland, India and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸³ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

⁸⁴ Ragini Mohite, 'Constructing the Modernist Self: Nationhood and Domesticity in the Writings of Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats', PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 2016.

⁸⁵ Tara Harney-Mahajan, 'Queering Inheritance in Irish and Indian English Contemporary Fiction', PhD Thesis, University of Connecticut, 2016. <http://english.uconn.edu/tara-harney-mahajan/>.

studies that compare women poets from Ireland or India with writers from other countries; however, projects that juxtapose women's poetry are few, suggesting that this rich field of feminist research is largely unexamined in the academy.⁸⁶ Some of the writers in this thesis find connections with people or cultures from Ireland or India. Bhatt, for example, travels to Ireland often and is a friend of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, a contemporary of Boland and McGuckian's, and Meehan is greatly influenced by Hindu symbolism and philosophy which is reflected in her portrayal of female incarceration in Ireland in her play *Cell* (2000).⁸⁷ Nonetheless, my thesis does not explore these kinds of interpersonal connections and relationships but focuses instead on parallels in women's responses to institutional practices.

My study of women poets offers an original contribution to the field of comparative research on Ireland and India in its scope that explores the work of seven writers and in the use of various methodologies that create a feminist approach to examining the poetry and literary careers of women from vastly different cultures. As I discussed in my analysis of critical research on Irish and Indian women's poetry, projects that recover women's writing and reflect of the creation of a national poetic canon have been underway simultaneously in Ireland and India since the 1990s. Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt work within these traditions to challenge the modes of representation that have defined women's lived experiences and change the portrayals of those experiences in contemporary poetry. The poets represent two generations of women publishing during the late twentieth century in Ireland and India. The first generation includes Eavan Boland and Kamala Das who began publishing in the 1960s. Closely tied in age and historical connections are Medbh McGuckian and Eunice de Souza, who began publishing in the 1970s and work in education—McGuckian as a poet and Poet-in-Residence at Queen's University Belfast, and de Souza as an editor of Indian women's literature and former Head of English at St. Xavier's College in Bombay. The second, slightly younger

⁸⁶ Palacios and Lojo, *Bonds*; Mina Surjit Singh, *Six Women Poets: A Cross-Cultural Study: Emily Dickinson, Sarjaini Naidu, Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das Surayya, Adrienne Rich, Mamta Kalia* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2003); Nidhi Mehta, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das: A Comparative Study of Confessional and Feminine Perspectives* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2016).

⁸⁷ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, email exchange with the poet, February 18, 2013; Paula Meehan, *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2000); Michael Pierse, *Writing Ireland's Working Class: Dublin After O'Casey* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 185–87.

generation of poets represented here includes Paula Meehan, Melanie Silgado and Sujata Bhatt, who, with the exception of Silgado, began publishing in the 1980s and continue to publish and engage with their respective communities today.

Although Boland and Das are somewhat older than the other poets I have selected, I felt that it was imperative to include their work because of the writers' literary achievements in poetry and prose and because of their roles as figureheads who opened literary spaces in their respective national traditions for other women to publish more broadly in the last sixty years. Kamala Das died in 2009, but texts such as Das's posthumous *Selected Poems* have brought her work to younger generations of critics and readers of Indian women's poetry on the subcontinent and abroad. In the last months of writing this thesis in 2017, Eunice de Souza passed away not even a year after the publication of her well-received new collection *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (2016). Indian literary criticism has only just begun to place de Souza in a national canon. The historical framework for this project is the period between 1979 and the early 2000s. Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt were publishing extensively during the 1980s and 1990s, and as I argue throughout the thesis, these writers were engaged poetically with social and political concerns of the time.

Methodologies and the Value of the Comparative Mode

This project uses seven case studies and various methodologies to juxtapose political, social, cultural and religious pressures placed on Irish and Indian women poets and their careers as writers. By using a combination of approaches, I examine how each poet challenges or works within institutions of the nation-state or publishing industry to change its treatment or representations of women. Each comparative analysis began with an examination of poetry and themes arising from the poet's work. From there, I explored historical, political and social narratives that informed the poetry and as well as feminist and cultural theories that would create a cross-national comparison of women's histories, texts, and experiences. In the chapters that examine institutional practices of the publishing industry, I used archival research, interviews and book histories to analyze McGuckian's career, and in relation to de Souza and Silgado, I looked at creative industry practices that affect the publication of women's writing in India. In addition to these layers of interdisciplinary study, I conducted archival research at the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester in Manchester,

UK, where I examined manuscripts and correspondence on Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan and Sujata Bhatt in the Carcanet Press Archives. All of the writers (with the exception of Silgado who has remained out of the public sphere for almost thirty years) have openly discussed their careers in interviews, online columns, or in correspondence I found in archives. I attempt to foreground each poet's voice, stories, memories and understanding of her personal and political agenda as a writer to draw attention to the intersections that have shaped her career, but also to indicate her intentions for writing poetry in the first place.

My methodologies—textual analysis, archival studies and print history—are integrated to construct a conscientious and original feminist approach to the work of contemporary Irish and Indian women poets, one that takes into consideration the personal and professional developments of each writer but also underscores her movement within literary, cultural and political networks of late twentieth-century Ireland or India. In many cases I use the individual poem text as a means of exploring key issues related to the poet's concerns as a writer. For example, in Chapter 2 which examines Medbh McGuckian's publishing history, I chose to analyze poems that were pivotal for her career such as the piece 'The Flitting' which won the National Poetry Competition in 1979 and led to McGuckian's being published on the Oxford Poets list. I also examine the poem 'On Ballycastle Beach' from McGuckian's title collection published in 1988 within the context of correspondence, manuscript materials and paratexts I found in the archives at Emory University and Oxford University Press. My examination of the poem within its broader print history is used to explore challenges McGuckian faced in her literary and political development as a poet. Comparably, I analyze the poem 'An Introduction' from Kamala Das's early career as a point of entry into my examination of Das's multiple personae as an artist and public figure in Indian society. Often seen as a strictly biographical poem that 'introduced' Das to her first readers in 1960s India, I argue that a postcolonial autobiographical reading of the poem—one that takes into consideration the intersectional realities and multiple dimensions of the postcolonial subject—is a more appropriate method of examining Das's confessional poems. In both cases, the lyric poem lends itself to personal and political interpretations that I use to build a critical narrative about the poets' creative development.

My textual analysis is connected with cultural and feminist theories that I believe align my readings of the poems with the women's political and social

engagements as writers. The chapter on McGuckian's publishing history was constructed from periods of archival research in the US and the UK and my analysis of transitional periods in her career was informed by interviews with McGuckian herself as well as her publisher Peter Fallon, which I conducted in March 2012 while I was completing postgraduate study in Ireland. These conversations were later supplemented by interviews undertaken during a period of fieldwork in St. Louis, Missouri in November 2015 where I met with Dillon Johnston and Guinn Batten, the former publisher and editor of Wake Forest University Press, who shared with me materials on McGuckian's *The Soldiers of Year II* (2002) as well memories of their time working for the Press. Batten and Fallon also wrote me letters about McGuckian's readership in North America and Europe which supported my research on the final section of Chapter 2 that compares McGuckian's later publications from two different cultural and geographical contexts. The process of undertaking archival studies was extensive and, at times, perplexing. Although the Emory University and Oxford University Press archives are well-organized, I felt it necessary to create my own biographical and publishing timelines of McGuckian's career based on letters, articles and manuscripts I found in both places, and inevitably, there were pieces of her publishing history I could not recover. I photographed and documented all the material I used, but my findings were so extensive that much of my analysis needed to be summarized or condensed in order to create a single, cohesive chapter on McGuckian's early career. I used a similar archival approach to my examination of de Souza's and Silgado's print history in Chapter 3, but in quite the opposite case to my study of McGuckian, I struggled to find biographical information on the poets as well as interviews and relevant literary criticism on their work, a point which I discuss at greater length in my introduction to their careers in that chapter.

The use of print history is most evident in my analysis of de Souza's and Silgado's early careers in Bombay, but it is a methodological approach that I employed throughout my development of this project. There is a great deal of literary criticism on several of the poets in this study, a statement that is particularly true in the case of the Irish writers, but there is a lack of literature to date that places Boland's, McGuckian's, Meehan's, Das's, de Souza's, Silgado's and Bhatt's creative trajectories as poets in conjunction and conversation with the experiences of women writing from comparable political and social contexts of another nation-state. My integration of textual analysis, close readings of the poem text, archival studies and

print history as methodological approaches offers a postcolonial feminist reading of women's poetry that answers to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's appeal to recognize the 'complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes'.⁸⁸ In her prominent piece of feminist scholarship 'Under Western Eyes', Mohanty warns readers and researchers of the problems of homogenizing women's experiences of cultural, religious and patriarchal 'oppression'. She argues for the implementation of research practices that separate the 'Third World Woman'—'a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses' from 'women'—who are 'real, material subjects of their collective histories'.⁸⁹ Irish women are not often studied as Third World women, but I believe their experience of gendered nationalism in the creation of the Irish nation-state set in motion national and religious discourses that limit women's rights and responses to institutional practices in a way that make their experiences comparable to that of Indian women.

Indian women have long been studied in the Third World context, but it was not until the 1990s and early 2000s that critics of Irish women's poetry began to theorize Irish women's historical silences in the national canon by reading their work through a postcolonial feminist lens. Colin Graham, Eóin Flannery, Emer Nolan and Pilar Villar-Argáiz, among many others, have read Irish women's literature through theories of subalternity, female agency, and self-representation that were developed by postcolonial feminist theorists Gayatri Spivak and Mohanty. Graham, Flannery, Nolan, Villar-Argáiz and others map Irish women's lives against the backdrop of colonial history and postcolonial studies by applying theories used to examine systems of oppression for Indian women to the experiences of Irish women writers; however, these critics do not go so far as to compare the lives and writing of women in Ireland with those in India, as I do in this project.⁹⁰ By integrating varied

⁸⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 335.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988): 66–111. Colin Graham, 'Subalternity and Gender: Problems of Postcolonial Irishness', *Theorizing Ireland*, Edited by Claire Connolly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 150–53; Eóin Flannery, *Ireland and Postcolonial Studies: Theory, Discourse, Utopia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 146–181; Emer Nolan, 'Postcolonial Literary Studies, Nationalism, and Feminist Critique in Contemporary

methodological approaches in my analysis of women's poetry, I draw parallels between Irish and Indian history in the institutional practices that have shaped women's lives, and I also emphasize each poet's ideological differences that have influenced her career and motivations for writing. My analysis foregrounds the poets' self-presentations as writers working within local and global networks, and it acknowledges the multiple dimensions that define the poets' self-representations in their work and the way that women poets perceive their own intersectional identities and experiences.

The final and most imperative methodology I used was the comparative mode through which I paired women poets from Ireland and India. The comparative method is valuable because it foregrounds distinct parallels in the institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry that shaped women's experiences and ability to get published in the 1980s and 1990s. By aligning the work of women poets alongside contemporaries of comparable classes, religions and political interests, I demonstrate the ways that Irish and Indian women have challenged and worked within institutions to recover women's writing in Ireland and India but also how poets have worked to change literary representations of women in the nation-state. The comparative mode allows me to align postcolonial feminist approaches to women's poetry with an analysis of the poet's biography and creative development. These approaches and points of focus in my examination of women's writing can be allied to acknowledge the diversity of postcolonial production and the intersection of political and experiential positions of contemporary women poets in Ireland and India.

I have paired poets based on the institutional practices they dispute. I look at how Boland and Bhatt represent women in the Irish or Indian nation-state in their poetry and how Meehan and Das respond to practices of the nation-state through their own voices as poets and their activism in Dublin and Kerala, respectively. Chapters 2 and 3 are coupled to showcase each poet's publishing history and the challenges she faced in bringing her poetry, or those of other women, to national and international audiences. Chapter 2 examines McGuckian's early career by using archival research undertaken at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University in Atlanta, US, as well as the poet's correspondence with her

Ireland', *Éire-Ireland* 42, no. 1 and 2 (2007): 336–361; Pilar Villar-Argáiz, *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company 2008): 9–60.

publishers archived at Oxford University Press in Oxford, UK. Chapter 3 pairs Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado because they are good friends whose literary careers are closely entwined. McGuckian, de Souza, and Silgado are Catholic poets whose careers I track between the 1970s and early 2000s; the chapters on their publishing histories parallel journeys to publication that cross geographical and cultural borders.

Chapter Synopses

The first chapter of the thesis brings together the works of Sujata Bhatt and Eavan Boland by examining the ways that they represent women's lives in the Irish and Indian nation-states. These poets share important parallels for a comparative analysis. Bhatt and Boland have maintained long-standing relationships with Carcanet Press in the UK, have family ties to national politics and have spent the majority of their lives outside of Ireland or India. This chapter creates a comparison in the ways that Bhatt and Boland 'write back' to their home countries by depicting representations of Indian and Irish women that work within and, at times, against institutional practices of the nation-state. Their depictions of women's lived experiences are also politicized by their attempts to write themselves and women in their families into their respective national histories.

The second chapter explores an archival examination of Medbh McGuckian's early career with Oxford University Press in the UK, the Gallery Press in Ireland and Wake Forest University Press in the US. Using correspondence with her publishers housed at Emory University and Oxford University Press, I examine McGuckian's development of her literary career during the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. McGuckian is not often read as a 'political poet' when compared to the more overt observations of her male peers writing in the North, but the aim of this chapter is to align McGuckian's development of her poetry and early career with her political engagement as a woman writing during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In doing so, I argue that the political undertones of her work and the partitions of her own national identity can be seen in her poetry published between the 1970s and 2002.

The third chapter that pairs Eunice de Souza's and Melanie Silgado's careers is coupled with the previous chapter on McGuckian in its critical examination of the pressures placed on women as they attempt to publish poetry and enter a national literary canon. The chapter traces de Souza's early career as a poet in 1970s Bombay and her transition to her work as an editor of Indian literature and women's poetry.

De Souza's enthusiasm for bringing the work of women writers to national and international audiences contrasts with the career of her friend and former student Silgado. Silgado was very involved in poetry publishing in India and the UK as a poet, editor and also publisher of a small poetry collective in Bombay. Yet, after moving to the UK in the 1980s, Silgado stopped publishing after she produced just two collections of poems. This chapter compares the different ways that Indian women poets respond to pressures placed on their careers by practices of the publishing industry and how de Souza and Silgado, in their own ways, resist those practices.

The final chapter of the thesis returns to institutional practices of the nation-state by comparing how Paula Meehan and Kamala Das voice the experiences of dispossessed individuals in their respective communities in their poetry, but also in their activism. A number of Meehan's early poems portray representations of poverty, dispossession and incarceration to commemorate lives that have been overlooked by practices of the state, and her work in prisons, schools and recent tenure as the Ireland Professor of Poetry attests to her commitment to 'voicing' experiences of dispossession in Ireland. Comparably, Das is often read as a confessional poet, and while her lyrical style connects with aspects of her life, I argue that Das poetry voices the multiplicities and diversities of Indian women's experiences. She wrote about controversial subjects of her poetry and prose—extramarital affairs, sex, female masturbation and sexual abuse—and I see these depictions of a woman's life as closely connected with her political agenda to help women, children and those in poverty in Kerala. In this final chapter, I bring together the youngest of the Irish poets and eldest among the Indian writers included in this study to create a parallel in the ways that Irish and Indian women resist institutional practices of the state throughout history.

CHAPTER 1

Representations of Women and the Nation-State in the Poetry of Sujata Bhatt and Eavan Boland

Mother tongue, father tongue –
when the child started to speak
she used all her words at once,
at once in a rush: *pani, water, Wasser*.
When the child started to speak
she meant *fish* and *Fisch*.

How many languages must you learn
before you can understand your own?

When she lived on a mountain
among people whose language
she did not know, her own language turned
into a festival of fruits, and a festival of
birds.

Sujata Bhatt, 'Truth is Mute', *Poppies in Translation* (2015)

What do we grieve for
when we leave a country
and live for years in
another one?

I was a child.
I came to the New World.
I neither knew nor was told
what I know now:

It is not the physical
or literal differences between
the ground we stand on
that marks loss

but what is severed in us
by the sound
of endings falling into
their lesser selves forever

Eavan Boland, 'Port of New York: 1956',
A Woman Without a Country (2014)

The excerpts from Sujata Bhatt's 'Truth is Mute' and Eavan Boland's 'Port of New York: 1956' that appear as epigraphs come from the poets' most recent collections *Poppies in Translation* (2015) and *A Woman Without a Country* (2014), respectively, and were published by Carcanet Press six months apart between autumn 2014 and spring 2015. Although Bhatt and Boland represent vastly different cultural and social backgrounds in the fact that Bhatt is Indian and Boland Irish, their poetry shares themes of dislocation from a homeland as well as representations of personal memories, women's lives in Ireland and India, and references to nationhood and nationality that have informed their careers as writers. In 'Truth is Mute', Bhatt explicates the problems of language when one lives in many cultures, a subject that she has carried forward in her poetry from the time her first collection *Brunizem* was published in 1988. The child's experience of learning language—'*pani, water, Wasser*'—alludes to the three cultural backgrounds—Gujarati (and Hindi), English and German—that have shaped Bhatt's life as a contemporary Indian poet. The child's

movement between languages suggests the fluidity of every word she says, but the speaker of the poem projects onto the child her own anxieties: ‘How many languages must you learn | before you understand your own?’. Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, Gujarat on the Pakistan-India border, and she spent her childhood moving between India and the US. Bhatt now resides in Germany, and though she is fluent in the three languages represented in the poem, much of her work continues to dwell on a lost childhood in India, a sense of dislocation from home and longing for national and cultural identities that are fractured or irretrievable. The many voices and translations that arise in *Poppies in Translation* express not only the complexities of language when one is multicultural but also the importance of a personal history for the child learning language and for Bhatt herself who attempts to preserve such memories—but also her own cultural heritage—in her poems. Bhatt has published eight collections of poetry with Carcanet in her nearly thirty-year career, and we might read the child’s language that turns into a ‘festival of fruits, and a festival of birds’ as the poet’s celebration of multiculturalism but also Bhatt’s tendency to idealize her first culture—that of India—in her work.

The theme of dislocation that is so pronounced in Eavan Boland’s ‘Port of New York: 1956’ is familiar to readers who have followed her publications since the 1960s. As is the case with Bhatt, Boland expresses a dislocation from a national identity, portrayed in this excerpt that recounts her memory of leaving Dublin with her family to live in London and then New York City. Like the speaker who ‘neither knew nor was told | what I know now’, the personae of Boland’s poems reflect nostalgically on a childhood that is lost; they are also exigent in a desire to make whole a national identity that is ‘severed’ and irrecoverable. Many of Boland’s poems return to this motif of ‘exile’, a term both poets use to describe their separation from Ireland or India. I draw attention to this theme in their poetry to suggest that it is ‘exile’—a separation from one’s national identity—that underscores and informs the poets’ representations of women’s lives in India and Ireland.¹

Having established long careers with Carcanet Press in the UK, Bhatt and Boland have attracted similar audiences in Europe and North America, and they share

¹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 35–37; Vicki Bertram, ‘Sujata Bhatt in Conversation’, *PN Review* 138 27, no. 4 (2009): 2.

other discernible connections that help locate their work in a comparative lens. They have done poetry readings together in Ireland, and both attended the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop—Bhatt for a Master of Fine Arts and Boland to teach on the programme. Bhatt's archived correspondence at the John Rylands Library at Manchester indicates that she has followed Boland's poetry closely over the years, for she often wrote to Michael Schmidt, the publisher of Carcanet, requesting copies of Boland's books as soon as they came out.² Their histories with the foremost poetry publisher in the UK as well as themes of exile, dislocation and representations of women in their home countries proffer important reasons for placing Bhatt and Boland together in a collateral study of Indian and Irish women poets.

This chapter explores the ways that Sujata Bhatt and Eavan Boland illustrate and complicate representations of Indian and Irish women in their respective nation-states. Because they are dislocated from a national culture and heritage in their lives abroad, both poets are inclined to 'write back' or idealize their heritage by representing the effects of institutional practices of the nation-state on women's lives in their home countries. Their attempts to 'speak for' women's experiences manifest in the overtly political representations of women who are often placed in settings that depict a traditional, or romanticized, version of life in India or Ireland. Returning here to the politics of women's writing that I discussed in my introduction, I argue that Bhatt and Boland enter into the poem as the speaking voice that gives agency to the subjects about which they write; however, the results of such representations materialize differently for each poet. Both writers come from political backgrounds that inform the subjects of their work—members of Bhatt's family were close friends with Gandhi and Boland is the daughter of the first Irish diplomat to the UK—and these political and, even nationalist, family backgrounds are adapted and altered in the political agendas that arise in their poems. This chapter takes their experiences as diaspora poets who live in two or more cultures as a starting point for examining Bhatt's and Boland's traditional—but, as I argue, immensely politicized—representations of women. I begin by providing a history of women's lives in the Irish and Indian nation-states before exploring how each poet politicizes representations of the female body and sexuality and how she portrays motherhood and women's

² Sujata Bhatt, Undated letter to Michael Schmidt, CPA Accession 4-3 Box 3 and letters to Schmidt, Dated July 24, 1994 and February 23, 1994, CPA Accession 6-3 Box 27, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

responsibilities in the home. The chapter then examines the politics of women and the nation-state in the more personal context of Bhatt's and Boland's diasporic childhoods to look at representations of their mothers and how each poet situates personal memories within a greater national history. This literary and sociological analysis of their poetry offers a politically-informed reading of the private subjects of their work, and in doing so, I compare Bhatt and Boland in their engagement with cultural politics and national history.

Women and the Nation-State

Before turning to the work of these poets, it is necessary to provide a more comprehensive background of women and the nation-state to explicate how national discourses have affected women's lives in India and Ireland. This comparative historical background proffers a deeper understanding of why Bhatt and Boland contend with national rhetoric and its consequences in their poetry. In *Woman – Nation – State* (1989), Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis define the nation-state as 'a particular "machinery" for the exercise of "government" over a given population, usually territorially or nationally defined'. The nation-state, in this rather broad context, can be read a 'body of institutions' which are organized around the 'intentionality of control with a given apparatus of enforcement'.³ In response to nationalist movements that occurred in India and Ireland at the turn of the twentieth-century, both countries exercised specific boundaries and regulations that defined the Republic but also delineated its respective national culture and traditions. Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Louise Ryan's essay 'Mother India/Mother Ireland' provides an informative starting point for comparing the effects of national discourse on women's lives in these countries. Their essay compares women's activism in the early twentieth century and explores women's involvement in Indian and Irish nationalist campaigns that were inherently connected with sexualized discourses of nationalism. This historical backdrop and nationalist resistance to British rule resulted in the conflation of woman and nation in the representation of Ireland as Mother Ireland and India as *Bharat Mata*. The perceptions of India and Ireland as mother figures affirmed specific roles for women in society who came to be seen as biological and cultural reproducers

³ Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Woman–Nation–State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 5.

of national ideals.⁴ Women's roles as mothers became particularly important during national resistance because the 'private domain [of the home was] permeable and part of larger public actions' during periods of political upheaval, and the 'domestic sphere' of the home became a space of political resistance that affirmed a national identity.⁵

In this historical context of the 1930s and 1940s, women's roles as mothers and homemakers became politicized by nationalist rhetoric of the nation-state.⁶ Partha Chatterjee argues that in newly-Independent India, the nationalist movement necessitated reforms to women's roles in the home and in the public domain which led to the social construct of the 'new woman', one who demonstrates 'new social forms of "disciplining"—of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene'. Women were not only expected to run their homes efficiently, but in a rapidly-changing nation, women were expected to quickly adapt to 'new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world'.⁷ The social construct of the new Indian women affirmed women's roles as the preservers of Indian ideals in that women were expected to show devotion to their husbands and children, reverence for their elders and other males, and maintain the home. As mothers, women were expected to instil Indian traditions and values in their children, who were perceived to be the future of the nation. Women were seen as 'nurturer[s] of civilization', and this idealized representation of motherhood became intertwined with nationalist rhetoric of *Bharat Mata*, a united motherland.⁸ The conflation of woman and nation inspired resistance to British rule in the public domain which, in turn, augmented the political and social significance of women's roles as mothers and homemakers in the private sphere. Instead of freeing women from the national representation of India as *Bharat Mata*, women in newly-Independent India became more closely tied to the domestic sphere in that they were seen not only as biological mothers and caregivers but also as preservers of Indian

⁴ Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Louis Ryan, 'Mother India / Mother Ireland: Comparative Gendered Dialogues of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Early 20th Century', *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 3 (2003): 304.

⁵ Ibid; Suruchi Thapar, 'Women as Activists: Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement', *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 81.

⁶ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, 'Mother', 304–5.

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, 'Colonial, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India', *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 629.

⁸ Thapar, 'Women', 88.

culture and traditions.⁹ In her poems, Bhatt engages with this history through gendered narratives of the Indian mother figure as well as through representations of a woman's place in the home. Her depictions of Indian women's roles in society allow for a political and social reading of her poems which examine the Indian female subject.

Compared with the case of India, sexualized discourse of the Irish nation as Mother Ireland is seen to be problematic by a number of critics including Boland herself who argues that the conflation of women's bodies and roles in society with nationalists representations of Mother Ireland sought to simplify both and obscure the reality of women's lives.¹⁰ Gerardine Meaney has examined how the conflation of woman and nation in Irish national discourse was imbued with religious symbolism and ideals of the Catholic Church, specifically the figure of the Virgin Mary that overlapped with the representation of Mother Ireland so that the nation was venerated as a self-sacrificing and racially pure mother of her citizens.¹¹ As nationalist and religious symbolism of the mother figure as nation became intertwined, women's roles as mothers and their places in the home became intrinsically connected with discourses of the nation-state. Women were perceived to be biological reproducers, as well as the preservers of Irish culture and traditions, further advancing gender constructs regarding familial roles and women's places in society.¹²

As I discussed in the introduction, policies set out in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have changed women's positions in Irish society. Women in Ireland now have the right to contraception and divorce as well as higher status in the workforce and educational system, but political and religious ideals continue to hinder women's rights to reproduction and on a more social level, their roles within the family and in the home, which is true also in the case of India.¹³ However, Heather Ingman notes that motherhood and domesticity remain at the heart of Irish nationhood which inhibits significant changes to women's places in Irish society.¹⁴ Boland's poems examine the complex relationship between women and the nation-state, as she employs national representations of the female figure to depict women's lived

⁹ Thapar and Ryan, 'Mother', 304.

¹⁰ Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), 7.

¹¹ Gerardine Meaney, 'Race, Sex and Nation', *The Irish Review* (1986-) 35 (2007): 51.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ Meaney, 'Sex', 230.

¹⁴ Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 24.

experiences. She purposefully politicizes representations of motherhood and domesticity to complicate the cultural and literary representation of the nation as Mother Ireland. Like Bhatt, Boland also portrays private subjects in her poems—childbirth and memories of her mother, as examples—to account for the realities of women’s lives in the Irish nation-state.

Bhatt’s Representations of the Female Body, Sexuality and Reproduction

Although Bhatt and Boland write in a contemporary context that is quite distanced from the discourses of the nation-state that were so definitive for Indian and Irish women in the early twentieth-century, the consequences of this highly politicized history continue to affect women’s lives, and both poets seem to be exceedingly aware of their histories and social politics. Bhatt’s and Boland’s interest in representing the lives of Irish and Indian women derive also from the poets’ social backgrounds that give them a sense of privilege as voices for women’s stories. Bhatt’s poetry is influenced by her high-caste Brahmin Hindu background, and she stated in an interview with Vicki Bertram that she attempts to ‘break the silence’ surrounding women’s lived experiences by depicting private subjects of menstruation, gestation, parturition, and female sexuality, as well as women’s roles as the preservers of Indian culture and traditions.¹⁵ As I stated in the introduction, Boland has written extensively on the difficulties she faced in her early career as a poet in Ireland because the traditional literary representations of women that placed them as the objects of poems rather than the voices of its stories. Boland positions her poems within and against the Irish historical context because of her interest in ‘writing back’ to a national culture and heritage, but we can also link this interest to her privileged upbringing as the daughter of an Irish diplomat. Her family’s involvement in the establishment of the Republic as individuals who ‘represent’ Ireland abroad certainly can be read in the politicized nature of her poetry. Boland’s poems employ female symbols of the nation as mother figure, and she portrays her own experiences of motherhood and domesticity to explore the obscurity of women’s experiences in a national tradition. By creating a comparison between Bhatt and Boland in their representations of the female figure, I argue that even while they engage with gender issues, their poems are

¹⁵ Bertram, ‘Bhatt’, 1, 8.

entrenched in social and historical constructs created by the Indian and Irish nation-states.

I begin by looking at Bhatt's and Boland's representations of the female body in the nation-state. In Bhatt's 'Udaylee' *Brunizem* (1988) and Boland's 'Mastectomy' from her early volume *In Her Own Image* (1980), we can observe politicized depictions of social limitations placed on female sexuality and reproduction.¹⁶ Bhatt's *Brunizem*, named after a type of soil found in North America, Europe and Asia, portrays memories of her childhood in India and the poet's sense of loss in moving to the United States and later Germany. Bhatt's sense of 'exile' enables her to re-imagine her youth had she stayed in India that comes out in representations of women in her homeland. The speaker of 'Udaylee' along with other women in her family stay in a room separated from the rest of their home during menstruation. The title is first written in Gujarati script then in English, and Bhatt translates 'Udaylee' in the postscript as 'untouchable when one is menstruating'.¹⁷ Even from these brief details of poem, we can see the way that Bhatt intentionally puts forward a political reading of a topic that is not often written about in Indian literature. The Gujarati script of the title is, of course, unintelligible to Western readers who make up a large part of her audience, suggesting that there is something unknowable, something that a reader outside of the specific Indian culture portrayed cannot grasp. In addition to this, Bhatt's translation of the title as a reference to being 'untouchable' immediately brings to mind the social hierarchy of the caste system in India, which was formally revoked by the Constitution but still carries on as a social system across the country. 'Untouchable' refers to the Dalits, the lowest social group in the caste-system, and the women's placement in this group, even temporarily, suggests the limitations of the roles in Indian society. It is important to consider that Dalits are always untouchable but women of higher-castes are not. Most readers of 'Udaylee' would not be aware of these intersectional differences and would, therefore, read Bhatt's representation of women's seclusion during menstruation as an experience shared by many Indian women.

Given the social context inscribed in the poem, we can read 'Udaylee' as a representation of an extremely traditional practice in some Indian societies, but also

¹⁶ Sujata Bhatt, *Brunizem* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), 15; Eavan Boland, *In Her Own Image* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1980), 19.

¹⁷ Bertram, 'Bhatt', 1.

one that celebrates menstruation and female sexuality. The poem begins with the following lines:

Only paper and wood are safe
from a menstruating woman's touch.
so they built this room
for us, next to the cowshed.
Here, we're permitted to write
letters, to read, and it gives a chance
for our kitchen-scarred fingers to heal.¹⁸

Here, the social and physical conditions surrounding the practice of Udaylee are described in the things the women can touch and do, but also women have a space where they are released from daily chores to rest and be creative. The speaker appears to embrace her untouchability, whatever the social status around it. Still, Bhatt deliberately leaves the speaker and other women in the poem unnamed. For a reader who is not familiar with this custom followed in certain Brahmin communities, one might assume that the lived experience portrayed here suggests physical and social limitations placed on all Indian women. I read this poem within a specific social context to explore Bhatt's politicized representations of women's menstruation and sexuality. In doing so, I assert that Bhatt purposefully chooses a very traditional example of an Indian custom to subsume the realities of other women's experiences.

There are limitations to the seclusion these women experience in their practice of Udaylee. Only certain materials like 'paper and wood' are safe for the women's touch and men in her family 'built this room | for us, next to the cowshed' where the women must stay until their menstrual cycles are over. The social boundaries between men and women are symbolized by the physical confines of the room, and its location next to the cowshed is ambiguous. Bhatt's Western readers would take its placement as a sign that women are seen as a subordinate sex. Alternatively, readers familiar with Udaylee or Hindu culture would perceive the shed's location, which implies women's positions in society, to be held in high regard because the cow is a sacred in the Hindu tradition. It seems, at first, that the menstruating women are passive, having been placed in this room, but the speaker and other women demonstrate agency in their actions and control over their bodies. While they remain physically and socially

¹⁸ Bhatt, *Brunizem*, 15.

limited during menstruation, they do not perceive it as a negative experience, but rather enjoy the chance ‘for our kitchen-scarred fingers to heal’. Their adherence to the custom, however, might indicate to readers unfamiliar with the custom that women who practice Udaylee accept social limitations that might seem egregious to a non-Indian.

Taking a sociological reading of this poem, I turn to research done by H. E. Ullrich on Brahmin customs relating to menstruation. She writes that according to Hindu beliefs, ‘reproductive capacity, as manifested by menstruation, was the only area in which men could not control women’.¹⁹ This a rather partial reading of the practice of Udaylee, but we can observe women’s sense of power or ‘control’ in the poem in that menstruation gives menstruating women freedom from chores and mental space for creativity. Ullrich states that while menstruation held both religious and cultural significance, it indicated a woman’s ability to bear children, which was her most important duty as a wife. Contrastingly, menstrual blood may also be perceived as ‘a failure to become pregnant’, depending on the woman’s circumstances, her age, and whether or not she had already borne children.²⁰ Although women were restricted by their responsibilities within the home and specifically to their roles as mothers and wives, menstruation marks female sexuality and highlights the importance of their roles as childbearers and thereby also reproducers of Indian culture.

The speaker associates physical changes in her body during menstruation with images of nature to demonstrate control over her own sexuality, as seen in the following lines:

When I can’t sleep, I hold
the conch shell to my ear
just to hear my blood rushing,
a song throbbing,
a slow drumming within my head, my hips.²¹

In this metaphor of woman’s menstrual blood flowing like the ocean, the speaker suggests that she takes pleasure in her body and her ability to bear children. The

¹⁹ H.E. Ullrich, ‘Menstrual Taboos Among Havik Brahmin Women: A Study of Ritual Change’, *Sex Roles* 26, no. 1/2 (1992): 28.

²⁰ Ulrich, ‘Menstrual’, 20.

²¹ Bhatt, *Brunizem*, 15.

‘rushing’, ‘throbbing’ and ‘drumming’ is indicative of sexual pleasure which the speaker correlates with metaphors for sexual intercourse and gestation. Her sexuality and appreciation for how her body moves, becomes a metaphor for intercourse as the ‘seaweed’ moves from the ocean to the shore, exposing ‘newly laid turtle eggs’, symbolic of the speaker’s own fertility.²² The poet’s celebration of female sexuality in relation to intercourse and gestation suggests that the women maintain control over their bodies and future (though not over menstruation itself), even while they may be physically confined by society.

While ‘Udaylee’ refers specifically to cultural practices among Brahmins possibly within Bhatt’s own family and community, the poem demonstrates women’s agency in spite of social limitations. Their sexuality is marked by menstruation, and the poem’s frequent references to fertility suggest the importance of sexual purity in Indian society. Bhatt’s depiction of the women who practise Udaylee follows national representations of women as biological and cultural reproducers, who, although limited by the practice of seclusion, demonstrate agency and appreciation for their sexuality and social roles. The women’s acceptance of their roles as biological mothers and metaphorical reproducers of Indian culture is implied by the speaker’s address, either orally or on paper, of women’s private and undisclosed experience of seclusion. The women demonstrate agency in the performance of their gender roles. Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler argue that gender is not a ‘stable identity’ but one that is developed in our engagement with others. Butler summarizes the term ‘gender’ in her belief that it is ‘instituted through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’, meaning that individuals are not strictly defined as male and female, but rather individuals take up the practices of gender through their actions.²³ If one’s gender is performed, then we can observe that the speaker demonstrates her own performative agency in her choices to move, write and express her experience of menstruation. She seems to appreciate her sexuality and, with it, her expected gender role as an Indian woman. Readers of ‘Udaylee’ in Europe and North America would likely be unfamiliar with the social backdrop of the poem, which politicizes Bhatt’s

²² Ibid.

²³ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

representation of menstruation and the speaker's observance of the custom. Readers of the poem might assume that Bhatt is referring to a practise that is observed throughout India, rather than one practiced by a very specific community, and it is possible that Bhatt even intentionally generalizes this perception of women's experiences to make the portrayal of female agency even more striking.

Boland's fifth collection *In Her Own Image* is a distinctly political book in its representations of women's bodies and female sexuality. Throughout the collection, Boland portrays the female body in disturbing ways that are not often discussed in social contexts. The speakers of poems such as 'Anorexia' and 'Menses' as well as 'Mastectomy' which I compare with Bhatt's 'Udaylee' intimate descriptions of violence, sexual control and self-hatred, which is not to speak of the actual topics themselves that are not often discussed in Irish or other societies. Boland politicizes the female body throughout the collection to examine what Pilar Villar-Argáiz calls, 'the effects of traditional sexual representations of women' on Irish women's lives.²⁴ In 'Mastectomy', Boland portrays the speaker's reaction to the surgical removal of her breast. She also interweaves the figure's body with that of the nation as Mother Ireland to complicate the relationship between women and the nation-state but also to depict how violations against the body politic 'violate' women's bodies by limiting their sexual and reproductive rights. Through the conflation of the speaker's body with the metaphorical 'body' of the nation, Boland works within limitations of cultural and national representations of women to demonstrate the repression of women's rights but also the figure's agency when it comes to her sexuality. 'Mastectomy' is more overtly political than Bhatt's 'Udaylee' in its criticism of how women are treated in a national context, but I extrapolate a comparison between the two in Boland's response to cultural and social representations of women.

The conceit of the female body as nation becomes most evident in the conflated representation of the woman's body with that of a desecrated land:

I could see
through them
to the years

²⁴ Pilar Villar-Argáiz, *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2008), 89.

opening
their arteries,
fields gulching

into trenches,
cuirasses stenching
a mulch of heads.²⁵

Boland enters the poem as the voice of the forcefully-lacerated female figure whose body she merges with that of the nation as Mother Ireland. As the speaker watches the surgeons ‘opening | their arteries’, it is her body she describes, but also the nation whose arteries (as in channels, fields, trenches and ‘towns’) have been violated by war. Ireland experiences this loss both in the violation of her metaphorical ‘body’ and in the death of her men, the sons of her nation. Through the conflation of the speaker’s mastectomy with that of Mother Ireland, Boland appeals to national representations of the woman as a selfless mother figure. Yet, even while Boland works within the cultural representation of the woman as Mother Ireland, she attempts to illustrate how women continue to possess agency and power over their bodies.

The conflation of the speaker’s body with the nation undermines the woman’s personal violation and is depictive of the political repression of Irish women’s rights. As the woman expresses fear and resentment in response to the laceration, her body is broken down into parts: ‘My ears heard | their words’ and in reference to her breast, ‘I have stopped bleeding. | I look down. | It has gone.’²⁶ Neluka Silva notes the significance of perceiving the female body as a metonym for the nation, which in turn affect women’s experiences in the nation-state. Silva writes in *The Gendered Nation* (2004): ‘The body is often identified in terms of its reproductive organs—breasts or womb, and thus the erasure of its totality and individuality makes it apparent that female sexuality and mortality are not private entities but appropriated within public discourses’.²⁷ The speaker’s body is not her own but is seen as a public entity, not only to the ‘male surgeons’ in the poem, but the figure’s body is also transposed onto the nation as Mother Ireland violated by the colonizer. In this way, the physical

²⁵ Boland, *Image*, 19.

²⁶ Boland, *Image*, 21.

²⁷ Neluka Silva, *The Gendered Nation: Contemporary Writings from South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), 24.

laceration of the woman's body and metaphorical violation of the land as Mother Ireland suggests the intricate and consequential relationship between women and the nation-state and the political repression of Irish women's rights over their bodies.

Despite the speaker's circumstances, Boland employs the conceit of woman as nation to depict female agency and the speaker's desire to remain in control of her body. The speaker's sexuality is foregrounded even while her sexual organs are removed, as seen in the following lines:

blue-veined
white-domed
home

of wonder
and the wetness
of their dreams.²⁸

The speaker praises her body in spite of her shock and resentment after the mastectomy which indicates that she maintains sexual control over the male surgeons. The woman does not have agency in stopping the mastectomy but, through the conflation of her body with that of Mother Ireland, the figure becomes a national, physical and sexual home and homeland. Both physical and metaphorical female bodies may have been violated by 'the bladed men', 'the surgeon, | blade-handed, | standing there', but the woman's sexuality empowers her, giving her control over men in 'the wetness | of their dreams'. Reading the representation of the woman's breast as a 'white-domed | home', I turn to Meaney in 'Race, Sex and Nation' who argues that the conflation of Mother Ireland with Catholic doctrine deployed the Virgin Mary's status as the 'epitome of whiteness' that was seen to guarantee 'Irish (racial) purity'.²⁹ This racialization of the maternal body certainly had even more consequential effects on the cultural representations of women and, specifically women of colour, in Ireland. Given the speaker's satisfaction in describing her body as a 'wonder' in men's dreams, we might read this reference her 'white-domed' breast as following national representations of sexual and racial purity that would have rung true in the Ireland of the early 1980s when *In Her Own Image* was published.

²⁸ Boland, *Image*, 21.

²⁹ Meaney, 'Race', 52.

The speaker's body as a home 'of wonder' not only asserts the persuasive symbolism of the nation as Mother Ireland, but the metaphor of the female body as body politic also underscores women's roles as biological reproducers and guarantors of racial purity in the nation-state. In reading women's agency in the poem, we can compare Boland's representation of sexualized agency with Bhatt's depiction of women finding respite in the practice of Udaylee. Following Butler's reading of female agency and the performance of sexuality, I push the metaphor of the speaker body in 'Mastectomy', and the nation she represents, so that Boland intimates a political reading of this conflation. Women are violated by the politics of social restrictions and by consequences of sexualized discourse of the nation-state. By entering the poem as the woman and nation, Boland works against historical and literary representations of Mother Ireland to suggest that women's lived experiences are greatly affected by the nation-state. Just as women in Bhatt's Udaylee' are perceived to be sexually pure in order to fulfil their roles as biological mothers of future citizens, the speaker's body in 'Mastectomy' is correlated with national and religious representations of women as self-sacrificing mothers. The conflation of woman and nation highlights the severity of the physical violation and its social limitations of the female body. Nevertheless, we might read the metaphor of the body/breast as home as one that gives women agency over their sexuality thereby elevating women's roles in Irish society, even though they are limited by the nation-state.

While Boland does not directly engage with issues related to women's rights in terms of abortion or contraception in the poem, it is clear that 'Mastectomy' examines the negative effects of social limitations on the female body because the conceit of woman as nation has detrimental effects on the figure's body and sexuality. Her body is confined by the conflation of the nation as a woman, yet she, as well as the women she represents, demonstrate agency in their desire to maintain control over their circumstances. Boland appears to perceive the speaker's experience of 'Mastectomy' to be symbolic of the repression of women's rights in Ireland. The poem remains deeply influenced and confined by the historical and social contexts of Ireland in 1970s and 1980s during which it was written, and therefore, it cannot be read as representative of all women's experiences throughout Irish history. In this way, the poem itself is hindered by social and historical constructs of the nation-state

because women's rights in Ireland as well as representations of women in the nation-state have continued to change since the publication of *In Her Own Image*.

Nonetheless, a comparison can be made between Boland's 'Mastectomy' and Bhatt's 'Udaylee' in that both poems explore methods through which women assert power and control over their bodies, even while they are restrained by Indian and Irish societies. 'Udaylee' examines the specific custom of seclusion by specific Brahmin castes in India, but Bhatt allows for ambiguities in the poem to engage with social issues and practices which place women in their social roles as biological mothers of the nation. By portraying how women in the poem follow national ideals found in Sita and the 'new woman' construct, Bhatt suggests that these women are restrained by social expectations of their roles as biological mothers and homemakers, but they continue to exercise agency and control over their sexuality. Boland's 'Mastectomy', in comparison, depicts the effects of national representations on the female body, which is seen through the conceit of Mother Ireland and that of the Virgin Mary, symbols created to heighten nationalist appeal but which compromise women's actual experiences in the nation-state. Through these representations, we see Bhatt's and Boland's interest in depicting women's lived experiences, but we must guard against positioning the poems as representative of every woman in their respective nation-states. By placing 'Udaylee' in the social backdrop of Bhatt's own experience as a Brahmin Hindu woman, and by looking at Boland's 'Mastectomy' as a representation of the female speaker as Mother Ireland and as a response to Irish women's experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, we can begin to place both poems in their appropriate social and historical contexts. Still Bhatt and Boland depict representations of women that follow social constructs of the nation-states, in the figure's expressions of sexuality. Through representations of extremely private subjects in a traditional—and in Boland's 'Mastectomy'—violent, context, Bhatt and Boland work within representations of the nation-state or national culture to portray women's agency despite limitations placed on them by society.

Bhatt's Portrayal of Motherhood and Domesticity

While Bhatt and Boland have distinct ways of portraying restrictions on women's bodies in their poems, we may find parallels in how the poets examine representations of motherhood as well as women's roles as homemakers and preservers of a 'traditional' way of life that celebrates or preserves Indian or Irish traditions and

culture. Although individual experiences of motherhood and domesticity differ across race, ethnicity, class, caste and other factors, we can still draw a comparison in the way that Bhatt and Boland portray women's roles as mothers and their places in the home. Bhatt's poems about Indian motherhood explore family dynamics and depict representations of her own mother as the preserver of Indian traditions and culture in their lives abroad. Contrastingly, Boland's poems about motherhood portray her desire to bring women's experiences, particularly her own mother's life as an artist, into a national history. In writing about domesticity, Boland correlates the domestic space of the house with that of her homeland, as she confronts her sense of 'exile' from Ireland and a woman's place in a national poetic tradition.³⁰

Regarding Indian women's roles in the family, Suruchi Thapar (later Thapar-Björkert) analyzes the importance of Indian motherhood in familial and national contexts. She states that the Indian family, 'enshrined as the fundamental unit of society, is assigned a metonymical value and the nuclear family in particular is projected as the microcosm of the Nation'.³¹ This idea that the family unit is a microcosm of the nation suggests that individual roles within a family not only affect internal relationships but also reflect how well members preserve and pass on Indian traditions and values to future generations. Given this metonymical and political representation of family life, we can read Bhatt's seemingly personal poems about her mother and other women's experiences of motherhood and domesticity against the backdrop a national history.

