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____Numéro 25, juin 2025____



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**Publication semestrielle de l'Interdisciplinaire Groupe
de Recherche sur l'Afrique Contemporaine (IGRAC)**

**PUBLICATION SEMESTRIELLE DE L'INTERDISCIPLINAIRE GROUPE DE
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S O M M A I R E

Éditorial.....	13
-----------------------	-----------

Articles

Histoire

Clotaire MESSI ME NANG Les mouvements sociaux étudiants de l'Université Omar Bongo de Libreville (1990-2016).....	19
--	-----------

Léon Modeste NNANG NDONG, Les indigènes dans la Chambre de Commerce, d'Agriculture et d'Industrie du Gabon : une place marginale (1935-1960).....	41
--	-----------

Christine NZADIMANA, L'embargo sur les armes en Centrafrique : entre affaiblissement de la souveraineté sécuritaire de l'État et dépendance à l'aide extérieure (2013-2024)	63
--	-----------

Géographie

Jean Bruno MIFOUNDOU et Patrice MOUNDZA, L'inapplication des documents d'urbanisme de Brazzaville (République du Congo)	85
--	-----------

Borgia Géréon C TOKPEME, Babatundé Eugène OGUIZI, D. David BALLOUBI et Sotondji Benjamin ALLAGBE, Croissance démographique et distribution de l'énergie électrique de la SBEE dans le grand Cotonou au sud-Benin.....	99
--	-----------

Prisca Elisabeth NSITA BAKEMITA et Gaston SAMBA, Quelques facteurs explicatifs des difficultés dans la compréhension de la notion d'espace en géographie en classe de 6^{ème} dans l'Inspection des CEG Brazzaville 3.....	125
---	------------

Safiou ATÉ, Matiéyendou KOMBATÉ, Edinam KOLA et Mohammed Fall DOGO, **Enjeux thérapeutiques des patients atteints de la tuberculose dans la région maritime du Togo.....**153

Philosophie

Dimitri OVENANGA-KOUMOU, **La vérité entre incertitude et erreur chez Nietzsche.....**173

Langues et littérature

Djili SOURA, **Women and the Single Woman Phobia in Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *After the Silence*.....**195

Salif GUIBILA, **Échos du passé et éco-narration : disruption linguistique et stylistique dans *L'Île des Dieux* de Prince L. Thiobiany.....**215

Séverin NGAKOSSO, **Liens obvie entre l'homme noir, l'Holocauste et la Shoah dans quelques œuvres romanesques concentrationnaires.....**233

Anthropologie, Économie et sociologie rurales

Alphonse BAYALA, **L'anthroposémiotique pour une exégèse de la communication de développement durable au Burkina Faso....**249

Rock OKIEMBA, **La violence verbale dans les transports en commun à Brazzaville : cas de l'arrondissement 6 Talangaï.....**265

Gilles Freddy MIALOUNDAMA BAKOUETILA, **Rôle du téléphone mobile et du capital social dans le commerce de la banane plantain à Brazzaville (Congo).....**281

Instructions aux auteurs

Éditorial

Ce numéro 25 des *Cahiers de l'IGRAC* que nous publions pour le compte du premier semestre de l'année 2025, suivant la périodicité de parution actuelle¹, témoigne du parcours digne d'éloges de notre revue, mais aussi du groupe de chercheurs dont elle diffuse les travaux. Grâce à son indexation survenue en 2024, les articles que publie la revue ont désormais une plus grande visibilité à l'internationale. C'est l'occasion de féliciter, d'une part l'équipe rédactionnelle qui depuis 2006, date de la parution du tout premier numéro, a travaillé dans des conditions proches de la témérité pour garder le cap vers l'excellence, contribuant ainsi à l'élargissement du capital de connaissances sur l'Afrique et ses problèmes contemporains. D'autre part, nous félicitons les 14 chercheurs africains qui, une nouvelle fois, ont fait confiance à notre revue en nous soumettant leurs articles.

Dans ce numéro, le principe de la pluridisciplinarité de notre revue est resté de mise. Ainsi sur ces 14 articles, trois appartiennent au champ de l'histoire, quatre à la géographie et ses sous domaines, trois à l'anthropologie, un à l'économie et la sociologie rurales, trois aux langues et à la littérature et un seul à la philosophie.

Les thèmes abordés dans les trois articles d'histoire s'inscrivent tous dans le champ de l'histoire contemporaine, précisément de l'histoire immédiate. **Clotaire Messi Me Nang** retrace sur une période de 25 ans (1990-2016) les mouvements sociaux récurrents survenus à l'université Omar Bongo du Gabon². **Christine Nzadimana** s'est penchée sur un sujet qui continue impacter l'histoire présente de la République centrafricaine et sa souveraineté : la question de la circulation des armes³. Analysant l'histoire du Gabon de 1935 à 1960, **Léon Modeste Nnang Ndong** met en exergue la place marginale des indigènes

¹ Jusqu'au numéro 16, *Les Cahiers de l'IGRAC* paraissaient une fois l'an, au mois de juin. À la demande de nombreux collègues congolais et africains désireux de publier, nous avons adopté en 2020 la périodicité actuelle : un numéro par semestre.

