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THE REFLECTION OF A NEW FEMALE IDENTITY IN EAVAN BOLAND'S POETRY

EAVAN BOLAND'IN ŞİİRİNDE YENİ BİR KADIN KİMLİĞİ YANSIMASI

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze Eavan Boland's poetry in terms of shaping a new female identity in Irish poetry. Eavan Boland (1944-...) is a contemporary Irish poet whose works are regarded as canonical in Ireland. However, the number of Irish women poets is very few compared to male poets. Boland is aware of the fact that there are no predecessors for her to be inspired and her poetry can be seen as a reaction against a male dominated Irish poetic tradition in which women are treated or accepted as emblems, subjects or images. Especially, in Irish myths, women are depicted as voiceless figures who are waiting to be saved by males. In other words, women are used as emblems or symbols rather than as fully developed characters. When Eavan Boland realizes this patriarchal ideology which dominates Irish poetry and myths, she determines to create a completely new female identity. In her poetry collections, it is observed that there are fully independent women characters who are not chained or controlled by male gaze. In this study, I will examine how Eavan Boland reflects this new female self in her narratives by making certain references to her poems chosen from her selected poetry collections and at the end of this study, it will be discussed how Boland left a legacy to the contemporary Irish poetry tradition and to the future female poets.

Key Words: Eavan Boland, Irish poetry, Ireland, Women's Poetry, Irish Myths

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Eavan Boland'ın şiirini, İrlanda şiirinde yeni bir kadın kimliğinin şekillendirilmesi açısından analiz etmektir. Eavan Boland (1944-...) İrlanda'da eserleri kanonik olarak kabul edilen çağdaş bir İrlanda şairidir. Ancak, İrlandalı kadın

şairlerin sayısı, erkek şairlerle kıyaslandığında çok azdır. Bu durum yirminci yüzyılın sonlarında yayınlanan birçok şiir antolojisinde gözlemlenebilmektedir. Boland, ilham alması için hiçbir öncünün bulunmadığının bilincindedir ve şiirleri, kadınlara sembol, konu veya imge olarak muamele eden veya kabul eden erkek egemen İrlanda şiirsel geleneğine karşı bir tepki olarak görülebilir. Özellikle İrlanda mitlerinde kadınlar, erkekler tarafından kurtarılmayı bekleyen sessiz figürler olarak tasvir ediliyor. Başka bir deyişle, bu mitlerde kadınlar tam olarak gelişmiş karakterler yerine amblem veya sembol olarak kullanılır. Eavan Boland, İrlanda şiirine egemen olan bu ataerkil ideolojinin farkına vardığında, tamamen yeni bir kadın kimliği yaratmaya karar verir. Şiir koleksiyonlarında, erkekler tarafından zincirlenmemiş veya kontrol edilmeyen tam bağımsız kadın karakterlerin olduğu görülmektedir. Boland, yüzyıllardır susturulan veya bir obje olarak sunulan İrlandalı kadınları, şiirlerinin merkezine alarak onlara yeni bir kimlik kazandırmayı hedeflemiştir. Bu çalışmada, Eavan Boland'ın şiir koleksiyonlarından seçilen bazı şiirlerine göndermeler yaparak, anlatılarında bu yeni kadın benliğini nasıl yansıttığını inceleyeceğim ve bu incelemenin sonunda, Boland'ın çağdaş İrlanda şiir geleneğine ve kendisinden sonra gelecek olan kadın şairlere nasıl bir miras bıraktığı tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eavan Boland, İrlanda Şiiri, İrlanda, Kadın Şiiri, İrlanda Mitleri

Eavan Boland (1944-...) becomes one of the few Irish women poets who are regarded as canonic in Ireland. Boland is also included in the Contemporary Irish Poetry section of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* along with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Medbh McGuckian. Although she publishes her first poetry collection, *New Territory* in 1967, it takes more than thirty years to find her own poetic stance in a male dominated Irish poetry (Mahony 1999: 71). Boland complains that there are no models or predecessors for her or any other woman poets in the Irish poetic tradition in which her gender are given certain roles such as emblem, muse, subject and image. All of these roles are pertain to a male creator and she tries to ignore this patriarchal male tradition. However, in her first collection, *New Territory*, she frequently uses of stock women characters and images from male dominated poetic tradition of Ireland. In her second collection, *War Horse*, it can be suggested that there is a change in her poetic style. The analysis of Eavan Boland's women characters in her collections will show that she aims to create a new female identity and she reacts against a patriarchal ideology which dominates Irish poetry.