In the Irish context of women's roles in the family and the home, Gerardine Meaney notes that nationalist rhetoric and Catholicism sought to portray the importance of women's roles in maintaining Irish culture and traditions. She states:

In ancient Ireland, as in the Ireland of today, all roads seemed to lead to the hearth and the home. The result was an exceptionally wholesome family life that leavened the entire nation. This devotion to the principles of home life explains the unusual moral rectitude of Irish maidenhood.³²

As in the case of India, the home and family life were seen to be at the centre of Irish culture, as this is where national ideals were created and passed on. Women's roles as

³⁰ Boland, *Object*, 45.

³¹ Thapar, 'Activists', 30.

³² Meaney, 'Race', 54.

mothers, caregivers and homemakers upheld internal dynamics and family values, which emphasized women's places in the home and therefore diminished their contributions to the public realm. In the last thirty years, there has been a shift in perceptions about Irish women's roles in the public and private domains, but women still face challenges in overcoming gender disparities.³³ Although women's rights have changed since Boland began writing, her poems attempt to bridge the gap between representations of women and their lived experiences.³⁴ In this section, I draw a comparison between Bhatt's and Boland's representations of motherhood and domesticity by looking at how the poets depict women's roles as mothers and their perceptions of 'home' life. Bhatt's poems consider the dynamics of the Indian family unit and women's roles as mothers and preservers of Indian traditions. Boland, however, places women's roles as mothers and homemakers within a national context in order to depict the significance of women's places in art and history and her own sense of exile from her homeland and a national tradition.

If the Indian family is a microcosm of the nation, then Bhatt's representations of women's roles as mothers and her portrayals of her own family may be seen as indicative, to a certain extent, of what other Indian women experience in their roles in the home. Bhatt's poems about family life depict women as biological mothers of the nation who are perceived to be the preservers of Indian ideals such as devotion to their husbands, reverence for elders, as well as their responsibilities of maintaining the house and raising children.³⁵ Bhatt's poem 'Buffaloes', also from *Brunizem*, demonstrates the conflicting experiences of a woman's many responsibilities to her family because the poem records the fears and desires of a recently widowed mother in an Indian village. As with 'Udaylee', 'Buffaloes' does not indicate the speaker's locality or caste, so it is difficult to place the poem in a particular social context. The 'young widow' remains unnamed, indicating Bhatt's desire for the woman to be seen as representative of other Indian women's experiences. Although it is impossible to draw generalizations about Indian family dynamics from 'Buffaloes', the poem lends itself to a reading of the social expectations surrounding Indian women's roles as mothers.

³³ Ingman, *Twentieth*, 24.

³⁴ Boland, *Object*, 183.

³⁵ Thapar, 'Activists', 84.

‘Buffaloes’ centres on a woman’s experience of single motherhood, and the speaker, reflecting on her husband’s death, highlights the importance of her responsibility to her family. As is the case with ‘Udaylee’, the poem is immediately politicized by the figure’s social context made evident to us as readers in her stream of consciousness:

The young widow
thinks she should have burned on
her husband’s funeral pyre.
She could not, for her mother-in-law
insisted she raise the only son
of her only son.
Out of the way, still untouchable, she suckles
her three-week-old son
and thinks she could live
for those hungry lips³⁶

From the onset of the poem, we observe that the woman’s experience of motherhood is politicized by her multiple roles as widow, wife, mother and daughter-in-law, to each of which she owes a different set of responsibilities. Her life is also politicized by the ‘funeral pyre’, and the woman’s attempt to kill herself after her husband’s death, a point to which I return in a moment. The persona is conflicted as she deliberates between her duties as a mother and family member and her longing for independence that is implicated by her desire to take her own life. It is only her role as a mother to an infant boy that is keeping the woman alive at the moment represented in the poem. Her deliberation on death in the face of her child suggests a conflict between the figure’s agency to choose the course of her life and the expected roles placed on her.

During imperialism, the practice of *sati*, in which a woman killed herself by burning on her husband’s funeral pyre, indicated the social position and status of women in India. While *sati* is no longer in practice, the action remains a symbol of a woman’s devotion to her husband and family. Thapar argues in ‘Women as Activists, Women as Symbols’ that under British imperialism, the position and status of women indicated the ““modernization” of a country’. *Sati* was highly criticized under imperial

³⁶ Bhatt, *Brunizem*, 13.

rule as the practice appeared to non-Indians to be ‘inconsistent with Western ideas of liberalism and humanitarianism’ which strongly defined the social hierarchy of imperial rule.³⁷ Readers of Bhatt’s poetry might be surprised to find that the woman in ‘Buffaloes’ wishes she had died in the practice of *sati*, but I argue that it is exactly these historical and social pressures placed on women that Bhatt lays out in the poem. When discussing the politics of *sati*, one cannot fail to mention Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of the practice and female agency in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’. Spivak argues that British and nationalist perceptions of *sati* claimed to ‘liberate’ Indian women from their responsibilities to die with their husbands but in doing so ‘the free will of the constituted sexed subject as female was successfully effaced’.³⁸ In other words, women were not given the choice in whether or not to carry out *sati*, and therefore their agency in choosing the trajectory of their lives was removed. The figure’s contemplation that she should have ‘burned on | her husband’s funeral pyre’ suggests Bhatt’s interest in depicting female agency even while the central figure in the poem remains responsible to her family in her roles as a wife and mother.³⁹

Returning here to the representation of multiple gender roles placed on the central figure in the poem, the woman’s role as a mother is of utmost importance to her mother-in-law, who wishes to maintain the family legacy and have a caregiver for her grandson. In this poem, Bhatt places the persona in multiple roles signifying that her individual worth is determined by her responsibilities to her family. The depiction of the woman’s desire to practice *sati* is juxtaposed at the end of the poem with the idea of female independence, as the woman contemplates the possibilities for her and her son’s future: ‘The infant’s mouth asleep | against her breast. Dreams stuck | inside her chest twitch’.⁴⁰ Though the woman is conflicted in her responsibilities to her family, she accepts her role as a mother and makes the choice to live for her child’s sake. In this poem about single motherhood, Bhatt suggests that while the woman has many responsibilities, she continues to bear responsibilities of her family and other social roles. As the figure in the poem ‘watches the buffaloes pass | too close to her house’, we can see Bhatt’s intentional use of setting to represent the woman’s position

³⁷ Thapar, ‘Activists’, 82.

³⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 98.

³⁹ Bhatt, *Brunizem*, 13.

⁴⁰ Bhatt, *Brunizem*, 14.

in a location and family context that is associated with a conservative way of life in India. As is the case with 'Udaylee', Bhatt portrays a specific religious and social context limited to some Indian women's experiences. Yet, however limited the woman's agency over her future, Bhatt represents the complexities of motherhood through a conservative setting and reference to *sati* that suggest the difficulties Indian women face in their familial roles.

In other poems depicting motherhood, such as in 'Voice of the Unwanted Girl', Bhatt takes on the highly controversial subject of sex-selective abortions. While 'Buffaloes' offers a favourable representation of women's roles as mothers and shows how women accept their position within the family, Bhatt's 'Voice of the Unwanted Girl' presents a very different depiction of a woman's social roles in the family. Published in *Augatora* (2000), a volume which focuses on Bhatt's memories of leaving India and her desire to 'voice' the experiences of women in history and mythology, the poem is put forward in the voice of an aborted foetus who questions her mother's actions after death. In this disturbing poem, the foetus addresses her mother in the following words:

Mother, I am the one
you sent away
when the doctor told you
I would be
a girl – In the end they had to
give me an injection to kill me.⁴¹

The poem explores the mother's predicament when she realized she was pregnant with her second girl, and, despite the knowledge of her mother's circumstances, it appears that the foetus blames the woman for what happened, begging her to 'look for me' because she does not want the abortion to be forgotten. While the poem centres on the foetus's perspective in not being given a chance to live, 'Voice of the Unwanted Girl' also outlines the serious plight of the mother figure who endures a sex-selective abortion because she will not—or cannot—have another daughter. The poem makes the mother figure seem unloving or uncaring because the woman will not '[l]ook for the unspeakable, | for the place that can never be described' in her choice to have an abortion, but the reality portrayed to the reader suggests that the woman had no choice

⁴¹ Sujata Bhatt, *Augatora* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 38.

because of social and marital pressures. Even while the woman decides to have an abortion, it is clear that she remains responsible to her husband and family because she must be the “‘right’ kind of mother’ who can bear sons.⁴² Even today, there continues to be a widespread preference for sons in India, which comes at the cost of ‘the dire neglect of daughters, multiple pregnancies, high mortality rates for women, sex selective abortions, female infanticide and male biased population ratio’, according to Radha Hedge.⁴³ The priority given to boys over girls advances a cultural subordination of women and ultimately defines and restricts their roles as mothers, creating a duality of women’s societal worth based on whether or not they raise sons. The depiction of the woman’s role as a biological reproducer indicates how the family unit might be seen as a microcosm for *Bharat Mata*, the motherland whose children reflect traditional culture and values in the home. It also suggests the ways in which the Indian nation-state ‘disciplines’ the female body in terms of reproduction and women’s responsibilities to their families.⁴⁴

‘Voice of the Unwanted Girl’ can be juxtaposed with Bhatt’s poems discussed earlier in the chapter in its overtly politicized subject matter and its depiction of multiple determinations that influence women’s choices as mothers. By entering the poem as the speaking voice of the aborted female foetus, Bhatt critiques a social preference for sons and brings to bear the realities of terminating one’s pregnancy, whatever the reason for this decision. The Indian government has in the last decade established strict regulations on abortion to curb the high rate of sex-selective procedures, however the realities that Bhatt represents in the foetus’ voice and in the mother’s dilemma suggest the consequences of enforcing traditional social values on women’s lives. By indicating the social pressures placed on women to bear sons, Bhatt presents a less-glorified representation of motherhood and one in which social values and traditions literally affect the lives of women and girls. ‘Buffaloes’ and ‘Voice of the Unwanted Girl’ depict women’s roles as mothers and care-givers in ways that align with national and traditional representations of the mother figure. The indication of pressures upon women not only to raise their children but to bear sons shows how

⁴² Ibid., 39.

⁴³ Radha Hegde, ‘Sons and M(others): Framing the Maternal Body and the Politics of Reproduction in a South Indian Context’, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 22, no. 1 (1999): 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

her life abroad. Yet, even in this idealistic representation of her mother and the now-adult speaker's memory of her youth, we can observe Bhatt's integration of political subtexts into the poem. The child wishes her mother 'would wear silk', but as she goes about her daily labour, her mother chooses to wear saris made of *khadi*, a "hand-spun, hand-woven cotton" which the poem implies Bhatt's mother made herself.⁴⁸ The making of *khadi* holds political significance, for this type of cotton is a Gandhian symbol of women's involvement in the nationalist movement. In making *khadi*, women were brought out of the home into the public realm of the movement because their involvement in making clothes from cotton was an act of resistance to British-taxed goods.⁴⁹ Her mother's choice in wearing the simple *khadi* instead of the more delicate silk suggests the woman's autonomy in making her own decisions and her movement between private and public realms; it also implies that she works hard for the betterment of her family, and by way of this the nation, all attributes which Bhatt seems to admire. The poem can be read as Bhatt's celebration, and even her idealization, of Indian dress and culture.

Bhatt's depiction of her mother as someone who represents but also preserves Indian culture can be seen in other poems such as 'History is a Broken Narrative' from *Augatora* and 'Whenever I Return' from *Pure Lizard* (2008), both of which depict her mother in her roles in the home—in the first instance, in her teaching Bhatt their vernacular languages of Gujarati and Marathi and, in the second, her cooking, which Bhatt attempts to emulate in her own life abroad. 'History is a Broken Narrative' is a multi-layered poem which explores Bhatt's experience of being 'out-of-language',⁵⁰ as Rushdie calls it, as her family moved between the United States and India when she was a child. The poem centres on Bhatt's experience of learning English while simultaneously learning the alphabets of Gujarati and Marathi; consequently the speaker's languages and cultures merge in the poem.⁵¹ In 'History is a Broken Narrative', Bhatt idealizes her mother as the preserver of Indian traditions by associating her with an Indian heritage: 'Afternoons my mother | led me through our old alphabet – | I felt as if the different scripts | belonged together'.⁵² By learning the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Thapar, 'Activists', 86.

⁵⁰ Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 12.

⁵¹ Bertram, 'Bhatt', 7.

⁵² Bhatt, *Augatora*, 41.

‘old’ traditional alphabet from her mother, Bhatt feels connected to her Indian heritage and homeland, even though she is abroad. Thapar-Björkert and Ryan state that religion and vernacular language are defining elements of national culture in both India and Ireland.⁵³ Through the language passed on from mother to child, Bhatt connects representations of her mother with her mother tongue and motherland, so that her family dynamics create a microcosm of a preserved national culture.

Bhatt’s portrayal of her mother as representing and preserving an Indian way of life can also be seen in ‘Whenever I Return’ from Bhatt’s more recent volume *Pure Lizard* (2008) in which the poet nostalgically describes her childhood home in Pune, as seen in the following lines:

My mother must be
in the kitchen now – making tea
boiling milk – the whole house
smelling of buffalo milk –
and fresh tea –⁵⁴

As in other poems I have discussed in this section, Bhatt’s idealization of her childhood is created through very traditional depictions of Indian life—in this case represented by tea made from buffalo milk that the speaker has missed in her adult life. The correlation between her mother’s role in preserving Indian traditions and the poet’s childhood are compounded by the fact that Bhatt left India at a young age, and she sees her ‘home’ life, even when her family moved away, as inextricably connected with her ‘homeland’. Thapar-Björkert and Ryan correlate a woman’s role in preserving culture with nationhood in stating that the domestic space of the home is not only a place for ‘biologically reproducing the nation but also for the transmission of cultural traditions’, which ensures that the heritage is passed to future generations.⁵⁵ By re-imagining her mother in the kitchen of their childhood home, Bhatt not only creates a representation of her mother’s actions as part of a national culture, the domestic space of the home and kitchen come to represent India for the speaker whose cultural heritage is now lost to her in her life abroad. Because she sees her mother as symbolic of an Indian heritage from which she is dislocated, her mother’s act of

⁵³ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, ‘Mother’, 306.

⁵⁴ Bhatt, *Augatora*, 41.

⁵⁵ Thapar-Björkert and Ryan, ‘Mother’, 306.

making tea from buffalo milk takes on a greater meaning as a symbol of Bhatt's childhood but also a traditional Indian way of life.

In other poems, Bhatt attempts to recreate or retain her culture abroad, such as in 'Gale Force Winds' from *Pure Lizard*. The speaker attempts to reproduce her Indian culture in her new life in Germany by using the same spices her mother once used in India:

I'm refilling jars with spices.
As I release them,
as I pour them from paper into glass,
I recall my mother's instructions,
her recipes, her ginger cures
for almost every ailment.⁵⁶

In using the same spices her mother once used, the speaker is closer to her heritage, but she also believes she can become like her mother, as a preserver of her Indian heritage abroad. This portrayal of a woman's domestic role in the home reifies Bhatt's memories of her mother but also obscures the difficulties her mother may have faced in maintaining their Indian culture abroad. The poet's desire to celebrate her culture and preserve her Indian heritage seem to be a result of Bhatt's dislocation from her childhood in India and a desire to 'write back' to a life that is now lost to her. By placing her mother and other women in domestic roles as preserver of Indian culture and traditions, Bhatt's interlaces representations of motherhood with national perceptions of a woman's role in the home.

Boland's Depictions of Motherhood and Domesticity

Boland takes a very different approach to Bhatt in poems about motherhood and domesticity because, in her depictions of her own mother and daughters, Boland places women in a national history to account for her sense of exile from her homeland, but to acknowledge the obscurity of women's voices in a national poetic tradition. In 'The Oral Tradition' from *The Journey and Other Poems* (1987), Boland depicts a story told by word of mouth about a woman giving birth in a field. The woman's experience of childbirth is framed within the speaker's own story as she attends a poetry reading, and the poem's layers of telling and retelling suggest the

⁵⁶ Bhatt, *Pure*, 41.

ways that Boland intentionally politicizes the subjects of language and representation of women in her work. This well-known poem is an important example of Boland's interest in entering the poem as its voice but also in giving the agency to the woman's experience by making the story of childbirth symbolic of the birth of a nation. There are parallels here between 'The Oral Tradition' and Bhatt's 'Buffaloes' because it too depicts the difficulties women face as mothers. According to Katherina Walter, the story at the heart of the poem is that of a woman speaking about her 'grandmother, who gave birth alone, in open nature, to a son who was conceived out of wedlock', as seen in these lines: ⁵⁷

“...when she lay down
and gave birth to him
in an open meadow.
What a child that was
to be born without a blemish!”⁵⁸

Walter examines the embodied experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in 'The Oral Tradition' and other poems, and she analyzes these lines in stating that 'vivid description of the imagery belies the fact that the speaker is depending entirely on secondhand information' that is overheard in a conversation and occurring in a distant time.⁵⁹ Yet, the story at the heart of the poem portrays the woman's agency as well as mental and physical strength in giving birth without aid.

Because the woman is unnamed, it seems that Boland wants her to be perceived as an Everywoman figure who, when placed in the difficult situation of having to give birth alone, exemplifies courage in a difficult situation. Yet, the woman's experience is not without its problems, because as Walter suggests, the figure is, by the end of the poem, reduced to being a victim in need of shelter for she is perceived a '[remnant] of a nation' after the child is born.⁶⁰ Boland's portrayal of a woman's agency and courage followed by overwhelming helplessness suggests the ways that representations of mother figures in Irish literature and society have reduced

⁵⁷ Katharina Walter, "Suspended between Two Worlds": Gestation Metaphors and Representations of Childbirth in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry', *Estudios Irlandeses* 5 (2010): 107.

⁵⁸ Eavan Boland, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), 75.

⁵⁹ Walter, 'Suspended', 107.

⁶⁰ Walter, 'Suspended', 107; Eavan Boland, *The Journey and Other Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1987), 76.

women from active agents who reproduce Irish culture to passive objects in a national history. ‘The Oral Tradition’, as implied by the title, is an attempt to perceive a woman’s experience of motherhood as part of—and not just a representation of—the history of Ireland. In making the woman’s story part of a poetic tradition, Boland preserves the difficult reality of the woman’s experience as a mother and places her within an oral and national tradition.

Aside from poems which correlate representations and lived experiences of mothers, Boland also portrays the intimacies of motherhood in poems that recall memories of her own mother and Boland’s daughters. Boland herself politicizes representations of her own family life because, as a young poet in Ireland, she believed that writing poetry was incongruous with her experiences as wife and mother whose realities of daily life and domesticity were largely obscured in a national tradition.⁶¹ By depicting representations of women’s experiences as mothers and in the home, Boland closes the distance between poetic expression and women’s lived experiences. Unlike Bhatt, who focuses on her mother’s role as the preserver of Indian traditions, Boland reflects on memories of her mother to explore the poet’s role in placing women in a national history. In ‘The Parcel’ from *In a Time of Violence* (1994), Boland employs a quotidian memory of her mother as a means of connecting her with a history that had obscured her mother’s art and lived reality. While the craft of making up a parcel and the memory of her mother remain, the speaker fears that they will be forgotten, for she says: ‘this is how it died | out: among doomed steamships and out-dated trains, | the tracks for them disappearing before our eyes’.⁶² The poem turns finally to Boland’s adult perspective as she describes this lost art:

 this is how it died
 out: among doomed steamships and out-dated trains,
 the tracks for them disappearing before our eyes,
 next to station names we can’t remember
 on a continent we no longer
 recognize. The sealing-wax cracking.
 The twine unravelling. The destination illegible.⁶³

⁶¹ Boland, *Object*, 114.

⁶² Eavan Boland, *In a Time of Violence* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), 33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

These lines not only conclude that the art of making a parcel has disappeared with the rise of new technology and ways of life, but they also portray Boland's perception of her mother's work as part of an antiquated world that is distant from her own. As the parcel unravels in the poem, we realize that the world of Boland's childhood is also 'disappearing before our eyes'. The 'steamships and out-dated trains' are historically distant, but if we take into account Boland's perspective as a diasporic writer, we find that she also perceives the Ireland of her youth as distant, for it part of a 'continent [she] no longer recognises'.⁶⁴

The final images of the poem that describe the parcel as untouched, unopened, and undelivered indicate that Boland associates this memory of her mother and with simpler way of life, but unlike Bhatt's attempt to depict her mother as the preserver of culture, it is Boland herself who preserves these memories. The act of parcel-making is not in itself a specifically Irish tradition, yet the nostalgic tone of the poem suggests that Boland sees her mother as representative of a simpler way of life in Ireland. The idea of a lost antiquated world presented in 'The Parcel' rings true for many of Boland's poems that depict her inexorable separation from an Irish national identity. Although Boland continues to return to Ireland, it is not the same place where she was born, and many of her poems lament the passage of time and the distance she feels from her Irish roots. Boland spent much of her childhood in the UK and the US, and upon returning to Ireland, she felt it was not the same place she had left. She describes this immeasurable loss in *Object Lessons* in stating: 'I had lost not only the place but the past that goes with it, and with it, the clues with which to construct the present self'.⁶⁵

Boland's mother, Frances Kelly, was an artist, and her mother's work often appears in Boland's poems in ways that parallel her craft with Boland's creative endeavours as a writer. We see this mother-daughter relationship in such poems as 'The Last Discipline' from *The Lost Land* (1998), a volume which explores Boland's interest in reimagining Irish history and women's places in it. In the poem, Boland recalls a childhood memory of her mother and wants to become the kind of artist that she was. The memory is told from a child's perspective, as Boland watches her mother assess her painting at the end of her day:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁵ Boland, *Object*, 58.

Then she took a mirror,
hand-sized, enamelled in green,
and turned her back to the canvas.
And stood there.
And looked at it.⁶⁶

In watching her mother evaluate her art objectively, Boland focuses on female agency and sees her mother as an example of the kind of artist she wished to become. The poet's perception of her mother's work, captured in the poem, differs from Bhatt's approach to childhood memories of her mother, in that Boland, while still idealizing her mother's actions, does not attempt to recreate a specifically Irish tradition. Boland instead places her mother's work within a greater picture of national history, which she believes had previously elided details of women's work as artists and writers.

Other poems showcase the placement of women's stories in a national history such as in the poem 'Inheritance' from *Domestic Violence* (2007), in which Boland attempts to pass on her own awareness of Irish women's history to her daughters. She imagines what she could give her daughters as their inheritance and decides to pass on her own history:

This is an island of waters, inland distances,
with a history of want and women who struggled
to make the nothing which was all they had
into something they could leave behind.⁶⁷

The poem is a reminder to her daughters that they have inherited a rich history of women's experiences in Ireland. While the women to whom she refers remain unnamed, Boland evokes their experiences in an attempt to show her daughters that women have changed Irish history by moving from representations in art to actors in its making. Throughout 'The Oral Tradition', 'The Parcel', 'The Last Discipline' and 'Inheritance', among other poems, Boland not only attempts to include women's stories in a national history, but in doing so, she places mothers and daughters at the centre of her poems and asserts their agency as actors in history who produce and reproduce Irish culture.

⁶⁶ Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (New York: Norton, 1998), 59.

⁶⁷ Eavan Boland, *Domestic Violence* (New York: Norton, 2008), 39.

Although Bhatt's poems of motherhood and domesticity are focused on expectations placed upon women's roles as mothers and depictions of her own mother as the preserver of Indian traditions, Boland's poems about domesticity connects her experience as a mother with the distance she feels from her homeland and the Irish poetic tradition. Boland also correlates motherhood with the nation in such poems as 'The Lost Land', the title poem from her 1988 collection. The poet associates her own experience as a mother watching her children growing up and leave home with the metaphor of Mother Ireland watching her citizens emigrate. The overlap of motherhood and nationhood is connected with the poet's sense of loss in leaving Ireland and a desire to have her poetry become part of a national tradition. The mother's loss in watching her children grow up is correlated with emigration from Ireland in these lines: 'Now they are grown up and far away || and memory itself | has become an emigrant'.⁶⁸ Boland attempts to draw closer to her Irish heritage by associating her own experience as an emigrant who spends part of the year in the United States with a history of emigration from Mother Ireland whose 'children are distances, horizons'.⁶⁹ In correlating her own experience as a mother as that of the personified mother nation, Boland falls into the trope of Mother Ireland that she works to subvert. This representation of herself as the nation only further advances the conflation of the mother figure as nation-state. In her attempt to feel closer to her Irish heritage and to bring her work as a poet into a national tradition, which as she believes has simplified representations of women, Boland obscures the challenges of being an Irish mother abroad. The conceit of the mother figure as the nation not only simplifies her own experience as a mother, but it romanticizes the emigrant experience, for the poet says, 'I imagine myself | at the landward rail of that boat | searching for the last sight of a hand', possibly that of the mother nation calling her to return.⁷⁰ Although Boland attempts to challenge representations of motherhood and nationhood in her own nostalgia for Ireland, the poem overshadows a woman's lived reality as a mother in favour of idealizations of the nation.

Like Bhatt, Boland's perceptions of motherhood, family, home and homeland are ultimately shaped by her experience of growing up abroad and her current

⁶⁸ Boland, *Lost*, 41.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

circumstances of splitting her time between the United States and Ireland.⁷¹ While a number of her early poems focus on domesticity and women's roles as mothers of which she wrote when her children were young, Boland's more recent poems complicate the idea of domesticity through depictions of the physical house as a metonym for Ireland. In these poems about domestic spaces, she does not focus on specifically Irish traditions, but rather a way of life that she lost in moving abroad. In 'The Rooms of Exile' from *Against Love Poetry* (2001), for example, we see a comparison with poems like Bhatt's 'Gale Force Winds', as Boland attempts to reconnect with her Irish heritage now that she is in the United States for part of the year. The speaker of the poem sees every object in the house as a reminder of life in Ireland because they seem to 'represent': 'a spacious morning in the Comeraghs. | An iron gate; a sudden downpour; a well in | the corner of a farmyard; a pool of rain'.⁷² The everyday objects around her hold personal significance to the speaker, and in focusing on how these objects remind her of life in Ireland, Boland suggests that her life was simpler there because in the dark, the objects metaphorically return to their natural elements of 'Stone. | Brass. Bronze.'⁷³ Interestingly, while Boland explores a sense of confinement in this home because it is so different from her life in Ireland, she nevertheless creates stereotypical images of her homeland in an attempt to draw closer to her heritage. The poem simplifies her own memories of Ireland to focus on the landscape of the countryside, as well as images of Dublin or a 'farmyard' when it rains.⁷⁴ Here the domestic space becomes a reminder of the speaker's sense of exile from Ireland. Boland's nostalgia leads her to idealize her life in Ireland. The speaker of 'The Rooms of Exile' realizes that her home cannot be the same as her life in Ireland was, and so she is left 'crazed' by its memory. The poem depicts the domestic space that is used to reproduce Irish ways of life, but it also creates a sense of distance between Boland's homeland and her Irish heritage. In depicting a correlation between her physical house abroad and Ireland, Boland simplifies perceptions of female figures in the home so as to portray the nation as the motherland to which she will someday return.

⁷¹ Eavan Boland, email exchange with the poet, August 10, 2014.

⁷² Eavan Boland, *Against Love Poetry* (New York: Norton, 2001), 30.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Bhatt's and Boland's representations of motherhood and domesticity show two different approaches to writing about a woman's experience in the home; nevertheless, their politicized representations appear to be derived from a sense of dislocation from India and Ireland and a need to write to a cultural heritage that is lost to them. Bhatt's poems firmly locate women in seemingly traditional roles as biological mothers and reproducers of Indian culture in ways which align with national representations of the 'new woman' construct that asserts women's roles as mothers and homemakers. Boland, however, focuses on placing women's experiences as mothers and her depictions of domestic spaces within a national history in an attempt to draw closer to her Irish heritage and a poetic tradition that she feels have obscured women's experiences. Yet, even while Boland strives to subvert such representations of motherhood and the home, she falls into idealizations of her homeland as Mother Ireland rather than successfully challenging the very representation she attempts to undermine in her work. Having spent much of their lives abroad, both poets romanticize memories of their childhoods and their mothers but also a lost homeland. It is their separation and multicultural and also geographical identities as poets that lead to their comparable engagement with politicized, but ultimately traditional, perceptions of motherhood and domesticity.

Women's Stories in a National History

In the final two poems of this chapter, I explore Bhatt's and Boland's interest in representing women's experiences as part of Indian and Irish national histories. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin explicate the importance of integrating women's stories in a national history in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998). They state that 'Different sorts of telling reveal different truths, and the "fragment" is significant precisely because it is marginal rather than mainstream, particular (even individual), rather than general, and because it presents history from below'.⁷⁵ Bhatt's 'Partition', also from *Augatora*, recounts a story of a young woman's experience of hearing the violence and suffering in Ahmedabad during the division of British India. The speaker hears her mother's story years later and captures this singular memory in

⁷⁵ Rita Menon and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 8.

the poem; the poem then becomes the fragment of memory that defines Partition for mother and daughter.

We find a comparable call for the recognition of women's stories as part of a larger canon or history in Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole's *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (2008). They believe that even in the twenty-first century 'male-focused metanarratives' tend to 'dominate' perceptions of the Irish literary tradition. To change such circumstances, they insist on the need to redress the canon so as to facilitate a greater inclusion of Irish women writers.⁷⁶ Their book attempts to include women in a national tradition of literature, but we might also take Coughlan and O'Toole's words as an inference about the way we tell stories and recount cultural and national histories. Boland's 'Fever' from *The Journey and Other Poems* is an interesting poem to place in conjunction with Bhatt's 'Partition' because 'Fever' reimagines a story of Boland's grandmother's death at a young age, leaving five daughters behind. Her grandmother's life was lost in a national history, but the story of her death is captured in the poem as an example of the consequences of exclusion and silence surrounding women's stories. My comparison of these two poems demonstrates Bhatt's and Boland's shared interest in placing personal or private memories of the women in their families within the metanarratives of a national history; it also denotes how these poets capture family memories in different ways.

'Partition' explores Bhatt's mother's memories of Ahmedabad, a major city on the Pakistan-India border where Bhatt and her family are from, during the political upheaval which followed India's Independence and the creation of Pakistan. Given the title of the poem, it is clear that Bhatt wants her mother's story to be seen as part of the greater narrative of Partition history. However, the narrative depicted in the poem is a private memory of a young woman's fear and shame that, decades later, is passed on from mother to daughter. The poem begins with its retelling:

She was nineteen-years-old then
and when she stood in the garden
she could hear the cries of the people
stranded in the Ahmedabad railway station.
She felt it was endless – their noise –

⁷⁶ Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole, *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), 1.

a new sound added to the city.⁷⁷

The reader is immediately drawn into the vivid sounds of suffering that the girl heard in Ahmedabad which suggests the girl's fear but also that she is safely distanced from the conflict in her home. At nineteen, the girl might have been able to help people whose cries she heard, but 'she was afraid, | felt she could not go with her aunt'. Even though she is separated physically from the violence, the experience of Partition reverberates in the 'sound added to the city', in the 'birds [that] sounded different' and by 'the shadows cast by the neem trees'.⁷⁸ For the woman now recounting her story to her daughter, there is 'no consolation' in her youth and naiveté or in her removal from the conflict. Sound, stories and retelling are an integral part of the poem, and though Bhatt's mother did not actually experience the violence first-hand, the memory is carried into a present moment.

Now, when my mother
tells me this at midnight
in her kitchen – she is
seventy-years-old and India
is 'fifty'. 'But, of course
India is older than that,' she says,
'India was always there.'⁷⁹

As the poem shifts from the girl's memory to Bhatt's hearing of the story years later, we are able to perceive the social and historical frame of the poem that locates her mother's memory in a national history.

The retelling of the event is as important as Partition itself because it places the speaker of the poem, whom we might read as Bhatt, as the keeper of this narrative who chooses to incorporate her mother's story—however fragmented and separated it might be from the actual trauma—into the metanarrative of Indian history. She turns the memory into a poem and names that poem 'Partition'. Returning here to a sociological and political perspective of storytelling, Menon and Bhasin set out an ethnographical study in *Borders and Boundaries* through which they travelled across India and Pakistan gathering stories of women's experiences of Partition, of violence they witnessed or withstood, and of the immense loss they continued to bear decades

⁷⁷ Bhatt, *Augatora*, 34.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

later. Throughout the book, they reiterate the importance of hearing personal stories first-hand, however trivial or seemingly unrelated to the actual conflict those stories might be.⁸⁰ They argue for the importance of women ‘speaking for themselves’ when it comes to such a large-scale tragedy because a ‘representative history can only be written if the experience and status of one half of mankind is an integral part of that story’.⁸¹ In the poem, the story of Partition is not one of witnessing the trauma, as we might expect, but it is about sensing the weight of that historical moment in the sounds that carries the ‘cries of the people’ at the railway station and ultimately alters the girl’s world for she bears this memory years later. Bhatt’s mother looks back at this moment with great shame, wishing she had been of more help at the time, but her regret is only secondary to the speaker, for it is her mother’s presence in the moment of Partition that is carried, remembered and retold by the poem’s speaker to the reader. Sounds and stories are essential in bringing women’s experiences into a national history, and although her mother cannot change history—acknowledged in the fact that India as a Republic is only ‘fifty’ but as a country, its history was ‘always there’—we realize that every fragment of memory is integral to preserving history and passing on those memories to future generations. The most interesting aspect of the poem is certainly the title, for it demonstrates Bhatt’s deliberate act of making a personal memory of her mother part of a national history in a way that challenges male-dominated metanarratives of the nation-state.

Boland shares Bhatt’s interest in representing women’s experiences as part of a national history. She recreates stories of women in history in a number of poems that have come to define her career such as ‘The Achill Woman’ from *Outside History* (1990), ‘That the Science of Cartography is Limited’ and ‘Lava Cameo’ from *In a Time of Violence* (1994) and in ‘Quarantine’ from *Code* (2001), a poem which a couple’s death during the Great Famine and was shortlisted for RTÉ’s ‘Poem for Ireland’ in the 2016 commemorative competition.⁸² ‘Fever’ recreates a fragment of family history as Boland attempts to place her grandmother’s untimely death in a national narrative of Irish history. Her grandmother died in the National Maternity

⁸⁰ Menon and Bhasin, *Borders*.

⁸¹ Menon and Bhasin, *Borders*, 10.

⁸² Eavan Boland, ‘Quarantine’, *RTÉ – A Poem for Ireland*, Undated, Accessed August 1, 2017, <https://apoemforireland.rte.ie/shortlist/>.

Hospital in Dublin, but the poem begins with an absence in history that cannot be ‘shaken out’:

is what remained or what they thought
remained after the ague and the sweats
were over and the shock of wild flowers
at the bedside had been taken away;

is what they tried to shake out of
the crush and dimple of cotton,
the shy dust of a bridal skirt;
is what they beat, lashed, hurt like

flesh as if it were a lack of virtue⁸³

The poem begins in mid-sentence at the end of the story when her grandmother’s death has already occurred. The diction Boland uses—‘shock’, ‘shake out’, ‘crush’, ‘beat, lashed, hurt’—suggest violence, and although they refer to the aftermath of death in the cleaning out of the fever, we read this eradication also as others’ attempt to exorcise her grandmother from history. Andrew Auge argues that Boland recreates the past in this story to demonstrate its very real effects on present circumstances. Looking at ‘Fever’ from a historical perspective, Auge believes that the first stanzas of the poem draws connections between puerperal fever caused by uterine infection following childbirth and the ‘famine fever’, connected with Great Famine, that is contagious because it is contracted by lice. The woman’s clothes and belongings were burned after she died so as not to affect others, but as Boland suggests, this expungement was unnecessary because of the cause of her grandmother’s death.⁸⁴ Boland correlates the act of burning the remains of the fever with the silencing and absence of women’s stories from Irish history. In her grandmother’s absence, there is a vacuum in the woman’s family and later her personal history, for the woman left ‘five orphan daughters to her name. | Names, shadows, visitations, hints | and a half-sense of half-lives remain’.⁸⁵ The women are unnamed, and the absence of girls’

⁸³ Boland, *Selected*, 77.

⁸⁴ Andrew Auge, ‘Fracture and Wound: Eavan Boland’s Poetry of Nationality’, *New Hibernia Review* 8 no. 2 (2004): 136.

⁸⁵ Boland, *Selected*, 77.

mother, and later grandmother, exist for the speaker only in 'hints' and 'shadows'. Relating to this silence, Stef Craps writes that the evocation of Boland's grandmother's story in the poem is 'deliberately tentative, speculative and provisional' so as to express the disruptive presence of the past upon the present, and to focus, in turn, on the absence of women's voices from a national history.⁸⁶ The retelling of her grandmother's story is an attempt to bring that personal memory to bear on a national history of the silences of women, but also the loss of life in the Great Famine. Unlike Bhatt whose retelling of her mother's story appears to be successful, Boland in 'Fever' focuses on the absence of her grandmother's life from a national history, suggesting that the stories of women like her are lost and irretrievable, but also that they have been forcibly hidden or removed.

Her grandmother's death is only half-told to the reader, but Boland attempts to bring her retelling into a national narrative of Irish history. She positions herself as the storyteller of the lost narrative in the following stanzas:

I re-construct the soaked-through midnights;
vigils; the histories I never learned
to predict the lyric of; and re-construct
risk; as if silence could become rage,

as if what we lost is a contagion
that breaks out in what cannot be
shaken out from words or beaten out⁸⁷

In connecting her grandmother's story with the burning out of famine fever, Boland longs to place her story and other women's experiences in a national history that had obscured them. As she attempts to reconstruct the past by bringing a single story into the metanarrative of Irish history, Boland places herself as the actor and agent of its telling. That which is 'shaken out' and 'beaten out' is not only the purported fever but the omission of women's stories that cannot be recovered. In the end, Boland attempts to record her grandmother's life, only to realise the impossibility of this desire.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Stef Craps, "'Only Not Beyond Love': Testimony, Subalternity, and the Feminine in the poetry of Eavan Boland', *Neophilologus* 94 (2010): 172.

⁸⁷ Boland, *Selected*, 77.

⁸⁸ Pilar Villar-Argáiz, 'Recording the Unpoetic: Eavan Boland's Silences', *Irish University Review* 37, no.1 (2007): 476.

Given their titles, both 'Partition' and 'Fever' are meant to evoke national narratives of violence and death in India and Ireland. Yet by specifically focusing on pieces of family history that have been passed on to the poets, Bhatt and Boland attempt to connect personal stories of the women in their families with national narratives of history. As Bhatt experiences her mother's retelling of Partition memories, she becomes part of the narrative and the person who makes her mother's story part of Indian history. Boland's 'Fever' also considers a piece of family history, and she correlates her grandmother's death with the severity of the Famine as well as the absence of women's narratives from Irish history. Boland contemplates the power of the past in affecting the present, and that even through language, her grandmother and other women's narratives remain shadows in a national history. Writing from what we might call their own 'partitioned' national identities created by their dislocation from India or Ireland, Bhatt and Boland are unrelenting in their desire to 'write back' to a national culture and history by representing traditional but idealized realities of women's experiences. Both women intentionally politicize their work through references to a national history and the failures of the nation-state, and by doing this, Bhatt and Boland respond to institutional practices of the state by bringing women's stories—however private or troubled—into a national canon.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways that Sujata Bhatt and Eavan Boland respond to institutional practices of the Irish and Indian nation-states. Taking a sociological as well as literary reading of their early poems, I examine how the poets depict the female body, sexuality and reproduction and how they portray motherhood and domesticity in their home countries and abroad. Both women seem determined to politicize women's lived experiences in their attempts to bring personal stories into a national history, which they do through historical references in their poems, but also in quite 'traditional' or antiquated representations of life in India and Ireland. Both poets attempt to subvert national representations of the female figure, but they continue to work within social and historical constructs of gender roles to portray women's lives. Perhaps because she is aware that her poetry reaches international audiences in Europe and North America, Bhatt's representations of Indian women and their roles in society are idealized and traditional, but she uses these depictions to draw attention to female agency and the figures' abilities to challenge and change their futures. Boland

sometimes places female figures in traditional settings—as is the case with the woman giving birth in a field in ‘The Oral Tradition’—but more significantly than representations of a traditional Irish culture, Boland is interested in portraying the personal and political challenges that women face in having control of their bodies and experiences and the difficulty of passing on those realities to later generations. Their poems cannot be seen as representative of all Indian and Irish women’s experiences, but Bhatt’s and Boland’s representations of women nevertheless illustrate the complex relationship which exists between women and the nation-state.

CHAPTER 2

Searching for ‘Maeve’: An Archival Examination of Medbh McGuckian’s Publishing History in Ireland, the UK and the US

Writing to Peter Fallon in 1985, Medbh McGuckian enclosed an enigmatic letter containing sixteen poems that she hoped to publish as a chapbook with the Gallery Press. The letter conveyed uncertainty about her work, for she asked Fallon to ‘[p]lease return these with an explanation of why they do not grab you, as they will not, as they do not me, much’.¹ McGuckian’s mixed emotions, indicated by her expectation that the poems will be rejected and her veiled hope that the selection might ‘grab’ Fallon’s attention, are understandable; she had submitted poems to Fallon before, explaining in this letter that these new poems ‘may or may not be more to your taste than the ones I sent in the late seventies’.² McGuckian was doubtful as to whether Fallon would consider a chapbook—he did not, in fact, decide to publish McGuckian’s poetry until some years later. Given the light and conversational but also expectant tone of the letter, it is surprising that McGuckian had already published two chapbooks: *Single Ladies: Sixteen Poems* (1980) with Interim Press and *Portrait of Joanna* (1980) with Ulsterman. Her poem ‘The Flitting’, which won the 1979 National Poetry Competition, had secured the publication of McGuckian’s first full-length collection *The Flower Master* with the Oxford Poets series in 1983. Although she was contracted with Oxford University Press (hereafter OUP) to begin work on her second book, McGuckian offered Fallon no details about her literary endeavours, and given the deference of her words, one might believe that she had never published a poem, let alone a collection, with one of the foremost publishers of British poetry.

Although the letter reveals McGuckian’s lack of confidence in her work and uncertainty about the future of her career, its most unusual aspect is found in the valediction which she signs as ‘Maeve’ in reference to her birth name Maeve McCaughan.³ The letter ends with the statement, ‘I used that name as the letter was written by me and the poems by the other. So rejecting me does not entail accepting

¹ Letter from Medbh McGuckian to Peter Fallon, September 21, 1985, Peter Fallon – The Gallery Press Collection (GP), Box 45, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

² Ibid.

³ Faragó, *McGuckian*, 2.

either of us'.⁴ In this aside, McGuckian distinguishes between her personal identity as a woman and her poetic persona which she calls 'the other'. She perceives these two aspects of her identity to be distinct, disconnected, and even opposed, for she insists that a rejection of the poems would not hinder a friendship with Fallon. Her signature and aside are meant to be lighthearted, but they also capture McGuckian's 'internalization of otherness', to take a Lacanian reading of this aside. Jacques Lacan describes the otherness within through the metaphor of a mirror; to state it simply, the child creates a subjective identity at the moment when she understands that the disparate 'other' body in the mirror is her own. The girl realizes, then, that the image in the mirror is separate but not entirely alien from herself and that both physical and psychological selves are within her. In her feminist reading of Lacan, Elizabeth Grosz argues that the mirror represents the creation of female identity through the child's relationship with her mother, but is also possible to understand the internalization of otherness as a woman's, and in this case specifically McGuckian's, awareness of her multiple identities—wife, mother, daughter, caregiver, financial provider and poet, to name a few—that tether her to personal, artistic and vocational roles.⁵

McGuckian's reference to her private self as separate from her poetic identity indicates her awareness of the multiple roles women must fulfil in order to be published in the Irish and British literary markets of the 1980s. Her archived correspondence with publishers which are held at Oxford University Press and Emory University are dated to the mid-1970s, which suggests that she had been serious about publishing her work for at least a decade before she sent Fallon the selection of poems for consideration. She was, by the time the letter was written in 1985, acutely aware of the pressures placed on writers to establish a distinctive, comprehensible and attractive poetic style that would be well received by a large readership in the region and abroad. McGuckian's corroboration of the role of the poet is most evident in her signature 'Maeve' instead of 'Medbh McGuckian', the name under which she is published. McGuckian started using the name 'Medbh' after her mentor and university teacher Seamus Heaney began signing books to her using the Irish spelling

⁴ Letter from McGuckian to Fallon, Dated September 21, 1985, GP, Box 45.

⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 42.

of her birth name.⁶ By the 1980s she was regularly deploying the name ‘Medbh’ in publications, personal letters and professional correspondence with publishers including other letters with Fallon, so it is a deliberate act that she chose to sign a letter about a possible publication as ‘Maeve’. In using the anglicized form of her name, McGuckian demonstrates an awareness of her position as a friend of Fallon who might persuade him to publish her work. She is also conscious of the writer’s need to create—in her case, quite literally—a name for herself so that she may advance her literary career.⁷

The poet’s decision to foreground her private identity but also acknowledge an internalized otherness compels us, as readers of her work, to consider the personal, professional and political pressures placed on McGuckian as she established her literary career. More than forty years after this unusual letter arrived at the Gallery Press, McGuckian has become one of the most critically acclaimed, but remains among the most ‘difficult’, contemporary poets to come out of Northern Ireland. Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Shannon Hipp as well as other devoted critics of her poetry have examined McGuckian’s extensive collection of manuscripts, correspondence and personal documents at Emory University for insight into the workings of her poems.⁸ However, little research has been done to piece together her publishing history in order to understand exactly *how* Medbh McGuckian came to be the well-known poet she is today. In this chapter I attempt to reconcile McGuckian’s public persona as a poet with the other ‘Maeve’ whose prolific literary career has been shaped by challenges and opportunities posed by British, Irish and American publishing houses in order to understand how she worked within, and sometime against, publishing institutions to become one of the foremost Irish women poets today. Using correspondence between McGuckian and her publishers, I examine three periods of transition in her literary career: the events leading to her move from the

⁶ Medbh McGuckian, ‘Drawing Ballerinas: How Being Irish has Influenced Me as a Writer’, in *Wee Girls: Women Writing from an Irish Perspective*, edited by Lizz Murphy (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2003), 194.

⁷ Medbh McGuckian Papers (MM), Boxes 14a, 15; Peter Fallon – The Gallery Press Collection, Boxes 45, 46, 47, 126, 213. Medbh McGuckian, Box OP2403 / 017653 *The Flower Master*; Box OP1209 / 008892, *Venus and the Rain*, Box OP1015 / 007564, *On Ballycastle Beach*, Oxford University Press.

⁸ See Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006); Shannon Hipp, “‘Things of the Same Kind That Are Separated Only by Time’: Reading the Notebooks of Medbh McGuckian”, *Irish University Review* 39, no.1 (2009): 130–148.

Oxford Poets list to the Gallery Press in 1991; her response to claims in the 1990s that her poetry did not address the political conflict in the North; and finally, the American and Irish reception of her collections *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001) and *The Soldiers of Year II* (2002), which were published by Gallery and Wake Forest University Press, respectively, in the aftermath of the ceasefires in Northern Ireland. Through a critical examination of these moments in her publishing history, I argue that McGuckian's career as a poet is defined by an irreconcilable partitioning of self and other that is evident not only in the letter to Fallon but also in the social, religious, political and vocational ties that drive her career. The main sources of this material come from McGuckian's correspondence with her publishers as well as production materials of her books, which have been documented up to 2006 after which she published four more poetry collections.

The Intersections of McGuckian's Poetic Identity

The self and other of McGuckian's letter appear in the multiplicity and ever-shifting personae of her collections, such as in 'The Flitting', the poem which launched her career and was originally published in her second chapbook *Portrait of Joanna* in 1980.⁹ Setting a precedent for McGuckian's provocative style, 'The Flitting' resists a linear pattern and instead 'flits' between the spaces of the house, the flora of a garden and the psychological state of the speaker's mind. The poem begins with a bold statement, "You wouldn't believe all this house has cost me — | in body-language terms, it has turned me upside down", and although the 'cost', or emotional burden that the speaker bears, is carried for the rest of the poem, it remains unclear whom the speaker addresses in these first words. The house is at once the physical, confining space through which the speaker moves and a metaphor for the private persona that she struggles to conceal: 'Now my own life hits me in the throat, the bumps | And cuts of the walls as telling | as the poreholes in strawberries, tomato seeds'. The 'life' of this 'other' persona is separate from the speaker, but its presence is felt and known.¹⁰ On another level, the house can also be read as McGuckian's home city of Belfast, which was, at the time the poem won the National Poetry Competition, in the midst of a civil war between unionist and nationalist groups.

⁹ 'The Flitting' won the 1979 National Poetry Competition in the UK and led to an outpouring of interest by potential poetry publishers in McGuckian's work.

¹⁰ Medbh McGuckian, *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1993), 54.

As Leontia Flynn rightly notes in *Reading Medbh McGuckian* (2014), there are numerous ways of approaching the poem, and McGuckian herself has offered contradictory responses to ‘The Flitting.’¹¹ Nonetheless, I want to offer two specific readings of this piece: the dichotomy of self and other as a struggle between a public, artistic persona and McGuckian’s private identity; and the poem’s allusions to war that make concealment necessary. The private identity presented in the first lines shifts from a personification of the house to the figure of a shadow sister, or private self, which the speaker attempts to hide behind paintings:

I cover them for safety with these Dutch girls
making lace, or leaning their almond faces
on their fingers with a mandolin, a dreamy
chapelled ease abreast this other turquoise-turbanned,
glancing over her shoulder with parted mouth.¹²

The persona or personae, ‘them’, cannot be concealed because ‘these Dutch girls’ become, or always were, the mirror image of the speaker herself—they are the other ‘half of me’. Flynn and Paul Volsik acknowledge the poem’s references to Johannes Vermeer’s ‘Girl with the Pearl Earring’ as well as ‘The Lacemaker’ and ‘Girl with a Guitar’, but it is also important to acknowledge that the pieces of art are used to hide the truth about this shadow, private self. Critics of McGuckian’s work often note her oblique language and syntax, but in these words about concealment, she admits that her own art obscures a deeper meaning. While the shadow sister has a ‘narrative [that] secretes its own values’, the speaker, like McGuckian herself, must display an exaggerated persona. The speaker wears ‘a faggotted dress, in a peacock chair’ and speaks of ‘No falser biography than our casual talk | Of losing a virginity, or taking a life’ to hide the truth about her life.¹³ The private persona may lead a life of her own making, but the speaker must create a different and aggrandized narrative to suit her public persona. As the poem ‘flits’ between ‘me’ and the ‘other’, it becomes impossible to differentiate between the two; the speaker and her shadow sister are two halves of a single identity—one visible and one hidden.¹⁴ The private persona of ‘The

¹¹ Leontia Flynn, *Reading Medbh McGuckian* (Cork: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 1–17.

¹² McGuckian, *Flower*, 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54–55.

Flitting’—or the reality of McGuckian’s life as a woman poet from Northern Ireland—is not far removed from her own art.

If McGuckian’s poetry conceals the reality of her lived experiences, then it is not inconceivable to read ‘The Flitting’ as a poem about the Troubles and their effect on the speaker. For instance, the word ‘chapped’ in reference to the ‘turquoise-turbanned’ ‘Girl with the Pearl Earring’ is a play on the word ‘chapel’, which is a specifically Christian building of worship, but in British English it also refers to members of a print or newspaper trade union. Therefore, ‘chapped’ is both a religious and political reference, and McGuckian uses the term to underscore and criticize the ideological differences, and the reporting of those differences, between Protestant and Catholic communities at war in Northern Ireland.¹⁵ In reading for the political currents of the poem, the word ‘faggotted’ also stands out for its double meaning and atypical conjugation. The ‘faggotted dress’ is the embroidered design of the speaker’s outfit, but it also alludes to a bundle of sticks bound together to fuel a fire which lends a darker and more foreboding meaning to ‘the half of me that welcomes death | in a faggotted dress’ and moreover suggests homophobic connotations. The speaker is not simply wearing an exaggerated outfit to counter her shadow sister; her actions ‘fuel the fire’ as she prepares to die. Words such as ‘hit[ting],’ ‘escape’, ‘safety’, ‘solidarity’, ‘waiting’ and ‘plough[ing]’ also suggest the speaker’s and the poet’s anxiety about the conflict in the North.¹⁶ The idea of ‘flitting’ encourages us to read the poem for its light, quick movements from one line to the next, and as Flynn notes, it is a colloquial term for ‘moving house’, so the poem is most obviously about a woman’s emotional state as she moves from one place to another.¹⁷ However, ‘flit’ in Northern Ireland is not just moving house; it is the act of leaving one’s residence without paying rent or the bill. Therefore, the poem’s title ‘The Flitting’ conceals the speaker’s desire to free herself from the war by becoming immersed in her art; it also illustrates her desire to hide from the violence that engulfs her home. The ‘body-language terms’ of the speaker’s opening lines invite us to read the poem’s alternative

¹⁵ In *Poetry and Its Others* (2013), Jahan Ramazani examines how poets subsume the language of news and broadcast in their poetry. He specifically addresses McGuckian’s later work including *Drawing Ballerinas*, but it is possible to perceive the inclusion of news and political unrest in McGuckian’s early collections, as seen in this poem. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), Kindle edition, Chapter 3.

¹⁶ McGuckian, *Flower*, 54–55.

¹⁷ Flynn, *Reading*, 2.

language for its undertones of violence as well as psychological and sociopolitical conflict. ‘The Flitting’ indicates the intertwining of McGuckian’s artistic and private lives, and it exhibits the consequences of war—psychological distress, internalized otherness and the disruption of language and meaning.

In an essay titled ‘Drawing Ballerinas’ which later became the title of one of her collections, McGuckian acknowledged that the poem was inspired by a ‘Troubles related incident’.¹⁸ She recounts the story behind ‘The Flitting’ in this way: ‘My husband’s sister had been a bomb-victim and her husband, a brother-in-law I never met, did not survive. The poem was a dramatic monologue set in her voice’.¹⁹ Although ‘The Flitting’ does not divulge details of a bombing, its suggestive tone makes it possible to perceive the tensions of the Troubles in the background. Yet, in an interview from a decade earlier in 1993, McGuckian tells a different version of the same story. She states, ‘So the heroine and speaking voice of “The Flitting” is, in fact, a woman friend whose husband was murdered by a bomb which he threw himself on in order to protect the family.’²⁰ It is impossible to tell which elements of these stories are true, and it is interesting to note how McGuckian interchanges gender roles and creates varying social distances between the victims and her own life. Still, no matter how we read the poem, the dissociation between artistic expression and experience remains. So highly acclaimed was ‘The Flitting’ that the poem was reproduced in the OUP edition of *The Flower Master* in 1983 and once again in the Gallery Press edition of *The Flower Master and Other Poems* in 1993. Its publication in these definitive collections indicates that the poem is of personal significance to McGuckian and is a signature text of the literary career it set in motion. These stories and the poem itself encourage us, as readers, to see McGuckian’s personal life and her poetry as inherently connected with the political, social and cultural history of Northern Ireland.

Having lived in Belfast all her life, McGuckian’s work as a poet has been shaped by different factors to those of Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan, whose work I discuss in other chapters, as well to the careers of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and other contemporaries writing from outside the province of Ulster, where six of the nine counties make up Northern Ireland and remain a part of the United Kingdom. McGuckian was a teenager during the onset of the Troubles in the

¹⁸ McGuckian, ‘Drawing’, 194.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Frankie Sewell, ‘Interview with Medbh McGuckian’, *Brangle* 1 (1993): 52–53.

late 1960s, and she began working with her first major publisher OUP in 1980 during a period when violence between nationalist and unionist groups had reached its peak. It is integral to an understanding of McGuckian's poetry and the trajectory of her career to locate her within the social and political conflict in the North and to consider the 'effects of national partition' on her work.²¹ In 'Drawing Ballerinas', McGuckian reflects on her childhood in Belfast and acknowledges an acute sense of physical and cultural separation from the rest of the island. She writes:

We barely heard of Dublin and never went there. We would drive, when my father obtained his first Austin 4, eventually down to the border, to visit the procathedral at Armagh, but as far as I was concerned in my mind, beyond that was the sea. As if what they called Ulster was itself an island, and there was no way out of it.²²

The growing sociopolitical unrest at the time and militarized conditions of daily life in the North led to a sense of isolation, not only because part of Ulster county was, and remains, partitioned from the rest of the island, but also in that McGuckian internalized these effects, creating in her poetry a language that expresses the complexity of this experience. In *Spectral Borderlands*, Maureen Ruprecht Fadem points out that, 'power dynamics of war silence and paralyze' those living in such conditions and that McGuckian responds to these pressures in her poetry by disrupting the syntax of lines and stanzas but also by destabilizing the meaning behind the poems.²³ McGuckian's poems have been criticized for being 'at best intricate and enigmatic, at worst inaccessible and subjective', to use Shane Alcobia-Murphy's summary of responses to her work.²⁴ Although her poetry can be difficult to understand, such analyses limit the reader's willingness to engage with sociopolitical factors that have shaped her writing. Unlike Fadem's political analysis of her early poems and Alcobia-Murphy's focus on an intertextual reading of her work, my own interest in locating McGuckian in a specifically Northern context aims not only to provide a historical and politically informed reading of her poetry but also to examine how the intersections of her religious and cultural identities as well as those of her gender and vocation have affected her publishing history.

²¹ Maureen Ruprecht Fadem, *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 100.

²² McGuckian, 'Drawing', 186.

²³ Fadem, *Borderlands*, 100.

²⁴ Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic*, 43.

McGuckian's Catholic upbringing, which does not fit into dominant narratives of religion, politics and culture in the North, affects how she perceives her identity as an Irish poet. She has acknowledged a sense of internalized otherness because of her religious identity and political affiliation as a nationalist in a number of interviews including conversations with Michaela Schrage-Früh, Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, Danielle Sered and Kimberly Bohman.²⁵ When she discusses the cultural divide between Catholic and Protestant communities in the North, she perceives herself to be an outsider because of her religious affiliation, noting that as a young woman, 'I was no less confused as to my own identity, my own nationality, my relevance to the world'.²⁶ This position of otherness, but also unworthiness, because of her religious identity contributed to McGuckian's sense of uncertainty about her skills as a poet and the future of her career. As a Catholic nationalist, she began to develop an awareness of her identity as an Irish writer and her relationship with OUP changed, leading to a state of dissonance between poet and publisher. Over the course of her career, she has more overtly acknowledged a belief in republican nationalism which can be seen in a number of her books, including her most recent collection *Blaris Moor* (2015) that was published by the Gallery Press and takes its name from a ballad written in remembrance of four members of the United Irishmen who died during the 1798 Rebellion.²⁷ Although she was criticized for not directly responding to the conflict in Northern Ireland in her writing, she subverts political ideologies in her poetry, which can be seen in even her early collections.²⁸ In the late 1980s and early 1990s McGuckian ran a creative writing workshop for nationalist and unionist groups at Her Majesty's Prison Maze, more commonly known as Long Kesh, located just outside of Belfast, and her fourth book *Marconi's Cottage* was influenced by her

²⁵ Michaela Schrage-Früh, 'An Interview with Medbh McGuckian', *Contemporary Literature* 46, no. 1 (2005): 4. Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, 'Interview with Medbh McGuckian (Anthol Hotel: Aberdeen, 6 May 2007)' in *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian: The Interior of Words* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), 202. Medbh McGuckian, interviewed by Danielle Sered, July 23, 1999, Irish Women Poets Oral History Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Kimberly Bohman, 'Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian', *Irish Review* (1994): 102.

²⁶ McGuckian, 'Drawing', 186.

²⁷ Brian MacDonald, 'The Monaghan Militia and the Tragedy of Blaris Moor', *Clogher Record* 16, no.2 (1998): 123.

²⁸ Faragó, *McGuckian*, 65–95.

experience of working with prisoners on both sides of the conflict.²⁹ Discussions over the poems in this collection eventually led to the breakdown of her relationship with OUP and her move to the Gallery Press, an important transition in her career which I explore further in this chapter. In marketing herself as an Irish poet, McGuckian articulates a controversial identity that in itself engages with the questions of representation, as well as personal and political conflict.

These layers of McGuckian's identity expressed in her sense of otherness as a Catholic nationalist are further complicated by her experience as a woman determined to establish her career in what was in the 1980s and 1990s a traditionally male-dominated publishing industry.³⁰ McGuckian 'despises' the term 'woman poet', stating that '[I] think of myself as a poet who happens to be a woman, rather than a woman who happens to be a poet'.³¹ This disclaimer notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge these intersections of her vocational identity which have made her career quite different to that of her male peers. Eavan Boland has argued that the dissonance between the Irish political and social constructs of *woman* and *poet* prevented her from laying claim to a literary tradition which would acknowledge and include her work. She has written extensively about facing such difficulties when she began her career in the early 1960s before many women had begun publishing volumes of poetry in Ireland.³² These circumstances have changed drastically over the last fifty years, but Boland draws our attention to a literary history that once excluded, or at least challenged, women's writing in Ireland. Boland and other poets of the mid-twentieth century purposefully wrote about subjects of motherhood and the domestic space, which were personal to them but, for a long time, had been overlooked by poetry publishers. In doing so, these writers gave value to the materiality of women's everyday lives as mothers, daughters, wives and writers. Although she began her own career as a poet almost two decades after Boland, McGuckian experienced similar

²⁹ Suzanne Temple, 'McGuckian, Medbh', *Postcolonial Studies @ Emory*, July 2012, accessed May 8, 2016, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/11/mcguckian-medbh/>; Faragó, *McGuckian*, 68 and 92.

³⁰ Medbh McGuckian interviewed by Anne Langford, 'Medbh McGuckian – Telling Men About the Feminine Experience' in *Belfast Magazine* (Box OP 1209 / 008892, *Venus and the Rain*, OUP).

³¹ Medbh McGuckian, 'Your thoughts about how your own work connects with this tradition of women writers', Undated, MM, Box 26.

³² Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 1-2.

challenges to getting published and broadening her readership, but her task was further complicated by the social and political conflict in the North.³³ While Boland's poetry is firmly located in Dublin and McGuckian's is based, if anywhere at all, in the North, there are undoubtedly resonances between their early careers. In 1980, the year that *Portrait of Joanna* was published, Boland published the collection *In Her Own Image*, which draws disturbing and provocative parallels between the female body and the Irish nation, a theme which I examine in greater depth in Chapter 1. McGuckian's poetry dwells on subjects of female sexuality, domestic spaces and mother-child relationships, but she is also interested in poetry of commemoration and the effects of political unrest on a people.

Given that Ulster was both politically and culturally isolated from the rest of the island by the conditions of war, McGuckian's influences have been mainly those of her male peers living in the North, including Seamus Heaney, as well as her friends Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon with whom she studied at Queen's University Belfast. She did not become aware of or work with other women poets writing in Ireland until later in her career.³⁴ As such, from an early age, McGuckian was responding to a specifically male audience in her writing, and this influence is perhaps most obvious in the fact that her literary persona 'Medbh' was given to her by Heaney.³⁵ Although she is now well established in her career, she continues to acknowledge Heaney's influence as well as the encouragement of her peers, often referencing these Northern writers in her personal letters.³⁶ Her friendships with male poets may also have attributed to her successful publishing career with Fallon, who brings two perspectives to her poetry as her editor but also as a poet himself. Although she has been greatly influenced by what was a predominantly male community of writers in the North, her trajectory as a poet has been largely shaped by her life as a mother of four children, and this too is apparent in countless references to her pregnancies, childcare and life as a working mother that she discussed in archived letters to her publishers at OUP, Gallery Press and Wake Forest.³⁷ McGuckian was deeply affected and informed by a period of severe postpartum depression after the

³³ Boland's first collection *23 Poems* was published by Corgi in 1962; McGuckian's first chapbook was published by Interim Press in 1980.

³⁴ McGuckian, 'Thoughts', MM, Box 26.

³⁵ Langford, 'Telling', Box OP 1209 / 008892, *Venus and the Rain*, OUP.

³⁶ Gallery Press Collection, Box 45; MM, Boxes 14a, 15.

³⁷ McGuckian Papers and Gallery Press Collection, Rose MARBL, Emory.

birth of her second child, a topic which she has broached in interviews but remains largely overlooked in critical analyses of her poetry.³⁸ She sees the physical separation between mother and child after birth as the very embodiment of internalized otherness, the irreconcilable partitioning of one's identity as a woman, mother and writer.

In referring to McGuckian as a 'woman poet', I call attention to the social and political constructs of the terms *woman* and *poet* that weigh on how she must position herself and her poetry towards different publishers, editors and audiences of her work. I have elaborated on the intersections of McGuckian's religious, political and cultural identities as well as her role as a woman poet to augment a discussion of her publishing history but also to problematize the effects of national partition on McGuckian's career. She discusses the intersections of these identities in an unpublished essay held at Emory University titled 'Your thoughts about how your work connects with this tradition of women writers', in which she states:

I suppose my own personal development as a woman and a poet [...] parallels the gradual separation of these [Northern] writers from a sense of union with their fellow island or a sense of its being the mainland to their provincial dependency, towards an initially tentative and finally aggressive self-definitive and ultimate repudiation of the British influence. It was and is and always has been and presumably always will be an ambivalent relationship within me.³⁹

McGuckian's sense of otherness as a woman writer runs parallel to her experience as a Catholic nationalist living in Belfast, where she must negotiate both British and Irish identities. The binaries she refers to here are laid against the backdrop of the partition of the island and her sense of separation from an Irish identity that she cannot fully claim. As I piece together McGuckian's publishing history, I address the significance of these layers of her identity and explore the ways that their intersections have shaped her literary career.

³⁸ Schrage-Früh, 'Interview', 11; Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. 'Comhrá, with a foreword and afterword by Laura O'Conner', *The Southern Review* 31, no. 3 (1995): online.

³⁹ McGuckian, 'Thoughts', MM, Box 26.

Early Career with Oxford University Press

Between 1980 and 1991, the period during which McGuckian was published by Oxford University Press, she produced three collections of poems: her highly acclaimed first book *The Flower Master* (1982) followed by *Venus and the Rain* (1984) and *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988). Correspondence between McGuckian and her first publisher suggests that editors of the Oxford Poets list were supportive of her work, often writing words of encouragement, as many of their letters were signed with the valediction, ‘Love’.⁴⁰ Even so, McGuckian’s archives at OUP indicate that, from the outset, her editors Jacqueline Simms and Will Sulkin struggled to make sense of her ambiguous poems. Writing to Sulkin about the manuscript for *Venus and the Rain*, Simms seems to apologize for the difficulty of McGuckian’s poetry.⁴¹ She writes:

There are all sorts of ‘problems’ of syntax and ‘meaning, no meaning’ [...] Often there is so much confusion, I give up—or just vagueness. Sometimes a little work on her punctuation helps one, but she uses such a free associative method, that often arguments about sequence and logic don’t help much. I do find that if you relax on a first reading, are attracted to something, and then read again, something clicks, and you are prepared not to ask so many difficult questions.⁴²

Simms’ confusion was understandable because not only do the ideas presented in McGuckian’s poems seem to wander from one place to the next, but also McGuckian’s own explanations of the poems do not simplify them for the reader. Simms asked the poet on a number of occasions to change lines or justify the quality of her poems to which McGuckian responded with thorough—but not necessarily explicative—analyses.

Take, for example, the poem ‘The Sunbench’ from *The Flower Master*, which an uninformed reader might interpret as a free verse sonnet (though there is an extra

⁴⁰ MM, Boxes 14a, 15; GP, Boxes 45, 46, 47.

⁴¹ Jacqueline Simms was the commissioning editor at OUP who worked most closely with McGuckian from the start of the poet’s career in 1980 until McGuckian left OUP in 1991. Simms became a freelance editor for OUP and officially returned during the course of McGuckian’s career with the Press but throughout these transitions, Simms remained McGuckian’s most-involved editor. Will Sulkin was the chief editor of the trade division during the publication of McGuckian’s first two books, and he left OUP for Faber in 1986.

⁴² Letter from Simms to Sulkin, May 11, 1983, Box OP1209 / 008892, *Venus and the Rain*, OUP.

half line at the end of the first stanza) that seems to depict the beauty of a garden in early spring. The first stanza reads:

Behind my party wall what bolts of silk
Prepare their images, relax from them
Like petals lolling in a knot garden
Voluptuous with rapid growth! These seed leaves
I have summered and these true leaves wintered
Through the spartan frost, supported by sweet
Chestnut, riven oak, till lime unlocks
Their mongrel tenderness, the shattering excretion
of the rose...⁴³

This portrayal of the garden that is ‘Voluptuous with rapid growth’ suggests not only a turn towards spring, but also female sexuality and gestation. McGuckian explains in a detailed letter to Simms that the poem portrays a woman coming to terms with changes that a child will bring to her own life. She writes to Simms, ‘The very centre of [the woman’s] existence is to be tested and emptied, her guest is to vanish after a long stay, his departure will have good and bad significance’.⁴⁴ Although the poem can be read as a metaphor for gestation and physical changes to a woman’s body during pregnancy, these lines do not necessarily lead to McGuckian’s analysis that ‘[the woman] will be able to once again nourish only herself, but [she] will have to pay for this recovery of individuality’. The ‘party wall’ that hides ‘bolts of silk’ are presumably a reference to a physical wall around the garden, but McGuckian urges that it is ‘not only the thin, stretched skin of her stomach, but the element of fear that [the woman] is caught in some conspiracy of nature’, yet it is unclear what this ‘conspiracy’ is or how it is presented in the poem.⁴⁵ Yet, even in this analysis that she sent to OUP, we can perceive McGuckian’s political subtexts that might not have been obvious many readers. A ‘party wall’ refers to a wall that separates neighbouring structures and the fact that the poem begins with these lines indicates that representations of the garden and gestation are politicized by the ‘party wall’ between the Republic and Northern Ireland. The ‘shattering excretion’ of the rose is also

⁴³ McGuckian, *Flower*, 39.

⁴⁴ Letter from McGuckian to Simms, September 24, 1980, Box OP2403 / 017653 *The Flower Master*, OUP.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

reminiscent of Heaney's 'Act of Union' from *North* (1975) that conceives a 'parasitical' force whose 'ignorant little fists already | Beat at your borders'.⁴⁶ McGuckian would certainly have been aware of this poem by her mentor, and we might read 'The Sunbench' as engendering representations of fertility, but also confinement for the speaker in the garden and nation.

If one reads the poem without the analysis or even McGuckian's explanation without reading the poem itself, the reader might be as confused as Simms was about the logic behind the piece. Given the title 'The Sunbench', the reader follows an image of an individual sitting at a bench in a garden who admires changes in the new season and may not consider the less obvious metaphors of gestation and a woman's fear of separation once the child is born. Taking into consideration that this is one of McGuckian's less demanding poems in terms of syntax, word play and content, it seems plausible that her editors at OUP would find her work difficult to follow if they are looking to produce books that would be accessible to readers. Nevertheless, it is important to note that given the passionate tone of McGuckian's letter and the great detail in which she analyzes the poem and others in this collection, she seems convinced of her own reading, as though the metaphor of the mother-child relationship during pregnancy should be obvious to her audience.

These interactions between Simms and McGuckian made the poet feel unsure about the quality of her work, yet Simms and Sulkin continued to encourage her writing. In 1985 Sulkin responded to a letter of irresolution from McGuckian about reviews of *Venus and the Rain*, stating, 'For the most part, the reviews of *Venus* have been terribly good. Where less so, it's to be expected perhaps—after the tremendous, and virtually universal, praise heaped on *The Flower Master*'.⁴⁷ Sulkin downplays the lull that followed the publication of her second book, noting that he looked forward to working on the next manuscript. However, given that their exchanges indicated support but also bewilderment about the poems, it is unsurprising that McGuckian seemed concerned about the future of her literary career and the lack of sales of *Venus and the Rain*. This unpredictable relationship offers a possible reason as to why she would ask Fallon to consider a chapbook despite her apparent success in being a published on the Oxford Poets list. Other letters to Fallon during the late 1980s as well

⁴⁶ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 'Act of Union', Kindle edition.

⁴⁷ Letter from Will Sulkin (Editor OUP) to Medbh McGuckian, Dated March 29, 1985, MM Box 15.

as exchanges with Simms indicate that McGuckian was interested in broadening her readership throughout Ireland where her sales were most profitable.

McGuckian's interest in having her books published and marketed more widely in Ireland suggest that her allegiances as a poet had begun to shift as she sought to establish her poetic identity and broaden her readership. By the time her third book *On Ballycastle Beach* was published with OUP in 1988, her relationship with her British publisher had become strained. While the book was in production, her editors at OUP did not agree with McGuckian about the poems that should be included in the collection, and nor did they agree with her on its presentation. McGuckian wanted to include in the book an epigraph by the revolutionary and humanitarian Roger Casement, who was a politically and culturally controversial figure in Irish history.⁴⁸ He attempted to import German arms in support of Irish independence during the revolutionary events of 1916. The epigraph comes from a rather well-known letter Casement had written to his sister Nina Newman from Pentonville Gaol in July 1916, and the letter expresses his relief and joy in returning to Ireland despite the knowledge that he would be executed.⁴⁹ The excerpt from his letter titled 'On Banna Strand' reads (as quoted by McGuckian):

'When I landed in Ireland,' he was to tell his sister in a letter written while he was awaiting execution, 'swamped and swimming ashore on an unknown strand, I was happy for the first time for over a year. Although I knew that this fate waited on me, I was for one brief spell happy and smiling once more. I cannot tell you what I felt. The sandhills were full of skylarks rising in the dawn, the first I had heard in years—the first sound I heard through the surf was their song, as I waded through the breakers, and they kept rising all the time up to the old rath at Currsahone, where I stayed and sent the others on, and all around were primroses and wild violets and the singing of the skylarks in the air, and I was back in Ireland again.'⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Guinn Batten (Editor, Wake Forest University Press, Critic of McGuckian's poetry), interview with editor, October 5, 2015, St. Louis; Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, 'Interview', 195-6.

⁴⁹ 'Casement 1916', *Ardfert: Medieval Capital of Kerry, History and Architecture*, accessed 29 March 2016, <http://www.ardfert.ie/history-architecture/sir-roger-casement/>.

⁵⁰ 'On Banna Strand', epigraph in note from McGuckian to Fallon, undated, Gallery Press Collection, 45; McGuckian, *On Ballycastle Beach*. Box OP1015 / 007564, OUP.

In wanting to have a passage by Casement writing about the moment of his return to Ireland as the epigraph of *On Ballycastle Beach*, McGuckian wished to express her own republican belief that the north of Ireland should become independent of British influence and that the island should no longer be partitioned. McGuckian's invocation of Casement's failed attempt to secure German arms conveys a sense of personal failure in her ability, or desire to, negotiate both British and Irish identities. The epigraph also suggests a political failure by connecting Casement's call to arms with sectarian violence in the North that was still underway in the late 1980s. The earnestness of this passage veils a plea for independence for the North which had not yet been achieved; it seemed impossible that a resolution that would please both nationalist and unionist parties could be reached. In her desire to begin a collection with a proclamation from a nationalist about his return to Ireland, McGuckian hoped to declare her own political stance as a nationalist in spite of the conditions of political unrest in the North.

There are many reasons as to why McGuckian would want the excerpt from Casement's letter as the epigraph for *On Ballycastle Beach*, but Oxford University Press chose not to publish it. McGuckian stated in her interview with Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland that the disagreement with OUP stemmed from the fact that an individual in the office was a relative of Casement and did not approve of its publication.⁵¹ In my own research in McGuckian's relationship with her first publisher, I have found no evidence to corroborate her story about the personal reasons for the epigraph's exclusion from the book. There are several series of correspondence held at Emory University that indicate McGuckian's frustration and concern about the publication of her third book, yet little evidence regarding the epigraph can be found in the archives of her first three books held at OUP. Among the well-documented letters between McGuckian and the OUP as well as the production materials for *The Flower Master*, *Venus and the Rain* and *On Ballycastle Beach*, there are only three references to the epigraph. The first is a letter dated September 1987 when McGuckian wrote out the excerpt by hand in a note to Simms asking to include it in the book.⁵² Simms responded some weeks later stating that the note arrived too close to the publication date, and she believed that it was 'not so

⁵¹ Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, 'Interview', 195.

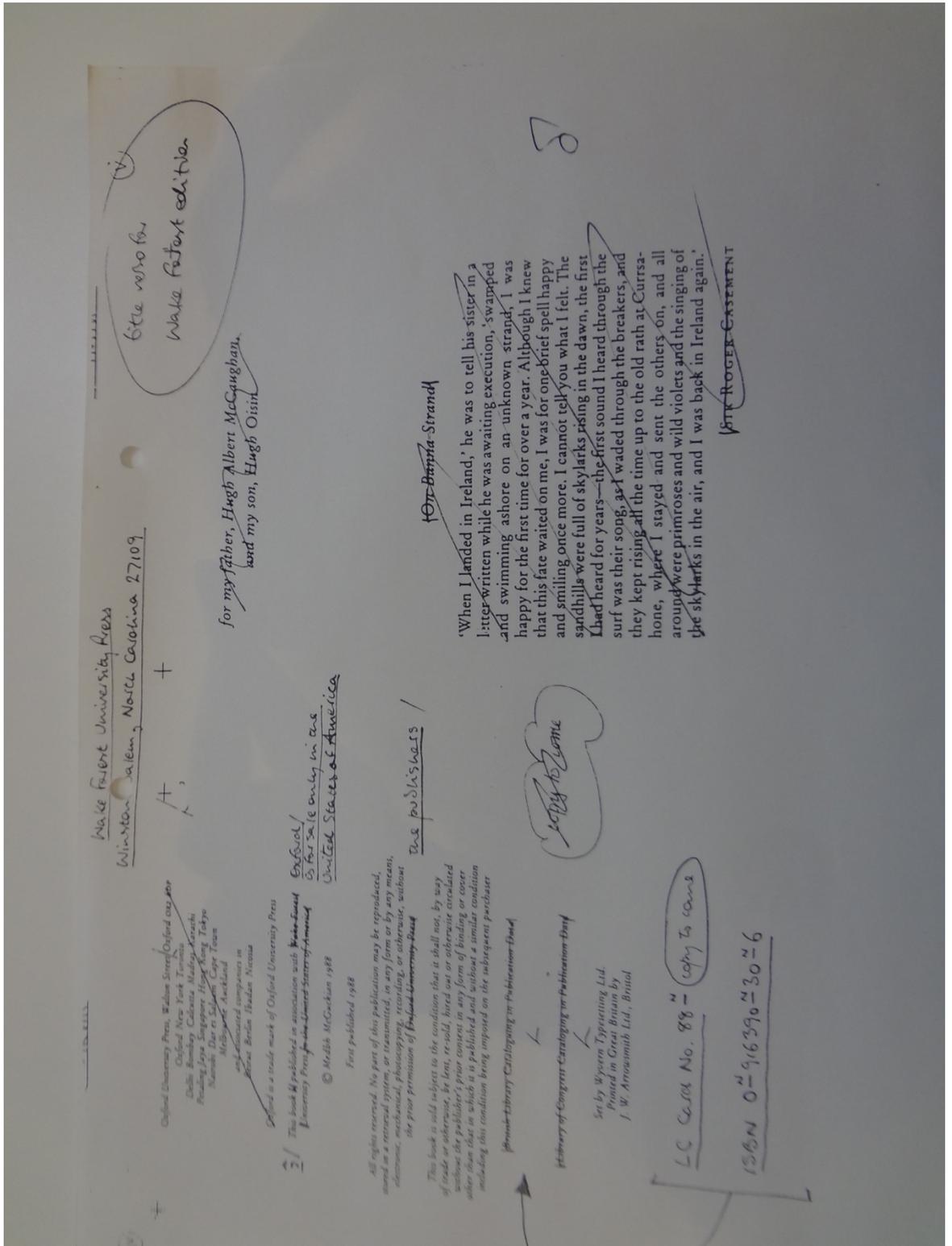
⁵² Roger Casement, as quoted in a letter from McGuckian to Simms, September 30, 1987, Box OP1015 / 007564, *On Ballycastle Beach*, OUP.

good'.⁵³ McGuckian's late request is a sensible reason as to why the epigraph would not be published, but there probably would have been time to include it in the collection. The production materials for *On Ballycastle Beach* also include two annotated versions of the copyright and verso pages for the book that were sent to Wake Forest University Press in the months leading up to publication. On both copies, corrections were made to the copyright page to reflect accurate details for the American publisher, but on the opposite verso pages where the dedication is outlined, the epigraph was printed below and crossed out [See Figures 1 and 2].

⁵³ Letter from Simms to McGuckian, October 28, 1987, Box OP1015 / 007564, *On Ballycastle Beach*, OUP.

Figure 2

On Ballycastle Beach proof, second exchange between Wake Forest and OUP



Production Material, Exchange between OUP and Dillon Johnston, Publisher at Wake Forest University Press, Undated, Medbh McGuckian, Box OP15015 / 007564, On Ballycastle Beach, Oxford University Press.

Dillon Johnston, the publisher of Wake Forest, had acquired the rights to publish McGuckian's third book at quite a late stage in production, and OUP was working with him to get proofs of the contents mailed before the impending publication date. These two documents were part of a larger conversation between OUP and Wake Forest, as the publishers finalized details for *On Ballycastle Beach*. It is clear from the handwriting and notes in pen and pencil that these changes were made at separate times and possibly set by different publishers. Given that these were photocopies sent to Wake Forest to reflect the American copyright and verso pages, it seems that Wake Forest had attempted to include the epigraph in the American edition, but OUP, as McGuckian's main publisher, made the final decision not to include Casement's words. There is no epigraph in the British and American publications of *On Ballycastle Beach*, which indicates that 'On Banna Strand' was of such personal significance to McGuckian that she did not want to replace it with a less provocative quotation.

The circumstances surrounding the excerpt from Casement's writings are controversial, but it is important to consider the incident's implications for her career with OUP and how it shaped her own development as a poet. It seems from McGuckian's interviews with Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland as well as Borbála Faragó that she believed Oxford University Press's omission of the epigraph as delimiting her identity to that of a specifically 'British poet'.⁵⁴ The disagreement between OUP and McGuckian about the inclusion of the epigraph is linked not only to personal circumstances that affected the individuals involved, but also to cultural and historical perceptions of Casement. To republicans in the north of Ireland, Casement was a 'revolutionary hero', but to unionists, he was perceived as a terrorist because of his support for an armed rebellion in Ireland.⁵⁵ Casement may also be seen as a controversial figure to quote in an epigraph because he was condemned for allegedly writing about his homosexuality in a series of notebooks that came to be known as the 'Black Diaries'.⁵⁶ These depictions of Casement made him a particularly disputable figure to acknowledge in her collection, but her desire to include the

⁵⁴ Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, *Interior*, 193; Faragó, *McGuckian*, 15.

⁵⁵ Lucy McDiarmid, 'The Posthumous Life of Roger Casement', in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* ed. by Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialenella Valiulis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 127–155.

⁵⁶ McDiarmid, 'Casement', 136.

epigraph shows McGuckian's changing perceptions of her own work and poetic identity.

Although the passage from Casement's letter was not included in either the OUP or Wake Forest editions of *On Ballycastle Beach*, the title of the collection undoubtedly invokes 'On Banna Strand', the title of Casement's letter, suggesting that McGuckian was in a quite conspicuous way able to claim an Irish identity in this collection. The title poem suggests the inspiration of Casement's life because the speaker in the poem draws a connection between her own language and an individual found 'wandering round the edge | Of a French-born sea'. Just as the figure in poem stands at the edge of land and sea, so the speaker's words and experiences also exist in a liminal space:

Like a ship coming in to harbor,
As meaningless and full of meaning
As the homeless flow of life
From room to homesick room.⁵⁷

The ideas of homelessness and homesickness suggest the speaker's longing to come to terms with her own identity and place to which she belongs. The speaker's words seem intricately connected to the individual's life in the words, 'My forbidden squares and your small circles | Were a book that formed within you | In some pocket, so permanently distended, | That what does not face north, faces east.'⁵⁸ Words and experience are interlinked here, suggesting that the book *On Ballycastle Beach* is in some way linked to the liminality of this individual's life. We also see a moment of inspiration for McGuckian in the references to 'what does not face north, faces east' indicating a connection between the geographical placement of Ballycastle Beach northeast of the island, and the location of Banna Strand on the southwest coast; though greatly distanced, these shores remain part of a single island and experience. According to Lucy McDiarmid, Casement lived 'between accents, nationalities, allegiances, and genders, hybrid and subversive' and it is possible that McGuckian perceived her own experience as a Catholic nationalist in the North as comparable to Casement's experience of liminality and the cause for which he died.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Medbh McGuckian, *On Ballycastle Beach*, (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1995), 61.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ McDiarmid, 'Casement', 127.

The poem 'On Ballycastle Beach' was later dedicated to her father in the Gallery edition reproduced in 1995, but one may draw the conclusion that in its original publication in the OUP edition, the poem serves as a statement to McGuckian's coming to terms with her identity as a poet during a period of political unrest in the North. As the closing poem in her final collection published with Oxford University Press, 'On Ballycastle Beach' marks McGuckian's movement away from being marketed as a British poet. Speaking of the collection as a whole, McGuckian writes, '[*On Ballycastle Beach*] will probably be classified by experts as the most "Irish" of my collections to date, but like all my work, it is a simple diary or record of my emotional life during those years.'⁶⁰ Though the collection did not include the epigraph by Casement, the poems in *On Ballycastle Beach* suggests that McGuckian had shifted towards a distinctly Irish republican identity, and the book's success established her position as one of the leading women poets in the North. Although the epigraph from Casement's letter does not appear in either the OUP or Wake Forest editions of *On Ballycastle Beach* published in 1988 or in the Gallery edition reproduced in 1995, the epigraph was included in her long-awaited book *Selected Poems: 1978-1994* published in 1997, a collection which she had periodically discussed compiling with OUP since the late 1980s.⁶¹ The epigraph's appearance in this landmark collection serves as a declaration of McGuckian's political beliefs but also her insistence to go against the norms expected by her publishers. Considering that the poet had felt uncertain about her career in the years leading up to the publication of *On Ballycastle Beach*, this collection demonstrates McGuckian's development of her poetic identity.

McGuckian's Transition to the Gallery Press

According to McGuckian, the circumstances surrounding the epigraph by Roger Casement led to the eventual breakdown of her relationship with Oxford University Press and culminated in her move to Gallery when disagreements with OUP over the manuscript of her fourth collection became intolerable for her.⁶² As mentioned, McGuckian was teaching creative writing to nationalist and unionist groups at the

⁶⁰ 'On Ballycastle Beach: Medbh McGuckian on her "Diary"' in *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Summer 1988, p. 10, MM, Box 56.

⁶¹ Letter from Simms to McGuckian, July 6, 1987, MM, Box 15.

⁶² Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, 'Interview', 196; Correspondence between McGuckian and Fallon, GP.

Maze Prison in the 1980s, and her fourth manuscript, which would eventually be published as *Marconi's Cottage* in 1991, reflected a distinct change in poetic style that differed to OUP's expectations of her work. The poems in this collection are not overtly political, as one might expect given her experience of working with the prisoners, but they do move away from subjects of domesticity and sexuality, major themes of her previous collections, to convey the nature of war which can be seen in the recurrence of such words as 'death', 'window[s]', 'newspapermen', 'soldiers', 'July', and 'flame[s]',⁶³ all disturbing and disconnected references to increasing violence in the North. The dual personae of the lyrical speaker and her 'other' are also present in a number of poems including 'To Call Paula Paul', 'Brothers and Uncles', 'The Cloth Mother', 'The Unplayed Rosalind', and 'On Her Second Birthday', to name a few and, paired with the change of register, the collection as a whole suggests not only the interference that the conflict had inflicted upon people's lives, but also the disruption of McGuckian's personal and poetic identities as she attempted to write about the reality of her experience.

In considering this pivotal collection, I want to draw attention to a particular poem in *Marconi's Cottage*, 'To Call Paula Paul', which might offer some sense of the complexity of the poems and the foreboding tone of this book. It would be too simplistic to give a thematic description of 'To Call Paula Paul' because the poem does not seem to follow a particular logic; rather, images of parts of a woman body, a seemingly pregnant speaker, children, the juxtaposition of 'July' and 'winter', a 'camera' knocked out of a 'newspapermen's | Haphazard hands' as well as references to 'soldiers' and 'lorries' all suggest the proximity of war and its disruption of daily life.⁶⁴ In addition to countless deaths of Catholics and Protestants living in Northern Ireland, October 1988 saw another turn of events in which a ban was placed 'on the broadcasting of direct statements by representatives of Sinn Féin, Republican Sinn Féin and the [Ulster Defense Association]'.⁶⁵ The RTÉ ban on Sinn Féin was an attempt to prevent nationalist groups from gaining momentum through radio broadcasting. McGuckian acknowledges this interference with freedom of speech in her poem, 'To Call Paula Paul' does not make overt references to the conflict, but

⁶³ McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1991), 17, 19, 59, 60, 107.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-19.

⁶⁵ Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1993* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993), 217.

rather it suggests the devastating effects of civil war. The idea of the silenced self is expressed in the following stanza taken from the middle of the poem:

I did nothing, I didn't cry;
I held the permanent bangle on her wrist
For a long time. In the bright July
My window seemed too big, all day
Long to insult me, with its pale heaven,
Putting supple hands around my throat.⁶⁶

The reader does not know the action which has left the persona unable to do anything or express fear, distress and sorrow in crying, but it is evident that this inability to act has gone on 'for a long time.'

The reference to July in this poem and others in this collection evokes the events of 12th July, a day in which the Orange Order, a long-standing Protestant organization, celebrates the 'Protestant Ascendancy' in the North. McGuckian herself refers to Catholic responses to these events in her 'Drawing Ballerinas' essay in which she states:

Any Catholic who could, would evacuate the streets before the celebrations of the twelfth with its bonfires, and go to the seaside ghettos Catholics were allowed to go to. Even here, war brooded menacingly, for the beach was still reputed to be mined.⁶⁷

Although McGuckian's sentiment about the beaches being mined might have been an exaggeration of the predicament faced by individuals in the North, 'To Call Paula Paul' suggests the fear and dissociation that emanates from McGuckian's reflection on her childhood memories. The implications behind the word 'July' are heightened by the half-rhyme 'cry' and 'time', and the 'supple hands around my throat' suggest a metaphorical silencing and suppression of one's truth. It is also interesting to see the word 'window' in this poem as well as others in *Marconi's Cottage* because letters to Fallon archived at Emory University make reference to the windows of McGuckian's own home being shattered during this period. During the production of her fourth book, McGuckian sent Fallon a photograph of a dim room with a window lit by sunlight at its centre, a pot with flowers on the sill and a view of a stone wall outside

⁶⁶ McGuckian, *Marconi's*, 17.

⁶⁷ McGuckian, 'Drawing', 188.

of the window, attached with a note asking if this photograph of her father's birthplace near Ballycastle Beach might fit as the cover of *Marconi's Cottage*. She says rather playfully, 'All of it has vanished. It would help me forget all my *real broken windows!*'⁶⁸ The window that '[seems] too big' suggests not only the '*real broken windows*' but also the proximity and interference of the Troubles on people's lives.

If one was not convinced by these suggestions of fear and silencing surrounding the events of 12th July, this might change as the poem moves away from images of the speaker and a woman's body to depict wind so strong that it 'throws cameras out of newspapermen's | haphazard hands' and 'so many orange skies' that have 'smashed | The light bulbs of the weather'⁶⁹ The wind here is a force that overwhelms not only the speaker but other figures in the poem. In *Poetry and Its Others* (2013), Jahan Ramazani dedicates a chapter to depictions of the news in Irish poetry, which he explores through the life and work of W. B. Yeats, Louis MacNeice, Heaney, Michael Longley, Muldoon and McGuckian. Ramazani argues that these poets 'engage with and deflect the cataclysmic news of the post-1968 Troubles' by '[integrating] a discrete news event into the imaginative space' of the poem.⁷⁰ In his consideration of McGuckian's work, Ramazani reflects on her later, more overtly political collections such as *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001), but I would argue that the disconnected allusions in 'To Call Paula Pall' indicating interference and impending violence in its references to the unwanted camera, newspapermen, and soldiers on the street convey McGuckian's engagement with the political conflict. The title of the poem itself 'To Call Paula Paul' implies that certain truths must be hidden, suggested by the removal of the letter 'a' in 'Paul', in order for her work to be published and accepted by audiences in the UK, Ireland and abroad.

Responding in 1990 to the manuscript of *Marconi's Cottage*, Jacqueline Simms writes, 'Poem by poem we need you to be clearer – to keep us with the story you begin to tell, usually so vividly, instead of abandoning us without recall during the course of a poem.'⁷¹ She insists in an encouraging way that McGuckian edit the poems and clarify the syntax, so that her readers could make sense of their scope as they move through the poems. Simms affirms this in stating, 'It seems to me that your poetry

⁶⁸ Photograph and letter from McGuckian to Fallon, Undated, GP, Box 45.

⁶⁹ McGuckian, *Marconi's*, 17-18.

⁷⁰ Ramazani, *Others*, Kindle, Ch. 2.

⁷¹ Letter from Simms to McGuckian, October 26, 1990, McGuckian Papers, Box 15.

hankers after becoming painting! [...] a poem has to lead one, not logically, but at least on a thread one can follow from line to line.⁷² Given Simms' analysis of the poems 'A Small Piece of Wood' and 'The Unplayed Rosalind', it seems that the McGuckian did not alter the poems much from manuscript to publication. While it is important to remember that Simms was only representing the Press's interest in publishing McGuckian, the ensuing correspondence between them demonstrated the publisher's eagerness for a change in McGuckian's style to make her poems accessible to a greater audience.⁷³ Given Simms' insistence on the poems following a logical pattern, it is understandable that OUP would have differences with McGuckian as her poems not only continued to be ambiguous in content and word play, but they took on a different tone, as they made references to enclosed rooms, religious symbolism, the female muse and change in seasons, all of which seemed disconnected to an outside reader.

McGuckian's engagement with political activists on both sides of the conflict at the Maze Prison changed her approach to poetry, as she began to associate creative labour with the efforts for republican nationalists. Speaking of her time working with the prisoners, she states:

I suddenly realised this was the absolute truth of Bobby Sands and all of that battle. I could see very clearly the very entrenched positions of everybody there. Basically, what illuminated it was that I was going through this very cosy world of being a British poet and being spoiled with all this English stuff, and these people wanted to be Irish. They desperately wanted to speak Irish. They wanted the pride of having a nation.⁷⁴

McGuckian's words reflect how she remembers her transition to a specifically 'Irish' identity in her poetry; however, it is unclear from her archived correspondence how

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Letter from Dillon Johnston to Jacky Simms, Dated May 9, 1991, GP; Letter from Fallon to Simms, Dated July 22, 1991, GP.

⁷⁴ Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, *McGuckian*, 204; Provisional Irish Republican Army leader Gerard Sands died on a hunger strike campaign in the Maze Prison in 1981. Before his death, Sands was elected to the Westminster seat of Fermanagh-South Tyrone while imprisoned, drawing international attention to the hunger strikes and efforts to acknowledge republican political status. Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968–1993* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993), 146-147.

this political engagement was received by her publishers. OUP eventually closed the Oxford Poets series in 1999, and the imprint was taken over by Michael Schmidt at Carcanet Press. It is possible that during the years leading up to its closure, the series could not afford to continue with books that would not guarantee a wide readership, which is a possible reason as to why the contract with McGuckian did not continue. However, the exchanges among OUP editors, McGuckian and Fallon from this period of her career indicate a growing tension between McGuckian and her British publishers, but the exact cause of the friction is not known.

Simms and other editors at OUP did not wish to move forward with the manuscript for *Marconi's Cottage*, instead insisting that she make the poems more accessible to her readers. McGuckian became frustrated and turned to Fallon once again, asking him to consider publishing the collection. This time, Fallon showed great interest in the book, and he, along with McGuckian, began negotiations with OUP to co-publish *Marconi's Cottage* with the Gallery Press in Ireland. Although OUP did not agree to publish the poems in the fourth manuscript, they offered McGuckian the option of publishing a *Selected Poems* that would include earlier poems that had been omitted from earlier books and the option to publish *Marconi's Cottage* with another publisher. As Alcobia-Murphy explores in *Sympathetic Ink* (2006), OUP also felt 'compelled to set restrictive conditions for the proposed publication of her *Selected Poems*', which included a guarantee that her first three books would not be reprinted by another publisher during the lifetime of the *Selected Poems*, that there would be no rival collections and that she would have to make these terms clear to the Gallery Press.⁷⁵ Simms acknowledged that McGuckian felt 'trapped in a contract with OUP, and negotiated, as much as possible to bring out the best collection of poems.'⁷⁶ Even Dillon Johnston at Wake Forest, who was also scheduled to publish the fourth collection, could not offer McGuckian reassurance about the publication for, as he quoted in a letter to OUP, 'She herself said in a February note: "again, I am so unsure of these poems and the shape of this book"'.⁷⁷ When, in 1991, three years after the publication of *On Ballycastle Beach*, no settlement was reached, McGuckian took the advice of Fallon and Johnston and decided to cancel the publication of *Marconi's Cottage* with OUP and publish it instead with the Gallery

⁷⁵ Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic*, 45.

⁷⁶ Letter from Simms to McGuckian, May 2, 1991, MM, Box 15.

⁷⁷ Letter from Dillon Johnston to Jacky Simms, May 9, 1991, MM, Box 15.

Press and Wake Forest University Press. As Johnston notes in a letter to McGuckian, ‘Pick publishers who have some understanding of what you are about, who support you enthusiastically, and who can present your work in attractive form. It seems to me that Gallery, Wake Forest, and Bloodaxe [in the UK] can do that’.⁷⁸

The rejection of McGuckian’s manuscript for *Marconi’s Cottage* by her British publisher and her difficult transition from OUP to the Gallery Press is a well-known story in her literary career, and she has openly discussed it with critics and interviewers alike. McGuckian’s correspondence with OUP, Wake Forest and the Gallery Press, as well as the letters that Fallon received from OUP, all of which are held at Emory, demonstrate the frustration that her British publishers, Fallon and McGuckian expressed during this period, but also the severe anxiety which the negotiations caused her. Although there are only a few letters in the Emory archives received from OUP during McGuckian’s final years on the Oxford Poets list, there is no documentation at all of her transition to the Gallery Press held in the Oxford University Press archives. OUP has copies of both the letters sent from the Press to McGuckian alongside handwritten letters from McGuckian about her first three books. Correspondence between OUP and McGuckian lessens after 1987, just before the publication of *On Ballycastle Beach*, and there are only a handful of interdepartmental notes on McGuckian between 1988 and 1991, the year she left OUP. There is no documentation of her requests to publish with the Gallery Press, letters from McGuckian and Fallon to OUP, or copies of letters sent to them, which suggests that the transition was a point of contention for the Press as much as it was for McGuckian.⁷⁹ The lack of evidence concerning McGuckian’s transition to the Gallery Press makes it difficult to trace this particularly challenging moment in her career. This suggests the publisher’s ability to determine the story by either disregarding or, intentionally not documenting, the provocative and crucial letters sent from McGuckian and Fallon to OUP. Nevertheless, the lack of evidence marking this transitional period in her career also allows McGuckian’s story of the fourth manuscript to become widely known. Either way, the absence of these letters suggests that there was more to the disagreement than McGuckian’s determination to publish *Marconi’s Cottage*.

⁷⁸ Letter from Johnston to McGuckian, August 29, 1991, MM, Box 15.

⁷⁹ See files in McGuckian production materials, *On Ballycastle Beach*, OP1015 / 007564, OUP.

After she had begun working with Fallon, McGuckian claimed that if it had not been for her close friend and colleague Ciaran Carson supporting her work, Fallon would not have agreed to publish her. She recalls, ‘Ciaran [Carson] would insist that it was *he* who persuaded Peter that I was good. I don’t buy that, but I’m sure he *had* something to do with it.’⁸⁰ Once again, McGuckian asserts the value of her poetry and a belief that her work as a poet is comparable to that of Carson and other male writers published by the Gallery Press. However, there may be some truth to McGuckian’s insistence that it was ‘he [Carson] who persuaded Fallon’ to publish McGuckian because there were only two other woman poets published by the Gallery Press at the time. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, one of McGuckian’s other contemporaries, had published four collections by the time McGuckian was also published by Gallery, the most recent of which was *The Magdalene Sermon* which came out in 1989. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who writes in Irish published her book of poems in translation, *Pharaoh’s Daughter*, in 1990 just one year before McGuckian’s *Marconi’s Cottage* came out. The fact that Fallon had to be ‘persuaded’ to take on a woman poet is possible because, even today, the current Gallery Press publishing list, which is still selected by Fallon, includes nine women writers out of fifty-seven in total. While McGuckian insists that Fallon saw value in her work outside of Carson’s validation, she agrees that Carson’s approval of her poetry had a part to play in Fallon’s willingness to publish her. It is interesting to note that even while McGuckian seemed personally offended by OUP’s insistence that she edit and rework the poems in the *Marconi’s Cottage* manuscript, they still wished to move forward with a fourth collection of poems. She, however, had to convince her seemingly supportive Irish publisher to take on her work when her relationship with OUP became fraught.

Although Fallon has helped McGuckian achieve a prolific and productive career, having shown great enthusiasm for her work, she did not always experience the same enthusiasm from other poets because they felt that her collections did not engage with the political conflict that overwhelmed Northern Ireland in the 1990s.⁸¹ In ‘Ambiguous Silences?: Women in Anthologies of Northern Irish Poetry’, Alex Pryce draws connections between the poetic and political developments of the post-1960s period in Northern Ireland with those of the second-wave feminist movement

⁸⁰ Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, ‘Interview’, 195.

⁸¹ See letters from Fallon to McGuckian, MM, Box 15; Letter from Peter Fallon to the author, June 30, 2016.

which had, by then, spread across the Western world, leading to the growth of women's poetry and criticism. Some feminist texts such as *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (1985) and *Against the Grain: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Northern Ireland* (1991) have brought critical attention to women's writing in relation to the Northern Irish conflict, but Pryce notes that at its height, 'The Troubles were so prevalent, and the political picket lines so clearly defined that those issues white-washed feminist thought. Given the pressing political preoccupations, perhaps the encouragement of women's artistic expression seemed somewhat dispensable'.⁸² The article establishes a long history of women poets publishing collections before, during and after the Troubles, but Pryce notes that despite their efforts, many female poets 'have all but been forgotten, in part because of their exclusion from anthologies such as [Frank] Ormsby's'.⁸³ While McGuckian is nationally and internationally recognized as one of the leading poets from the North, her work was not included in some major anthologies of Irish poetry during this period.

The original edition of Frank Ormsby's *Poets from the North of Ireland*, published in 1979, did not include the work of a single woman poet. The collection is separated into two generations of writers, the older of which included George Buchanan, Louis MacNeice and Roy McFadden, while the younger generation incorporated Heaney, Michael Longley, Seamus Deane, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Michael Foley, Tom Paulin, and William Peskett. The introduction offers detailed analysis of each poet's background and interests, indicating Ormsby's hope that readers would decide for themselves the extent to which Northern Irish poets expressed or responded to the Troubles. He states that the poets in the anthology have been 'accused of being unadventurous, unwilling to experiment, prisoners of the neat lyric', and while these men have been 'commended for their restraint in not allowing the brutal realities of their place and time to impair their sense of aesthetic responsibility,' they are also 'denounced for failure to "confront" the realities directly.'⁸⁴ Although Ormsby offers both sides of the debate that Northern Irish poets should or should not engage with political conflict in their poetry, his omission of

⁸² Alex Pryce, 'Ambiguous Silences? Women in Anthologies of Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry', *Peer English* 9 (2014): 57.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Frank Ormsby, *Poets from the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1979), 13.

women poets suggests that either women are not expected to depict the ‘aesthetic responsibility’ of the Troubles or that their poetry does not do so.⁸⁵

The second edition of *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1990) published a decade later was an ‘enlarged, updated edition reflecting the transitions and developments of the 1980s’, but McGuckian was the only woman poet to merit a place in the book.⁸⁶ His introduction praises her work but focuses only on the ‘feminine’ subjects such as the ‘world of houses, rooms, family and other relationships; others range outwards to incorporate the weather, the seasons, gardens, vegetation, the landscape and the planets in ways that are often symbolically significant’.⁸⁷ Although McGuckian’s poems in *The Flower Master*, *Venus and the Rain* and *On Ballycastle Beach* do not seem to overtly engage with political conflict, McGuckian creates these tensions in the poems through the disruption of the language, syntax and meaning in the poems.⁸⁸ In her *Comhrá* with Ní Dhomhnaill, McGuckian responds to the criticism that that she has been called, ‘a wallpaper poet, a woman who writes about begonias’ by stating that, ‘They think that all you are concerned with is the earth. And it’s true that you are very concerned with the earth, but the earth is your metaphor for this other’.⁸⁹ This otherness to which she refers is linked not only with a reference to her identity as a woman poet from the North, but also to her experience as a Catholic nationalist attempting to write about the reality of her life during the Troubles.

In 1992, Blackstaff published Ormsby’s *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* to acknowledge the work of poets who ‘continued, in reviews and criticism as well as poetry, to weigh and scrutinize the relationship between art and politics and the nature of artistic responsibility’.⁹⁰ In this book, Ormsby adopted a different format in which he grouped single poems by themes, rather than separating sections by individual poets, in order to emphasize themes present in ‘poetry written during the phase of Northern Ireland’s Troubles which began in 1968’.⁹¹ The volume included a single poem by a female poet—this time,

⁸⁵ Ibid., xiii.

⁸⁶ Ibid., xiii.

⁸⁷ Frank Ormsby, *Poets from the North of Ireland: Second Edition* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990), 15–6.

⁸⁸ Fadem, *Borderlands*, 109–110.

⁸⁹ McGuckian and Ní Dhomhnaill, ‘Comhrá’, online.

⁹⁰ Ormsby, *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992): xv.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Rita Ann Higgins— out of more than 300 poems compiled for the publication. The thematic content reflects on poems of war, division, historical responses to the Troubles as well as writers' emotional and physical distances from it, but, McGuckian's work is not included among that of her male peers. McGuckian responded to the omission from Ormsby's anthology by including in her 1994 collection *Captain Lavender* an epigraph by the famed Spanish painter Pablo Picasso which reads 'I have not painted the war...but I have no doubt that the war is in...these paintings I have done.'⁹² The quotation attests to Picasso's subversion of violence in his paintings, and suggests that the artist could not escape the emotional and psychological effects of the First World War and the Spanish Civil War. Schrage-Früh acknowledges that in choosing the epigraph, McGuckian responded to those 'critics who reproach (and frequently dismiss) her for supposedly having ignored the civil war around her', and Alcobia-Murphy's intertextual readings of McGuckian's poetry examine her use of Picasso's biography in her poems.⁹³ According to Alcobia-Murphy, McGuckian's indirect influences allow her to 'explore moments of crisis (due to violence, imprisonment and enforced deprivation) without having to deal explicitly with the more immediate conflict in Northern Ireland'.⁹⁴ From these critics, it is clear that McGuckian uses Picasso's quotation to address that she too has been deeply influenced by the sociopolitical conflict that engulfed her home country. Interestingly, she does not cite Picasso's quotations in the collection, and his exact words about the influence of war is indeed difficult to find. Her use of Picasso's words is then her own transformation of others' art and language into her own. Even in her most direct address to the conflict in the North, McGuckian comes to her poetry through the concealment and transformation of others' words.⁹⁵

From Europe to America: McGuckian's Publications During the Peace Process

By the end of the 1990s, McGuckian had published four collections with the Gallery Press, including her first and formative edition of *Selected Poems: 1978–1994* that

⁹² Medbh McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1994), 9.

⁹³ Schrage-Früh, 'Interview', 3; Shane Alcobia-Murphy, "'Signs of the still recent war": Medbh McGuckian and conflict', *Irish Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (2012): 115–16.

⁹⁴ Alcobia-Murphy, 'Signs', 115–16.

⁹⁵ Alcobia-Murphy has done extensive research on McGuckian's intertextuality, which can be found in the article 'Signs of the still recent war' as well as *Sympathetic Ink*. My own interest in her work is not intertextuality as much as it is her publishing history and perceptions of her own identity as a writer, so I do not go into Alcobia-Murphy's work in great depth.

included Casement's quotation as an epigraph as well as *Marconi's Cottage, Captain Lavender* and *Shelmalier* (1998). Fallon also brought out revised editions of her first three books that were published in the early 1990s. The conflict in the North changed as the Good Friday Agreement found a point of consensus among parties in Northern Ireland and was signed on 10 April 1998. The agreement acknowledged two existing governments in the North and outlined three strands of negotiations: the establishment of democratic institutions in Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom; the relationship between North Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.⁹⁶ The Agreement acknowledged that the majority of people living in Northern Ireland wanted to remain in the United Kingdom, and therefore, it would remain part of the UK until a majority decided to move towards a united island. The peace process went into effect the following year.⁹⁷ Stephen Farry notes that although the Agreement was necessary in ending the conflict through 'its creation of a set of political institutions with cross-community legitimacy within a deeply divided society', it created a paradox in that although the intensity of violence in Northern Ireland has been reduced, 'divisions have become even more clearly defined and entrenched'.⁹⁸ The beginning of the peace process also marked a transition in McGuckian's literary career because her collections published from 2000 onward depict a more overt engagement with the political conflict and the effects of the Troubles on Irish history and its people, a change which was likely made possible by the movement towards peaceful conditions in the North.

Responding to the omission of her work from Ormsby's *A Rage for Order* and criticism on 'her lack of engagement with the Northern Irish political situation', McGuckian began to express a distinctly republican nationalist sentiment which Borbála Faragó argues is present in her collections from the 1990s onward.⁹⁹ *Drawing Ballerinas*, published in 2001 at the beginning of the peace process, is perhaps the most well-known example of her political engagement, which is most evident in the

⁹⁶ Jörg Neuheiser and Stefan Wolff, ed., *Peace at Last?: The Impact of the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 14.

⁹⁷ Neuheiser and Wolff, *Peace*, 21.

⁹⁸ Stephen Farry, 'The Morning After: An Alliance Perspective on the Agreement', in *Peace at Last?: The Impact of the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 25.

⁹⁹ Faragó, *McGuckian*, 65-96.

title taken from a quotation by the French artist Henri Matisse who, according to McGuckian, ‘when asked how he managed to survive the war artistically, replied that he spent the worst years “drawing ballerinas”’.¹⁰⁰ As in the case with the epigraph to *Captain Lavender*, McGuckian used an artist’s words about his influences and responses to war to express her own literary engagement with the Troubles. Once again, Matisse’s exact words on ‘drawing ballerinas’ are difficult to find and the quotation itself is not cited in the collection, so we must rely on McGuckian’s representation of Matisse’s words, whatever they may have been, to understand the political undercurrents of this collection. Nevertheless, the title creates a parallel between McGuckian’s artistic expression as a poet and the realities of war, and in doing so, responds to and subverts the conflict through the apparent absence of violence, death, fear and political tension in the art itself. The title also mirrors McGuckian’s 1996 essay that reflects on her memories and experience as a Catholic woman in the North; in doing so, *Drawing Ballerinas* intersects the poet’s personal, political and poetic identities that cross throughout her literary career. Faragó and Alcobia-Murphy have argued for the artistic expression of war in this collection, but I am interested in examining how McGuckian’s publications during the early years of the peace process convey the irreconcilable partitioning of her identities as a Catholic nationalist who did not fall in with the political efforts put in place by the Good Friday Agreement.¹⁰¹

In this final section, I compare the book histories of two collections that came out at the turn of the century, *Drawing Ballerinas*, published by the Gallery Press and *The Soldiers of Year II* published by Wake Forest University Press in 2002 as a means of exploring how McGuckian’s work was marketed to European and North American audiences during a period of political and social change in Northern Ireland. The two books not only share close publication dates, but they share several poems. *The Soldiers of Year II* has a section titled ‘Drawing Ballerinas’ which, according to Guinn Batten, McGuckian’s editor at Wake Forest, were not originally compiled in this way for the American publication but were separated out after they were selected for the Gallery Press book.¹⁰² Several poems in the section titled ‘The Palace of Today’ are

¹⁰⁰ Medbh McGuckian, *Drawing Ballerinas* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2001), 15.

¹⁰¹ Faragó, *McGuckian*, 81; Alcobia-Murphy, ‘Signs’, 116.

¹⁰² Guinn Batten, ‘Batten Proposal for Medbh McGuckian Collection’, Dated February 11, 2002, Fax to Wake Forest University Press, Batten’s personal documents.

also published in two other Gallery books *The Face of the Earth* (2002) and *Had I A Thousand Lives* (2003) which came out soon after the American publication. Although Wake Forest had, until that point, published all McGuckian's collections in cooperation with the Gallery Press, there is no American publication of these three Gallery books, and correspondingly, there is no European edition of *The Soldiers of Year II*. The overlap between the American and Irish books has led to the perception that *The Soldiers of Year II* is akin to 'a selected poems', to take the words of one 2003 reviewer of the book, and the collection has often been overlooked in criticism of McGuckian's recent collections because it was not published by Gallery and is perceived to be an aside to her better known Irish publications.¹⁰³ The overlaps and differences between *Drawing Ballerinas* and *The Soldiers of Year II* indicate that Gallery and Wake Forest envisioned two very different collections for this period of transition in McGuckian's career after the ceasefires, and these distinctions convey the very subject of partition.

Each text is a distinctive and formative publication that because it expresses the challenges of McGuckian's coming to terms with the ceasefires and peace process in the North. In *Reading Medbh McGuckian*, Leontia Flynn examines *Drawing Ballerinas* as representative of McGuckian's response to the Good Friday Agreement, and like other critics of McGuckian's work, Flynn focuses on the title poem as an example of McGuckian's intertwining of art and political engagement.¹⁰⁴ Notwithstanding the political representations, images and language in the book, I am interested in considering how its paratexts express McGuckian's discontent with the political state of the North and to explore how *Drawing Ballerinas* was marketed to Irish and European audiences. Unlike previous Gallery Press blurbs that had marketed McGuckian's books as 'complex, richly textured' and 'challenging, mesmerizing and highly rewarding', the blurb that accompanied *Drawing Ballerinas* indicated the poet's political stance and response to the peace process explicated in references to the 'drawn-out process of change' in Northern Ireland and the closing statement that its poems are '[c]onstantly affirming the validity and necessity of aesthetics, [for] the muse of this book is not so much Peace as what Edward Said calls, 'peace with

¹⁰³ Peter Champion, 'Review of *The Soldiers of Year II*', *Poetry* 183, no. 2 (2003): 97.

¹⁰⁴ Flynn, *McGuckian*, 163.

justice.¹⁰⁵ References to the ‘drawn-out process of change’, ‘backward and forward steps, and ‘tragic gestures’ towards a settlement candidly indicate the poet’s frustration with the political status of the country. The collection’s references to postcolonial theorist Said and McGuckian’s home as the ‘North of Ireland’ indicates her belief in republican nationalism and acknowledges the effects of colonial history on present circumstances.

Poems such as ‘The Dead Are More Alive’, which only appears in this collection, insinuate memories of the Troubles in the words ‘murder’, ‘slashing as if on flesh’, ‘an open knife blade’, ‘senselessly scattered things’ and ‘blood-filled collapse’.¹⁰⁶ Unlike the disconnected and foreboding language of *Marconi’s Cottage*, the references to violence, death and hopelessness here are strung together by the title ‘The Dead Are More Alive’, demonstrating the inclusion of political tension in the language of the text. Other poems such as ‘A Ballet Called Culloden’ suggests a play on words that refer to the historical Battle of Culloden which ended a religious war in Britain when the ‘rebel’ Jacobite soldiers were defeated and their campaign failed. In drawing upon religious civil war and British history in this collection, McGuckian outlines her belief in the failure of the Good Friday Agreement to lessen entrenched difference between Protestant and Catholic communities in the North. The poem’s artistic transformation of representing the Battle of Culloden as a ‘Ballet’ suggests her intentional recreation and commemoration of political and historical memory into art. The image on the cover of *Drawing Ballerinas* is also more suggestive than previous collections that feature prints of drawings or paintings. The cover art reprints an abstract painting called ‘Dream’ by Félim Egan, an Irish artist also from the ‘Border Area’ who is close in age to McGuckian.¹⁰⁷ The painting depicts two squares, one at the top and one at the bottom portions of the page, a half-line across the centre of the painting. While the image itself seems to carry no meaning, when connected to the blurb on the back cover and the sombre tone of the poems, one may perceive the painting as a representation of the island separated by the border line. The painting’s title ‘Dream’ is also evocative of the failed dream for a united Ireland.

¹⁰⁵ Medbh McGuckian, *Venus and the Rain: Revised Edition* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1994), back cover; McGuckian, *Marconi’s*, cover. McGuckian, *Drawing*, back cover.

¹⁰⁶ McGuckian, *Ballerinas*, 12–13.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Félim Egan: Artist’, in *Migrants Matter*, Accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.migrantsmatter.org/felim-egan.html>.

Aesthetically, *The Soldiers of Year II* could not be more different from the Gallery book in presentation and content. The collection is separated into two sections, 'The Palace of Today' and 'Drawing Ballerinas', and the poems within them move between scenes of violence, tension and sorrow in the personae's present moment but also in history. This collection differs from most of McGuckian's previous publications because it opens with a prose piece titled 'Helen's War', which reveals a narrative by a female speaker about her friend Bertie who enlists in Allied efforts of the Second World War because he had no other options for employment.¹⁰⁸ The locality of this brief piece sets the tone for the collection suggesting, as Heaney and McGuckian's other peers had done, the proximity of war, but also the desperation for change and equality for those living in the North. The connections drawn between the Second World War and the recent Troubles in Northern Ireland are implied not only by the title of the collection, but also by the marketing blurb which reads:

While *The Soldiers of Year II* is not overtly militant or nationalist, in poem after poem the enforced forms of peace seem only an inversion of those of the prior war... In these poems persists a suggestion that has come through in each of McGuckian's recent volumes: while the body may become a shared prison, nevertheless through its agency, through its ability, literally to act, the suffering and even the dead may find, if not release, then at least a common language.¹⁰⁹

Although the majority of poems in this collection appear in either *Drawing Ballerinas*, *The Face of the Earth* or *Had I A Thousand Lives*, their appearance in the American publication suggests not only the individual struggle to come to terms with the political transition in Northern Ireland but a collective movement towards understanding and acceptance.

Unlike the blurb for *Drawing Ballerinas* which associates the poems in the collection with Edward Said's personal and theoretical statements on political justice, the reference to the 'common language' on the blurb for *The Soldiers of Year II* evokes the collection *The Dream of a Common Language* by feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich. The phrase 'common language' is also found in Rich's poem 'Origins and History of Consciousness' which is highly appropriate for McGuckian's poems

¹⁰⁸ Medbh McGuckian, *The Soldiers of Year II* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2002), 13–14.

¹⁰⁹ McGuckian, *Soldiers*, back cover.

about the history and present circumstances in Northern Ireland. A second stanza from ‘Origins’ reads:

No one lives in this room
without confronting the whiteness of the wall
behind the poems, planks of books
photographs of dead heroines.
Without contemplating last and late
the true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language.¹¹⁰

The ‘whiteness of the wall’ hints at a kind of truce but also the uncertainty about what the future, and the reality of one’s experience, hold. The enjambment in ‘The drive | to connect’ is in itself a disconnection and dissociation between the body and experience, between the self and ‘other’. The ‘dream of a common language’ is only a dream.

The expression of despondency in Rich’s poem can be seen in poems from *The Soldiers of Year II*, such as in ‘Life of a Literary Convict’, one of the few poems in the collection which appears only in the Wake Forest book. The poem is quoted in the blurb, drawing our attention to the ‘artifice of photograph’ and references to ‘photojournalism’ that are captured in the images throughout the book but also on the cover image.¹¹¹ A stanza from ‘Life as a Literary Convict’ reads:

Signs of the still recent war
creep among the people like a plague,
dressed as Phoebus.
While I wander about in search of the dead,
all I see are the living,
being pulled into full existence,
emerging as if from a cellar.¹¹²

The ‘still recent war’ is both a reference to World War II and the Troubles, and the speaker of the poem cannot wake from the nightmare of death and violence. Even ‘the living’ in the poem have no agency or ability to accept the present state. Because

¹¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977* (New York: Norton and Company), ‘Origins and History of Consciousness’ (1978), Kindle edition.

¹¹¹ McGuckian, *Soldiers*, back cover.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 18–19.

‘Everything that ended in gunshots | and news of massacres’ leaves ‘tears of childhood’, the war has not really ended for the speaker and the photojournalistic quality of the poem capturing the aftermath of war suggests the same kind of helplessness evident in Rich’s ‘Origins and History of Consciousness’. The title ‘Life of a Literary Convict’ also indicates the same kind of silencing of expression through language that was found in McGuckian’s earlier collections, indicated in the word ‘Convict’ that peace does not bring cohesion and understanding, but rather judgement and dissension.

The cover of *The Soldiers of Year II* is in black and silver print, with a sepia photograph of Thomas Ashe, a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and founder of the Irish Volunteers who took part in the Easter Rising of 1916. Ashe stands defiantly and confidently among guards at Kilmainham Gaol; he would die soon after the photograph was taken during a hunger strike in 1917.¹¹³ By having this suggestive image on the cover of *The Soldiers of Year II* and drawing attention to the photojournalism and capturing the aftermath of war, the collection acknowledges republican efforts to resist British rule. It also opens connections in the history of the island by correlating the recent hunger strikes in the North with the innumerable loss of life in the Second World War. The poems in *The Soldiers of Year II* move between images from Irish history, the Troubles and its aftermath to explore McGuckian’s dissent from the efforts towards peace in the North. Notes and letters in the Emory archive indicate that Gallery Press and Wake Forest envisioned different collections for McGuckian that would capture her discontent with the political conditions, a sentiment which both Peter Fallon and Guinn Batten expressed more recently.¹¹⁴ Yet, the political sentiments of both *Drawing Ballerinas* and *The Soldiers of Year II* attest to the insurmountable effects of war on individual lives and the importance of voicing that experience to preserve and represent history.

Conclusion

In 2017, eleven years after McGuckian’s Emory archives are dated, she has written five more books of poetry including *The Book of the Angel*, which was published by both Gallery and Wake Forest in 2004, as well as *The Currach Requires no Harbours*

¹¹³ Ibid., front and back covers.

¹¹⁴ Batten, ‘Batten proposal’, 1–2; Peter Fallon, letter to the author, June 30, 2016, 2.

(2007), *My Love Has Fared Inland* (2010), *The High Caul Cap* (2013) and *Blaris Moor* (2015). In these books, McGuckian moves through familiar themes in her work—the interior spaces of the home and body, as found in the title poem of *The High Caul Cap* (2012). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that McGuckian continues to represent political events that mirror and correspond with the movement towards the ceasefires in the North, and she portrays undercurrents of political tension that have carried through the last seventeen years since the peace process began. This chapter creates an archival history of McGuckian's early career to examine some challenges she faced in getting her work published with Oxford University Press, the Gallery Press, and Wake Forest University Press. McGuckian perceived the excision of the Roger Casement epigraph from the OUP edition of *On Ballycastle Beach* as a personal, and perhaps also political, criticism of her work, but the inclusion of this Casement's words in her *Selected Poems* indicates not only a personal achievement in having such a politically controversial and suggestively republican statement in her book, but it also indicates McGuckian's transition towards a more political stance in her poetry. She responded to the omission of her poetry from Ormsby's *A Rage for Order* with poems that express not only the politics of the conflict in the North, but the subversion of war into art. In her two significant publications depicting McGuckian's response to the peace process, she and her publishers consciously market her work in very different ways that demonstrate her ability to be read across geographical borders. This also suggests a partitioned poetic identity—a separation between the personae of her poetry and her own lived experience as a woman writing in the North—that may never be reconciled. In the next chapter, I compare McGuckian's poetry with the literary careers of Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado. The comparison will demonstrate how women poets writing in two different parts of the world faced challenges to the publication of their work and how each poet responded to pressures of the publishing industry.

CHAPTER 3

‘The battle is to validate the material’: Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado as Poets and Editors in the Global Literary Market

In 1979, the year that Medbh McGuckian won the National Poetry Competition for her poem ‘The Flitting’ that launched her career, women poets in India were also beginning to publish more broadly as a national canon of literature took shape. The 1970s were an important period for Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado who worked at the heart of the flourishing literary scene in Bombay where poetry readings, literary magazines and small publishing houses had opened to encompass new writers. De Souza was teaching at St. Xavier’s College at the time, and her student Silgado, along with two of Silgado’s contemporaries Raul D’Gama Rose and Santan Rodrigues, published de Souza’s first collection *Fix* (1979) that year with their poetry collective Newground. The previous year in 1978, the students had produced their own first book *Three Poets* with the collective, and the publication of de Souza’s work demonstrated not only the quality of her poetry and the proficiency of new publishing collectives in the city, but also the fervour and enthusiasm that surrounded poetry—and the publication of poetry—in the Indian literary market.

This chapter compares McGuckian’s publishing history in Ireland, the UK and the US, which I examined in the previous chapter, with Eunice de Souza’s and Melanie Silgado’s careers as Indian English poets who also began publishing in the 1970s. Both de Souza and Silgado were involved in publishing institutions as writers as well as editors, and my examination of their work exposes how closely-woven Indian poets’ careers were with poetry publishing processes of the time. Both writers remained close friends since their encounter in the 1970s and were passionate about bringing Indian literature to national as well as international audiences. I place de Souza and Silgado alongside McGuckian to highlight some similarities in the trajectory of their careers but also to acknowledge the very different ways that all three writers responded to challenges they faced by publishing institutions.

De Souza’s and Silgado’s work as poets and editors presents an engaging comparison with McGuckian’s career as a Northern Irish poet. Like McGuckian, both Indian writers are Catholic and express in their poetry, especially in de Souza’s case, a sense of otherness because of their religious identities. De Souza and Silgado come

from Goa, a state on the western coast of India which remained under Portuguese colonial rule until 1987, and although they moved to Bombay to study and work, both are always referred to as ‘Goan’ writers in the biographies that accompany their anthologized poems. Although this chapter is not based on archival work, the process of undertaking historical research on de Souza and Silgado—particularly the latter who has not published poetry in almost thirty years—was comparable to the turns, modifications, dead-ends and discoveries I experienced in researching McGuckian’s early career. Because of the limited distribution of books in India that are sometimes poorly catalogued—a point de Souza herself makes in her introduction to the anthology *Nine Indian Women Poets* (1997)—my own experience of finding copies of their books and anthologies that included their work involved extensive inter-lending library services and searches.¹ The research process also necessitated personal requests to those involved with publishing de Souza’s and Silgado’s books and foraging the internet for reliable sources about their poetry and—more imperatively for this project—their lives as women poets.

I take a political reading of McGuckian’s poetry and her choices as a writer, but this chapter turns to the politics of *being* an Indian woman poet. This chapter examines the difficulties women faced in getting published in the period between 1970s and early 2000s, and it demonstrates how de Souza and Silgado resisted institutional practices of the industry. De Souza became an editor and anthologist to bring the work of Indian women to national as well as international audiences; contrastingly, Silgado, who has remained in publication because of de Souza’s anthologies, resists the pressures of the industry by removing herself entirely from the business and its processes. The chapter examines how these two friends arrived at remarkably different choices in their careers. De Souza died in July 2017 just months before the completion of this thesis. The importance of her work as a poet and editor is only now becoming more widely acknowledged in the wake of her absence from the Indian literary scene.

Connecting Eunice de Souza’s Poetry and Career

Right, now here it comes.

¹ Eunice de Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

I killed my father when I was three.
I have muddled through several affairs
and always come out badly.
I've learned almost nothing from experience.
I head for the abyss with
monotonous regularity.

My enemies say I'm a critic because
really I'm writhing with envy
and anyway need to get married.

Yes, I've tried suicide,
I tidied my clothes but
left no notes. I was surprised
to wake up in the morning.

One day my soul
stood outside me
watching me twitch
and grin and gibber
the skin tight
over my bones.

I thought the whole world
was trying to rip me up
cut me down go through me
with a razor blade.

Then I discovered
a cliché: that's what I wanted
to do to the world.²

² Eunice de Souza, *Fix* (Mumbai: Newground, 1979), 34.

Originally published in Eunice de Souza's first collection *Fix*, the poem 'Autobiographical' brings into question the relationship between the speaker's narrative and its real or imagined connection to the poet's life. Given its expository title and the invitation of the opening line—'Right, now here it comes'—to read the poem as an outpouring of emotion, the reader is led to believe that the poem explicates the author's personal story. The poem has been analyzed by critics Veronica Brady, Gautam Karmakar, Tanu Gupta and Anju Bala Sharma as evidence of de Souza's 'confessional' style, and their readings of the poem assume that the lyrical 'I' is synonymous with the poet.³ In different ways, these critics argue that the poem grounds her debut collection in the locale of Christian Goa, but however testimonial the lyrical 'I' might be, 'Autobiographical' divulges no tangible information about the speaker's—or de Souza's—life. We are not told where she—the speaker or de Souza—is from, details of the mishandled 'affairs' or 'suicide' attempts, or what it is that the speaker so resolutely wants 'to do to the world'. We are also left wondering whether the claims of aggression and self-harm implied in the poem are factual or dramatized to achieve its disturbing effects. 'Autobiographical' at once opens itself up to a conversation with the reader while it prevents us from making sense of the story that unfolds.

De Souza was praised by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, a poet himself, as well as editor and father-figure to a generation of Indian poets writing in the 1970s, for the 'unflinching bare-fisted' style of her poems that have the 'brevity, unexpectedness, and urgency of telegrams'. Yet, he, too, insists that the poem correlates with de Souza's lived experience.⁴ Her sharp diction and brief syntax are apparent in the stanza, 'I thought the whole world | was trying to rip me up | cut me down go through me | with a razor blade', but the tone is ominous as we attempt to work out why the speaker exists in such a state of affliction and confrontation. Beneath the candid, straight-forward language lies the implication that the speaker cannot actually account for her lived experience. We, as outsiders to her story, watch her 'twitch | and grin

³ Veronica Brady, "'One long cry in the dark'?: The poetry of Eunice de Souza.", *Journal of Literature and Theology* 5, no.1 (1991): 116; Gautam Karmakar, 'A Feminist Re-Reading from Different Perspective of Eunice de Souza's Poems', *International Journal of Applied Research* 1, no. 4 (2015): 276; Tanu Gupta and Anju Bala Sharma, 'Confessional Poetry of Eunice and Sylvia Plath: A Study in Comparison', *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 6 (2014): 44.

⁴ Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1992), 114.

and gibber | the skin tight | over [her] bones’, and this strange position of hovering above the imagined persona suggests not only the reader’s penetrating gaze onto a life one can never comprehend, but also the silencing of the female body. The lyrical persona twitches and gibbers in her attempt to tell us her ‘autobiography’, and the narrative she tells us is impenetrable. If we are to perceive the poem as self-referential, as critics suggest, then de Souza’s lived experience as a writer remains largely inaccessible to readers.

I begin with this unusual ‘confessional’ poem to indicate some of the problems that attend to reading, accessing and understanding de Souza’s literary career. Just as there are generalizations and holes in the narrative, much of the literature on her career is generalized in the biographical descriptions which precede de Souza’s anthologized poems, and details of her life remain unknown to those outside of her immediate personal and literary circles.⁵ Her Roman Catholic upbringing and Goan heritage are foregrounded in biographies and are almost always followed up with a reference to de Souza’s retirement from her long-standing post as the Head of English at Xavier’s College in Bombay.⁶ Renate Papke, who provides the most detailed biography of de Souza that I have found (though it is still quite general) states in *Poems at the Edge of Difference* (2008) that de Souza’s father, who was also a writer, died when she was a child. Papke goes on to say that she is unmarried and does not have children.⁷ These biographical details, however interesting in terms of their effect on de Souza’s poetry, shed little light on her influential career as a poet who not only helped to shape a national literary canon after Independence but who also collaborated with writers, editors and publishers to bring Indian English literature and especially women’s poetry to international audiences. The interconnections between de Souza’s poetry, anthologies and networks are central to understanding her convictions as a writer.

The dichotomy between the speaker’s simultaneous openness and sealing off of personal information in ‘Autobiographical’ can be seen as a metaphor for the disparities between information on de Souza’s career as a poet and her work as an anthologist of Indian literature. Her poetry collections *Fix*, *Women in Dutch Painting*

⁵ Mehrotra, *Twelve*, 114; Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP), 2001), 156; Brady, ‘Cry’, 116; Gupta and Sharma, ‘Confessional’, 44.

⁶ Renate Papke, *Poems at the Edge of Difference: Mothering in New English Poetry by Women* (Göttingen, University of Göttingen, 2008), 66.

⁷ Papke, *Difference*, 66–67.

(1988), *Ways of Belonging* (1990), *Selected and New Poems* (1994), *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009) and, most recently, *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (2016) are not easily accessible outside of India, and as a researcher I struggled to obtain copies of these texts, particularly the first two published by Newground and Praxis, respectively, which were produced in India. In stark contrast to these limited publications, de Souza's edited anthologies can be found in British universities and public libraries, and they can be purchased online through mega-bookstores such as Amazon and AbeBooks because they are published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in New Delhi. Although the Indian branch is not as far-reaching as OUP Oxford, the association with a British publisher has, undoubtedly, accelerated the distribution of her edited anthologies in Europe and North America. The discrepancy between her little-known poetry collections and more prominent edited anthologies is highlighted by the fact that there is also an absence of interviews, well-founded critical analyses, manuscripts and correspondence on this distinguished poet. As Renate Papke writes, details of de Souza's life are 'scant' and difficult to find, and it is likely she wanted it to remain this way.⁸

My study of her literary career investigates developments in Indian poetry publishing since Independence and looks at limitations, but also achievements, in the marketing of literature by women within the country and abroad. In doing so, I argue that the typical readings of her poetry as 'confessional' writing limit our understanding of the life behind the poetry; they also neglect de Souza's networks with other writers that have transformed the Indian literary scene in recent decades. De Souza engaged with readers in her poetry by creating an 'imagined community' on the page and a network of writers behind her publications. She did not write in isolation, as one might assume of a confessional poet, but worked fervently within publishing networks to bring women's voices into a growing canon of Anglophone poetry. It is the interdependence of these two aspects—poet and editor—that I unravel in this chapter. By examining De Souza's career in a pivotal moment of poetry publishing in India that was underway between the 1970 and early 2000s, I establish how closely connected Indian poets' careers are with publishing processes. Sarah Brouillette argues in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007) that 'authors' careers are key paratexts' for the reception and reproduction of

⁸ Ibid.

literature, meaning that we should look at writer's careers, in addition to the literature they produce, as critical components of the publishing industry that inform and construct canon-formation.⁹ De Souza's edited anthologies have been crucial to the dissemination of Indian literature abroad, yet little critical attention has been paid to the implications of her career as a poet and anthologist. The following sections of this chapter examine how de Souza moved within institutions of the publishing industry to reach this end.

The Problems of Reading de Souza as a Confessional Poet

Poems such as 'Autobiographical' mistakenly lead readers to look for elements of confessionalism in de Souza's work. She is widely known in Indian literary circles, but there appears to be limited criticism of her poetry in Indian publications and these exist to an even smaller extent abroad. The criticism that does circulate rightly politicizes the subjects of de Souza's work but perhaps looks too closely for personal testimonies in the 'immediacy' and 'unguarded sense of statement' that define her poetic style.¹⁰ De Souza is often compared with American confessional poets Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman, but I believe that the meticulous search for connections between the poetry and de Souza's life limit our ability to connect her poetry with other aspects of her career. Melanie Waters writes in relation to Plath and Sexton's poetry: 'In seeking to understand the confession as unadulterated revelation then, we risk undermining the complexity' of what the poet is trying to convey.¹¹ Bringing this argument into my analysis of de Souza's career, it seems that if we only look for the putative testimony of her speaking voice(s), we fail to consider how the subjects of de Souza's poetry relate to her career as an editor.

Many of de Souza's early poems published in *Fix* and *Women in Dutch Painting* depict the intersections of religious, social and gender differences in what we can only presume to be an Indian community. Poems such as 'Catholic Mother', 'Feeding the Poor at Christmas' and 'Sweet Sixteen' only rarely hint at the author's geographical location, but they do foreground a critique of the intersections between religion and a

⁹ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

¹⁰ A. D. Hope, *Fix*, quote on the back cover of de Souza's book.