In Ireland, women are not included in

anthologies excessively. In Brendan Kennelly's *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* (1981), there are only two women poets under the section of "Yeats and After" and 71 of them were males. In Thomas Kinsella's (1986) *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, women poets are not included in the sections of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), there are only three contemporary Irish women poets and Eavan Boland is one of them (Volsik 2003: 148). One of the reasons behind this lack of women's voices in Irish literature is that women writers do not find any other examples or forerunners in Irish poetic tradition when they decide to become a poet. There are no models to be inspired and this situation discourages women poets to produce poetry. Ines Praga Terente also discusses that "women's poetry has been underrated and neglected everywhere and not only in Ireland. The reasons, oversimplifying, are crystal clear: the publishing world was dominated by men and the word "poet" was definitely masculine" (1992: 132). Eavan Boland also reacts against the male domination or masculine power in Irish poetry and in one of her interviews, Boland asserts that "[a]s an Irish woman poet I have very little precedent. [...] You didn't have a thriv-

ing sense of the witness of the lived life of women poets, and what you did have was a very compelling and at times oppressive relationship between Irish poetry and the national tradition" (Reizbaum 1989: 475). She is aware of the fact that being a female poet without having any earlier examples is one of the challenges of writing poetry for her and in another interview, she discusses that "[she] began to write in an Ireland where the word 'woman' and the word 'poet' seemed to be in some sort of magnetic opposition to each other" (Boland, "Poet Q&A's", n.p.). Boland argues that when she decides to become a poet, there are various obstacles and dogmas regarding her sex. However, she disregards her society's expectations and she tries to reflect her own life into her poetry. It can be put forward that Eavan Boland starts her career in a patriarchal world where there is no place for a woman poet, but she aims to put together those two words [woman and poet] in her life and poetry. Boland shows her resistance to this harsh atmosphere in which she writes and she enriches her poems by reflecting her own life into them.

Though Eavan Boland is obsessed with the idea of creating a new female identity, she does not define herself as a feminist poet. According to her, "[f]eminism is an enabling perception but it is not an aesthetic one. The poem is a place- at least for me- where all kinds of certainties stop. All sorts of beliefs, convictions, [and] certainties get left at that threshold" (Allen-Randolph, 'An Interview', 1993: 125). Since her poems do not include any convictions or facts, she can never be a feminist poet. Boland argues that her poetry is full of personal experiences and feelings of individuals and that characteristic of Boland's poetry does not permit her to convey certain beliefs and perspectives such as feminism. Evidently, Boland regards feminism as a necessary vehicle so as to shape policy and structures, but according to her, feminism and

poetry cannot co-exist but rather they should be alienated from each other. In her poetry, there are no convictions and certainties but feelings and obsessions. Outside poetry, feminism has a significant place in her life because it defines the atmosphere in which she writes.

In her first collection, although she is in search for a new female self in the Irish poetry, she cannot escape from the traditional themes and characters which promote the image of a woman restricted by the patriarchal propaganda. Boland publishes *New Territory* (1967) when she graduates from Trinity College. In this volume of poetry, it is difficult to find independent women characters and her poems generally celebrate male heroes such as Isaiah, Oedipus, princes, fathers and sailing men. In the collection, there are also poems which focus on women, but these women figures are the stereotype characters and one of them is 'The Winning of Etain'. The poem retells the Irish legend of Etain, Fergus and Aengus. In the original story, two male characters, Fergus and Aengus try to possess Etain. At the end of the story, Aengus is the one who unites with Etain (Haberstroh, 1996: 60-61). Boland revisits this fairytale and she starts the poem as follows: "Etain twice a woman twice a queen,/ Possessed of two lives and one love,/ [...] This story tells the winning of Etain/ A second time with Aengus, how he strove/ To own his own – a tale of tears, of lovers" (Boland: 2009). It can be asserted that Boland characterizes Etain as an object which can be possessed by Aengus and in the poem, Aengus and Fergus are trying to possess Etain but Aengus is victorious in this struggle: "And Etain from her window knew the prince/ For Aengus, and ran to him and took his arm/ And Mounting up, rode away with him" (Boland: 2009). In the poem, a weak female figure is saved by a powerful male character and Boland fails to create an opposite example. Patricia Haberstroh claims that

"Boland never wrote a poem like this again, and her growing realization that such stereotypes betrayed the real women of Ireland was a first step in establishing a new aesthetic" (1996: 61-62). In the same collection, she gives a clue about what her poetry might become in her later collections. In 'Athene's Song', Boland describes the transformation of Athene from goddess of war to goddess of love. When Athene plays her pipe, love flourishes, but the noises of war make her drop the pipe: "When other noises broke my sleep/ Like dreams I saw the hot ranks/ And heroes in another flower/ Than any there; I dropped my pipe/ Remembering their shouts, their thanks" (Boland: 2009). Basically, in the poem, her music is oppressed by the noise of the war. To put it another way, the silenced pipe implies not only the "the muffled music of peace but also the lost voices of women" (Haberstroh 1996: 62). Moreover, Albert Gelpi comments on the poem as follows: "Athene-daughter of patriarchy, [...] becomes a poet, learning on her pipe to make 'a new music,' so that, even on the battlefield, far from the woods where she played her musical instrument, her 'mind' follows not her father's dictates but 'my heart' and 'holds its own'" (1999: 216). Athene frees herself from her father's control and she is able to listen to her own heart without any interference. With this last poem, Boland paves the way for her new themes related to her later poetry.