¹¹ Melanie Waters, 'Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets*, edited by Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (CUP), 2015): 388.

multiculturalism; what we observe are satirical representations of individual stories and a speaker's conflicted position both in and outside of her community. De Souza's poetry is marked by its tell-tale signs of 'intensity and poignant irony', as Brady acknowledges, in poems such as 'Feeding the Poor at Christmas' quoted in its entirety below:¹²

Every Christmas we feed the poor.
We arrive an hour late: Poor dears,
like children waiting for a treat.
Bring your plates. Don't move.
Don't try turning up for more.
No. Even if you don't drink.
You can't take your share
for your husband. Say thank you
and a rosary for us every evening.
No. Not a towel *and* a shirt,
even if they're old.
What's that you said?
You're a good man, Robert, yes,
Beggars can't be, exactly.¹³

'Feeding the Poor at Christmas', like many of de Souza's early pieces portrays a conversation between individuals in the speaker's community. Here we see a one-sided conversation in which the speaker takes on the voice of presumably affluent people serving 'beggars' on Christmas day. The title indicates a genuine attempt at empathy given the word 'Feeding', but in the poem itself, the underprivileged individuals being served come up against the social restrictions of their lower financial and social conditions. The social imbalance between those feeding the 'poor dears' and the beggars themselves are astutely portrayed in the repetitive reminders to the beggars of what they can and cannot have ('No. Not even if you don't drink', 'No. Not a towel *and* a shirt'). These lines undermine the beggars' dignity and remind them of their low social standing. The final lines of the poem—'You're a good man, Robert, yes'—operates not as a confirmation of the individual's morality and equality in the

¹² Brady, 'One', 102.

¹³ Eunice de Souza, *Fix*, 11.

eyes of God, but as a statement of condescension and disapproval expressed by the privileged individuals who take pity on the man while announcing his virtue. As a one-sided conversation, the poem can be read as not just a single voice but that of many individuals who come to feed the poor. Nevertheless, the speaker is positioned as part of the group but wholly aware of the ironic rectitude that seems to follow religious practice. We recognize the representation as that of Catholicism because of the reference to the rosary, and it appears that the speaker parodies not only the social practices that some associate with their faith but also the social class and caste hierarchies that exist in his or her community.

Comparably ironic endings seem to be de Souza's signature style, as seen in 'Catholic Mother' and 'Sweet Sixteen' which were also published in her first collection. 'Catholic Mother' confronts religious restrictions on women's bodies, a subject I will return to in relation to Paula Meehan's poetry in Chapter 4. In the poem, 'Francis X. D'Souza | father of the year' praises God for his large family—'seven children | (in seven years)'. Speaking with exuberance, he says:

We're One Big Happy Family
God Always Provides
India will Suffer for
Her Wicked Ways
(these Hindu buggers got no ethics)¹⁴

In this poem that represents a community's social values through dialogic speech, we see two interesting ways that de Souza plays with language and irony. By giving the speaking voice of 'Catholic Mother' to the family's father Francis X. D'Souza, his wife's agency in her social role as wife and mother is removed. D'Souza's desire for a large family fits neatly with the religious restrictions on female sexuality, a point which I examined at length in relation to Sujata Bhatt's poetry in Chapter 1, and what is implied by the quick succession of seven children is that contraception is not permitted. His wife's submission to her role as biological reproducer, returning here to the women's roles in the nation-state put forward by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, indicates the intersections of religion and family roles in the nation-state that combine to remove the woman's agency. De Souza points to the woman's

¹⁴ De Souza, *Fix*, 9.

predicament in the final lines of the poem: ‘the pillar’s wife | says nothing’.¹⁵ The woman’s silence highlights her discontent but also her lack of agency to change the intersectional family values placed on her by religious and cultural, and by way of this familial, expectations placed on her.

De Souza’s poems often address sexual differences as well as religious differences in her community, but representations of sex and gender roles are often overlooked in criticism of her work, as R. Raj Rao points out in his comparative study of de Souza and Kamala Das.¹⁶ ‘Sweet Sixteen’ though also depicting social restrictions on women that are related to religious beliefs differs from ‘Catholic Mother’ in that the poem gives agency to the poem’s female figures. The speaker recalls memories from her early education and the silences around female sexuality that was instilled in the girls at her school:

Mamas never mentioned menses.
A nun screamed. You vulgar girl
don’t say brassières
Say bracelets.
She pinned paper sleeves
onto our sleeveless dresses.¹⁷

The speaker’s reflection on the taboos around menstruation and female sexuality seem almost absurd in the nun’s reaction to topics that are not so obviously about sex as they are about the female body. Social and religious restrictions on female sexuality are undermined by the girls’ discussions of menses, bras and their sleeveless dresses, and de Souza accounts for their playfulness in the lines above. The poem ends with a conversation between Phoebe and the speaker in which she asks if it is possible to get ‘preggars’ while dancing to which the speaker responds: ‘I, sixteen, assured her | you could’.¹⁸ The poem remains unclear as to whether or not the speaker and Phoebe believed this statement was true when they were sixteen, but the effect of the final lines is that social restrictions on female sexuality and women’s bodies lead young women to believe inaccurate information that affect their lives. The poem is lighthearted, and it returns agency to the female figures in the poem who were, as

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ R. Raj Rao, “‘Interpretative Testimony’: Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza”, in *A History of Indian English Poetry*, edited by Rosinka Chaudhuri (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), 235–250.

¹⁷ De Souza, *Fix*, 12.

¹⁸ De Souza, *Fix*, 12.

students, curbed in learning about sexuality. The interactions, speech and silences of the poem suggest once again social restrictions placed on women by the Catholic Church but also intimate that not all young girls adhere to those principles. ‘Sweet Sixteen’, ‘Catholic Mother’ and ‘Feeding the Poor at Christmas’ demonstrate not so much a strictly confessional or testimonial intimation of de Souza’s experience of growing up in a Catholic community as they appear to present problems created by religious, social, cultural and class interactions. The speakers are immersed in the action of each poem, the brevity and irony of each piece suggests conflicting positions within and outside these social interactions as opposed to an undemanding self-reflection of the poet’s life.

Despite the unusual ways that de Souza intersects sex, religion, class, culture and caste differences in these examples of her work, critics of Indian English poetry proffer simplistic and sometimes dismissive readings of her poetry. Bruce King in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* published in 1987 and extended in 2001, offers a rather Eurocentric view of *Fix* without appreciating the Indian context from which she writes. He compares de Souza’s poems with Plath’s ‘self-ironic wit’, which undermines what Waters calls ‘the strategies of evasion and artifice that characterise poetry’, by diminishing both women’s efforts to portray complex representations of voice, lived experience and ‘revelations of truth’ in their work.¹⁹ King’s summary of her poetry is worth quoting at length:

Although de Souza’s poems arise out of alienation and the feeling that life is a mess, they are also highly conscious of the situations and problems faced by women. This consciousness is expressed through understated irony rather than articulated comment. [...] This is not a poetry of heroics, nor does it seek pity. While it has no affiliation in politics, community, humanistic ideals, religion, it is feminist in its kind of awareness, female vision, and affinities to the mode of other women poets—rather than in a proclaimed commitment.²⁰

King praises de Souza’s consciousness of social ‘situations and problems’ but seems to group all women’s experiences into a single category based on sex and misses the connections to society, religion and culture that are clearly at work in her poems. He

¹⁹ King, *Modern*, 158; Waters, ‘Confessional’, 380.

²⁰ King, *Modern*, 158.

goes on to analyze poems such as ‘De Souza Prabhu’ that depicts a young woman’s dissatisfaction with sex because she ‘heard it said | my parents wanted a boy’.²¹ The poem plays on gender roles as the speaker takes up the clothes and behaviours expected of boys but ends quite seriously when the speaker realizes she cannot hide her breasts or ‘the bloodstains’ from her period. The poem closes with the suggestive lines ‘Words the weapon | to crucify’.²² Reading the poem literally, King believes that de Souza ‘rejects her past and alien mixture of names and language, but claims that she belongs with ‘the lame ducks’ ever since she heard her parents ‘wanted a boy’, a statement that cannot be confirmed from details of de Souza’s life.²³

King’s quite dismissive take on her work can also be seen in responses by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who despite praising her poetry and including de Souza in *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Indian Poets*, takes a rather simplistic reading as well. Mehrotra speculates that her poems are a ‘theatrical act’, stating that ‘Miss de Souza adopts the role of a community entertainer’, which misinterprets the poet’s intention to depict the social, religious, and familial pressures placed on women. He also covers ‘Autobiographical’ in a single phrase, arguing in support of ‘an almost Larkin-esque self-irony’.²⁴ I draw attention to King’s and Mehrotra’s responses to de Souza not to dwell on shortcomings of their criticism, but to indicate a problematic trend in the reading of de Souza’s poetry as confession. King’s *Modern Indian Poets* and Mehrotra’s anthology are seminal texts of Indian literature that introduce poet and criticism of Indian English poetry to international audiences. Both books were produced by Oxford University Press—King’s in Oxford and Mehrotra’s in New Delhi, and as I stated previously, books produced with significant publishing conglomerates such as OUP lead to an extensive dissemination of texts abroad. King groups together women poets into a single chapter of the 1987 edition and extends this to two chapters on ‘Women’s Voices’ and ‘New Women Poets’ in the 2001 republication; along similar lines, Mehrotra included de Souza as the only woman poet in his book, a point I return to later in the chapter. These trends in the industry at a time when poetry was widely produced, read and criticized more broadly in India

²¹ De Souza, *Fix*, 32.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ King, *Modern*, 156.

²⁴ Mehrotra, *Twelve*, 115.

would, however inadvertently, restrict women's poetry by making their work seem elementary and self-involved.

De Souza's Engagement with Readers

De Souza was certainly aware of pressures within the industry to produce certain kinds of poetry and criticism, and she resists simplistic readings of her work by creating what Benedict Anderson calls an 'imagined community' with her readers and a real-life network of poets behind her publications. If we turn our attention to the paratexts of her publications rather than focusing primarily on the social representations of her work, we can see how de Souza resisted dismissive readings of her poetry. Gérard Genette defines paratexts in his eponymous book by arguing that 'Paratexts are those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader: titles, forewords, epigraphs, and publisher's jacket copy are part of a book's private and public history'.²⁵ Genette sees paratexts as anything involved in the publication of a book including interviews, correspondence and jacket cover material. Throughout Chapter 2, I examined the paratexts of McGuckian's early publications to align her political trajectory with her blossoming career as a poet. In this chapter, I take a specific example of de Souza's paratexts from *Fix* to demonstrate how, aside from her dialogue within poems, de Souza created communities on and off the page.

Fix provides a good example for understanding her resistance to a 'confessional' reading because it is the only one of her publications to present a photograph on the cover. Also, the collection was published by Newground at the height of thriving literary scene in 1970s Bombay. As previously stated, the book was published by Newground, which was, as mentioned earlier, founded by three of de Souza's students including Silgado, whose work I examine next. This cursory description of the book's creative genesis in itself suggests a community of writers who influenced one another's poetry, rather than advancing the idea of an individualistic and self-reflective stereotype of the poet working alone as a creative tormented artist. Although King's analysis of de Souza's poetry is invariably limited, as we have seen in his superficial reading of her work in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, he does provide

²⁵ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), foreword.

a detailed discussion of how three generations of poets influenced one another and developed a community of Indian English writers in the years following Independence.²⁶ Laetitia Zecchini, Anjali Nerlekar, Anjum Hassan and Emma Bird have examined the 1970s poets and publishing collectives that included Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitra, Mehrotra and de Souza, and these critics allude to the rich cultural scene created by the Bombay poets of this period as well as the close relationships between writers in this community.²⁷ De Souza herself discusses the important work of these writers and her students in a 2014 interview with *Nether Magazine* in which she states, ‘We used to have lots of readings in the 70s and so on, with established poets, new poets. There were many new groups. They formed co-operatives and publishing houses, they produced beautiful books, very inexpensive.’²⁸ Given the context of these literary relationships and influences, one may argue that Souza’s early collections respond to and resist the idea of a strictly personal, solitary, ‘confessional’ reading; her poems create a dialogue with readers that encourages us to perceive their narratives as speaking back to the reader or to other poems she has published.

De Souza worked within a community of writers during her career, and along similar lines, she created an imagined community with readers. Benedict Anderson coined the term ‘imagined communities’ to examine how individuals in a nation create and define a national identity. He argues in his eponymously titled book that the nation is defined by ‘finite, if elastic boundaries’ in the sense that members of a nation believe in a community that is ‘conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’, and is one that people will go to any length to defend.²⁹ Bringing this into the context of national and global literary markets, Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson in *Postcolonial Audiences* (2012), highlight the links between audiences

²⁶ King, *Modern*, 38.

²⁷ Anjali Nerlekar and Laetitia Zecchini, ‘Introduction: The worlds of Bombay poetry’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 1 and 2 (2017): 1–11; Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Anjum Hasan, “‘Your Missing Person’: Clearing House and the Bombay Poets’, *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, November 1, 2010, Accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/essay/your-missing-person-clearing-house-and-bombay-poets>; Emma Bird, ‘A platform for poetry: The PEN All-India Centre and a Bombay poetry scene’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 1 and 2 (2017): 207–220.

²⁸ Eunice de Souza, ‘What’s to Finish? In Conversation with Eunice de Souza’, Interview by unknown, *Nether Magazine* 6, May 2014, 12.

²⁹ Benedict Anderson, ‘Imagined Communities’, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1984), 49–50.

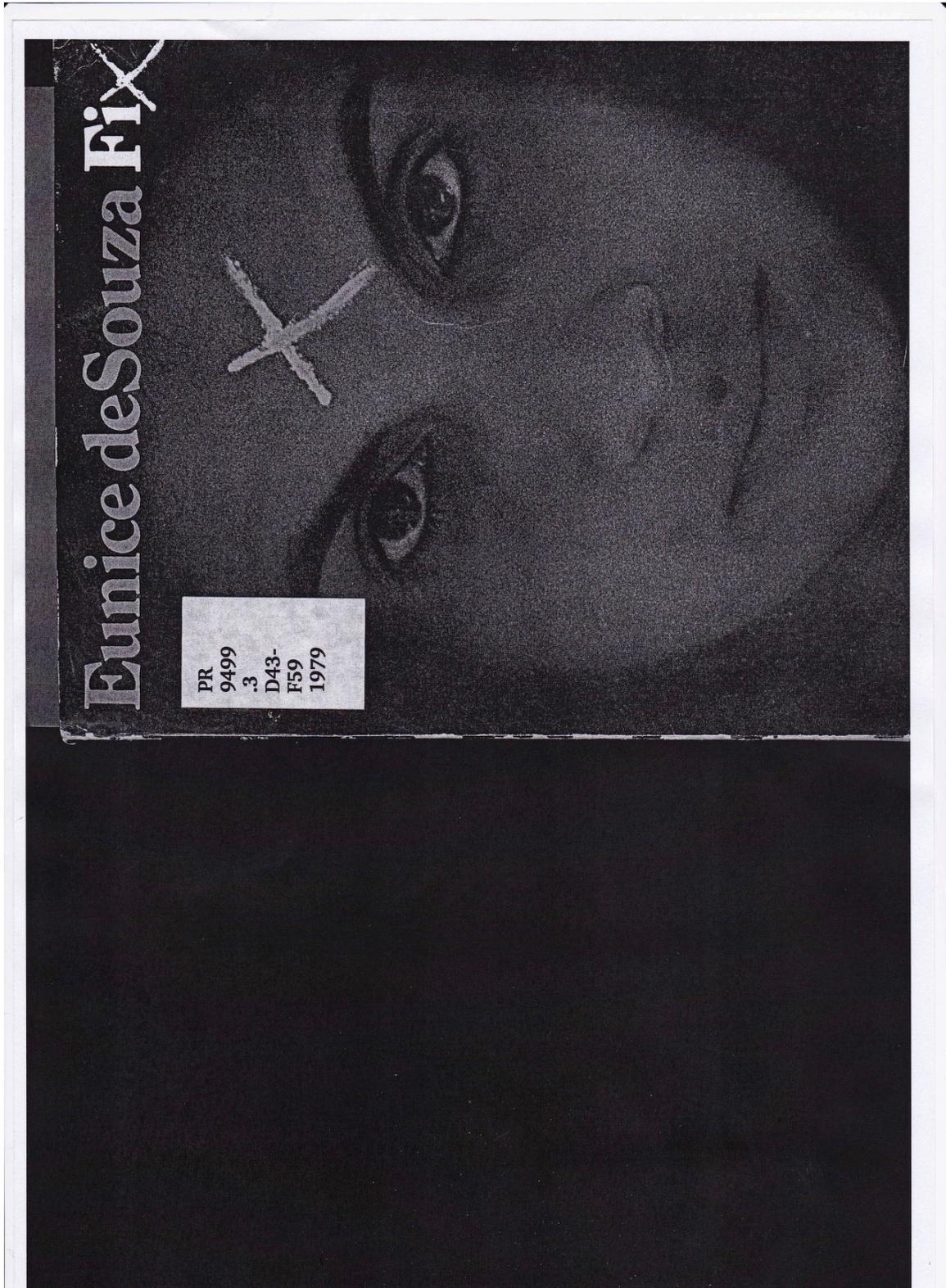
and nationalism. Readers want to see the idea of the nation reimagined in the literature they consume.³⁰ De Souza uses not only her poetry but the books' paratexts to create a community with readers. Designed by fellow poet Kolatkar, the cover of *Fix* differs from other collections because of its provocative photograph [See Figure 3].³¹

³⁰ Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson, eds., *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Views and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

³¹ De Souza, 'Interview', 12.

Figure 3

Book cover of Eunice de Souza's first collection *Fix* (1979)



Eunice de Souza, *Fix* (Bombay: Newground, 1979), front cover.

The cover of the book portrays a photograph of an Indian woman with ‘X’ from *Fix* marked on her forehead in the place of a bindi, a red dot worn on the forehead as a symbol of religious worship for those of Hindu faith. The placement of the ‘X’ symbol instead of one of faith suggests the poet’s resistance to dominant narratives of religious identity in Indian society. Furthermore, the woman’s penetrative gaze back into the camera dares the reader to interpret her action—and by way of this, the personae in the poems—as resistant to dominant narratives of Indian culture and society. Lisa Lau and Emma Dawson Varughese in their book on postcolonial paratexts *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation* (2015) question the ways the ways that books by Indian English women writers are produced and marketed in the global ‘West’. Looking at a number of publications by female novelists, they discuss the problems of representing Indian women’s experiences in the ways that their books are marketed, specifically in relation to book cover designs. According to Lau and Varughese, the truncated image of an Indian woman who stands alone, which is seen in the close-up photograph of the woman on the cover of *Fix*, demeans the experiences of Indian women through layers of misrepresentations that lead to the implication that the woman is, invariably, ‘Any-Indian-Woman’.³² The representation of the lone Indian woman on a book cover implies that women’s experiences are disconnected from those of their families, friends, communities, networks and, and even removed from society as a whole. The reader’s gaze upon the woman posing for the book cover only intensifies the historically problematic colonial gaze upon the Indian woman as an exotic other, a figure of beauty and mystery.³³ Although de Souza’s first book foregrounds the image of the lone Indian woman, she and her publishers at Newground challenge the ‘Western’ or colonial gaze upon Indian women’s lives. The woman photographed on the cover of *Fix* is not complacent, silent and gazing into the distance, we might see in many cover designs of novels by Indian women novelists. Instead, the woman stares back into the camera, her body language and the ‘X’ on her forehead provoking us, as readers, to consider her response, but it can be read as emotive and against the currents of society.

³² Lisa Lau and Emma Dawson Varughese, *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation: Judging More Than a Book by its Cover* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

The cover design of *Fix* not only prompts the reader to open the book, creating a dialogue between the poet and her audience, but the image also speaks back to poems in the collection, encouraging us to read the personae of the poems as agents of their own making. The title of the collection comes not from an eponymous title of a poem, but rather from a line in the poem 'He Speaks'. Unlike other poems in this collection which take on voices of female figures in conversation with one another or with the reader, the lyrical persona of 'He Speaks' is, as the title suggests, that of a man who justifies to the reader the ill-treatment of his partner. Comparable to the opening lines of 'Autobiographical', the persona invites a conversation with the reader in the opening words:

Well, now tell me
what would you do to a
woman who wrote to you
saying: You haven't written
for three weeks. You're the
meanest man alive.³⁴

These lines are followed with a story about his partner's behaviour, but unlike the speaker of 'Autobiographical' who only alludes to images of self-harm and aggression, this male speaker comments on his emotional and psychological control of his partner, with references to his 'hypnotic effect on women' and the belief that the woman's conduct towards him is '[r]idiculous'—'Her pleadings wore | me down. She was an affectionate | creature and tried hard, poor dear | but never quite made the grade'.³⁵ The story about the relationship, and the poem itself, ends when the male speaker decides to 'fix' his partner's behaviour by telling her that he is cheating on her:

I decided there was only one
thing to do: fix her.
The next time we were making love
I said quite casually:
I hope you realize I do this
with other women.³⁶

³⁴ De Souza, *Fix*, 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The word ‘fix’ is used in the poem as a form of emotional manipulation through which the male figure demeans his partner’s worth and psychological state; he takes control of their relationship by ending it and demonstrates that she is no different from other women with whom he instigates sexual encounters. In using the word ‘fix’ as the title of the collection, de Souza reframes the power of the male persona’s manipulation of his partner. She redirects this power back onto a woman represented by the female figure on the cover design who resists a conventional reading of the collection, and by implication, encourages new interpretations of Indian women’s lived experiences. Through the title *Fix*, de Souza suggests ideas of reparation and making amends, but the singularity of the word also implies its opposite—the belief that nothing is fixed, always changing and in motion. De Souza connects the cover design and the title through suggestions of female agency, not only in the image of the woman but also throughout the poems of this collection in order to establish connections across the poems and to create a dialogue with the reader about cultural and religious differences that the speakers in the poems experience. Through these forms of communication with the reader, de Souza creates a community of readers who are interested in Indian English poetry and who are arrested by a candid, conversational style of writing. It is possible that de Souza draws from personal influences to write about religious and cultural differences and pressures placed on female sexuality and reproduction, but reading her work as ‘confessional’ suggests that sole aim of her career was to portray internalized expression and reflexivity, when she was instead deeply connected with networks in the publication of her books.

The Politics of Anthologization

In his introduction to *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) Arvind Krishna Mehrotra discussed the history of Indian English poetry and the editor’s role in shaping a national literary canon. He acknowledged his own ambitions for the book in stating that, ‘[t]o edit an anthology is an opportunity to revise the literary map, bring neglected work back in circulation, and shift the emphasis from certain poets to others’.³⁷ Mehrotra’s statement about ‘neglected work’ does not exaggerate the conditions of publication in India; rather, he refers to the

³⁷ Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Calcutta: OUP, 1992), 8.

importance of anthologies in increasing the dissemination of Indian poetry on the subcontinent and internationally. After India's independence from British rule in 1947, almost all of the publications by Anglophone poets were produced by small publishing houses and collectives that were established and funded by the poets themselves. Mehrotra was a founder of the journal *damn you: a magazine in the arts* that ran in Allahabad from 1964 to 1969 and, as editor, he helped to create a close-knit group of poets writing in English, a position which likely led to his role as the editor of *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*.³⁸ Other publications in the post-Independence period included journals such as *Kerala Kavita* and *Quest*, as well as *Poetry India* and *Opinion Literary Magazine*, to name a few.³⁹ There was also a number of small, but influential, publishing houses such as Clearing House, Newground and the Writers' Workshop which welcomed new writing in English.⁴⁰ Although each of these ventures produced magazines or collections of a high quality and established connections among English-language writers, the magazines closed and books went out of print quickly due to lack of funds. Mehrotra's desire to bring the work of certain poets back into circulation suggests the importance of anthologies not only in reproducing poems that would otherwise be inaccessible to readers but also in recreating a conversation among the poets included in the anthology.

Twelve Modern Indian Poets was the second major anthology of Indian poetry produced by Oxford University Press after Independence; the first was *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets* edited by the poet R. Parthasarathy in 1977. The publication of these anthologies by a British publisher based in India meant that the books would inevitably reach an international audience. The dissemination abroad would lead readers outside of India to presume that the poets selected for the anthology were representative of a national canon; similarly, readers and poets in India would perceive the book as indicative of important voices and trends in a growing literary market. In juxtaposing prominent poets with a new group of writers, Mehrotra hoped to draw connections between poets from different generations and to suggest some of the ways in that Indian writers have localized but also pushed the boundaries of the English language.

³⁸ Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 9.

³⁹ Hasan, 'Missing'; King, *Modern*, 9; Anjali Nerlekar, "'Melted Out of Circulation": Little Magazines and Bombay Poetry in the 1960's and 1970's', in *A History of Indian Poetry in English*, edited by Rosinka Chaudhuri (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), 190–202.

⁴⁰ Hasan, "Missing," 3–4.

As the book was so influential in reaching audiences in India and abroad, Mehrotra's selection for the anthology is particularly important to consider. Firstly, the introduction acknowledged Mehrotra's choice to exclude the work of two significant poets, R. Parthasarathy and Kamala Das, on the basis that their poetry was already well known.⁴¹ For reviewers of the anthology, such as K. Narayana Chandran and Tarun Tejpal, the omission of these poets allowed the reader to take 'another look at the current English poetic scene in India', which suggests that Parthasarathy's and Das's poetry was outdated.⁴² These writers were colleagues, friends and mentors of poets included in the anthology; therefore, Parthasarathy's and Das's absence from the book suggests a sense of insularity, but also rapid growth, within the community of poets writing in English. The blatant omission of these leading writers is particularly concerning in the case of Das, who was one of the only women in a male-dominated group of poets to publish in the years following Independence, a statement that was well-captured in the fact that she is the only woman poet to appear in Parthasarathy's anthology. The second point of note is that among the twelve poets in the collection, Mehrotra chose to include the work of only one woman, de Souza, because her poems had 'the sharp-edged quality of Indian verse' that he believed defined contemporary Indian poetry in English.⁴³ De Souza's succinct and candid poems certainly have an intense and perceptive quality about them, and she did not object to being included in the anthology. However, de Souza took offence at the omission of her female contemporaries, and five years later she edited her own anthology *Nine Indian Women Poets* (1997), also produced by Oxford University Press in India, as a response to Mehrotra's book.⁴⁴

In discussing the publication of *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* and the problematic lines of inclusion and omission that Mehrotra drew in this important anthology, I hope to illustrate how intricate, personal and mutually dependent the relationship is between Indian English poets and the publishing industry and to suggest the crucial role that anthologies, and those who edit them, have played in

⁴¹ Mehrotra, *Twelve*, 8.

⁴² K. Narayana Chandran, "Review of *The Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*," *World Literature Today* Vol. 67, no. 4 (1993): 893; Tarun Tejpal, "The New Literary Map," *India Today*, January 3, 2013, accessed May 29, 2016, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/book-review-twelve-modern-indian-poets-by-arvind-krishna-mehrotra/1/307490.html>.

⁴³ Mehrotra, *Twelve*, 8.

⁴⁴ Eunice de Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* (New Delhi: OUP, 1997), 5.

shaping this growing field within Indian literature. De Souza, like Mehrotra, Parthasarathy and several poets before her, became interested in editing an anthology because she believed that certain writers deserved to have their work read and acknowledged by an international audience. She responded to women's lack of agency in publishing processes and the formation of a national poetic canon by editing her own anthology which included the work of Kamala Das and herself. *Nine Indian Women Poets* focused on a young generation of writers who began publishing in the 1980s and 1990s. Like previous Oxford anthologies of Indian English poetry, it not only showcased the work of those considered to be 'significant' poets writing during a particular period of Indian history, but, being representative of literature in a country where poetry in English would not be easily accessible either in print or oral dissemination, these anthologies delineated the fine line between what was considered to be 'good' and 'bad' poetry, what was worthy of going back into circulation and what was not, and in doing so, have shaped our own understanding of which poets are part of the Indian literary canon.

In her article 'Anthologizing the Nation', Neelam Srivastava discusses the importance of looking at anthologies not just as texts that are central for teaching but as a genre in itself that exposes trends of the creative industry and generates a set of texts that are disseminated broadly and then canonized. Looking at several important anthologies of the post-Independence period including Amit Chaudhuri's *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001) as well as Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West's anthology of post-Independence writing *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947–1997* (1997), Srivastava argues that anthologies have played a significant role in promoting a national culture in India and have thereby determined the kind of texts that make up a national canon. Anthologies, she believes, helped to create new narratives of the Indian nation-state. The anthology represents the unity of the nation in the sum of its parts and therefore acts out the 'pedagogical moment of nation-forming' which leads readers to believe that writers included in the anthology are representative of national trends.⁴⁵

Srivastava focuses primarily on fiction, but we can apply her assessment to Indian English poetry anthologies. As I have discussed at the beginning of this

⁴⁵ Neelam Srivastava, 'Anthologizing the nation: Literature anthologies and the idea of India', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 2 (2010): 153–54.

chapter, the poetry scene in Bombay and other cities in India grew rapidly in the 1970s, and anthologies became an important way of compiling established writers and introducing new voices to the canon. Mehrotra, Parthasarathy, Ezekiel, Seth, Kolatkar, Jussawalla and others in this group were by the 1970s established poets in their own right who were also involved in literary scenes as teachers, mentors, and publishers of small collectives and magazines.⁴⁶ Their work was central to the formation of a national canon of literature after Independence, but women writers continued to face difficulties in getting published as only Kamala Das had become well-known in this generation of writers.⁴⁷

Because of their influence in publishing scenes across the country, the male poets I have mentioned here often became the editors and critics of new anthologies of Indian literature. One would assume parity between the sexes when it came to representation and visibility in such crucial texts, but Ammu Joseph, et al. point out in their 2003 publication *Storylines* that Indian women are often ignored in publishing processes no matter what language they write in, and if they are selected for publication, editors often incorporate their work into the book by ‘herding them all into one chapter under the rubric of “women writers”’.⁴⁸ Such trends can be found in King’s *Modern Indian Poetry in English* as well as in Parthasarathy’s and Mehrotra’s OUP anthologies. Given this history, de Souza’s placement in Mehrotra’s anthology is a significant accomplishment for a woman poet of the time. However, because of the limited opportunities presented to women writers in India, one can see why she wanted to edit an anthology dedicated to women’s writing. De Souza’s interest in discovering and anthologizing writings by women led to a transition in her literary career. Alongside her five collections of poetry, she edited ten anthologies on historical and contemporary perspectives of Indian literature before her death in 2017. For de Souza creating anthologies was a political act that worked within institutional practices of the publishing industry to challenge trends in the omission and exclusion of women writers from a national canon.

The publication of de Souza’s *Nine Indian Women Poets* helped to bring the women poets included in the book to an international audience, which is due to the

⁴⁶ King, *Modern*, 16; Nerlekar and Zecchini, ‘Introduction’, 1–11.

⁴⁷ De Souza, ‘What’s’, 12.

⁴⁸ Ammu Joseph, Vasanth Kannabiran, Ritu Menon, Gouri Salvi, and Volga, eds., *Storylines: Conversations with Women Writers* (Delhi: Women’s World, 2003): 3.

critical focus of the anthology and to the fact that it was produced and marketed with Oxford University Press. The introduction of the anthology discusses a history of Indian women's poetry in India, and de Souza argues that contemporary women writers must create a new language for themselves that differs from the detached, conservative mode of writing practised by pre-Independence poets such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu.⁴⁹ Unlike Mehrotra's anthology which excluded Das, de Souza acknowledged Das's achievements as a contemporary writer, and the collection includes poems by writers who had only recently established their careers such as Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silgado, Imtiaz Dharker and others. *Nine Indian Women Poets* brought a critical focus to the work of younger generations of writers including Sujata Bhatt, Charmaine D'Souza and Tara Patel who published their first collections in the late 1980s and early 1990s. De Souza's desire to demonstrate the diversity of women's writing in India is evident in the fact that she included writers from vastly different religious and cultural backgrounds represented by Catholic, Parsi, Hindu and Muslim faiths.⁵⁰ At the time of the book's publication in 1997, Smita Agarwal had not yet produced a collection, and the poems in the anthology were selected from her unpublished manuscript.⁵¹ De Souza's inclusion of her work helped to establish Agarwal's career as a poet, and Agarwal herself has since become an editor, having published *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* in 2014.

De Souza's selection of the women in the anthology not only created a means of communication between each poet and the editor, but it also established a literary community of Indian women poets writing in English which was crucial in bringing critical attention to their poetry.⁵² Editors of anthologies attempt to group writers together based on a particular style of writing or themes in their work, and Matilde Martín González notes that being part of a 'community' is especially significant for women writers who may not 'have the right literary and personal affiliations necessary for inclusion in an anthology'.⁵³ By including the work of women from various religious and geographical backgrounds, de Souza created associations between the

⁴⁹ De Souza, *Nine*, 1–3.

⁵⁰ Papke, *Difference*, 67.

⁵¹ De Souza, *Nine*, 60.

⁵² Matilde Martín González, "Gender Politics and the Making of Anthologies: Towards a Theory of Women's Poetry," *Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 18 (2006): 60.

⁵³ González, "Gender," 60.

writers that indicated the diversity and individuality of Indian women poets writing in English.

Though *Nine Indian Women Poets* was extremely successful in bringing attention to the work of women writers, it received mixed reviews from critics and readers of Indian English poetry. Makarand Paranjape, writing for *World Literature Today*, criticized the aim of the collection in its focus on women's writing and drew attention to the fact that all the poets wrote in English.⁵⁴ He believed that most of the seventy-eight poems included were 'quite weak' except for about 'two dozen or so' poems.⁵⁵ In contrast to this, Vibha Chauhan praised de Souza's efforts as an editor in her review of *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, stating that de Souza 'feels that the note of protest in the poetry of these women provides a context that is truly supportive of the poetry of contemporary women poets [...] challenging, for example, what is seen as masculine domination sentimentalised into virtue.'⁵⁶ De Souza's work as an anthologist and editor has altered the canon of Indian literature to include the voices of women writing in English as well as those writing in regional languages. King notes that in terms of English-language poetry in India, the assessment of lasting quality comes from poets and reviewers rather than editors and academic critics.⁵⁷ It is evident that editors have a significant role to play in shaping a national canon of literature, and for that reason it is important to consider poets' roles as editors, especially in relation to women's writing. Geetha Ganapathy-Doré states that, 'In recent years, an increasingly high number of women are slowly and steadily asserting their competence in the editorial and publishing sectors in India.'⁵⁸ This, Gillian Gualtieri argues, came as a result of feminist criticism in the 1980s, which sought to recover 'lost' literature by women writers in order to canonize their work.⁵⁹ De Souza's efforts as an editor follow in this feminist tradition which can be seen in both her literary and critical anthologies.

⁵⁴ Makarand Paranjape, "Review of *Nine Indian Women Poets*," *World Literature Today* 72, no. 4 (1998): 898.

⁵⁵ Paranjape, "Review," 898.

⁵⁶ Vibha Chauhan, "Review of *Nine Indian Women Poets*," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* (1999): 343.

⁵⁷ King, *Modern*, 61.

⁵⁸ Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, "Editing and Publishing by Indian Women in India and Canada," *Wasafiri* 14, no. 28 (2008), 12.

⁵⁹ Gillian Gualtieri, "Canonized Women and Women Canonizers: Gender Dynamics in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature's* Eight Editions," *Gender Issues* 28 (2011):104.

Speaking of her work as an editor and poet, de Souza acknowledges the importance of looking at women's merit when reading their poems for she insisted that it is more difficult for women than men to write about their own lives.⁶⁰ De Souza wrote, 'The battle is to validate the material to begin with—the stuff of women's lives, women's experiences, not to "transcend" being a woman'.⁶¹ She challenged institutional practices that excluded women writers from anthologies by focusing on themes that typically would be considered unacceptable for publication. One such example of this is de Souza's anthology of feminist criticism and creative writing on the theme of *Purdah* (2004), which pushed beyond the social norms of women covering their faces and bodies, and even the separation of men and women in social spaces, to consider all the 'elaborate codes of seclusion and feminine modesty used to protect and control the lives of women'.⁶² The comprehensive volume brings together a number of critics and creative writers who offer historical, social and literary aspects on the practice of purdah in the subcontinent. The introduction of the critical anthology explores the intersections of purdah in both Hindu and Muslim cultural practices, and she discusses the historical implications on women's rights to own property and even considers how purdah affects the institution of marriage. De Souza's political interest in representing women's writing and bringing their experiences out of the silences of history is implied throughout its introduction and can be seen most vividly in a brief anecdote from the book in which De Souza recalled her visit to a co-educational college and found that her own poetry had been banned from the classroom because of references to 'sexual and bodily functions such as menses and pregnancy'.⁶³ One of the students responded to the exclusion by writing a poem about the experience of reading de Souza's work and how the student wished she had defended the poems to her peers and teachers.⁶⁴ This story suggests two levels of purdah, or silencing—first, in the sense that the books were censored by the education system and, second, in the fact that education remains closely linked to the practice of purdah, preventing women from reaching equal financial and educational

⁶⁰ Nishat Haider, "Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Indian English Women's Poetry," in *Gender Issues: Attestations and Contestations*, ed. Rajul Bhargava (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010): 31.

⁶¹ Haider, "Gender," 31.

⁶² Eunice de Souza, *Purdah: An Anthology* (New Delhi: OUP, 2004).

⁶³ De Souza, *Purdah*, xviii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

status as that of their male peers. De Souza's book on *Purdah* brings historical, critical and personal accounts of silencing together by moving women's stories out of seclusion to be read, understood and appreciated by international audiences. In doing so, she created a greater understanding of purdah and its distinctive cultural and religious practice.

Yet other volumes such as *Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English* (2002) recover 'lost' work by women writers, for de Souza and Lindsay Pereira compiled a range of 'letters, tracts, diaries, magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, short stories, novels, [and] biographies' of women writing during the pre-Independence period.⁶⁵ De Souza's work as an editor aligned with her own efforts as a poet to depict the challenges women face in Indian society, and in this volume she argued for a 're-writing of history on the basis of texts and anthologies which have been published in the area, and further research into other forgotten or ignored names.'⁶⁶ *Women's Voices* is particularly important because it focuses on non-fiction writing and the engagement of Indian women writers and the global 'West'. The women included in the anthology were 'political activists, diplomats, legislators, doctors, writers. They published and were feted abroad. They travelled extensively. At home they often took risks in their personal lives.'⁶⁷ Through an array of letters, articles and personal files, de Souza and Pereira recovered from history the silences surrounding women's writing in the pre-Independence period. Without this anthology on *Women's Voices* in India, readers outside the subcontinent would be unaware of the diversity and complexity of experiences women who lived through the transition from colony to nation-state.

Alongside these significant anthologies on Indian women's writing, de Souza has since published other anthologies on historical and contemporary Indian literature, such as *Early Indian Poetry in English* in 2005 and co-edited texts *The Puffin Book of Poetry for Children* (2005) and *These My Words: The Penguin Book of Indian Poetry* with Melanie Silgado. All of the anthologies I have mentioned here, with the exception of the co-edited books with Silgado, have been produced OUP New Delhi.

⁶⁵ Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira, *Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002): xi,

⁶⁶ Eunice de Souza, "Recovering a Tradition: Forgotten Women's Voices," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 26, 2006:1642.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1642.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Indian branch is not as far reaching as OUP Oxford, but the association with an international publishing conglomerate has played an important role in bringing Indian literature to audiences in Europe and North America. The dissemination of critical and literary anthologies of Indian literature to a global market suggests what Sarah Brouillette calls ‘market postcolonialism’, the cultural process by which books are produced and sold not just as texts for reading but the books themselves also come to ‘stand for an assemblage of separate entities’ in the global market.⁶⁸ These anthologies might be read by international audiences as representative of Indian literature and women’s writing in the country. They may also offer readers a glimpse of Indian culture, traditions and literature, a point which Lisa Lau and Om Prakash Dwivedi examine in greater depth in *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English* (2014).⁶⁹ Graham Huggan expands on the marketing of postcolonial literature as different or exotic in *Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), but when it comes to understanding de Souza’s purpose in publishing these books with OUP, we can only confirm her awareness of OUP’s readership and her hope for the potential dissemination of the books by the Press.⁷⁰ This well-established publisher, in fact, approached de Souza with requests to edit more books on Indian literature, and given the publisher’s consideration of appropriate marketing and commodification for European and North American audiences, it seems inevitably that de Souza’s anthologies would become widely read.⁷¹ I address de Souza’s anthologies with OUP to highlight another parallel with Medbh McGuckian’s early career. McGuckian was published on the Oxford Poets list which is separate from the marketing departments of de Souza’s anthologies but still associated with the Press. In both cases de Souza and McGuckian developed long-standing relationships with OUP in order to bring their work to readers in their home countries and also to international audiences in Europe and North America. Given the long-established history of the Press in India, we might see their connection to OUP as an example of postcolonial networks fostered by social and literary connections that emerged from imperial history.⁷²

⁶⁸ Brouillette, *Postcolonial*, 44–46.

⁶⁹ Lisa Lau and Om Prakash Dwivedi, *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5–6.

⁷⁰ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁷¹ Anjali Nerlekar, “‘Indian doesn’t exclude me’: An interview with Eunice de Souza”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 1–2 (2017): 253.

⁷² Rimi Chatterjee, *Empires of the Mind: A History of the Oxford University Press in India under the Raj* (Oxford: OUP, 2006): 1–13.

Melanie Silgado's Early Career

Although Melanie Silgado showed great promise in her early career as a poet, publisher and later as an editor for the feminist press Virago in London, she stopped publishing poetry in 1985 after producing only two collections which consist of twenty-six poems in total. Despite these limitations, her work is still anthologized in major volumes of Indian English poetry, including Eunice de Souza's *Nine Indian Women Poets* and Jeet Thayil's *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008) as well as critical studies such as Renate Papke's book on postcolonial poetry of mothering *Poems at the Edge of Differences* (2008). The fact that Silgado is included in publications of Indian poetry to some extent suggests that she has entered a national canon of literature. However, the poems published after Silgado's biographical note are always from these two short collections and appear to be recycled time and again. No critics to date have questioned the absence of new material or why she has not produced a collection in more than thirty years. In my examination of her work, I explore some of the silences surrounding Silgado's literary career as well as the theme of silence itself that pervades her published poems. In *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (2010), Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill advocate for the study of silence as a means through which we acknowledge that which was hitherto invisible and unheard; it is also a way of questioning the institutional processes that led to their absence in the first place.⁷³

Since 1984 Silgado has lived in London where she was educated at the London College of Printing. After eighteen years of working in publishing in India and the UK, she left the industry to teach creative writing courses in London, and she now works as a freelance editor in the city.⁷⁴ Regardless of her dedication to publishing the work of women writers, as evinced by her successful career at Virago, she appears to be crippled by self-doubt when it comes to her own poetry. Silgado states in a rare, published interview with her mentor and colleague Eunice de Souza: 'I am now so excruciatingly self-conscious that I can't bring myself to publish at all. Or often even to show new work. I haven't written very much in the last fifteen years. I feel not so much blocked as blank'. It is surprising to see these words from someone

⁷³ Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill, *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–2.

⁷⁴ Papke, *Difference*, 72.

who has worked in editorial roles and teaches aspiring writers. My examination of Silgado's career considers the conditions leading up to her 'journey to silence', to take up Pierre Macherey's words on the subject.⁷⁵ In *A Theory of Literary Production* (2006), Macherey discusses silences in literature as the absence of material that is not published; silence is defined by words and meanings which have been left out of a printed work, summarized in the following statement:

The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure. Thus, the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a *certain absence*, without which it would not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence. [...] Either all around or in its wake the explicit requires the implicit: for in order to say anything, there are other things *which must not be said*.⁷⁶

For Macherey, 'silence' and 'absence' are interchangeable terms that refer to the author's or publisher's choice to publish certain words, ideas and meanings, leaving a blank space—or absence—of material which is deemed unworthy or inappropriate for publication. Silence is created by the editorial choice to make particular ideas public, and the value of silence is found in the limitations of speech. He states, 'eventually [speech] has nothing more to tell us: we investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking'.⁷⁷ For every printed word, there is a silence in its wake, and if we analyse poems and prose as incomplete works because of this absence, rather than reading literature as 'the hidden centre which is the source of life', we, as readers, can perceive the work's 'actual decentered-ness' and its true meaning.⁷⁸

In the case of Silgado's career, I take Macherey's examination of silence to refer to the very limited number of poems that appear in print, and I discuss absence as the lack of material on her life and career as a poet, publisher and editor. This chapter utilises the republication of her poems and the inadequate biographical details that accompany her work in anthologies as the foundation for examining Silgado's literary career and her poetry. Her poems explore the theme of silence as the result of

⁷⁵ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, ed. Terry Eagleton (London: Routledge, 2006), 97.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 95, emphasis his.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

failed communication, and one may argue that her poems foreshadow the ostensible end of her literary career. By analysing her career through the information I have gleaned, I demonstrate the ‘decentered’ nature of feminist research on a writer whose life and poetry remain largely unknown outside of India. When I discuss the silences surrounding Silgado’s life, I also draw from Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* (1978), which articulates many forms of this theme throughout literary history. Olsen interrogates literary silence as ‘the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot’. These struggles, she argues, are multifarious and controversial; they may include “Censorship silences. Deletions, omissions, abandonment of the medium [...] paralyzing of capacity [...] Publishers’ censorship, refusing subject matter or treatment as “not suitable” or “no market for.” Self-censorship. Religious, political censorship [...] a wearing attrition’.⁷⁹ As will become evident in my analysis of Silgado’s career, the silences surrounding her life are so absolute that it is impossible to name which, or how many, of the possibilities mentioned here have led to her inability to write, much less publish, new poems. The following study is an attempt to retrieve from the silences of literary history Silgado’s career as Indian English poet; in doing so, I explore some of the ways that silence and absence are embedded in the publishing process.

Silences in Silgado’s Poetry

Silgado’s career in publishing began in Bombay in the mid-1970s during the height of a flourishing poetry scene that was established around St. Xavier’s College, Kishinchand Chellaram College and Siddhartha College in the post-Independence period.⁸⁰ Her poetry was greatly influenced by Eunice de Souza, with whom she studied at St. Xavier’s College, and during her time in Bombay, Silgado became involved in the growing publishing scene in the city. She consecutively worked for two literary magazines *Imprint* and *Keynote* and then the Indian subsidiary of Macmillan Publishing before setting up a small poetry collective called Newground with Rodrigues and d’Gama Rose.⁸¹ Although she eventually stopped publishing and writing poetry, networks she created with other writers in Bombay remained an important aspect of Silgado’s career as an editor for Virago and co-editor of Indian

⁷⁹ Olsen, *Silences*, 6–8.

⁸⁰ Hasan, ‘Missing’, 4; Bruce, *Modern*, 38.

⁸¹ Hasan, ‘Missing’, 4.

poetry collections in her later life. It appears that during her early career as a poet, Silgado was undaunted by the authority of male poets who were publishing at the time which is made plain by her willingness to set up and run a publishing collective with her male contemporaries. Highlighting this point is the fact that the first collection produced by Newground showcased a collaboration of Silgado's, Rodrigues' and d'Gama Rose's work in a book titled *Three Poets* (1978) which places Silgado's 13 poems under the title "The Earthworm's Story" first in the book.

An introductory collection to a third generation of Indian English poets writing after Independence, *Three Poets* denotes a shift away from the straightforward, imagistic language that differed from the older poets and a movement towards metaphorical imagery, the localization of English, and the poets' interest in self-reflection and memory. Silgado's poems are marked by eloquent metaphors and images, but also by a distinctly apprehensive and disturbing tone which is discernible in recurring images of the mouth, hunger, kissing, speaking, a spilling forth of words and even 'chok[ing]'.⁸² The poem, 'Child', for example, presents a complex relationship between a maternal figure and her child, lingering on a moment of realization in which the figure perceives the child's independence as the three-year-old begins to distance himself from her.⁸³ The speaker of the poem, who may be the mother of the child or another maternal figure in his life, holds a dominant position in the relationship, her stance like a 'proverbial mountain' over the young figure. Although the speaker expresses humour and playfulness in her attempt to gather the child into her arms, the tone takes a distinctly ominous turn halfway through the poem:

I talk too fluently,
and smile too often and too long.

But I've not come to stay.
Yet, I can feel the hundred things
you'd like to say
choke
as if the alphabets had jagged ends
that fixed inside your throat.⁸⁴

⁸² Melanie Silgado, *Three Poets* (Bombay: Newground, 1978).

⁸³ Papke, *Mothering*, 74.

⁸⁴ Silgado, *Three*, 16.

Here the figure addresses the child with empathy stemming from the realization that he cannot fully understand her words or actions as she tries to get his attention. The child's silence because he does not yet know how to speak is juxtaposed with the speaker's ability to communicate, which is underscored in the lines, 'I talk too fluently | and smile too often and too long', words that in themselves suggest repetition and profusion. The maternal figure consoles the child, but even her 'smile' appears melancholy amid the realization that he cannot communicate what he wants. Although the rhyme here has a lucid quality and intimates the difficulties of communicating with a small child, the light tone of the speaker's address shifts entirely at the word 'choke', which stands out as an unexpected reference to something blocking or preventing the child from speaking. The image of the alphabets' 'jagged ends' 'fixed inside [the child's] throat' implies the child's desire to speak without having the words to do so, but they also suggest violence as well as the act of silencing. In *Poems at the Edge of Difference*, Papke argues that although the figure, whom she refers to as 'the mother', realizes her child's helplessness—'he cannot defend himself with words'—the poem moves back into a light, happy tone, as the speaker 'returns to childhood memories and identifies herself with the child'.⁸⁵ Although Papke's analysis of the poem is sound, the reader remains unmistakably fixed on 'choke' as the only word isolated in a single line, which means that it is removed both visually and contextually from the rest of the poem.⁸⁶ Through the word 'choke' as a metaphor for the child's inability to speak because of his age, Silgado demonstrates that silence results in futility, meaninglessness, force and, perhaps, failed communication in the repression of the child's voice.

The theme of silence as an inability to communicate is discernible in other poems from Silgado's section of *Three Poets*, such as 'For Father on the Shelf' in which a young woman reflects on her recently deceased father's influence on her life and writing. The speaker draws from childhood memories to portray her father's overbearing presence in her life, which is noted in the impertinent opening lines: 'Father, you will be proud to know | you left something behind. | The year you died | I inherited a mind'. The father-daughter relationship is fraught, and we see a different form of silencing from that which appears in 'Child' when the speaker admits that

⁸⁵ Papke, *Mothering*, 74.

⁸⁶ Silgado, *Three*, 16.

‘letters you wrote | in a large, scrawling man’s hand | became my manifesto’.⁸⁷ The letters on the page symbolize the speaker’s inability to write in a language that expresses her experiences as a woman, symptomatic of a metaphorical silencing of her poetic voice. The daughter confesses that her father’s influence has ‘crippled’ her identity as a woman and writer, which comes through most effectively in the final stanzas of the poem:

I grant you divine power that it took
to live your kind of life,
both villain and hero of the piece.
Father you lived too much.

And now I’m writing with my life.
The price of an inherited crutch.⁸⁸

At the end of the poem, the speaker appears to forgive her father for his dominant hold on her life because she is now able to address him with tolerance and understanding after his death. Despite this movement towards closure, the line ‘And now I’m writing with my life’ indicates the persona’s desperate attempt to regain control of her life. ‘The price of an inherited crutch’, then, is a metaphor for the figure’s inability to become fully independent of literary and personal influences. The final couplet leaves the reader discomfited by the speaker’s vulnerability and her inability to ‘speak’ and express the reality of her lived experience even after her father’s death. In his brief analysis of ‘For Father on the Shelf’ in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, King articulates a purely biographical reading of the poem and dismisses any metaphorical interpretation that might allow us to consider the themes of silence and censorship. King believes the poem is indicative of Silgado’s ‘preoccupation with [the] relationship to her father’, yet the reader who does not know enough details about Silgado’s personal life to know if this statement is true. King believes that the ‘psychology of horrifying fears, depression, self-hate, insecurities, self-humiliations and failed emotions’ that are revealed in Silgado’s section of *Three Poets* are representative of the poet’s lived experience.⁸⁹ Although King captures some themes that arise in Silgado’s brief selection of poems, his limited reading of ‘For Father on

⁸⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁸ Silgado, *Three*, 23.

⁸⁹ King, *Modern*, 159–160.

the Shelf' as merely a biographical interpretation of the poet's relationship with her father prevents us from understanding themes of silence, silencing and repression, which are at the heart of this poem.

The poem's depiction of a woman's desire to find a feminine language, one that will express her true 'self', can be read as an example of Cixous's *écriture féminine*, which I discussed in the introduction. Cixous believes that if a woman is able to overcome pressures to be silenced and suppressed by the 'conventional man', she can return to an identity which has been 'confiscated from her'.⁹⁰ The speaker of 'For Father on the Shelf' once accepted her father's words as her 'manifesto', but now that he has died, she longs to find her own identity as a writer. The woman's inability to speak and write her own language because of her father's influence might be read as a form of gendered censorship because the speaker does not believe that her thoughts and words are worthy of being spoken out loud or recognized as her own in comparison with a man's expression of his thoughts and identity.⁹¹ Cixous notes that if a woman writes about her experiences in a feminine language, this can help her "realise" the uncensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures'.⁹² The speaker's tone is not one of love or shame, as King observes in his analysis of the poem.⁹³ Instead, it is the voice of a woman responding to her father in an attempt to find her own form of expression. In both 'Child' and 'For Father on the Shelf', Silgado depicts an inability to communicate with others and, further, the effects of silencing on those who cannot speak for these experiences.

As was the case for her poems from *Three Poets*, Silgado's second collection *Skies of Design* (1985) depicts broken relationships between the speakers and addressees, and the poems in this collection convey feelings of panic, fear and isolation. The narratives told within the poems are even more ambiguous than those of *Three Poets*, and references to 'crippled birds', 'panic-stricken wings', 'coals of experiences', a 'resounding burial' and 'fractures' from poems such as 'Books of Memories', 'Bird Broken' and 'Crow' renew in the reader a sense that the world

⁹⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875.

⁹¹ Joseph et al., *Storylines*, 10–13.

⁹² Cixous, 'Medusa', 880.

⁹³ King, *Modern*, 160.

Silgado creates through language is desolate, lonely and irreparable.⁹⁴ Unlike the poems in *Three Poets*, Silgado does not explicate who the speakers and addressees are in *Skies of Design*, and readers are left to piece together images and fragments of meaning in this book. In this collection, ‘Doris’ is the only poem which names the addressee, an elderly woman who is left to face the difficulties of ageing alone. Rather than addressing Doris with empathy and understanding, the persona reminds the elderly woman of her loneliness. In addressing Doris, she tells us that the woman has outlived her husband, and that her sons and daughters have ‘dispersed’ in her old age.⁹⁵ Doris has given her best efforts, the best years of her life, to these loved ones, but now ‘that early confidence’ ‘has broken into fear. | Fear of the dark’.⁹⁶ Throughout the poem, the reader witnesses Doris’s transformation from a vibrant young woman with a family to an elderly woman who cannot speak about her lived experiences. The final stanza captures this hopelessness:

No one calls you Doris any more
because they are dead.
Alive, are your granddaughters
and grandsons
pursuing the same ancient plague.
You would warn them,
but only brittle age rolls off your tongue.⁹⁷

As seen in these lines, naming and speaking, or the lack thereof, are central themes in ‘Doris’. The line, ‘No one calls you Doris any more’ appears in both the first and last stanzas, framing the narrative in references to communication and loss. There is no one to communicate with Doris in her old age—to speak to her, or even to physically call her or call on her—and therefore Doris’s identity, suggested by the act of naming, is stripped from her. The line ‘No one calls your Doris’ indicates that our identities as individuals are created by our relationships with others and, because she has no one, Doris’s identity, and her life itself, no longer have meaning. It is unclear from the poem what the ‘same ancient plague’ is one that her granddaughters and grandsons pursue, but the poem’s doleful tone proposes a reference to the monotony of everyday

⁹⁴ Melanie Silgado, *Skies of Design* (London: London College of Printing, 1985).

⁹⁵ Silgado, *Skies*, 13.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

life or the repetition of mistakes that Doris herself would have learned in her youth. She longs to ‘warn’ her progeny of some terrible fate, but without a name—without meaning—Doris cannot speak for her experiences. When she opens her mouth in the final line, ‘only brittle age rolls off [her] tongue’. Her words, if she can even speak them, are lost. The sensual language of the final line draws our attention to the mouth and Doris’s attempt to create meaning, but the abrupt ending of the poem deprives her grandchildren and us, as readers, from the truth she longs to tell. Sharyana, writing of Silgado’s poems in *A History of Indian Poetry in English*, states that ‘[m]uch of Silgado’s work uses images and testimonies of violence to foreground the triumph of speech as a validation of that violence’.⁹⁸ Comparing her work with Manohar Shetty, Sharyana concludes that the act of speaking in the poems empowers the speakers, such as in the case of ‘Child’ and the poem ‘Goan Death’ from *Three Poets*, but I would argue that many of the poems in this collection and in *Skies of Design*, depict silence, not speech, as the end to which the personae of her poems move. There is no triumph in Doris’s silence or in the image of her brittle tongue, and the reader is bereft of meaning. It is that which remains unsaid in the poem that holds the meaning we cannot comprehend. Through ‘Child’, ‘For Father on the Shelf’ and ‘Doris’ which are poems about phases of a woman’s life, Silgado questions the stability of relationships and demonstrates that silence and silencing are as much a part of communication as speech itself.

Silence and Resistance

The silences which underscore these examples from Silgado’s work are also perceptible in her career as a poet and editor of women’s literature. Although her second collection *Skies of Design* was awarded the Best First Book Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Asian Section, I experienced silence in the form of failed communication when I began doing research on Silgado and attempted to contact her.⁹⁹ She sent me a scanned copy of *Skies of Design* that is no longer in print, but when I inquired about other aspects of her career and suggested an interview, she stopped responding to my emails. In the absence of further contact with the poet, I sought out other published

⁹⁸ Sharyana, ‘The Third Generation: Melanie Silgado and Manohar Shetty’, *A History of Indian Poetry in English*, edited by Rosinka Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 332–336.

⁹⁹ Papke, *Mothering*, 174.

interviews, reviews, readings and public engagements but found scant references to her poetry and career since her time in Bombay. The only interview with Silgado that I have been able to trace is—unsurprisingly—by de Souza and was published in a book of interviews with Indian writers titled *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (2001) that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. In the interview between these close friends, there are glimpses of Silgado’s passion for editing and publishing but also references to an overwhelming sense of self-doubt that has prevented her from writing in recent decades. Speaking of her time as the Commissioning Editor of Virago, Silgado claims that it was ‘undoubtedly the most fulfilling, the most fun’ experience of her publishing career, noting that she was particularly proud of her work on the Virago compilation of *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Women’s Writing* (1990).¹⁰⁰ Although this particular publication clearly had personal significance to Silgado, it is interesting to note that her name does not appear on either the cover or on the more comprehensive list of editors on the copyright and editorial pages of the book. One of the most important aspects of *Opening the Gates*, Silgado states, was the fact that ‘much of the writing had never seen the light of day’, making the book a ‘landmark for specialists here [in the UK] and in several of the Arab states’. Ironically, Silgado’s work on the anthology is not publicly recognized and continues to remain ‘in the dark’, so to speak.¹⁰¹

The absence of poems and editorial recognition as well as Silgado’s unwillingness to be interviewed suggest some kind of personal struggle which has led to silence and resistance to practices of the publishing industry. According to Olsen, silences in literary careers are not the ‘necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestations, in the natural cycle of creation’; rather, ‘the silences I speak of here are unnatural’.¹⁰² It is clear from Silgado’s interview that she struggles with many silences, as seen in this statement:

And that may have something to do with leaving India. Being here in England has led to a paralysis. I used to think, when I worked at Virago as an editor for years, that all I needed was to be in a job that had nothing to do with words. That if I could get away from words at work,

¹⁰⁰ Eunice de Souza, ‘Melanie Silgado’, in *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 124.

¹⁰¹ De Souza, *Talking*, 124.

¹⁰² Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (London: Virago, 1965), 6.

my own words would get freed up. I have written quite a bit since, but not enough to publish, or not good enough to publish.¹⁰³

Silgado attributes her literary ‘paralysis’ to two important reasons—her move to England and doubts about the quality of her writing. Much scholarship has been dedicated to the effects of relocation on South Asians in diaspora, and important feminist contributors in this field include Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Avtar Brah, among others. As a result, I will not go into great depth on this point, but I do want to note that Silgado’s separation from friends and family in India and physical distance from her home country creates a sense of isolation that contrasts with the networks and literary relationships that she had built in her life in Bombay. This distinct change in her career may be linked to why she no longer publishes poetry.

The second issue which arises in Silgado’s statement is that she believes that her work is not ‘good enough’ to be published, meaning that she thinks her new poems would not be accepted by publishers and, as suggested elsewhere in the interview, that the poems that are published are unworthy of being in print. We might read Silgado’s debilitating doubt as a form of self-censorship, which Joseph et al. examine *Storylines* as one of the many forms of silencing that force authors to maintain ‘the existing order’ of a given society. According to Joseph et al., censorship goes beyond publishers’ unwillingness to accept books on certain topics or state regulations on texts that the public can access; censorship can be as pervasive as loved ones not fully supporting an individual’s creative work, familial responsibilities that require a great deal of time and energy, or social taboos that constrain writers.¹⁰⁴ The silences present in Silgado’s work may very well derive from the intersections of her careers as an editor, publisher and writer, which make her too closely involved in processes of revision and criticism to write creatively without doubting the quality of her own poetry. It is also possible that her life may have been consumed with personal responsibilities that made time for poetry scarce. Yet, we can only conclude that the silence is ascribed to Silgado’s belief that her work is not worthy of publication.

Given all these possibilities, it is important to acknowledge that one may never come to conclusions as to why Silgado’s brief and vibrant literary career came to an

¹⁰³ De Souza, *Talking*, 127.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph, et.al, *Storylines*, 6–7.

end. The resounding silences of her story are particularly interesting because Silgado continues to be acknowledged in anthologies of Indian English which is due largely to the fact that de Souza anthologized her poems in *Nine Indian Women Poets* and *Talking Poems*, among other anthologies, which brought international recognition to the writers represented in these OUP publications. Silgado's poetry has been analyzed in other critical works of Indian literature including in Rosinka Chaudhuri's *A History of Indian English Poetry*, Anisur Rahman and Ameena Kazi Ansari's *Indian English Women Poets* (2009) and Rajul Bhargava's *Gender Issues* (2010), and the continuance of critical research on her poetry ensures Silgado's place in a national canon, at least for now. Without delving into too much speculation apart from what Silgado has stated about her career, I conclude this chapter by proposing the possibility that she is not silenced by the industry because she has not published in decade; rather, Silgado purposefully remains outside its institutional processes. Macherey leaves us with the question 'Can we make this silence speak?' which Gayatri Spivak takes as the theoretical question of her crucial essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. The essay examines silences in the context of Indian women's experiences of *sati* and the colonial rhetoric around this practice, which I discussed in relation to Bhatt's poem 'Buffaloes' in Chapter 1.¹⁰⁵ Looking at theories of power and silence in relation to groups and individuals who do not have agency in social, class and caste hierarchies, Spivak argues that the central concern for women regarding *sati* is not related to the suitability or morality of the practice; it is about women's agency to choose the direction of their lives.¹⁰⁶ I carry forward this idea of female agency to consider the possibility that Silgado chooses to remain personally uninvolved in the publishing industry, but because of connections and networks she had established in India, she allows for her work to be reproduced for publication. We might see Silgado's silence, then, as her taking agency over the course of her career, as a position of discretion, power and resistance.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the literary careers of Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado as poets and editors in the Indian literary market. As close friends who share a

¹⁰⁵ Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988): 271–313.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

publishing history, these writers and the networks they created in 1970s Bombay and afterwards exhibit how tightly-enmeshed Indian poets' careers are with institutional practices of the publishing industry. De Souza's poetry is often read as 'confessional' and straightforward, but I argue that this simplistic reading of her work disregards her engagement with readers in her poems and paratexts; it also overlooks her immersion in a network of editors and writers in India. Silgado's poetry is also sometimes read as 'confessional', but the themes of her work are more elusive. I examine the subject of silence in her poetry as a way of looking at the greater silences in her literary career. De Souza and Silgado share similarities with McGuckian, whose career I examined in Chapter 2, in the fact that all three writers, among other women poets writing in 1970s, were excluded from canonically-formative anthologies. McGuckian responded to the omission of her work from Ormsby's anthologies by taking on more overtly political subjects in her poetry, as seen through references to art, history and politics in her recent publications. De Souza responded to the exclusion of other women writers from Mehrotra's *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* by editing her own anthology *Nine Indian Women Poets* dedicated to the accomplishments of her female peers. The publication led to a turn in her career, and she successfully brought out several more books on Indian women's literature to national as well as international audiences before her death in 2017. We might also see the supposed 'obscurity' and 'difficulty' of McGuckian's poetry as comparable to readings of de Souza's and Silgado's work because all these interpretations of women's poetry tend to overlook women's voices, their *écriture féminine*. Along similar lines, we cannot disregard the importance of publishing institutions such as OUP in bringing the work of women writers to audiences in Europe in North America.

All three poets responded to institutional practices of the publishing industry in different ways. McGuckian changed publishers because of difficulties with reading and understanding her work, but she has now established a long-standing, successful relationship with editor Peter Fallon of the Gallery Press and with Wake Forest University Press. She works within the industry and even plays up her role as a poet by publishing extensively in her forty-year career. De Souza also worked within the industry by publishing with small presses in India and later by challenging the exclusion of women writers in the publication of several important anthologies of women's literature in India. Silgado differs from both of these poets in that, although she worked in the industry as a poet, publisher and editor for several decades, she has

now removed herself from publishing practices. Her work remains in circulation because of anthologies and critical research on her poetry, and therefore we might see Silgado as inadvertently connected with the practices she discharges.

CHAPTER 4

Poets as Activists: The Public Poetry of Paula Meehan and Kamala Das

The final chapter of this thesis draws a comparison between Paula Meehan, the youngest of the Irish poets selected for the project, and Kamala Das, the eldest of the Indian poets, to examine how these two important voices of contemporary women's poetry depict representations of dispossessed individuals in their respective communities. Meehan and Das demonstrate an interest in challenging institutional practices of the nation-state which they do by voicing experiences of dispossession in poetry and their activism, and my analysis of their work elucidates political narratives that align the prosaic or private subjects of their poetry with their public careers. Meehan began publishing in the 1980s, and her work commemorates the lives of individuals whom she believes have been overlooked by the Irish nation-state. Throughout her career as a poet, Meehan has publicly engaged in activism through her work in inner-city communities in Dublin by teaching in schools and prisons, working with people with drug addictions and, most recently, in her public role as the Ireland Professor of Poetry. Das was one of the first women to publish Anglophone poetry in 1960s India, and I problematize the rather limited readings of her poetry as 'confessional' to consider how she portrays the multiplicities and complexities of Indian women's lives. Das held many public roles in her lifetime—as a poet, prose writer, columnist, artist and later a politician, and my analysis of her poetry connects the private subjects of her work with her empathy for helping dispossessed individuals in Kerala.

Paula Meehan's Representations of Entangled Church and State Practices

On 28 October 2012, Savita Halappanavar, an Indian dentist in Ireland, died at the University Hospital Galway due to complications from a septic miscarriage after she was denied an emergency abortion. The inquest found that Halappanavar asked for 'a medical termination a number of times over a three-day period, during which she was

in severe pain’, but her requests were denied because a foetal heartbeat was present.¹ When asked why doctors would not—or could not—perform an abortion under these circumstances, a nurse at the hospital told the woman and her husband that Ireland was a ‘Catholic country’.² Halappanavar’s death in the autumn of 2012 instigated an international outcry against abortion laws in the Republic of Ireland as activists and especially women across the country protested against the entanglement of state and religious practices in the administration of medical care. Weeks after the incident, protesters marched through the streets of Dublin and held a candlelight vigil for Halappanavar outside the Irish Parliament in opposition to the Eighth Amendment of the constitution which recognizes the right to life of a foetus.

Before the march set off on 19 November, Paula Meehan, a poet, playwright and activist from Dublin, read her poem ‘The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks’ to a crowd standing outside the Garden of Remembrance at Parnell Square.³ The poem was written in memory of Ann Lovett, a fifteen-year-old girl who died of septic shock in 1984 soon after giving birth beside a grotto of the Virgin Mary in County Longford.⁴ Lucy Collins writes that Lovett’s death became the focus of a national debate on attitudes towards single parenthood in Ireland.⁵ The case also opened discussions around young motherhood, abortion and female sexuality in highly publicized cases such as the deaths of the Kerry babies also in 1984 and the ‘X’ case in 1992.⁶ ‘The Statue of the Virgin’ was published in Meehan’s third collection *The*

¹ Ben Quinn, ‘Scandal in Ireland as woman dies in Galway “after being denied abortion”’, *Guardian*, November 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov14/ireland-woman-dies-after-abortion-refusal>.

² Halappanavar delivered a stillborn girl on 24 October 2012 and died of septicemia four days later; ‘Woman dies after abortion request “refused” at Galway hospital’, editorial, *BBC News*, November 14, 2012, online. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20321741>.

³ Nicola Anderson and Caroline Crawford, ‘Protesters vow ‘never again’ as vigils held across the country’, *Irish Independent*, November 19, 2012, online; ‘Vigil4Savita – Paula Meehan reads a poem for Savita’, YouTube video, posted by Micks Metaphors, November 19, 2012, Accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABiZhQrLW2I>.

⁴ Ann Lovett was discovered on January 31, 1984, in a grotto just outside the town of Granard in County Longford. She had given birth to a baby boy, who had already died, and Lovett died of septic shock later that day in hospital. Lovett’s death, like Halappanavar’s twenty-eight years later, sparked a national outcry on social restrictions of women’s bodies in Ireland. ‘Paula Meehan’, *Ricorso: A Knowledge of Irish Literature*, Ricorso, accessed 16 May 2017, http://www.ricorso.net/rx/az-data/authors/m/Meehan_P/life.htm.

⁵ Lucy Collins, *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 102.

⁶ Jon O’Shea, ‘The Kerry Babies Case: The shocking scandal and tragedy that divided the nation and the mystery that was never solved’, *Irish Independent*, July 9, 2017, online <http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/the-kerry-babies-case-the-shocking-scandal-and->

Man who was Marked by Winter in 1991, and her reading at the protest drew parallels between the deaths of Lovett and Halappanavar almost thirty years later in the failure of religious and political institutions to save these women's lives. The Virgin Mary is disembodied—even trapped—in her statue form, and the last stanzas which Meehan read that day envisage the girl's cries for help and the limitations of religious faith in this moment:

On a night like this I remember a child
who came with fifteen summers to her name,
and she lay down alone at my feet
without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
and she pushed her secret out into the night,
far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
and though she cried out to me in extremis
I did not move,
I didn't lift a finger to help her,
I didn't intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear.

On a night like this I remember the days to the solstice
and the turn back to the light.

Oh sun,
centre of our foolish dance,
burning heart of stone,
molten mother of us all,
hear me and have pity.⁷

Meehan's portrayal of the childbirth and the Virgin's denial demonstrates her interest in depicting, but also challenging social injustices in her poetry, a conviction which is at the heart of her literary career.⁸ Through her portrayal of the disembodied Holy

[tragedy-that-divided-the-nation-and-the-mystery-that-was-never-solved-30176996.html](http://www.thejournal.ie/tragedy-that-divided-the-nation-and-the-mystery-that-was-never-solved-30176996.html);
'Twenty years on: A timeline of the X case', *Journal.ie*, February 6, 2012, online
<http://www.thejournal.ie/twenty-years-on-a-timeline-of-the-x-case-347359-Feb2012/>.

⁷ Paula Meehan, 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks', *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991), 40–42.

⁸ Collins, *Memory*, 103.

Mother who so strikingly juxtaposes the girl's reality of childbirth, Meehan indicates the limitations of religious practice in changing the girl's fate but also how religious ideals of motherhood have dire consequences on women's lives.

Meehan's depiction of Lovett's death in 'The Statue of the Virgin' and her reading of this particular poem at Halappanavar's vigil attests to her activism and desire to commemorate lives whom she believes have been overlooked by practices of the Catholic Church and Irish nation-state.⁹ Meehan's conviction regarding social justice can be compared with Kamala Das's career which I examine in the second half of this chapter. Meehan's career builds on the feminist tradition in contemporary Irish poetry that was established by Eavan Boland to construct a politically-charged feminist voice that is closely tied with performance and activism. In this way, Meehan not only uses her poetic voice to critique institutional practices, but she also uses it as a force for social change. Through disembodied maternal figures in 'The Statue of the Virgin' as well as the silences of the Virgin and town, Meehan illustrates the reality of the girl's experience of childbirth, and in doing so, uses her poetry to interrogate practices of the Catholic Church and Irish nation-state which she believes have restricted women's rights.¹⁰

Meehan creates a parallel between the girl and the Virgin by juxtaposing representations of parturition with maternal disembodiment. Although the Virgin is the speaking voice of the poem, she is disembodied in her statue form and by her consecration as the mother of God—'They call me Mary—Blessed, Holy, Virgin', 'They name me Mother of all this grief | though mated to no mortal man'. These names elevate her to a state of veneration that erases the Virgin's sexuality and separates her from the girl's lived experience.¹¹ This girl embodies motherhood in the act of childbirth, yet her pregnancy is concealed as she instead 'pushed her secret out into the night, | far from the tucked town'.¹² The girl's physical distance from the town indicates her fear of being found pregnant and unmarried, and the reality of her pregnancy separates her from the community that might save her. The girl's

⁹ Seán Rocks, "'Bolshie Dublin woman'" Paula Meehan on her new poetry collection', *Arena*, Aired November 21, 2016 (Dublin: RTÉ Radio 1, 2016), Radio broadcast, <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2016/1128/835056-paula-meehan-a-self-confessed-bolshie-dublin-woman-on-these-ti/>.

¹⁰ 'Vigil4Savita' video.

¹¹ Meehan, *Winter*, 40–1.

¹² *Ibid.*

concealment inadvertently makes the town complicit in her lonely childbirth and death, and her cries ‘in extremis’ that contrast the harsh stillness of the statue highlight the rigidity of religious practice in this society. The Virgin is constrained by her embodiment in statue form that ironically separates her from human suffering and makes her incapable of interceding with God on the girl’s behalf. Meehan creates a contradiction between the human and divine through opposing representations of embodied motherhood that is concealed in the face of the venerated Holy Mother. The juxtaposition of these figures in ‘The Statue of the Virgin’ allow us to perceive similarities between these maternal bodies that indicate how religious faith is limited by the idealization of the female body and sexuality in Church and state practices.

Meehan employs representations of silence and voice to accentuate the severity of the girl’s circumstances and absence of aid in her most desperate moment. Silences in the poem are expressed most evocatively in the Virgin appeals to the sun for reprieve from her inability to save the child: ‘molten mother of us all | hear me and have pity’. Just as the girl calls out to the Virgin in vain, so the Virgin calls to her perceived divine power, the sun, in the knowledge that relief will not come. The Virgin’s plea to a pagan god decentres her own intercessory role in the Catholic tradition and, ultimately, the faith that brought the girl to the grotto in the first place. The repetition of such phrases as ‘It can be bitter here at times like this’ and ‘On a night like this’ sound like a chant when read in the poem’s entirety, and these turns of phrase invite us to read the poem as the Virgin’s prayer that is unheard and unanswered. The cries of the Virgin and the girl echo across the desolate landscape of the poem where ‘there is | no respite’ for either figure. Although the girl cries out, the silences at the grotto inundates the reader who does not read her words in dialogic speech and so cannot stand as witness. The Virgin’s denial in the following words suggests not only the reader’s inability to ‘hear’ the girl’s cries, but they also erase the movement of her body in childbirth because the poem turns instead to the Virgin’s stillness and silence:

I did not move,
I didn’t lift a finger to help her,
I didn’t intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word in God’s ear.¹³

¹³ Meehan, *Winter*, 42.

The scene at the grotto also stands in contrast to the stillness of the ‘town tucked up safe and dreaming’, and the echoing silences of the poem implicate the town and the Virgin, as a symbol of the girl’s faith, in the latent responses to her pregnancy, childbirth and eventual death.¹⁴

The religious and political undertones of the poem work together in Meehan’s critique of institutional bodies in Ireland. The figure of the Virgin Mary functions as a symbol not only of Catholic faith but also the professed values of the nation-state. As I discussed in the Introduction and in relation to Boland’s poetry in Chapter 1, national discourses often portray the nation through representations of the female body, and this idealization leads to restrictions on women’s rights in the nation-state. Heather Ingman writes in *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (2007), that the conflation of woman and nation as Mother Ireland merged with Catholic doctrine that elevated the Virgin Mary, so that social constructs of femininity that were created by nationalist discourse came to more firmly assert moral values relating to female sexuality, chastity and motherhood.¹⁵ In ‘The Statue of the Virgin’ the girl’s pregnancy contrasts the Virgin’s desexualized, sacred body so that the girl’s pregnancy is bodily evidence of an irrevocable breach with her cultural upbringing. Because the Virgin Mary in her purity is seen as the paragon of femininity, the girl, whose pregnancy is concealed from the town, cannot be saved by her faith. Comparably, the Virgin’s sacred status has disembodied and separated her from human suffering.

The amalgamation of religious ideologies of the Virgin as ideal womanhood with the political iconography of the nation as Mother Ireland led to the representation of the nation as ‘Virgin Mary, Queen of Ireland’, which not only promoted national pride during the formation of nation-state, but continues to encourage the veneration of religious, and specifically Catholic, identity as the pure and essential representation of Irishness.¹⁶ The integration of Church and state practices perpetuate regulations of women’s bodies in Ireland, which can be seen most obviously in recent years in the form of the Eighth Amendment, an act which has become so problematic that the UN

¹⁴ Meehan, *Winter*, 40.

¹⁵ Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁶ Meaney, ‘Race’, 55.

recently stated that the abortion law in Ireland violate a woman's human rights.¹⁷ Given the poem's emphasis on maternal figures and their silences, it is possible to read the Virgin's inability to act and the town's unawareness of the girl's pregnancy as a political statement about institutions failing to notice the consequences of religious and national ideologies that negatively affect women's lives in ways that led to Lovett's and Halappanavar's deaths. The Virgin's presence as the voice of the girl's story indicates the centrality of religious faith and practice in defining women's experiences. Meehan's reading at the protest intentionally opposes the Eighth Amendment but also the idealization of motherhood in Irish culture.

Introducing her poem at the protest, Meehan excoriates institutional practices in Ireland in this statement:

I don't believe that we live in a Catholic country. I think we live in a barbaric dysfunctional state, and we have to change now. When I was a young woman in my twenties, I wrote this poem. I thought it was the low point for women. I thought things could only get better, but they haven't.¹⁸

Meehan's introduction makes the poem itself an act of protest against institutional practices in Ireland. Her allusion to the 'dysfunctional state' and the Catholic Church does not condemn these institutions as a whole but indicates that it is their conflation that legalizes control over women's bodies. She denounces the Eighth Amendment because it values the life of the foetus over that of the woman to the point that motherhood is sacralized and women's lived experiences of sexuality and abortion are erased. Her act of protest is supported by the fact that she, along with Boland, McGuckian and hundreds of other writers and creative practitioners in Ireland, have publicly signed the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment.¹⁹ Meehan goes beyond the portrayal of social injustice to use her poetry as a call for political

¹⁷ Joel Gunter, 'Abortion in Ireland: The fight for choice', *BBC News*, March 8, 2017, online, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39183423>; Paul Cullen, 'Irish abortion law violated woman's human rights, UN says', *The Irish Times*, June 13, 2017, online, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/irish-abortion-law-violated-woman-s-human-rights-un-says-1.3118145>; Henry McDonald, 'UN repeats criticism of Ireland's "cruel and inhumane" abortion laws', *The Guardian* June 13, 2017, online, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/13/un-denounces-ireland-abortion-laws-as-cruel-and-inhumane-again>.

¹⁸ 'Vigil4Savita', YouTube video.

¹⁹ 'Statement,' Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://www.artistsrepealthe8th.com/>.

and social change. In this way, ‘The Statue of the Virgin’ not only depicts the failure of a community to save a woman’s life but sounds a sonorous call for change in the laws that govern women’s bodies in Ireland and in society’s responses to abortion, young motherhood and single parenthood. The poem has been cited by commentators examining the ‘cultural crisis in 1980s Ireland occasioned by the fierce legislative battles on contraception, divorce, and abortion; the tragedies of Anne Lovett and Joanne Hayes’, and despite its controversial subject matter, ‘The Statue of the Virgin’ was shortlisted fifteen years after its publication for RTÉ’s A Poem for Ireland competition that celebrated the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016.²⁰ Its place among the ten ‘most loved’ poems in the country its evidence of how the portrayal of a private experience can come to ‘voice’ a public tragedy and one that continues to shape attitudes towards women’s rights in contemporary Ireland.

A ‘Voice’ for Working-Class Dublin

As a poet and playwright Meehan attempts to ‘voice’ individual stories of suffering which can be seen in her representation of Lovett’s childbirth in ‘The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks’ but also in the voices of working-class Dublin that echo across the eight poetry collections she has published since 1984. Addressing women’s rights in her poetry, but also representations of poverty, drug abuse and incarceration, Meehan discusses these subjects with Anne Karhio, Jody Allen Randolph and Janna Knittel as having greatly influenced her creative work as a writer.²¹ Meehan depicts these prosaic subjects to commemorate the lives of individuals whom she believes ‘didn’t seem to get much of a look in’ from the government, Church and other institutions.²² Meehan’s poetry, then, is highly politicized, and it is possible—and even necessary—to read her work within the social and political backdrop of her own upbringing in a working-class community that has influenced the trajectory of her

²⁰ Andrew Auge, *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 194. Meehan, Paula, ‘The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks’, *A Poem for Ireland, RTÉ*, <https://apoemforireland.rte.ie/shortlist/the-statue-of-the-virgin-at-granard/>.

²¹ Anne Karhio and Paula Meehan, “‘Imagined Domains’”: A Conversation with Paula Meehan’, *Nordic Irish Studies* 8 (2009): 73; Janna Knittel, “‘Nature Doesn’t Stop at the Limits of the City’”: An Interview with Paula Meehan’, *New Hibernia Review* 20, no.1 (2016): 78–79; Jody Allen Randolph, ‘The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan’, *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts* 5, no. 1& 2 (2009): 246–47.

²² Randolph, ‘Body’, 246–47.

career. Meehan often speaks about the importance of ‘voice’—in reference to her poetic voice as a writer and performances of her work but also in relation to the dialogic speech of her poems that depict the language of working-class urban life in Dublin—in a number of published conversations as well as in several recorded readings and interviews on RTÉ national broadcast radio and television in Ireland.²³ Connecting the personal, literary and political connotations of ‘voice’ in her poetry, she summarizes her agenda as a writer in an interview with Randolph published in 2009:

The great thing about poetry is that it’s the human voice, the one human voice breaking the silence. And how you make that voice powerful, trustworthy, capable of communicating, capable of changing other people’s energy, I think at the root of that is the manipulation of breath. And you hope that what you make transcends the maker. Poetry is public speech, no matter how private or intimate the material.²⁴

Meehan understands voice as sound, speech and narrative, and these elements are inherently intertwined with one another. She hopes to account for experiences of dispossession, or those living in poverty, tenements and prisons, and she does this by giving a ‘voice’ to these individuals in the dialogic speech of her poems. At the same time, Meehan uses her own ‘voice’ and position as a poet who engages in public discourse to make readers of her work, and more broadly, audiences engaged in Irish politics and culture aware of the social inequalities addressed in her writing. Meehan’s presence at the protest against the Eighth Amendment, her countless poetry readings, attendance at public events and her role as the Ireland Professor of Poetry during the commemorative centenary of the Easter Rising attest to the centrality of ‘voice’—both private and public—to her career.

Voice, then, is more than the sound of spoken words and a narrative through which the poem engages readers; it is, to use Judith Butler’s phrase, a form through which one ‘gives an account’ of oneself as an articulation of an individual’s multiple positions that establish one’s identity and explicates that reality to others in the

²³ Karhio, ‘Imagined’; Knittel, ‘Nature’; Randolph, ‘Politic’; Jody Allen Randolph, ‘Painting Rain: A Conversation with Paula Meehan’, *PN Review* 190 36, no. 2 (2009): 48–50; Paula Meehan, interviewed by Danielle Sered, ‘Conversation with Paula Meehan’, June 19, 1999, Dublin, Republic of Ireland,’ Irish Women Poets Oral History Collection, interview transcript, Stuart A. Rose, MARBL, Emory University.

²⁴ Randolph, ‘Politic’, 250.

creation of self-narratives. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) Butler theorizes politics of communication in philosophical and psychoanalytical contexts and builds on theories of self-awareness and moral truth put forth by Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche and Theodor Adorno to consider the ways that one positions oneself in the world.²⁵ In pursuit of understanding the trajectory of her career, I focus on voice as a narrative form that Meehan uses to represent lived experiences that portray and critique conditions of suffering. For Butler, ‘giving an account’ of oneself and one’s circumstances necessarily takes a narrative form because one narrates a set of plausible events to an audience and draws upon a ‘narrative voice and authority’ to communicate one’s position in the world. Butler builds on this essential communicative aspect of voice to state that in relating a story to an audience or reader, a person then ‘constitutes the prerequisite condition for any account of moral agency [one] might give.’²⁶ Voice, then is not only the medium through which one communicates one’s lived experience; in the act of recounting one’s story to an audience, the listener becomes morally responsible to act upon the narrative that unfolds. When Meehan speaks about the ‘human voice breaking the silence’, she touches on exactly the definition of voice in terms of the narrative poem but also the reader’s moral agency or responsibility to take Meehan’s unsettling representations of dispossession and to communicate and ‘[change] people’s energy’. As ‘a form of public speech’, Meehan’s poetry compels readers and audiences to not only comprehend narratives of dispossession but to also challenge and change the conditions leading to their oppression in the first place.²⁷

Nick Couldry, in *Why Voice Matters* (2010), builds on Butler’s definition of voice, and although he writes within the context of culture and politics of post-neoliberalism, his classifications are useful in tracing the ways that Meehan engages with techniques of voice in her poetry. Couldry understands voice as a process rather a singular, subjective action because sharing a story about one’s life—the narrative aspect of voice—is a ‘basic feature of human action’ that gives value to the person’s

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 65–69.

²⁶ Butler, *Account*, 12.

²⁷ When speaking about class politics in Ireland, Meehan herself has referred to the social and political systems that create inequalities as a form of oppression. Speaking with Anne Karhio about her upbringing, Meehan states ‘There is a real oppression there, that tells you who you are and what your place is, and that is quite often tells you “and you’re going to stay in your place”’. Karhio, ‘Imagined,’ 74.

account of the world within which she acts.²⁸ He divides voice into three particular categories which are useful in looking at Meehan's poems, specifically those that depict intersectional inequalities of class and gender. Couldry believes that at its core, voice is socially grounded because it is based on prior conditions that affect a person's life and because voice derives from a breadth of resources that make up that person's 'material life'. Voice is also a form of reflexive agency, returning here to Butler's definition, because the speaker takes responsibility for the story she tells, but also the listener is then responsible for responding in some way. Bringing these inter-relational aspects together, Couldry determines that voice is an inherently embodied process because every person articulates the world '*from a distinctive embodied position*' informed by his or her life experiences.²⁹ Meehan's poetry brings together these three classifications of voice because her poems use poetic personae, such as the Virgin or other speakers involved in the story, and act as the narrative voice in several of her poems. Meehan also uses speech within the poem to create a dialogue with her readers by inviting them to respond to and challenge the systems of oppression. She portrays these forms of voice are certainly intertwined in the controversial and politicized subject matter of 'The Statue of the Virgin', but Meehan also has employed techniques of voice in different ways throughout her literary career.

Meehan's political conviction about social consciousness, to use Lucy Collins' summation of her career, can be seen in poems that date back to her first collection *Return and No Blame* published by Beaver Press in Dublin in 1984.³⁰ Meehan's style in this collection differs from the deliberate integration of voices that is found in her later collections. The poems in *Return and No Blame* focus primarily on representing voices and experiences from Meehan's childhood in Finglas, North Dublin, and social conviction behind the work seems to foreground Meehan's interest in form and poetic style. 'Echoes' from *Return and No Blame* recounts Meehan's childhood through representations of tenement life and individuals living there. Given its title, the poem centres on voices from this community, so that the reader, like Meehan herself, is troubled by their call: 'I am haunted by voices echoing, | voices without bodies, | ghosts of my childhood dreaming'.³¹ Part Two of the poem, titled 'Voices That

²⁸ Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010), 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7–8, emphasis his.

³⁰ Collins, *Estrangement*, 102.

³¹ Paula Meehan, *Return and No Blame* (Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1984), 8.

Persist' is, for obvious reasons, the most poignant example of Meehan's early use of voice to narrate individual experiences from her childhood community. Separated into four stanzas, this part of the poem uses alliteration and idioms to portray the accents and dialogic speech of people in the neighbourhood. The stanza titled 'Barney the Butcher', for example, tells the reader, "'All I want is to batter | The head of the bollix | That drew up the plan | In the first place'" and 'Joan the Moan' represented in a later stanza complains about tenement life: "'The only birds I've seen | In fifteen years are sparrows | And the noise has craters | Dug in me poor old brain.'"³² These straightforward, colloquial representations of working-class speech demonstrate Meehan's interest in depicting tenement life through oral narratives and language but such examples as 'Echoes' do not carry the more complex poetic voice that Meehan developed later on.

The simplicity of Meehan's approach in this early poem differs greatly from the strategic use of speech and silence in 'The Statue of the Virgin' which was published six years later in *The Man Who was Marked by Winter* (1991). The jovial, familiar and communal nicknames suggest Meehan's relationship with these individuals, and because the speakers in 'Voices That Persist' appear to address the reader or the poet in colloquial language there is a sense that we, as readers who might not understand terms such as 'bollix' or even the subject of Barney's conversation, stand outside this tight-knit, familial community of the tenements. Economic status, but also language, appearance and lifestyle are central to literary and cultural representations of class, as Michael Pierson contends in *Writing Ireland's Working Class* (2011), yet depictions of working-class communities and lived experiences of poverty have remained largely absent from studies of Irish literature, history and culture until the last two decades.³³ Pierson emphasizes that, 'when class inflects things such as accent and idiom, when it affects a person's social status, cultural interests, gender relations and occupation prospects', class can and should be used as a tool to explore cultural issues and differences.³⁴ For Meehan, 'voice' is socially grounded in that she allows for the voices of childhood community to emerge in her writing. Her interest in accounting for experiences of poverty in her early poems suggests that Meehan's class

³² Meehan, *Return*, 8.

³³ Michael Pierson, *Writing Ireland's Working Class: Dublin After O'Casey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3–4.

³⁴ Pierson, *Class*, 8.

consciousness and conviction for social change precedes and even supersedes her artistic development as a poet. Even before she gained recognition as a writer in Ireland, Meehan's poetry was defined by a politicized portrayal of class inequalities in Dublin.