Her next collection, *The War Horse*, is published in 1975 and it can be propounded that there are more mature women identities in this collection. In 'Ready for Flight', the poetic persona, who is a woman, sees herself as a powerful figure to negotiate peace:

Then I would come at once my
love with love
Bringing to wasted areas the
sight
Of butterfly and swan and turtle
dove
Their wings ruffled like sails
ready for flight.

In such surroundings, after the
decease
Of devils, you and I would live
in peace. (Boland: 2009)

It can be suggested that the female character in the poem is quite different from Etain who is portrayed as a weak figure. She is more dominant than Etain in that she is ready to do anything for her lover. Etain is metamorphosed into a dragonfly by Fergus in the poem and she becomes a traditional representation of "the dehumanized women that Irish myth and literature often created" (Haberstroh 1996: 61). However, in 'Ready for Flight', this negatively stereotyped woman figure is transformed into a more independent and decisive woman.

Boland's third poetry collection, *In Her Own Image*, is published in 1980. She works with the Arlen House Press which is a feminist press and Boland offers completely different women characters and her approach can be seen in the first poem of the collection. 'Tirade for the Mimic Muse' is a poem which blames the traditional female muse as a traitor (Mahony 1999: 72). Boland questions the traditional representation of a female muse by a male perspective and she uses violent words to describe the muse:

I've caught you out. You slut.
You fat trout.
So here you are fumed in candle-
stink.
Its yellow balm exhumes you for
the glass.
How you arch and pout in it!
How you poach your face in it!
[...]Our criminal, our tricoteuse,
our Muse –
Our Muse of Mimic Art (Boland:
2013)

The mimic muse in the poem is regarded as an object of inspiration which is constructed by male gender and in creating

this muse, aesthetic decorum is taken into consideration. However, Boland deconstructs this traditional representation of a female muse and the narrator forces the Mimic Muse to see the real miseries and lives of women (Allen-Randolph, 'Ecriture', 1991: 49). The poetic persona suggests that the Mimic Muse protects herself "[...] from the lizarding of eyelids/ from the whiskering of nipples./ From the slow betrayals of our bedroom mirrors" (Boland: 2013). Furthermore, at the end of the poem, the poetic persona declares that time of the Mimic Muse is ended: "Your luck ran out. Look. My words leap/ Among your pinks, your stench pots and stinks./ [...] I will wake you from your sluttish sleep./ I will show you true reflections, terrors. (Boland: 2013). It can be argued that the patriarchal creation of the Mimic Muse is oppressed and dominated by a new female identity and she is compelled to see the struggles of the real women. The poetic persona forces the Mimic Muse to realize "true reflections" which suggests that reflections of the Muse are false representations.

After her first collection, Eavan Boland posits more individual and self-confident woman characters in her poetry. In her prose work shown below, *Object Lessons* (1996), she comments on how women are shown as passive and voiceless figures as follows:

"Women [...] were frequently referred to approvingly as mythic, emblematic. But to me these passive and simplified women seemed a corruption. Moreover, the transaction they urged on the reader, to accept them as mere decoration, seemed to compound the corruption. For they were not decorations, they were not ornaments" (1996: 135)

She opposes to portray women as

emblems or ornaments in her poetry. However, she underlines the fact that there is a long history of Ireland in which women are always depicted as emblematic in myths. In her fourth collection, *Journey* (1987), she tries to reshape these women figures in myths. 'Listen. This is the Noise of Myth' is a poem which tells the story of a man and a woman who "are fugitives. Intimates of myth" (Boland: 2009: 272-275). Until the middle point of the poem, Boland creates a traditional representation of men and women of Irish culture. It can be suggested that characters of the poem are the part of a patriarchal society. However, in the fourteenth stanza, Boland reveals the truths about the poem: "Forgive me if I set the truth to rights./ Bear with me if I put an end to this:/ she never turned to him; she never leaned/ under the sallow-willow over to him" (Boland: 2009: 272-275). Boland declares that what is told in the first half of the poem does not reflect the real story and she shows myths and legends as unreliable stories: "They were never mine. This is mine./ This sequence of evicted possibilities./ Displaced facts. Tricks of light. Reflections./ Invention. Legend. Myth. What you will." (Boland: 2009: 272-275). It can be assumed that Eavan Boland strictly criticizes male oriented myths and legends for their false representation of women. She labels them as "invention" and "reflections". In other words, Boland argues that those stereotyped women characters are the noises of myths which do not reflect real experiences of women.