Meehan acknowledges how her working-class upbringing influenced her work as a writer. In an interview with her partner, the poet Theo Dorgan, that was published in 1992, Meehan admits that she was not as concerned about her literary career as she was in helping people with drug addictions. When asked how readers responded to the poems in her second collection *Reading the Sky*, published by Beaver Row Press in 1986, she said:

I was a community activist in a large flats complex at the time and my mind was more occupied by meetings to get the heroin pushers out of the area and surviving on the dole. I was a writer. It was simple. Nobody was paying any attention to me except the odd person who knew me.³⁵

It is interesting to note how Meehan turned a conversation about her early publishing history into one about her activism; she perceives the two aspects of her career to be completely enmeshed with and dependent upon one another. For Meehan, writing is a form of activism and a way of voicing the stories of individuals who have been marginalized or dispossessed by practices of the nation-state. Poetry is not a form of expression or critique of society; it is her own form of communication through which she petitions her readers to understand and challenge social differences.

Gender and Class in Meehan's Poetry

In her second and third collections *Reading the Sky* and *The Man who was Marked by Winter*, respectively, Meehan began to more intentionally politicize representations of dispossession to examine how the intersections of gender and class marginalized individuals. 'The Dark Twin', first published in *Reading the Sky*, is an important example of her experimentation with poetic voice and demonstrates the intricate way her poetry complicates gender politics in Ireland. The 'dark twin' is at once the subject of the poem, the 'girl in pink passing', 'the woman you hold' and the otherness within

³⁵ Theo Dorgan, 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', *Colby Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (1992): 267.

oneself.³⁶ The poem hinges on the relationship between the dark twin and ‘you’, who can be read as either the speaker of the poem or the reader, so that the dispossessed dark twin—whose lived experiences of suffering because of her economic status, race or gender are overlooked by the nation-state—becomes a familiar figure to the reader. Meehan layers images of the violated woman’s body with those of a country at war in this experimentation with poetic voice:

She is your dark twin. You know you must heal her.
The burns from the bombing will ease as you rock her.
The legs that are mangled made whole for fast dancing.
Her sobs will be songs for the rearing of children.
Still you must pay her the exact amount due.³⁷

In these lines from the penultimate stanza of the poem, the dark twin is the ‘other’ within oneself, so that the female body becomes a vessel for perceiving, acknowledging and accepting cultural otherness in terms of race, class and nationhood. The split identity of the speaker and her dark twin is intentionally ambiguous, so that who or what the woman symbolizes can be read in multiple ways. The wounded body, seen in the woman’s ‘legs that are mangled’ and ‘burns from the bombing’ are a palimpsest overlaid by the portrayal of the nation destroyed by war. The burning of ‘the city that’s made her’ is also inscribed onto the twin’s body, so that the burns and mangled legs of bomb victims is perceived as a kind of art, one that is as graceful as a woman dancing. Meehan’s conflation of female sexuality, violence and nationhood foreshadows Medbh McGuckian’s 2001 poem ‘Drawing Ballerinas’ from her eponymous collection published after the Troubles in 2001, which I discussed in Chapter 2. Meehan’s rendering of the female body as violated ‘bloody’ and transactional (‘You will pay her the exact amount due’) allows us to read the woman’s assault and her need for healing as symbolic of the need to acknowledge and accept otherness in society. The meter of the lines quoted above mimics a chant or lullaby so that dark twin is assuaged and the reader is also drawn into the woman’s narrative. The twin, and the otherness she symbolizes, appears familiar to the reader and, in this way, her otherness is acknowledged. Through the speaking voice of the poem that creates a relationship between the readerly ‘you’ and the female figure,

³⁶ Paula Meehan, *Reading the Sky* (Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1985), 41–42.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Meehan uses voice as communicative agency to make the reader associate with and experience otherness.

Meehan's palimpsestic representations of the female body and war-torn nation allow us to read the dark twin as a figure who symbolizes experiences of dispossession on both individual and communal scales. Pilar Villar-Argáiz examines Meehan's poetry of locality in 'Telling the Truth about Time' that offers two readings of 'The Dark Twin'—those of a woman's multiple identities and of racial differences—that are relevant to an analysis of Meehan's development of poetic voice. I build on Villar-Argáiz's bifurcation to suggest that Meehan intentionally represents a conflation of woman and nation to portray the need for social change. Villar-Argáiz reads 'The Dark Twin' through a feminist lens in which 'the speaker herself encapsulates both opposing female figures, revealing the artificiality of stereotypes' that question the 'notion of stable identities'.³⁸ The dark twin, then, is a representation of a woman's multiple identities that urges the reader to recognize and accept the disparate identities that make up the individual and others. Villar-Argáiz's more recent work in *Words of Crisis, Crisis of Words* (2016) politicizes the poem as an example of Meehan's foresight about social changes in Ireland. 'The Dark Twin', she avers, portrays the challenges created by the unprecedented number of exiles and political refugees that arrived in Ireland since the 1990s.³⁹ In Villar-Argáiz's recent political reading, 'the dark twin' is representative of the dark-skinned bodies of migrants coming to Ireland, or is even symbolic of the waves of migrants travelling from Eastern Europe into the country. This analysis, which hinges on a literal and political understanding of the poem, perhaps gives Meehan too much credit for 'foresee[ing]' in this 1986 poem the financial and political crisis that would befall Ireland in the post-Celtic Tiger era that began in 2008. However, Villar-Argáiz's politicization of 'The Dark Twin' is generally useful in understanding Meehan's intentions as a poet and the inherent social and political critique that is embedded in her work. She suggests that Meehan

³⁸ Pilar Villar-Argáiz, "'Telling the truth about time': The Importance of Local Rootedness in Paula Meehan's Poetry", *Études Irlandaises* 35, no. 1 (2010): 109.

³⁹ Pilar Villar-Argáiz, 'Dark Twins and Black Cormorants: Migrant Others in Contemporary Irish Poetry', in *Words of Crisis, Crisis of Words: Ireland and the Representation of Times*, ed. by María Losanda-Friend, Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides, and Pilar Ron-Vaz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 227.

advocates that readers must find the Other within oneself in order to accept difference and the strangeness of the political, socioeconomic and racial Other.⁴⁰

Villar-Argáiz's readings of 'The Dark Twin' show some ways that the poem lends itself to allegorical interpretations and indicate that there is a tendency to examine Meehan's poetry through feminist and communal lenses.⁴¹ While critics such as Villar-Argáiz, Jody Allen Randolph, Thomas McCarthy and also Eavan Boland examine Meehan's poetry as empathetic with representations of community and social concerns in Ireland, I want to extend this analysis to argue that Meehan intentionally uses the social grounding of her poetic voice to represent an ambiguous dispossessed figure onto whom the reader can project any interpretation. Meehan's poetic voice in 'The Dark Twin' works differently from how she voices and critiques institutions in 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks'. These two poems were published together in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (1991), which lends a more political interpretation to 'The Dark Twin'. The conflation of the female body and the nation in the lines above creates a sense of community and familiarity with the dispossessed other, whereas in 'The Statue of the Virgin', the female figures are isolated from the community and solidarity the girl needs. The dark twin, to whom the speaker is indebted, can be understood through Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the 'abject', which exists in opposition to oneself because it unsettles and disturbs one's existence; the abject other, according to Kristeva, is the "jettisoned object" which is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses'.⁴² The abject exists outside of the norms of society and is largely unseen and unheard, but it is also the very mirror of society's greatest fears. It is this dual effect of abjection that leads to a collapse in meaning. The abject, in a reading of 'The Dark Twin' and even in Meehan's broader political intentions as a poet, can be seen in terms of class tensions which are created by cultural interests and occupational prospects that affect the education, social status, income and language of individuals and communities. The

⁴⁰ Ibid., 230.

⁴¹ Villar-Argáiz, 'Dark', 230; Jody Allen Randolph, 'Text and Context: Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts* 5, no. 1&2 (2009): 5–16; Thomas McCarthy, "'None of us well fixed": Empathy and its Aesthetic Power in Paula Meehan's Poetry', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts* 5, no. 1&2 (2009): 65–74; Eavan Boland, 'Unfinished Business: The Communal Art of Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts* 5, no. 1&2 (2009): 17–24.

⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. by Leo S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

refrain, ‘you must pay her the exact amount due’ which recurs throughout the poem suggests the importance of money, transactions and financial concerns in understanding this otherness in terms of the woman’s control over her own body and experience. In this way, the poem is a reading of class consciousness, and also about the dynamic struggles that create and continue to formulate working-class experiences.⁴³

The dark twin, or abject other, might also be read as that of a national identity on the island which is divided into two separate body politics—those of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. As I discussed in relation to Medbh McGuckian’s publishing history in Chapter 2, Northern Ireland was in the midst of civil war during the 1980s and 1990s because of sociopolitical differences between unionist and nationalist groups. As ‘The Dark Twin’ was first published in the mid-1980s, it is possible to read the wounded female body as Ireland ‘wounded’ by war and split into separate, disparate selves. The palimpsest of realized otherness layered with images of the wounded female body / nation may have been derived from other Irish poets who have informed Meehan’s literary career. The poem reconfigures Ireland as an empowered force, a retelling of Seamus Heaney’s representation of Ireland as the raped female body in ‘Act of Union’ from his collection *North* published in 1975. Even more likely, ‘The Dark Twin’ follows a feminist tradition established by Eavan Boland, namely her politicized representations of the female body as (Mother) Ireland that function as a leitmotif in a number of her collections including *In Her Own Image* (1980), *In a Time of Violence* (1994), *Domestic Violence* (2007) and, most recently, in *A Woman Without a Country* (2014), which were discussed at length in Chapter 1. Both are Dublin-born women though from very different class backgrounds, and Meehan looks up to Boland as a central figure in contemporary Irish women’s poetry, as I pointed out in the introduction.⁴⁴ Meehan hints at the troubled leitmotif of the woman-nation binary in ‘The Dark Twin’, particularly in the poem’s references to bombings and mangled bodies’, and as a close friend of Boland, she was certainly aware of, and even builds on, the particular feminist interrogation of this tradition. Yet Meehan’s own rendering of the woman-nation binary set forth in ‘The Dark Twin’ takes a distinctly different direction in that the poem remains ambivalent about who

⁴³ Thompson, E. P. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 298-299.

⁴⁴ Randolph, ‘Politic’, 247.

or what the figure symbolizes, allowing us as readers to project our own interpretations onto the poem. In this way, Meehan gives agency to the dispossessed voices the dark twin might represent, but she also appeals to readers of her work to acknowledge the poem's political subtext and accept differences within one's community or self. The multiple interpretations of 'The Dark Twin' allow for us to read the poetic persona as Meehan's consciousness of gender, class and nationhood and as an appeal to the reader to challenge the cultural and political conditions that other dispossessed individuals.

Meehan's depictions of gender and class can be seen in representations of her relationships with others in her community such as in the poems 'The Garden of the Sleeping Poet' and 'Buying Winkles' from *Reading the Sky*. Yet others portray a childhood in poverty seen in such poems as 'Ard Fheis' and 'The Child's Map of Dublin' from *The Man Who was Marked by Winter*. As her career progressed, Meehan's articulation of her own lived experience became more intimately connected the politics of how to appropriately 'voice' or account for class inequalities and social injustices in Irish society. Meehan's integration of personal and political depictions of voice is persuasive in later collections such as the memory of her father in 'My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis' and her representations of Dublin figures in the longer poem 'The Lost Children of the Inner City' from *Dharmakaya* (2000) through which Meehan creates an alternative history of Dublin, drawing attention to stories that might be otherwise unnoticed such as her portrayal of Molly Malone, a fishmonger and prostitute enshrined as a statue in Dublin city centre. These poems, though I do not analyze them in depth in this chapter, attest to Meehan's persistent interest in class politics in Ireland. Her politicization of poetry comes from an attempt to account for her own position in Irish society as a woman from a working-class upbringing who, against all odds, circumvented cycles of social and economic oppression instilled in children of this community to become one of the most acclaimed 'voices', so to speak, of contemporary Irish poetry. Meehan's formal education was 'very hard got', to use her words on the subject—she was the first person in her family to be educated 'at secondary level, let alone University level', and her most memorable experiences of her childhood came from her world outside of the classroom.⁴⁵ In conversation with Karhio, Meehan states, 'There were these

⁴⁵ Karhio, 'Imagined', 73.

fantastic stories, they had rhymes, they had lore, they had very precise and potent language, communicating about the human condition and experience, wisdom, especially the older people'. Speaking about the importance of language in defining and determining class conditions in her later life, she tells Karhio:

I think that [class consciousness] comes with the system, when you move out of your zone, your home zone, you move away from the hearth hoard of words, the home words, and when you start school, you really come in contact with the forces of the state you live in, through your teachers and through the culture of your classroom. So I think that all poets and writers draw on those early visceral perceptions of the world and their understanding of the world, before it's mediated by learned language, and what learned language carries with it, often a lot of encodings of power and authority.⁴⁶

As a child, Meehan was unaware of the effects of social class on her upbringing and perceived the interactions with her childhood community to be a largely positive and influential experience.

Class consciousness is an inherent part of Meehan's poetry, which can be seen in the intersections of gender and class in such as pivotal poems as 'The Pattern', which was first published in short form in *Reading the Sky*, and then extended into its more well-known form in *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*. In a way, the poem is an elegy for Meehan's mother, but it is one riddled with depictions of a difficult mother-daughter relationship as the speaker attempts to break away from the rigid patterns of her childhood poverty. The 'pattern' of the poem is at once her mother's labour in knitting clothes for her children, and it is the daughter's resistance to continuing the pattern of her mother's life. The poem weaves together memories of this relationship with conversations between these women and her mother's rituals of dress-making. In the final stanzas of the poem, Meehan recounts her mother's knitting ritual, and in doing so, she indicates a young girl's resistance to the patterns of poverty:

Sometimes I'd have to kneel
An hour before her by the fire,
A skein around my outstretched hands,

⁴⁶ Karhio, 'Imagined', 74.

While she rolled wool into balls.
If I swam like a kite too high
Amongst the shadows on the ceiling
Or flew like a fish in the pools
Of pulsing light, she'd reel me firmly
Home, she'd land me at her knees.

Tongues of flame in her dark eyes,
She'd say, 'One of these days
I must teach you to follow a pattern.'⁴⁷

'The Pattern' is central to Meehan's oeuvre because of the intimate portrayal of her mother's life, but also because of the poem's emotional and political subtexts incited by so simple a story as the passing on of handmade clothes from mother to daughter. While Villar-Argáiz looks at the localities of the poem and the speaker's desire to flee her childhood poverty, and Thomas O'Grady believes that the poem is as an example of Meehan's 'remarkably realized depiction of her mother's literal "life of quiet desperation"', these critics do not explore exactly how Meehan portrays class politics or the intersections of gender and class oppression in the poem.⁴⁸ The two aspects I would like to focus on here are the embodiment of voice and representations of class oppression as seen in the physical motions of women's bodies in the poem.

Interestingly, 'The Pattern' differs from some of the other poems I have examined in this chapter because it is socially grounded, to use Couldry's phrase, in the poet's deeply personal memories of her mother unlike other poems which account for stories outside of Meehan's personal experience. She skillfully interweaves dialogic voice in the poem with her own reflexive agency as the poetic persona who commemorates both good and unpleasant moments of her mother. The 'pattern' of poverty is passed on from mother to daughter most visibly in the handmade clothes through which the mother figure recounts memories from her youth. Referring to a particular dress given to the speaker, she tells her daughter, 'Plenty of wear in it yet. | You know I wore this when I went out with your Da.'⁴⁹ The anecdotal story that

⁴⁷ Meehan, *Winter*, 20.

⁴⁸ Villar-Argáiz, 'Telling,' 7; Thomas O'Grady, 'Akhmatova on the Liffey: Paula Meehan's Lyrical Craft', *Colby Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1999): 174.

⁴⁹ Meehan, *Winter*, 18.

follows is endearing and heartbreaking in the woman's account, portrayed in dialogic speech, of her own father's reaction to her sneaking out to meet a lover. This section of the poem ends with a sense of solidarity between mother and child—'It will be over my dead body that anyone harms a hair of your head'. Although the mother figure does not wish to pass on such difficult experiences to her child, the family's social immobility seems inevitable, as seen in the dress that is resized for her daughter. Couldry's interpretation of voice as an embodied process is particularly relevant to this poem because Meehan's portrayal of her mother is embedded in the realities of her own upbringing and perceived position as a 'voice' for working-class Dublin. The difficulties of financial and social immobility are not only voiced through the dialogue between mother and daughter, but they are also marked on these women's bodies in the re-made dresses that 'spelt poverty, | the stigma of the second hand'.⁵⁰ The rituals surrounding her mother's dress-making can be seen as embodied labour in the physical acts of the mother figure 'bending over crimson cloth' and working hard as 'Her steel needles sparked and clacked' to make clothes for her children, but to also make a living for the family. Meehan commemorates her mother's rituals of dress-making in the poem, and in doing so, she gives voice to her mother's work, both in the clothes and in the rituals they share. Couldry argues that voice articulates the world 'from a distinctive embodied position', and Meehan captures this embodiment in the speaker's resistance to patterns of class oppression. Meehan's patterns in the poem—of the dress-making, the conversations and clothes passed from mother to daughter, and in the speaker's desire to break with social patterns of poverty account for the hard realities of her mother's life and limitations of her own childhood.

The poem also depicts the limitations of social mobility which is perceived in representations of the mother figure and her daughter on their knees. Moving through memories of their relationship, the speaker recalls her mother's work in their home—in her knitting and remaking clothes for her children, but also in the meticulous way she cleaned their home. The speaker says her mother would 'scrub the floor with Sunlight soap, | one armreach at a time' until her 'knees grew sore', and this image of a woman on her knees is repeated throughout the poem, suggesting the limitations of a life of poverty that neither mother nor daughter could escape. Speaking of her mother, the speaker says, 'I have her shrug and go on | knowing history has brought

⁵⁰ Meehan, *Winter*, 19.

her to her knees'.⁵¹ This colloquial phrase indicates that, metaphorically speaking, her mother could not change the patterns of her own life and was unable to overcome a personal history of financial struggles and the social oppression that come with it. 'On her knees', the figure is immobile and unable to move forward with her life. The image of the woman on her knees is repeated in the final stanza when the speaker kneels before her mother to help with knitting; the girl is 'reeled in' from dreams of a life outside of the tenement flats to the reality of her family's poverty. The speaker says, 'she'd land me at her knees', reminding the girl of the limitations of her future and the social pattern that she, too, would eventually follow.⁵² Pierse's understanding of class as an empirical category is helpful in breaking down this metaphor of social immobility because he believes that class is an 'enduring subjective existence as lived experience.' According to Pierse, social status 'inform[s] and prescribe[s] our mobility through social space; [it] affect[s] our bodily practices, circumscribe[s] our ideational reality, our sense of self'.⁵³ Class, then, is not merely a condition of socioeconomic inequality, the representations of mother and daughter on their knees convey the bodily practices and realities of physical labour that are closely tied with working-class conditions. Poverty is physically experienced in the handmade clothes, but also by these women's movements, interactions and behaviours that accept or resist patterns of economic oppression.

The 'I' of this poem is not only a narrative voice, but an account of Meehan's own experience that commemorates memories from her childhood. In this way, the poem makes the reader confront lived experiences of poverty that are real and realized for the poem's speaker and the reader. Meehan's depiction of her mother is so 'remarkably realized' because of the intricate way that both mother and daughter embody the limitations of their socioeconomic status through the clothes passed on from one to another, but also through the beleaguered image of these women on their knees, subjugated by their lived experiences of working-class conditions. In this reading, the poem becomes more than an elegy for Meehan's mother and also more than a girl's desire to escape the poverty of her childhood. Indeed, 'The Pattern' depicts the embodiment of working-class life; in doing so, Meehan voices a lived experience that is not often represented in contemporary Irish poetry.

⁵¹ Ibid, 17.

⁵² Meehan, *Winter*, 19–20.

⁵³ Pierse, *Class*, 4.

Meehan's Poetry as Public Speech

Meehan's portrayals of economic oppression and her own childhood poverty extend beyond the political critique of her poems to her activism in prisons, schools and working-class communities in Ireland. In this final section on Meehan, I examine her poetry as a form of public speech, which can be understood amidst her creative work in recent decades. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Meehan's career as a poet developed in conjunction with her efforts to counter the heroin epidemic that pervades low-income communities. She also worked as a writer-in-residence at several prisons, most notably Mountjoy Prison in Dublin, in the 1980s and 1990s which she did alongside her work as a writer-in-residence at Trinity College Dublin. Meehan's work in the prisons culminated in the production of her play *Cell: A Play in Two Parts for Four Actors and a Voice* (2000) which was first performed at the City Arts Centre in Dublin in 1999, twenty-two days prior to the opening of the women's prison at Mountjoy.⁵⁴ The characters in this single-room play are imprisoned for heroin dealing, shoplifting, possession of heroin and murder, and Meehan unnerves the audience by presenting verbally-abusive discourse, sexual coercion, and controlling behaviour by more senior inmates which are made real to the audience in references to law, societal norms and even public elections that were occurring in Ireland at the time the play was first performed.⁵⁵ Because my thesis examines poetry, I will not analyze *Cell* in depth, but I do want to highlight the intimate connection between Meehan's creative endeavours and her activism, which is evident in even a brief synopsis of this play. Although it is not a poem, Meehan perceives *Cell* to be a kind of 'public speech' or a dialogue with readers that makes them aware of prison conditions but also the social inequalities within their own communities.

Meehan's poetry collections from this period, *Pillow Talk* (1994) with Gallery Press and later *Dharmakaya* (2000) and *Painting Rain* (2009) with Carcanet, draw on themes of class inequalities and representations of the female body that I have already discussed, but they also demonstrate other directions for literary activism in Meehan's work, namely those of environmental activism and eco-criticism. 'Death of a Field' from *Painting Rain* mourns the field that was behind the house she lived in as a child

⁵⁴ Pierse, *Class*, 183.

⁵⁵ Pierse, *Class*, 183; Katarzyna Poloczek, 'Paula Meehan's *Cell*: The Imprisoned Dialogue of Female Discourse', *Research in Language* 12, no. 4 (2014): 401.

which was appropriated into more council housing in Finglas.⁵⁶ A celebration of the meadow and wildlife in it, the poem has been compared to Heaney's 'Death of a Naturalist' from the eponymous collection published in 1966, and it politicizes the loss of this land.⁵⁷ Similarly, the series of poems 'Six Sycamores' also from *Painting Rain* was written about the set of trees that the original leaseholders around St. Stephen's Green 'had to plant [...] and tend them for three years'.⁵⁸ The poem narrates a history of the park through representations of nature and people's interactions with the city sanctuary in Dublin. Such poems exemplify Meehan's interests in social activism and the intricate ways that such work influences her writing. Meehan's interest in environmental concerns that have become an important part of her career are possibly related to her efforts in working-class communities, but they are subjects which are outside of the scope of this chapter. These poems demonstrate Meehan's interest in eco-criticism and activism related to environmental concerns.

I close my analysis of Meehan's poetry and early career with an anecdote about her most recent collection *Geomantic* (2016), which demonstrates the real way that Meehan envisions poetry as activism. The story also indicates her role as a public figure in Ireland, and these aspects of her work can be compared with the political and social interests at the heart of Kamala Das's career which I examine in the next section of this chapter. In a radio interview that aired on RTÉ *Arena* in November 2016, Meehan told Seán Rocks a story about the importance of commemoration to her work as a poet. Speaking of a private commemorative act that takes place annually in Dublin, she said:

Every February in Seán McDermott Street in Our Lady of Lords Church, the communities who have buried their children through drug use—and it could be their adult children or their young children—gather, and they hang their commemorative quilts around the church. It's a multi-denominational ceremony just to remember them. So, those acts of commemoration for people who didn't really get a look-in, in the State since the revolution, they move me.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Paula Meehan, *Painting Rain* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2009), 13–14.

⁵⁷ Amanda Perry, 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', *Wake Forest University Press*, November 2008, Accessed July 15, 2017, <https://wfupress.wfu.edu/an-interview-with-paula-meehan/>.

⁵⁸ Meehan, *Painting*, 28.

⁵⁹ Rocks, 'Bolshie', RTÉ.

This sombre story about commemorating the lives of young people who died through drug abuse moved Meehan so much that she replicated the ‘quilt’ pattern in *Geomantic*, which was published in 2016 at the end of her three-year tenure as the Ireland Professor of Poetry. There are eighty-one poems in the book which is divisible evenly by the number nine, and following this arrangement, each of the poems in *Geomantic* is nine lines long. Visually, the lines of each poem are short and centred on the page, and their brevity as well as Meehan’s substantial use of space suggests the shape of small square pieces. Together the poems in *Geomantic* create the template for a literary quilt in commemoration of individuals whose lives have been overlooked or obscured by public narratives of the Irish nation-state. Poems such as ‘The Melter’, ‘The Singer’ and ‘The Old Professor’ portray specific memories of people she has known, and in the act of turning memories into poems, Meehan honours their lives in this book. Given the important centenary status of 2016, the collection contains poems that imagine the revolution for independence that, although a failed insurrection against British rule, instigated a movement towards national sovereignty. Meehan’s ‘obsessive’ use of form, to use her own word about the process of writing *Geomantic*, demonstrates her attentiveness and dedication to commemorating people whose lives have not been accounted for by the Irish nation-state.⁶⁰

The collection, with its distinctly shorter poems and formulaic patterns, does share many of the concerns found in Meehan’s earlier work. ‘The Boy from the Gloucester Diamond’, for example, depicts a community’s grief over the death of a young man. Meehan, once again, positions herself within the working-class community in North Dublin, where the boy is from. Creating solidarity with this community, she writes, ‘We cursed those cold black-robed men who swept | the four winds and the four known seasons’, suggesting all uncontrollable forces leading to the boy’s death. The final stanzas share yet more similarities with Meehan’s ‘Child Burial’ from *The Man who was Marked by Winter* in the depiction of mourning, ‘By an unmarked grave we knelt and wept | spoke of his head of curls, his green eyes, | his broken back. His small hands empty.’⁶¹ The poem’s reference to the boy’s ‘broken back’ embedded within the final line indicates a sense of acceptance or predictability about the way the boy died, as if the violence in his community is commonplace.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Paula Meehan, *Geomantic* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2016), 35.

Other poems such as ‘The Pearl’ bring Meehan’s mother into a well-known history of Ireland by connecting her jewellery with an imaginative retelling of the fighting outside the G.P.O. during the Rising. The poem begins, ‘My mother did nothing but the past, | over and over’, suggesting the immobility of a life in poverty which is at play in ‘The Pattern’.⁶² Meehan believes the poems in this collection are inherently connected with her work as the Ireland Professor of Poetry, the role she held when writing this collection. As a job that ‘crosses [political] jurisdictions’ of the Republic and Northern Ireland, Meehan’s poetry ‘open[s] a space that crosses the border’. As a ‘cultural worker’, again her own phrase for this work, Meehan believes that her public role as a voice for dispossessed groups and as a poet ‘can provide a template for other kinds of cooperation in the bodies politic’.⁶³ Similar efforts to engage poetry, politics and the public sphere can also be seen in Kamala Das’s career which is discussed in the next section. For Meehan, ‘voice’ in the sense of poetic personae, but also in the speech of her poems and in her own efforts to account for dispossessed individuals, is intrinsically a part of her own agenda as a poet. Speaking about this conviction with Dorgan, she states, ‘My poems, though they’re autobiographical in a one way, are public speech. [...] At this stage, all the signals are saying to me that poetry is what I’m here to do.’ Meehan continues, ‘And my granny and my mother, both of whom are dead, they won’t let me alone. They won’t let me stop’.⁶⁴

Kamala Das in Comparison with Contemporary Irish Poets

In 1985 Kamala Das won the Sahitya Akademi Award (English), presented by India’s National Academy of Letters, for her *Collected Poems* Volume 1 (1984).⁶⁵ By then aged fifty-two, Das’s was one of the foremost voices of post-Independence Indian literature. She had published four poetry collections in English, several books of short fiction in Malayalam and a controversial autobiography that had drawn national attention for its depictions of female masturbation, extramarital affairs and sexual violence.⁶⁶ In her acceptance speech at the Sahitya Akademi Writers Meet on 25

⁶² Meehan, *Geomantic*, 56.

⁶³ Knittel, ‘Nature’, 84.

⁶⁴ Dorgan, ‘Interview’, 269

⁶⁵ ‘About Sahitya Akademi’, *Sahitya Akademi: National Academy of Letters*, Updated July 31, 2017, Accessed July 15, 2017, http://sahitya-akademi.gov.in/sahitya-akademi/awards/akademi%20samman_suchi.jsp; Kamala Das, *Wages of Love: Uncollected Writings of Kamala Das*, edited by Suresh Kohli (Noida: Harper Collins, 2013), 107.

⁶⁶ Kamala Das’s *My Story* (1988) was first published as *Ente Katha* in Malayalam in 1973.

February of that year, Das did not speak of her gratitude to the Akademi, a public institution founded by the Indian government to promote literature in vernacular languages and English, but instead she addressed the need for change in the social and cultural circumstances that affect a woman's ability to write creatively. Speaking of her early development as a poet, Das recounted memories of her writing ritual:

There was then no time to work on the unfinished poem. It lay neglected like a baby forgotten by its mother. [...] Then I would pick it up and hugging it to my bosom walk from room to room seeking privacy. But there was of course no privacy till all the members of my family had fallen asleep and even the dog had ceased to bark at the shadows cast by the moon. Then at midnight I would sit with my paper, write and rewrite till the mailman's cycle clanked near our gate, and it was once again the time for lighting the stove. Afterwards, when I reread the night's poem I would find that my fatigue had woven itself into its fabric becoming woof to the warp of my words. Then my heart would protest in silence. My heart protests at the unfairness of the situation, so unfavourable to women writers of this country who are not affluent.⁶⁷

Das spoke candidly about her struggle in finding time to write while she maintained responsibilities to her family, describing the dissonance between her ambition to write poetry and her lived experience as a wife and mother of three children. Significantly, Das also acknowledged her entitlement as a middle-class woman who at least had the financial backing and time to write when many women with creative gifts are burdened by 'the fear of untimely eviction, inflation and of penury in old age' and find no respite for such luxuries. Rather than demonstrating appreciation for the award she was given, Das highlighted a limitation of the Sahitya Akademi in its acclamation of writers 'to keep alive the intimate dialogue among the various linguistic and literary zones' of India's twenty-nine states, given the institution largely overlooks the socio-economic privileges it takes for any writer to achieve such an accolade.⁶⁸ Das's address at the Writers Meet offered the audience a glimpse of her own personal history as a poet. The speech also revealed her activism in tackling the inequalities in Indian

⁶⁷ Das, *Wages*, 108–9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 109–110; 'About Sahitya Akademi', online.

society and her sympathy for the hard realities of other people's lives, aspects which remained at the heart of her literary endeavours until her death in 2009.

Das's evocative address at the Sahitya Akademi shares similarities with the concerns of other writers I have discussed in this thesis, most notably those of Eavan Boland who began her career as a poet in the early 1960s at a time when few women were publishing poetry in Ireland. In her critical autobiography *Object Lessons* (1995), which I discuss in the introduction, Boland examines the state of Irish women's poetry in the mid-twentieth century and argues that at the time women were not seen as voices of a literary tradition but remained the passive objects of poems.⁶⁹ Boland politicizes the act of writing poetry in the following recollection from her early career:

I lived in a world familiar to many women. I had a husband, young children and a home. I did the same things over and over again. At night I watched water sluice the milk bottles to a bluish gleam before I put them out on the step. By day I went to collect my children under whitebeam trees and in different weathers. [...] Yet merely by the act of going upstairs in a winter dusk, merely by starting to write a poem at the window that looked out on the Dublin hills, I was entering a place of force. Just by trying to record the life I lived in the poem I wrote, I had become a political poet.⁷⁰

Like Das, Boland articulates the separation she felt between her own 'sexuality, its ritual, its history' as a woman and the realities of caring for children and a home.⁷¹ Das and Boland share other parallels in their careers in that Das was one of few women in a network of Anglophone writers to publish in Indian literary magazines and journals in the 1950s and 1960s. While Boland observed the insularity of the literary scene in 1960s Dublin, poets writing after India's Independence in 1947 did not typically express disparities between the sexes in terms of mentorship and access to publishing, but they did acknowledge the reluctant reception to poetry in English

⁶⁹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet of our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 183. See also Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, 'Introduction', in *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 1–28.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

when compared with literature in vernacular languages.⁷² However, Das, like Boland, found that for a woman poet writing during this period of Indian history, ‘there was no tradition to fall back on, no model to emulate’.⁷³ In light of the social and political limitations that befell these writers, both Das and Boland created a new tradition in contemporary women’s poetry which gave voice to their quotidian lives as well as those of other women.

In the final section of this thesis, I move backwards through history to interrogate the politics of Kamala Das’s confessional poetry and establish a relationship between the private personae of her work and the public role she played in the politics of her home state Kerala in the southern-most part of the country and, more broadly, Das’s life as a cultural icon in India. I compare her career with that of Paula Meehan because of the lyrical voice of Das’s poems which, I believe, denotes more than ‘the personal life of the poet’ and her ‘private experiences’.⁷⁴ I argue that in voicing her own embodied position, Das politicized what it meant to be an Indian woman during a transitional period of history as India moved from colony to nation-state. Das sympathized with the experiences of dispossessed individuals in her community, and her seemingly self-reflective poems also depict the complexity and multiplicity of women’s lives, evident in the ambiguous personae of her poems but also in Das’s public engagement as a poet, prose writer, artist, activist and politician. The immediacy of her lyrical personae allowed Das to build her readership and helped her become a public figure in contemporary Indian culture.

From Das’s Private Subjects to Public Voice

Das and Meehan make for a stimulating comparison in my study of contemporary Indian and Irish poets because of the unusual ways that these women portray—and ‘voice’—the intersections of gender, class and national politics in their poetry. While Meehan writes within the socioeconomic context of working-class Dublin, Das, although highly empathetic towards concerns of poverty, dispossession, as well as

⁷² Eavan Boland, ‘A Journey with Two Maps’, *American Poetry Review* (2011): 48; Smita Agarwal, ‘Introduction: Subaltern Discourse?’, *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* (Leiden, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2014), 1–9.

⁷³ K. Satchidanandan, ed., ‘Kamala Das’, *Authors Speak* (New Dehli: Sahitya Akademi, 2006), 136.

⁷⁴ Tanu Gupta and Anju Bala Sharma, ‘Confessional Poetry of Eunice de Souza and Sylvia Plath: A Study in Comparison’, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 6 (2014): 44.

caste and ethnic differences, remained to a certain extent distanced from these experiences because she was born into an aristocratic Hindu family.⁷⁵ Das comes from the matrilineal Nair, or Nayar, society, a set of castes that were, and remain, markedly different in social systems and behaviour from the caste traditions of other Indian states. In a *Rediff* interview with Shobha Warriar, Das broke down the perceived privileges of being a woman in a ‘matrilineal, matriarchal society’ by highlighting other kinds of social oppression for Nair women in post-Independence India, specifically the pressure within her own family to adhere to Gandhi’s restrictive beliefs about women’s roles in the home and society.⁷⁶ While Meehan was greatly influenced by her childhood in the tenement flats and tries to give voice to this community through her poetry, Das’s upper-class and -caste background separated her from the immediate community of her youth in the Malabar region of Kerala.⁷⁷ Her mother Balamani Amma was a distinguished Malayalam poet, but although they shared a vocation, Das could never identify with her mother’s poetry because, as she stated in an interview with K. Satchidanandan, Das felt that her mother did not write ‘freely, frankly’ about the realities of her life.⁷⁸ This perceived difference between Das and her mother suggests not only the reticence of the class into which she was born but is also evidence of a larger cultural transition in new India as younger writers, such as Das, expressed greater freedom in the style and subjects of their poems than women of previous generations.⁷⁹ Despite obvious socioeconomic and caste privileges which placed Das in a position to voice the experiences of other women, it should not escape our notice that she faced other limitations as a writer. Das received no formal education after the age of fifteen when she had an arranged marriage to a banker who was fourteen years her senior, and she is the only writer I have included in this thesis who did not have a university-level education. Das’s financial status dissipated after her marriage, and she often stated that she wrote prose—including her short fiction, autobiography and columns—for money, while she wrote poetry for

⁷⁵ Kohli, ‘Introduction’, xxi; Papke, *Mothering*, 60–62; Eunice de Souza, ed., *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

⁷⁶ Shobha Warriar, ‘The *Rediff* Interview / Kamala Das: “Manipulation is not a bad word all the time”’, *Rediff on the Net* 1996, Accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.rediff.com/news/1996/3107cdas.htm>.

⁷⁷ Kohli, ‘Introduction’, xxv–xxvi.

⁷⁸ Satchidanandan, *Authors*, 136.

⁷⁹ Eunice de Souza, ‘Introduction’, *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1–9.

pleasure.⁸⁰ Though a bilingual English and Malayalam writer, it is interesting to note that Das regularly spoke about the difficulties she experienced in finding the right words or language to depict her lived experience.⁸¹ The intersections of Das's Nair background, her socioeconomic status, bilingualism and lack of formal training shaped her literary and political career, and these aspects offer an important comparison to Meehan's work as an activist and voice for dispossessed individuals in Irish society.

Readers of Das's poetry often believe that the motifs in her work—female sexuality and a desire for love but also fear, domestic violence and death—derive from her attempt to make sense of an unhappy marriage.⁸² The tendency to correlate the imagined speakers of poems with biographical details of writers' lives can also be seen in the criticism of American confessional poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, to whom Das is often compared.⁸³ All these women became more widely published and read in the 1950s and 1960s—Sexton before her death in 1974 and Plath before her own in 1963—and, as in responses to the tragedies of these writer's lives, critics of Das's work such as Devindra Kohli, M. Dasan, Bruce King and Satchidanandan foreground the 'compelling biographical mythologies' surrounding her life story.⁸⁴ Das's unabashed portrayals of the female body and sexuality in both poetry and prose were criticized by her Malabar community, and she told Warriar that she 'suffered' because of the controversies surrounding her work, stating, 'I have some courage to

⁸⁰ Warriar, 'Rediff', online.

⁸¹ Satchidanandan, *Authors*, 139; Warriar, 'Rediff', online.

⁸² Sushil Kumar Mishra, 'The Confessional Element and Tone of Kamala Das' Poetry', *MIT International Journal of English Language and Literature* 2, no. 1 (2015): 33–38; Amit Bhattacharya, 'Damned for difference: Re-reading Kamala Das's Critique of Racism', *Lapis Lazuli – An International Literary Journal* 2, no. 1 (2012): online; Anju Gupta, 'Kamala Das: A Confessional Poet', *International Journal of Research in Management, Science and Technology* 3, no. 4 (2015): 164–170; Elangbam Hemanta Singh, 'Kamala Das, A Confessional Poet: A Quest for Identity / Self', *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 9 and 10 (2013): 140–45; Nidhi Mehta, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das: A Comparative Study of Confessional and Feminine Perspectives* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2016).

⁸³ Mehta, *Comparative*; Singh, 'Quest', 141.

⁸⁴ Kohli, 'Introduction', xxiv–xxvi; King, *Modern*, 147–155; M. Dasan, 'The Silenced Subalterns of Kamala Das's Poetry', *Indian English Poetry: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Jaydipsinh K. Dodiya (Sarup and Sons, 2004) 117–131; K. Satchidanandan, 'Relocating My Story', In *My Story* by Kamala Das (Noida: Harper Collins, 1988, 2009), vii–xviii; Melanie Waters, 'Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets* edited by Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 378–380.

be what I am, and I don't see my faults as faults—I see them as characteristics; strengths too'.⁸⁵ Das's statement suggests her consciousness of her audience despite the fact that she often wrote in a way that moved against traditional values of the new nation-state.

Notwithstanding the obvious differences between Das and Meehan's upbringings and their approaches to voice, I see these poets as comparable because of the politicized nature of their work that extends beyond poetry to their activism in Indian and Irish societies. I have already discussed Meehan's activism in prisons, schools and working-class communities in Ireland, and it is interesting to note that although Das is most well-known for her poetry and autobiography *My Story* (1988), she attempted to challenge social injustices in Kerala by running for political office at two different periods of her life. She also wrote extensively about corruption and the treatment of women in her poetry and prose, as well as in a regular online column on *Rediff* which she wrote from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s when her health began to fail.⁸⁶ Throughout her literary career, Das was aware of her readership but also evinced empathy for the community in which she lived, and her poetry, though highly intimate in nature, can be seen as an extension of her political agenda. In my analysis of her career, I broaden the rather limited readings of her work as confessionalism to argue that the private personae in Das's poetry also voice the experiences of women in newly-Independent India. The confessional 'I' of her poems is not a simple autobiographical referential; instead, Das created personae that are complex, fragmented, intersectional and multiply-determined, portraying marginalized subjects that challenge and resist systems of social oppression. Rather than gloss over the breadth of Das's oeuvre in an attempt to examine these personae, I select three examples of her confessionalism through which I interrogate the marginalized subject: the lyrical 'I' in Das's early poems 'An Introduction', the protagonist of her autobiography *My Story*, and the ambiguous persona of 'The Anamalai Poems', which Das wrote after her first attempt to run for Parliament in 1984. I foreground a political reading of these autobiographical pieces to examine how Das voiced the experiences of Indian women in her community.

⁸⁵ Warriar, 'Rediff', online.

⁸⁶ See Kamala Das, 'Kamala Das Columnist Page', *Rediff on the Net*, Undated, Accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.rediff.com/style/das.htm>.

Das's early poems from her first two collections *Summer in Calcutta* and *The Descendants* (1967) portray a lyrical persona that is candid and intimate. The poem 'An Introduction' from *Summer in Calcutta* is an important example of her lyrical style because it appears to 'introduce' readers in post-Independence India to a fresh voice in English poetry. Given the immediacy of the speaker's narration, it is easy to see why Sushil Kumar Mishra and Anju Gupta correlate the poem's lyrical persona with Das's lived experience.⁸⁷ The surprising vitality of the poem's speaker prefigures Eunice de Souza's arresting persona in 'Autobiographical' from *Fix* (1979), a comparison which the poets themselves make in a conversation published in de Souza's *Talking Poems* (1999).⁸⁸ I discussed the problems of reading de Souza's 'Autobiographical' as confessionalism at the beginning of Chapter 3, and the similarities between the poem and Das's speaker are evident in the very first lines of 'An Introduction':

I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I am very Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. [...]⁸⁹

From the outset, the speaker offers a straightforward testimonial, and her narrative about power, language and identity seems to function as a revelation of truth about Das's life. Renate Papke and Nidhi Mehta, among others, read 'An Introduction' within a strictly confessional mode—as a 'mechanism for the revelation of truth', to use Melanie Waters' description of the notion of confession.⁹⁰ The speaker's story clearly parallels Das's childhood in Malabar. Her self-descriptions—'very Indian, very brown'—and ensuing references to 'Kamala' and 'Madhavikutty' (Das's pseudonym under which she published in Malayalam), also appear to be confessions about Das's identity.⁹¹ While these aspects of 'An Introduction' certainly correspond

⁸⁷ Mishra, 'Confessional', 35; Gupta, 'Das', 165.

⁸⁸ De Souza, *Talking*, 34.

⁸⁹ Das, *Selected*, 5.

⁹⁰ Waters, 'Confessional', 381.

⁹¹ Papke, Kamala Das, *Summer in Calcutta* (Kottayam, Kerala: D C Books, 2010), Kindle edition, 'An Introduction'; P. P. Raveendran and Kamala Das, 'Of Masks and Memories: An Interview with Kamala Das', *Indian Literature* 36, no. 3 (1993): 148; Waters, 'Confessional', 381.

with Das's life, reading the speaker and poet as synonymous limits our ability to draw connections between Das's poetry and the creative and political endeavours that defined her career. I demonstrate how, even in this self-referential poem, Das does not create an absolute persona, but rather she propagates representations of a marginalized subject—a figure whose language, experiences and modes of being are shaped and vexed by systems of colonial and social oppression in a transitional moment in Indian history.

'An Introduction' does not begin with a voice of defiant selfhood—what Mishra calls 'frankly confessional, terrifying [*sic*] authentic and exclusively an articulation of feminine sensibility'—instead, Das immediately positions the speaker within a specific historical and social context that voices the experience of a marginalized subject.⁹² In these first words, the speaker asserts her status as the (post)colonial other and that she is a voice for the powerless. The reference to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India who, along with Gandhi, negotiated and influenced the Independence movement, locates the speaker in the historical transition from colony to nation-state. By naming 'those in power', the speaker articulates her own experience but also subsumes the voice of the powerless, the Indian people.⁹³ Das's distinctive use of enjambment in these first lines pushes the reader across dynamics of individual and collective experience, demonstrating the chasm between those in power and the collective community that is affected by cultural and political structures out of an individual's control. The persona's position as a former colonial subject is reminiscent of sentiments expressed by Nayantara Sahgal, Nehru's niece, who in her memoir published in 1954, *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, discusses how closely tied individual lives were with processes of nation-formation in this moment of Indian history.⁹⁴ Readers of 'An Introduction' might take the speaker's words, 'I am Indian, very brown, born in | Malabar', as a self-description by Das but even in these words, the speaker accounts for a collective rather than an individual experience because she positions herself as a racial and ethnic other who did not have the agency over her life prior to national, and by way of this, individual independence.

⁹² Mishra, 'Confessional', 35.

⁹³ See Alex von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2008) on Nehru and Gandhi's influence during the Independence movement in India.

⁹⁴ Nayantara Sahgal, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), vii–xiv.

The speaker's positioning within these cultural, historical, racial and ethnic lines allows us to read 'An Introduction' as an autobiographical poem that extends beyond a confessional utterance to account for the lived experiences of others. As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes ambiguous and therefore universal in her declarations, and the multiple roles she takes on in the poem suggest the multiplicity of Indian women's lives. The speaker resists using one language to voice her story: 'Don't write in English, they said, | English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave | Me alone [...] | Every one of you?'. She resists the gender roles placed on her, for she mockingly states: 'Dress in sarees, be girl | Be wife, they said. [...] | It is time to | Choose a name, a role'.⁹⁵ Indeed these lines correlate with Das's own life as a woman and her movement between English and Malayalam in her writing. However, I follow Udaya Kumar who states in her analysis of the poet's bilingualism in 'Choosing a Tongue, Choosing a Form' that she believes Das's creativity as a writer crosses genres and translation, so that while the motifs of her work remain, Das cannot be defined by a single narrative voice and experience.⁹⁶ Rather than becoming synonymous with Das's life, the speaker of 'An Introduction' becomes more fluid, fragmented and elusive as the poem progresses, appearing at once to reject and accept the numerous positions she articulates. The speaker tells us, 'I was a child, and later they | Told me I grew for I became tall, my limbs | Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair', following on with, 'I wore a shirt and my | Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored | My womanliness'.⁹⁷ Such lines depict the speaker's fluidity as regards gender roles and sexuality and suggests her resistance to taking on the traditional roles for women in this society—words that might be read as any young girl's experience. In stating her position as a racial and ethnic other while asserting her fluidity in terms of gender and sexuality, the speaker articulates a particular embodied position, to return here to one of Couldry's definitions of voice as a process.⁹⁸ In Meehan's poem 'The Pattern', the speaker embodies memories of her childhood poverty through the clothes passed on from mother and child as well as in the women's movements and

⁹⁵ Das, *Selected*, 5–6.

⁹⁶ Udaya Kumar, 'Choosing a Tongue, Choosing a Form: Kamala Das's Bilingual Algorithms', in *Indian Literature and the World: Multilingualism, Translation and the Public Sphere*, edited by Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁹⁷ Das, *Selected*, 6.

⁹⁸ Couldry, *Voice*, 9.

behaviour that figure forth socioeconomic oppression. However, in this poem, Das embodies voice by moving fluidly between personal and political stances and by resisting traditional roles set out for a woman. In doing so, the speaker of 'An Introduction' demonstrates her agency to create her own narrative for herself and the reader. The 'I' of the poem is autobiographical but also multiply positioned, and her varied perceptions of the world account for the experiences of an Everywoman.

Das creates an ambiguous persona who cannot be pinned down to a single identity, and in this way, she encourages readers of her work to project their own readings onto the poem. In the second stanza of 'An Introduction' the speaker's dialogue with the reader assumes another dimension as she describes the way people in her community try to place her within a single role in society. The speaker states derisively, 'Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better, | Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to | Choose a name, a role'.⁹⁹ The use of Das's name in these lines alongside her pseudonym Madhavikutty leads readers to believe that Das is explaining her own singular position as a woman poet whom identity and 'truth' readers try to unravel. Yet, in this brief list of names or roles the speaker must hold in society, we notice an additional name 'Amy', or 'Aami', as Das came to be known in Kerala. 'Aami' in Malayalam is the word for 'girl' or 'female', and even though Das eventually accepted the name as a gestural nickname, her play on the word here, suggests that even in this early poem from Das's career, she depicts experiences which other women might share. Das, and the persona in the poem, demonstrate a resistance to a single name, identity and role. Das foregrounds the perception that women must hold certain roles within society—'Dress in sprees, be girl | be wife, they said. Be embroidered, be cook, | be a quarreler with servants', but the speaker never accepts a single position or subjectivity. In narrating her own story, she demonstrates agency to 'Choose a name, a role' in her own narrative.

In her interrogation of Anne Sexton's and Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry, Melanie Waters argues that the notion of confession is often read as a 'vehicle for truth', but the apparent parity between confession and truth actually undermines 'the strategies of evasion and artifice that characterise poetry'.¹⁰⁰ Following Waters' interrogation of lyrical personae in Sexton and Plath's work, I believe that in 'An

⁹⁹ Das, *Selected*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Waters, "Confessional," 381.

Introduction’, the speaker is not bound to Das’s personal experience. The persona’s resistance to accepting one role or name suggests that the speaker does not articulate an individual’s lived experience but represents the possibilities of many women’s lives. The persona of ‘An Introduction’ is continuously changing as she positions herself in relation to various experiences and memories. As the speaker moves into adulthood—first a child, then a ‘youth of sixteen’, then a woman who allows a man to draw her ‘into the | bedroom and close [...] the door’, she moves between experiences and memories, and the only thing that remains constant is her agency to create and change the narrative about her life. Das herself seems to insist that the persona in ‘An Introduction’ is not a single woman’s experience, but can be interpreted in any way the reader chooses, for the speaker’s movements throughout the poem culminate in these lines from the second stanza: ‘Who are you, I ask each and every one, | The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and | Everywhere’. The speaker does not possess only a single voice, but one that is multifarious, encompassing not only Das’s own lived experience, if at all, but also the experiences of any woman who has been told to ‘Fit in. | Oh, Belong’.¹⁰¹

Das portrays some statements in ‘An Introduction’ that may have been true for her own life, but more importantly, the persona she creates in this poem articulates the distinctive embodied positions of any woman living or writing during the immediate post-Independence period. While Meehan voices experiences of class oppression through embodied representations of handmade clothes passed from mother to child and from bodies in motion in her poem ‘The Pattern’, in quite a different way, Das embodies the voice of a community, or in this case the story of an Everywoman, by demonstrating the figure’s agency to create a narrative that resists social identities placed on her. In *Why Voice Matters*, Couldry points out that even a single voice has ‘internal diversity’, and in the case of ‘An Introduction’, Das uses a personal but also universal persona to account for the challenges and resistances that any woman might experience in a desire to express agency over her own life and choices.¹⁰² Reading the personae of ‘An Introduction’ as personal as well as collective voice allows us to move beyond a simplistic reading of Das’s confessionalism to demonstrate her awareness of the multiple and conflicting identities that she and other

¹⁰¹ Das, *Selected*, 6.

¹⁰² Couldry, *Voice*, 9.

women of the time lived. To read Das's poetry as an example of the poet's personal story and 'feminine sensibility' is to disregard the processes of autobiographical writing that made it possible for an Indian woman in the post-Independence period to articulate the realities of her life and the social pressures placed on her. Through the multiply-determined and even universal voice of 'An Introduction', Das depicts the personal agency of a woman in determining her life story as well as the collective agency of a people in a newly-Independent nation.

Reading Das's Work as Autobiographical

Reading Das's poems within the genre of autobiography—rather than strictly as lyricism or confessionalism—allows us to consider how the private personae of her poems intersect with her other vocations. Closely related to this, her conviction to voice the experiences of Indian women is a subject she discussed in articles from her *Rediff* column and in essays posthumously published in *Wages of Love*.¹⁰³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *De/Colonizing the Subject: Politics and Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992) examine postcolonial autobiographies by interrogating representations of the marginalized subject, and their analyses of female subjectivity offer insight into how Das's seemingly private poetry might also voice—or attempt to account for—the experiences of other women. For Smith and Watson, a person's gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality complicate one another because the realities of the various aspects of one's identity do not 'overlap neatly or entirely' with one another.¹⁰⁴ These intersections of identity locate the subject in specific historical and social contexts, and while one woman's experiences of cultural or patriarchal oppressions cannot be read as the experiences of all because there are, in every society, 'colonies within colonies, oppressions within oppressions', the processes of autobiographical writing articulate problems of identity-formation that create a 'culturally empowered subjectivity' through which we can begin to understand oppressions that affect a larger community.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Kamala Das, 'Kamala Das Columnist Page', *Rediff on the Net*, Undated, Accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.rediff.com/style/das.htm>; Das, *Wages*, 'Thoughts on the Sahitya Akademi', 'A Poet at the Hustings', 'Shattering Misery's Silence', 107–126.

¹⁰⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject: Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xiv.

¹⁰⁵ Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing*, xvi, xix.

Autobiography is derived from Western practices of life writing, and the ‘self’ put forward in these narratives tends to privilege a white, male subjectivity. By taking on the autobiographical form, marginalized subjects—in Das’s case, an Indian woman writing in the immediate post-Independence period—offer readers ‘another way of seeing, one unsanctioned, even unsuspected in the dominant cultural surround’. Smith and Watson determine that for the colonial subject, ‘the process of coming to writing is an articulation *through* interrogation, a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure’; consequently, to portray one’s life as a formerly colonial subject is to voice an experience which was heretofore unheard.¹⁰⁶ In this way, autobiographical writing is inherently a politicized act of self-determination and articulation. Linda Anderson’s *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (2001) builds on Smith and Watson’s analysis to critique the autobiographical form through psychoanalytical, historical, feminist and postcolonial readings of several texts. Speaking of the importance of marginalized subjectivity to changing the genre, Anderson sets out the following consideration in her analysis of Julia Swindells’ research on women’s prison writing in *Victorian Writing and Working Women* (1985), which we might consider in our attempt to understand Das’s poetry as the voice of a marginalized subject:

The idea that autobiography can become ‘the text of the oppressed’, articulating through one person’s experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.¹⁰⁷

Simply by articulating an experience that is largely unheard and marginalized in society, an author expresses not only her own embodied position but also suggests the possibilities of others whose intersectional experiences of socio-economic status, race, class, caste or religion might cause her to be othered in the first place. In stating that the private persona of Das’s poems voices the experiences of others, I do not mean to suggest that it is wholly representative of all Indian women’s lives. Das’s own position as a middle-class, upper-caste woman from a Nair background differs

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii–xx.

¹⁰⁷ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 103–104.

greatly from the experiences of the vast majority of Indian women of other cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. As I will discuss in my analysis of ‘The Anamalai Poems’, Das realized the limitations of her ability to ‘speak’, politically and rhetorically, for those experiences. What I put forward in my analysis of her narratives is that Das created a personal as well as collective voice to which her readers could relate. Her lyrical personae are fractured and intersectional, so that even though they account for Das’s own lived experience, the speakers or narrator remain dislocated from a single life story. Reading Das’s work as autobiographical, rather than strictly a form of confessionalism, allows us to see the ‘I’ of her personae as self-representational because there is a distinct correlation between the speaker and Das’s lived experience. However, her work is also self-presentational in that Das demonstrates an awareness of her audience in such a way that the ambiguous voice or personae of her poems might be read as the experience of an Indian Everywoman.¹⁰⁸

The complexities and multiplicities of the lyrical personae in ‘An Introduction’ are part of Das’s signature style and can also be seen in the poems ‘With Its Quiet Tongue’ from *Summer in Calcutta* as well as ‘Composition’, ‘The Suicide’ and ‘The Doubt’ from *The Descendants*, among many other poems throughout her career. More intriguingly, the motif of a woman bearing multiple selves and social roles does not only surface in Das’s creative work but is also evident in the multiple vocations and personae that made Das a public figure in Indian society. In interviews with P. P. Raveendran and Warriar, Das acknowledged the ways that women balance a number of personal and professional roles throughout their lives, and her writing and activism attest to the various dimensions of her career.¹⁰⁹ As I stated at the beginning of this section, Das published short stories and a novel in Malayalam as Madhavikutty in addition to the eight poetry collections published under her given name during her lifetime. She was also an avid painter and, in 1994 at the age of sixty, Das held an exhibition of her work in Cochin, Kerala suggestively titled *The Unfinished Women* which collected a series of her paintings that depicted nude female figures, an

¹⁰⁸ I take the terms ‘self-representational’ and ‘self-presentational’ from Smith and Watson’s *De/Colonizing the Subject*, xx. They do not expand upon these terms in their analysis of female subjectivity; hence, I figure forth my own interpretation here.

¹⁰⁹ P.P. Raveendran, ‘Of Masks and Memories: An Interview with Kamala Das’, *Indian Literature* 36, no. 3 (1993): 148–49; Warriar, ‘Rediff’, online.

occasion that caused a stir at the time because of the opus's frank subject matter.¹¹⁰ Das's most well-known creative piece, however, was the publication of her autobiography *Ente Katha* which was first published in Malayalam in 1973 and was translated into English as *My Story* fifteen years later in 1988.¹¹¹ The book sets out brief yet vivid chapters that follow the stages of a young woman's life—beginning with the narrator's childhood in Malabar and Calcutta and her early sexual encounters which lead, quite unexpectedly, to a sexually abusive marriage, depictions of motherhood and trysts with lovers as well as the triumphs and tribulations of a woman's attempts to get published. The protagonist experiences several bouts of physical illness and depression that begin soon after marriage, and the story of her life closes with the woman's surrender to the possibility that she might die at a young age.¹¹²

K. Satchidanandan, in his essay 'Relocating *My Story*' which introduces the English edition, delineates a connection between the protagonist of *My Story* and Das's lived experience. He summarizes the conflation between Das and the text in the following words:

It is safe to assume that [Das's] autobiographical writings grew out of her monologic fiction that she developed in her middle years. One cannot ignore the exceptional continuity of her concerns despite the differences in the language and the genre of her writing.¹¹³

Satchidanandan arrives at this conclusion based on the evocative and supposedly authentic portrayal of the protagonist's life that parallels the personae in Das's poems. Take, for instance, the following statements from the text: 'Then without warning he

¹¹⁰ Kohli, "Introduction," xvi; 'Revealing Shift', *IndiaToday.in*, November 30, 1993, Accessed August 3, 2017, online, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/controversial-poet-kamala-das-painting-series-to-be-exhibited-in-cochin/1/303433.html>.

¹¹¹ In some publications *Ente Katha* has been referred to as *Ente Kadha*. Similarly, Das's pseudonym Madhavikutty has been spelled Madhavakutty, both meaning 'little Madhava' after the name of Das's husband Madhava. I have selected the spellings in this thesis based on biographical selections by Devindra Kohli, Suresh Kohli and K. Satchidanandan, who knew Das personally and spoke with her about her publishing history on various occasions. There is also a discrepancy about the date of the autobiography's publication in English due perhaps to differences between publications in India and abroad. *My Story* was copyrighted to Das in 1977, two years after its publication as *Ente Katha*; however, it is quoted in the introduction to *My Story* and in Devindra Kohli's introduction to Das's *Selected Poems* as having been published 1988. I follow the copyright date on my copy of the book.

¹¹² Kamala Das, *My Story* (Nodia: Harper Collins, 1988).

¹¹³ K. Satchidanandan, 'Relocating *My Story*', in *My Story* by Kamala Das (Noida: Harper Collins, 1988), ix.

fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack. I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace' is interpreted by Satchidanandan as a factual account of Das's wedding night.¹¹⁴ Devindra Kohli, too, urges an autobiographical reading of *My Story*, in which he contends that Das's 'clever genre-crossing' can be seen in the ways that her poetry reveals the protagonist's psyche in moments of depression and a longing for love.¹¹⁵ Both Satchidanandan and Kohli were friends with Das, and their analyses of *My Story* are possibly based on personal knowledge of the writer's life. However, such strict interpretations of confessionalism do not elucidate how the text aligns with Das's oeuvre as well as her political and social concerns as a public figure, nor can we overlook the possibility that the protagonist of *My Story* is yet another one of the personae that Das took up in her prolific career. In my brief analysis of the protagonist's complexities, I contend that if we allow for a more expansive interpretation of the autobiographical 'I' in *My Story*, we can begin to understand how the text might relate to Das's poetic and political voice as a writer.

Though the figure in *My Story* is a marginalized subject—a young woman in a 'traditional patriarchal society'—Das demonstrates the complexities of these roles which give her an 'empowered subjectivity', to use Smith and Watson's term. Although deeply personal and private, this empowered subjectivity might voice other women's experiences.¹¹⁶ Each chapter of *My Story* clusters around a single memory or moment of the protagonist's life, and the narrator condenses weeks, months and years into single statements and paragraphs so that the plot moves fluidly through the protagonist's roles as a child, wife, mother, lover and writer. The fluidity of the narrative supplicates a reading that follows Das's own life, but if we step back and perceive the author, narrator and protagonist as separate individuals in the autobiography, as Anderson invites us to do, then we can begin to understand Das's consciousness of her readership when she was writing *My Story*.¹¹⁷ The protagonist demonstrates the various social and personal pressures of her roles as a wife and daughter. Despite the implied brutality of her first sexual encounter and her

¹¹⁴ Das, *Story*, 84; Satchidanandan, 'Relocating', xv.

¹¹⁵ Kohli, 'Introduction', xlvi.

¹¹⁶ Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing*, xix; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, 'Terms of Empowerment in Kamala Das's *My Story*', in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), 346.

¹¹⁷ Anderson, *Autobiography*, 2.

unwillingness to be shunted into an arranged marriage, she appears, at first, to be compliant in accepting her circumstances. The morning after her wedding night, the protagonist is awakened to the realities of her changing social roles:

By morning I could hardly move my limbs but when my mother woke me up at six to meet the guests who were going away, I slid down the stairs and saw my friend with the camera slung over his shoulder looking up at me. My eyes filled with tears but I could not speak. He looked at me for a minute or two and without a word went his way.¹¹⁸

Whereas the night before the girl had been persistent in avoiding a sexual encounter, telling her husband that they ‘should first pray to Krishna’ and even denouncing her own sexuality—‘Perhaps I am not normal, perhaps I am only a hermaphrodite’—the new day exposes the reality that there is no way out; she must be a dutiful daughter and wife.¹¹⁹ Watching her childhood friend walk away because she is now a married woman, the protagonist is silenced by her new embodied position as a wife and realizes that she has no agency to change this fate.

Later in the same chapter—titled in the English edition ‘The Brutality of Sex’—the narrator skips forward in time to an occasion some weeks or months after her wedding in which the protagonist’s father visits her:

One day my father arrived from Calcutta on some official work and came from Taj Mahal hotel where he was staying to see me. [...] [H]e asked me why I looked so thin. ‘I thought you would put on some weight after marriage,’ he said. I wished then to cry and to tell him that he had miscalculated and that I ought not to have married the one I did, but I could not bring myself to hurt him.¹²⁰

Here, too, the girl is silenced in the knowledge that she cannot change her circumstance and does not want to hurt her father by being honest about her unhappiness. In both of these excerpts, the protagonist appears to be faithful to her parents, and though apparently in despair, she never attempts to escape from her marriage. Up until this point in the text, she apparently possessed agency in her friendships and travels and, though reactive in sexual encounters, seemed to be totally unaware of the fact that she would be married. In this transitional chapter, the

¹¹⁸ Das, *Story*, 85.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

protagonist articulates contrasting embodied positions of child and wife, innocence and sexual maturity. Her silence can be read as the protagonist's passivity in her marriage, or it might be seen as an act of defiance and self-determination to accept and subsume the social roles and expectations placed on her. The protagonist is silent in her recollection of these memories, but the fact that she, as the narrator, articulates these experiences as autobiography gives voices to her own memories as well as the possibilities of other young women who have to navigate new social roles in their lives. The narrative in *My Story* appears on first reading to be an extremely straightforward and confessional text about Das's early life before its publication when she was thirty-nine, but by reading the author as separate but related to the narrator and protagonist of the story, we can see Das's ability to articulate multiple social roles and consciousness at one time. The process of writing the protagonist's story, however private and intimate, gives agency to the character and to women's conflicting embodied positions.

The protagonist in this chapter may not have agency to voice the despair she feels, but the narrator of the story, who is a grown woman looking back at her youth, articulates her agency in recreating this story for the reader. The autobiographical form which allows for the narrator to reflect on her childhood demonstrates the poignancy of this form to express not only an individual life story but also a young Indian woman's marginalized subjectivity in a world that does not always allow her agency to determine her circumstances. We can read these figures—the author, the narrator and the protagonist—as inherently connected to Das's life. More importantly, these positions indicate Das's awareness of her readership and a desire to voice for herself and for any person who might read the text, a woman's desire to resist and, however privately, speak out against structures of social and cultural oppression. The protagonist carries not a single subjective experience but assumes conflicting feelings and identities even in her silence. In the same chapter on the early months of the girl's marriage, the narrator states that despite the suggestive violence of her first sexual encounter, 'I was at that time deeply in love with [my husband] and would have undergone any torture to be able to please him, but my body was immature and not ready for love-making'.¹²¹ In the chapter that carries the aforementioned ominous title 'The Brutality of Sex', Das describes not a single moment of the protagonist's

¹²¹ Das, *Story*, 85.

wedding night, but instead complicates the vignette about a young woman's sexual maturity through the narrator's stream of consciousness that describes fear, reluctance and dismay but also love and perseverance in the face of difficult circumstances. It is perhaps too linear and simplistic to read the protagonist and her multiple roles as synonymous with Das's own life; the diverse dimensions of her emotions, social roles and sexual maturation urge the reader to perceive the marginalized subject at the heart of *My Story* as expressing a young woman's determination to create her own destiny.

Though Das was fluent in both English and Malayalam, it is interesting to consider that she wrote *My Story* in her mother tongue, and the text was only later translated into English. Das wrote poetry solely in English but published fiction in both languages; thus, the publication of the autobiography in Malayalam suggests Das's consciousness of her readership in Kerala. *My Story* was first serialized in a now defunct Malayalam weekly *Malayalnadu* in 1972 before its publications as *Ente Katha* and *My Story*.¹²² The first audience of the book would have identified with the social and cultural pronouncements of the protagonist as well as the locations depicted in the text. Consequently, it is possible to see its publication in Das's home-state as her awareness of her readership and desire to portray for the people of this community the complexities and multiple roles that an Indian woman lives or could live. Speaking with de Souza in her interview for *Talking Poems*, Das states: 'I'll not swear everything in that book happened to me. I exaggerated a little bit. [...] If it's red, make it redder. It's the artist's freedom to deepen the colour. [...] I have been through so many avatars'.¹²³ This statement about *My Story* results in an exchange between the poets in which Das discusses her 'freedom to reinvent [her]self' through her literary works, a sentiment that resonates with other interviews such as Das's conversations with Warriar and Raveendran.¹²⁴ *My Story* launched Das into a national literary scene beyond that which she had already established with her poetry because of the text's bold depictions of female sexuality and violence and its representations of a young woman breaking social codes around chastity and marriage. However, even in this self-proclaimed autobiographical text, we can read the protagonist as yet another example of Das's complex and multiply-determined personae. In creating a hyperbolic version of her own life story, Das voiced her creative freedom and

¹²² Kohli, 'Introduction', xxiv.

¹²³ De Souza, *Talking*, 34.

¹²⁴ Raveendran, 'Masks', 148–49; Warriar, 'Rediff', online.

fearlessness of social pressures, and in doing so, she politicized women's embodied experiences of adolescence, marriage and motherhood.

Convictions and Limitations of Das's Political Voice

The personae of Das's autobiographical works are closely connected with her activism and the political efforts that shaped her career. By the 1980s Das had established her public role as a writer, having published two more poetry collections, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1979), as well as several pieces of short fiction and nonfiction in Malayalam. She wrote regular columns for various magazines and newspapers including *Femina* and *Savvy*.¹²⁵ By then, she had also gained a name for herself within social circles for the establishment of her informal literary saloon Bahutanrika—'a club of talents'—Das called it, in which she hosted various poets, playwrights, dancers, editors and publishers at gatherings and readings in her home in Kerala.¹²⁶ Aside from her fame from *My Story* and her literary achievements as a poet, Das began to move away the private subjects of 'childhood memories, marital disharmony, anxieties of old age and other "ordinary | events of an | ordinary life"', to adapt Raveendran's encapsulation of her work.¹²⁷ The voice of her poems became more journalistic and mournful as she depicted the rising tensions between the Buddhist Sinhalese nationals and the Hindu Tamil minority in Sri Lanka which she witnessed during her visits to the country while her husband worked in Colombo. Such poems as 'After July' and 'Smoke from Colombo' observe the ethnic conflict that peaked in 1983, and though she wrote from a particular perspective of the war caused by her own Nair heritage and locality in Kerala, the speakers of these poems voice an aftermath that is haunting and perturbing. Das writes in 'Smoke from Colombo': 'On that last ride home we had the smoke | Following us, along the silenced | Streets, lingering on, though the fire | Was dead then in the rubble and the ruins'.¹²⁸ The speaker depicts the powerlessness of a people, likely the Tamil community, although it is unclear of which side she speaks. Yet the lyrical personae

¹²⁵ M. A. Nare, 'The Poetry of Kamala Das and Nissim Ezekiel—A Comparative Study', in *Indian English Literature: Volume II*, edited by Basavaraj Naikar (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2007), 37.

¹²⁶ Kohli, 'Introduction', xxvi.

¹²⁷ P. P. Raveendran, 'Colonialism in Reverse: History, Territory and the Self in Indian English Poetry', in *Colonizer and Colonized*, edited by Theo D'Haen and Patricia Krüs (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 98.

¹²⁸ Kamala Das, *Collected Poems* (Trivandrum, Kerala: Navakerala Printers, 1984), 14.

‘we’ addresses the tragedies of displacement in the personification of the smoke pursuing the figures, but also in the city’s silence and the absence of people driven out or ‘dead then in the rubble and ruins’. ‘Grief lingers on’ for those still in Colombo, and the devastation is real and realized for the speaker and the lives she commemorates in this poem.¹²⁹

The social concerns and empathy expressed in the 1980s ‘Sri Lankan poems’, as they came to be known, became more noticeable when Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, was assassinated in October 1984, leading to an eruption of anti-Sikh riots in New Delhi. Das had met Gandhi just months before her death and wrote of their encounter and the ensuing violence in her poems ‘The First Meeting’ and ‘Delhi 1984’, respectively.¹³⁰ The following month after Gandhi’s assassination, Das quite unexpectedly ran as an independent candidate for a seat in Parliament in the November-December 1984 elections, a conviction largely supported by her friends even though they were surprised by the undertaking.¹³¹ After weeks of campaigning in villages and poverty-stricken areas across Kerala, Das obtained only 1,780 votes out of the several hundreds of thousands she needed to win a seat.¹³² Das was distraught after the loss and retreated to her sister’s home in the Anamalai Hills located on the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu states where she wrote some of the most evocative poems of her career, known as ‘The Anamalai Poems’.¹³³ In this final section of the chapter, I examine selected poems from the series to consider how the lyrical personae of ‘The Anamalai Poems’, so entirely removed from the political and historical context that led to their inception, portray Das’s realization of her own limited ability to represent the voices of her community and her persistent conviction to express the despair of human suffering despite these failures.

Excepting the title of the series, the personae of ‘The Anamalai Poems’ appear to be dislocated from any particular life story or experience, unlike the specifically-located speakers of Das’s earlier collections.¹³⁴ The ten poems that have been made

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 78; Das, *Selected*, 127.

¹³¹ Kohli, ‘Introduction’, xxxiii.

¹³² P.P. Raveendran, ‘Text as History, History as Text: A Reading of Kamala Das’s *Anamalai Poems*’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (1994): 53; Kohli, ‘Introduction’, xxxiii.

¹³³ Raveendran, ‘Masks’, 150.

¹³⁴ About fifteen to twenty of the twenty-seven poems in ‘The Anamalai Poems’ were published in a journal by Sahitya Akademi and in *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991), neither of

available to international audiences through Das's posthumously published *Selected Poems* (2014) depict a voice that is disembodied because of some unknown, immeasurable loss. Throughout the poems, there appear to be two selves present: a silent figure in the hills and a voice calling out to her, yet the two are inherently connected. Unlike earlier poems that portray a speaker who appears to be associated with Das's life, the personae in these poems are far less personal or definite. The mountain personifies the woman's despair, as seen in these lines from the introductory poem of the series, 'The Anamalai Hills':

Wrapped in shrouds of betrayals,
the woman walks alone. The mountain seems deaf-mute,
But the flesh of her spirit is but its flesh,
and, her silence,
despite the tumult in her blood,
its destined hush.¹³⁵

The 'destined hush' of the final lines can be read as that of the woman or the mountain, and this idea of a splintered self, or two selves—a silent figure and the speaker who articulates her dismay—is carried throughout the series.

As is the case in Meehan's 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks', motifs of silence and calling out echo throughout 'The Anamalai Poems'. The female figure takes on this double-identity more obviously in the series than in Das's poems from previous collections. She writes in poem 'I' from the series:

from each city I lived in,
each dusty town I stole out often
to walk this winding road, laying aside
my poor body that has perhaps no home,
no territory to call its own. Mine
was a somnambulistic tread, so soft
that not even the labourers heard it.¹³⁶

There is a disembodiment here between the speaker who metaphorically lays aside her 'poor body' in the mountains, and the other figure—'Mine'—the lone woman

which are readily available outside of India. My analysis of the poems is based on the eleven pieces published in Das's posthumous *Selected Poems*. Raveendran, 'Masks', 151.

¹³⁵ Das, *Selected*, 132.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

treading so softly that she is not noticed. The speaker experiences a spiritual splintering in the aftermath of some indeterminate loss. She attempts to separate herself from the world in her retreat to the mountains, but her voice—this other self will not disappear: ‘my own voice calls me out | of dreams, gifting such rude awakenings, and then | expelling me from warm | human love’, as Das writes in ‘II’.¹³⁷ Raveendran writes of ‘The Anamalai Poems’ that the separation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ and the speaker’s ‘inward movement’ as she questions her own identity and choices can also be read as Das’s ‘movement in the direction of a larger reality’. He reads the poems as Das’s longing for a community although the figure(s) in these poems appear to retreat from the world.¹³⁸ My own reading of ‘The Anamalai Poems’ follows Raveendran’s analysis of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ in that I also perceive disparate personae and a fractured identity. This splintering of the self, caused by the failed ‘dream’ that haunts the figure appears time and again in the series, and we see its fractured effects most obviously in these lines from ‘V’: ‘I cannot look the day in the face as once | I did, with gumption or confront myself and | declare, yes, old girl, I have sure let you down’.¹³⁹ These lines of the poem most obviously correlate with Das’s loss when she ran for a seat in Parliament, but we can read the speaker and her silent mirrored self as Das’s shame and alienation, but also a longing for justice. The pairing of silence and voice throughout the poem suggests the failure of speech to help dispossessed individuals. It also suggests a persistent belief that although one can be ‘cut adrift’ from the world, one can be separated entirely from a community.

The speaker’s apparent dislocation and disembodiment suggests the limitations of voice, but also the experience of otherness. Separated as she is from the world, the speaker can observe the realities of human suffering for she states, ‘obsessed as we are by our | physicality, restrained | by the eyes’ inadequate power | to perceive beyond the farthest | precincts of truth’.¹⁴⁰ The truth she speaks of is her own failure to account for the realities of others, but this failure makes the speaker’s reality even more universal. The fragmented voices and silent figures that wander throughout the series suggest not a single persona or experience, but many. The disembodiment of spirit and body, self and other, voice and silent figure suggest multiple determinations that

¹³⁷ Das, *Selected*, 133.

¹³⁸ P. P. Raveendran, ‘Colonialism’, 99–100.

¹³⁹ Das, *Selected*, 135.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

actuate the speaker's questioning of her abilities and limitations. The figure voices her limitations, but in doing so, she expresses her own humanity. On the edge of society and alone in the Anamalai Hills, Das was able to voice the realities of dispossession that she might not have been able to do in her campaign.

In the last decades of her life, Das remained adamant in her desire to challenge social injustices in Kerala. Reflecting on the campaign a year later in an article she published in *Femina*, she writes:

Forgetting shame, I wept with them. I saw the marks left on their bodies by the drunken husbands and fathers. I saw the thin cheeks and the bodies covered with sores. Their children huddled close to me, wide-eyed and curious. [...] After the day's campaign was over, after the delivery of a hundred and more speeches, I still lay sleepless remembering them.¹⁴¹

Das's conviction to help dispossessed individuals through a role in politics never transpired although she continued to write about the mistreatment of women and children, as well as corruption and her concerns about child prostitution in her *Rediff* column which she maintained into the mid-2000s.¹⁴² She was awarded the Chimanlal Award for Fearless Journalism in 1986, and she championed political activism in Kerala in poetry and prose.¹⁴³ Das continued to draw attention for her representations of female sexuality and marriage, and in 1999, she converted from Hinduism to Islam and changed her name to Kamala Surayya, an identity we might add to her other public personae. The decision sparked criticism because of the very recent history of Partition and religious violence, but Das gained many admirers for her support of *purdah* as an act of privacy and liberation for Muslim women.

Even after her death, several accomplished writers attest to Das's influence on their work including Indian and diasporic writers Meena Alexander, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, R. Parthasarathy, Jeet Thayil, Hoshang Merchant, Suresh Kohli, Tishani Doshi and Meena Kandasamy, as well as the Malaysian writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim and British poet Carol Rumens.¹⁴⁴ De Souza writes of Das: 'Women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. She mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and

¹⁴¹ Das, *Wages*, 117.

¹⁴² Kamala Das, 'Let us invade the brothels and rescue the children!', *Rediff on the Net*, 1996, Accessed July 1, 2017, online, <http://www.rediff.com/style/1996/1011das.htm>.

¹⁴³ Papke, *Mothering*, 56.

¹⁴⁴ Kohli, 'Introduction', xii.

linguistic terms. [...] And in her best poems she speaks for women, certainly, but also for anyone who has known pain, inadequacy, despair'.¹⁴⁵ Of her conviction for social justice, and her longing to account for those experiences in her poetry, Das told Satchidanandan, 'I was fully conscious of my role in society, that I have come here to change it a little bit, if possible. So I slipped into that role easily. I had to make up for the sins committed against women, the silence inflicted on them'.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

In the final chapter of this thesis, I compared how Paula Meehan and Kamala Das respond to institutional practices of the Irish and Indian nation-states. Both writers use lyrical voice or voices to account for lived experiences of dispossession in their communities and work in activism, but they do so in different ways. Meehan politicizes her poetry through representations of failed childbirth, death, poverty and incarceration, and she depicts the realities of those experiences through dialogic speech and personal memories from her upbringing in a working-class community. Meehan commemorates the lives of people overlooked by practices of the nation-state in poetry but also in her activism, such as her speech at Halappanavar's vigil and her work in Dublin prisons. Das, though more privileged than Meehan in terms of socio-economic background, was comparably moved by the social injustices she witnessed in Kerala. Her poetry is often read as confessionalism, but I argue that although we can connect the voice of these poems to Das's lived experiences, the fluidity and multiple determinations of these personae suggest Das's interest in voicing the many dimensions of women's lives and the roles they maintain in Indian society. In her representations of an Indian Everywoman, we see a figure who bears these multiple roles but also demonstrates agency in a woman's ability to create and change her life story, as Das did through the public roles she held throughout her lifetime. Das's activism and conviction for social justice can be seen in her awareness of her readership, but also the realization of her poetic, but also political, voice to express the experiences of others. Although she failed to win a seat in Parliament, Das's engagement with her community can be seen in her activism and influence on younger generations of writers in India. Both Meehan and Das demonstrate the power of poetic

¹⁴⁵ De Souza, *Nine*, 8–9.

¹⁴⁶ Satchidanandan, *Authors*, 139

voice to articulate experiences of dispossession and render realities that may have been disregarded by the nation-state.

CONCLUSION

Reflections on Contemporary Anglophone Irish and Indian Women's Poetry

This thesis has created a collateral study of Irish and Indian literary cultures and traditions in the way that contemporary Anglophone women poets respond to and challenge institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry. The project juxtaposed the personal histories of Irish poets Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian and Paula Meehan with those of Indian poets Sujata Bhatt, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado and Kamala Das to examine themes of dislocation, partition and otherness in their poetry, but also to look at how women's publishing histories, careers and activism play out against the backdrop of their respective national histories. Irish and Indian poets face comparable pressures by the nation-state or publishing industry to represent, acknowledge, dispute or resist institutional practices in their work, yet each writer responds in a way that is distinctive of her own lived experience. I have highlighted the poets' political and social concerns to acknowledge how their work as writers, editors, educators and activists influence a national literary tradition. By placing women writers from vastly different cultures alongside one another, I have attempted to illustrate each poet's literary strengths and intentions for writing that warrant her place in a growing canon of Anglophone literature.

In undertaking this project, I found that Irish and Indian women poets who began publishing between the 1960s and 1980s have faced similar challenges in their careers due to institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry. Yet, the intersections of each poet's sex, ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, class, caste and socio-economic background has led her to respond in ways that differ from her contemporaries. Chapters 1 and 4 considered the effects of gendered nationalism on women's lives in Ireland and India and how this is represented and challenged in the work of four politically-oriented poets writing after national independence. Chapters 2 and 3 examined the publishing histories of Irish and Indian poets to illustrate some challenges women face in getting published during periods of political and cultural transition, but also to assert how each poet works within or resists publishing practices to bring women's poetry to international audiences. As multicultural poets from privileged, nationalist family backgrounds, Sujata Bhatt and Eavan Boland 'write

back' to their lost cultural heritage by politicizing representations of Irish and Indian women. Although both poets idealize women's lives in the nation-state, Bhatt uses traditional settings to highlight women's agency in their social roles while Boland correlates her 'exile' from Ireland with the historical absence of women in a literary tradition. Paula Meehan and Kamala Das respond to institutional practices of the nation-state by 'voicing' experiences of dispossession in their poetry, but also through their work as activists in Dublin and Kerala, respectively. Meehan, who comes from a working-class community, politicizes her poetry through representations of failed childbirth, death, drug-abuse, incarceration and poverty, and her conviction for social justice is discernible through her work in prisons and schools and in her recent role as the Ireland Professor of Poetry. Das, an upper-caste middle-class Nair woman, is often read as a confessional poet, but I argue that she 'voiced' experiences of an Indian Everywoman by depicting the multiplicities of her own and other women's lives during the historical transition from colony to nation-state. Das also challenged practices of the state by running for a seat in Parliament and by writing about social concerns in poetry, prose and journalism.

My archival examination of Medbh McGuckian's career exposes challenges she faced in her early career with OUP, Gallery and Wake Forest due to difficulties in reading her poetry but also in the omission of her work from important anthologies about the Troubles. A Catholic poet from Northern Ireland, McGuckian responded to practices of the industry by politicizing the subjects of her poems, but also by building good relationships with publishers that have allowed her to produce a high number of volumes in her forty-year career. Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado, Goan Catholic poets, were immersed in the literary scene of 1970s Bombay as poets and editors of women's literature. De Souza's poetry is often read as confessional, but I argue that she also created a community with her readers and worked within networks to publish her own, and other women's, literature. Silgado largely stopped publishing poetry after producing two short collections, and my examination of the silences surrounding her career demonstrates that silence and absence are integral parts of the publishing process. De Souza worked with major publishers like OUP to bring women's literature to national and international audiences while Silgado appears to have removed herself entirely from practices of the industry.

The poets selected for this project share many similarities in the subjects of their work, but given limitations in time and resources, I have not examined other avenues

at length. For example, all of the poets I have studied here are influenced by writers and cultures outside of their national tradition, and parallel exist between them, even in these influences. McGuckian, like many other Irish poets, is influenced by Russian writers in her work, and comparably Das and de Souza were influenced by and rightfully compared to American confessional poets writing in the mid-twentieth century. In a similar vein, Bhatt's 2002 publication *A Colour for Solitude* imagines the relationship between German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker and poet Rainer Marie Rilke, and though it is a provocative and inter-artistic collection of poems, I chose not to examine the book for the thesis. In developing this project for a book-length publication, I would be interested exploring the international and inter-cultural literary influences that shape each writer's career. Like Bhatt, Boland, de Souza and McGuckian create a relationship between poetry and visual art in a number of their poems, and comparably Das's showcased her artwork during her lifetime. I would like to examine the aesthetic relationship between poetry and visual art for book publication. I would also compare Meehan's play *Cell* with Das's short fiction in English to consider how their representations of dispossession unfold in other genres. Finally, I would like to interview the poets and conduct more extensive archival research to further enhance my analysis of the poets' literary biographies and creative development.

New perspectives of Irish and Indian women's poetry have emerged from this study. By placing women poets in conjunction and conversation with their contemporaries from another country, I have highlighted parallels in critical trajectories of women's writing that have emerged in the last thirty years. The occasion of Mehrotra's *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, which can be seen in my analysis of de Souza's anthologies, is comparable to the response in Ireland to *The Field Day Anthology* which also occurred in the 1990s. My analysis of Silgado's career follows feminist projects of recovery in examining the silences of her work and her importance in the Indian literary canon. In both Ireland and India, Catholic poets McGuckian and de Souza responded to religious differences during the 1980s by depicting realities of social and cultural difference in their poetry. Additionally, postcolonial literary production by publishing conglomerates like Oxford University Press brought women poets from both countries to the global literary market during the 1990s, a trend that continues today. My study of Boland, Bhatt, Das and Meehan demonstrates that in recent histories of Ireland and India, women have responded to

institutional practices of the state by portraying intersectional differences of sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, caste or other backgrounds to express the multiple dimensions of women's lives and personal histories in contemporary poetry. All of the poets selected for this project do not create homogenous representations of Irish or Indian women, but they depict instead the complexities of women's lives in the home, within their families and communities and in their respective national histories. This thesis follows feminist projects of recovery in my examination of women's biographies and creative developments as poets. In doing so, I emphasize that although significant progress has been made in Ireland and India to bring women's poetry into national literary canons, more work among critics, biographers, researchers, anthologists, and publishers can be done to create parity between the sexes in terms of publication and to make Irish and Indian women poets more visible in a global literary market.

The fields of contemporary Irish and Indian women's poetry have evolved since the period of focus for this thesis which was between 1979 and the early 2000s. Since 2013 when I began this project, publications such as Lucy Collins' study *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement* (2015), Jody Allen Randolph's *Eavan Boland* (2014) as well as Leontia Flynn's 2014 study *Reading Medbh McGuckian* offered new critical perspectives of poets' literary biographies and have expanded the field of study on Irish women poets by examining women's engagement with their cultural and literary histories. In the Indian context, Rosinka Chaudhuri's *A History of Indian Poetry in English* (2016) brought together a range of perspectives on Indian literary criticism and on poetry print histories in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2017, the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* featured a special issue on 'The worlds of Bombay poets' edited by Anjali Nerlekar and Laetitia Zecchini which included a rare interview with de Souza that was published months before she died. The journal also included studies of publishing presses in 1970s Bombay and interviews with other poets who worked with de Souza and Silgado in the literary networks of the time. In a comparative context, collaborations such as *All the Worlds Between* (2017) edited by women poets K. Srilata and Fiona Bolger indicate the ways that contemporary Irish and Indian writers have begun to look for connections and cross-cultural understanding that traverse their national and geographical borders. A comparative poetry project that connects Ireland and India, the book underscores

representations of home, belonging, identity and exclusion, themes which I brought into focus throughout this study of Irish and Indian women's poetry.

Given the extensive breadth of historical and biographical material I have examined, several important concerns have emerged from this study of women's writing in Ireland and India. Moving forward, it is important to consider how Boland, McGuckian, Meehan, Das, de Souza, Silgado and Bhatt move within international networks and how their poetry has been received in the last twenty years. We might also consider the relevance of the lyric poem as an appropriate form through which to examine the life and creative development of these women writers. Given the focus on two institutional practices—those of the publishing industry and nation-state—we might also consider that there are other institutions that affect the careers of women poets that I have not examined in the thesis. Many of the poets work or worked at universities, for example, and it would be interesting to consider women's public roles in these educational institutions and how academic communities and the public engagement these institutions offer have shaped the trajectories of women's careers as poets. Archives are also important institutions that help researchers conserve and disseminate literary criticism on women poets. Building on this project, I would like to spend more time in the archives and consider the importance of personal papers and manuscripts by McGuckian, Boland, Meehan and Bhatt at length.

Younger generations of poets in India and the diaspora are the country's most politically-vocal writers yet. Meena Kandasamy, a writer and activist, portrays caste, gender and sexual differences in her collections, performances and on social media. Acclaimed diasporic poet Meena Alexander writes about her tricultural heritage in Sudan, India and the US in poetry, prose and performances, and Rupi Kaur, a Punjabi-Canadian poet who is internationally-renowned at the age of twenty-four, writes candid and provocative social media poems about female sexuality, at times creating politicized—but simplistic—representations of how Indian women are treated in the nation-state. Aside from the achievements of these writers, I found it difficult to glean information about younger generations of poets and trends in the industry because these poets are not often included in anthologies that are disseminated in the UK. European and American publications on Indian poets continue to focus on generations publishing after Independence up to the late 1980s, and it appears that new publications on Indian English poets are not distributed broadly outside of India.

Today, women are among the most celebrated and acclaimed writers in the Republic and Northern Ireland. Sinéad Morrissey, from Northern Ireland, won several awards for *Parallax* (2013) and her recent publication *On Balance* (2017), and Irish-language poet Ailbhe Ní Ghearbuigh, born in 1984, achieved acclaim for her poem ‘Filleadh ar an gCathair’ that was shortlisted alongside Boland’s ‘Quarantine’ and Meehan’s ‘The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks’ for RTÉ’s A Poem for Ireland competition in 2016. Writers such as Nuala Ní Chonchúir and Mary O’Donnell are well-known for their novels as well as poetry, and Irish-American writer Kimberly Campanello integrates Hindu and Irish mythological representations of women in her experimental poems. Caitriona O’Reilly won the *Irish Times* Poetry Now award for her book *Geis* in 2015, and Vona Groarke has published collections that push the boundaries of poetic form in *X* (2014). Her recent book *Four Sides Full* (2016) is the first publication by an Irish woman poet since Boland’s *Object Lessons* to coalesce poetry, memoir, art and female subjectivity. The accomplishments of these writers attest to the breadth of female voices in the Irish poetic canon which has changed significantly since Boland began publishing fifty years ago.

Contributing to the fields of Irish studies, Indian studies and comparative feminist research, this project creates a parallel between contemporary Irish and Indian women poets by examining institutional practices of the nation-state and publishing industry that have shaped contemporary poetry and the unique ways that women work within, acknowledge and resist those practices in their multi-dimensional careers. By comparing texts, experiences and personal histories, I have strived to create an original collateral study of Irish and Indian women’s writing that opens new avenues of comparative feminist research on poetry by women.

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