After her marriage, Eavan Boland's poetic identity is transformed and it is reflected upon her poetry. She starts to define herself as an indoor nature poet:

After a while, I came to think of myself as an indoor nature poet. And my lexicon was the kettle and the steam, and the machine

in the corner and the kitchen, and the baby's bottle. These were parts of my world. Not to write about them would have been artificial. Those objects were visible to me. They assumed importances. [...] I felt about them, after a day spent in the house or with little children, exactly the way the nature poet feels after taking the same walk for several days. (Allen-Randolph, 'An Interview', 1993: 124)

She begins to spend more time in her house after she gets married and she feels a connection between the daily objects and herself. As she suggests, it would be not realistic if she did not write about the indoor experiences. This influence can be easily observed in her collection, *Outside History* which is published in 1990. This collection is divided into three sections under the titles of 'Object Lessons', 'Outside History' and 'Distances' and there are thirty five poems in it. In this sequence, "everyday, domesticated objects, or objects which might have been everyday items in the past, are used in a manner similar to the way in which Seamus Heaney used them in *Seeing Things*" (Mahony 1999: 73). Especially, in the first section of the collection, 'Object Lessons', there is an emphasis on domestic interiors and everyday objects. In 'The Rooms of Other Women Poets', Boland observes the personal properties of other women poets so as to find a connection between herself and them. In other words, Boland tries to trace her female contemporaries and predecessors. As it has been stated earlier, she is in difficulty of finding female representatives in Irish poetry and in the poem, she revisits this idea by adding indoor elements to her poem. In the opening lines, Boland expresses her curiosity about other female poets: "I wonder about you: whether the blue abrasions/ of daylight, falling as dusk across your page,/ make you reach for the lamp. I sometimes

think/ I see that gesture in the way you use language" (Boland: 2009). Then, she describes indoor objects in order to understand the atmosphere in which other female poets write their poems: "the saucer underneath your cup, are a sign of/ a savage, old calligraphy: you will not have it./ The chair you use, for instance, may be cane/ soaked and curled in spirals, painted white" (Boland: 2009). At the end of the poem, Boland draws a parallelism between herself and the others: "Somewhere you are writing or have written in/ a room you came to as I come to this/ room with honeyed corners, the interior sunless,/ the windows shut but clear so I can see/ the bay wind break [...]" (Boland: 2009). It can be put forward that an indoor atmosphere and Boland's search for her contemporaries are combined in the poem that she tries to create new figures of women writing.

The Lost Land collection was published in 1998 and it is acknowledged that it is the beginning of a new era for Boland's career in that "after having rejected and deconstructed national poetic convention, [she] seemed ready to explore and critically scrutinize the universal human urge of belonging" (Böss 2004: 127). In this collection, she is willing to reshape the Irish history which is already shaped by the patriarchal ideology and her perspective and ideas can be observed in 'Mother Ireland'. In the poem, the speaker is Mother Ireland who is a mythologized figure. In the beginning of the poem, Mother Ireland says that "At first/ I was land/ I lay on my back to be fields/ and when I turned on my side/ I was a hill" (www.poetryfoundation.org). It can be said that the typical presentation of Ireland as a mother land is demonstrated by Boland. It is a common tradition to associate the land with female and "[p]olitically, the land is seen as an object to be possessed, or repossessed: to gender it as female, therefore, is to confirm and reproduce the social arrangements which construct women as material possessions, not

as speaking subjects" (Cullingford 1990: 1). However, Boland diverts this representation of the land as female in the poem and her Mother Ireland has its own voice: "I learned my name./ I rose up. I remembered it./ Now I could tell my own story/ It was different/ from the story told about me." (Boland: www.poetryfoundation.org). It can be suggested that Mother Ireland is no longer a passive land or hill that she learns her name and she is ready to tell her own version of the story. At the end of the poem, it can be put forward that Mother Ireland finds her own voice: "Come back to us/ they said/ Trust me I whispered" (Boland: www.poetryfoundation.org). Boland still deals with the female identity in this collection and it can be concluded that she deconstructs the roles and labels which are given to women.

To conclude, all of Eavan Boland's poems that are analyzed in this study show that she is in constant struggle with the male power in the Irish poetic tradition. In her poetry, Boland aims to centralize women who are previously marginalized by males. Eavan Boland can be regarded as one of the leading women poets who rejects and reshapes the traditional representation of women's roles in Irish poetry. Her main aim is to give a new voice to women who are left voiceless in the society by the patriarchal ideology. As she claims, it is one of the most challenging duties of her in that there is no example before her. However, she becomes a role model and an example for future generation as she writes in her poem, 'Is It Still the Same': "I wrote like that once./ But this is different./ This time, when she looks up, I will be there" (qtd. in Broom 2006: 132).

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