² Clotaire Messi Me Nange, *Les mouvements sociaux étudiants de l'Université Omar Bongo de Libreville (1990-2016)*.

³ Christine Nzadimana, *L'embargo sur les armes en Centrafrique : entre affaiblissement de la souveraineté sécuritaire de l'État et dépendance à l'aide extérieure (2013-2024)*.

gabonais au sein de la chambre de commerce, d'agriculture et d'industrie du Gabon⁴.

Les quatre articles de géographie se rapportent à trois espaces différents : le Congo, le Bénin et le Togo. Les chercheurs congolais se sont penchés sur deux questions : *L'inapplication des documents d'urbanisme de Brazzaville (République du Congo)*, par **Jean Bruno Mifoundou** et **Patrice Moundza** et *Quelques facteurs explicatifs des difficultés dans la compréhension de la notion d'espace en géographie en classe de 6^{ème} dans l'Inspection des CEG Brazzaville 3*, par **Prisca Elisabeth Nsita Bakemita** et **Gaston Samba**. Si les chercheurs béninois ont analysé *La croissance démographique et la distribution de l'énergie électrique de la SBEE dans le grand Cotonou au sud-Benin*, ceux du Togo ont passé en revue les *Enjeux thérapeutiques des patients atteints de la tuberculose dans la région maritime du Togo*.

Dimitri Ovenanga-Koumou s'est appuyé sur l'œuvre philosophique de Nietzsche pour rechercher la vérité qu'il entrevoit entre incertitude et erreur.

Dans le champ des langues et de la littérature, **Djili Soura** et **Salif Guibila** ont étudié respectivement deux romans, celui de l'auteure irlandaise Louise O'Neil et du Burkinabe L. Thiobany⁵.

S'appuyant à son tour sur quelques œuvres romanesques portant sur l'univers concentrationnaire, **Séverin Ngakosso** établit des liens évidents entre l'homme noir et l'holocauste des juifs ou Shoa.

Deux textes correspondent au champ de l'anthropologie. Le premier est celui **Rock Okiemba** sur *La violence verbale dans les transports en commun à Brazzaville, notamment dans l'arrondissement 6 Talangai*. Le second, celui d'**Alphonse Bayala** présente l'anthroposémiotique comme le moyen pour faire une exégèse de la communication de développement durable au Burkina Faso.

L'unique étude portant sur l'économie et la sociologie rurales est une recherche de **Gilles Freddy Mialoundama Bakouétla**. Il présente le *Rôle du téléphone mobile et du capital social dans le commerce de la banane plantain à Brazzaville (Congo)*.

⁴Léon Modeste Nnang Ndong, *Les indigènes dans la Chambre de commerce, d'agriculture et d'industrie du Gabon : une place marginale (1935-1960)*.

⁵ - Djili Soura, *Women and the Single Woman Phobia in Louise O'Neill's Only Ever Yours and After the Silence*.

- Salif Guibila, *Échos du passé et éco-narration : disruption linguistique et stylistique dans L'Île des Dieux* de Prince L. Thiobiany.

Tels sont donc ces 14 travaux de recherche que ce 25^e numéro des *Cahiers de l'IGRAC* met à la disposition de la communauté des chercheurs. Espérons qu'ils ouvriront de nouvelles pistes de recherches dans les domaines concernés.

Joachim Emmanuel GOMA-THETHET
Directeur de publication

Articles

Langues et littérature

Women and the Single Woman Phobia in Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *After the Silence*

Djili SOURA*

Abstract

This study aims to analyse the stigmatisation of female singleness in Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* (2014) and *After the Silence* (2020). While previous studies have investigated O'Neill's critique of aesthetic pressure and sexual violence, little attention has been paid to her engagement with the spinster stereotype—a recurrent theme in Irish women's fiction and an enduring social phenomenon in Western cultures. This analysis is carried out through the application of Anthea Taylor's theory of postfeminist spinster phobia. The findings show that O'Neill continues a subversive tradition that challenges the societal disparagement of the single woman. While her use of anachronistic settings highlights the persistence of spinster phobia in contemporary Ireland, her characterisation challenges the idealisation of marriage and reframes singleness as a site of resistance and agency.

Keywords : Singlehood, Stigmatisation, Irish fiction, Louise O'Neill.

Résumé

Cette étude se propose d'analyser la stigmatisation du célibat féminin dans *Only Ever Yours* (2014) et *After the Silence* (2020) de Louise O'Neill. Si des recherches précédentes ont examiné la critique de la pression esthétique et de la violence sexuelle chez O'Neill, peu d'attention a été portée à sa critique du stéréotype de la vieille fille célibataire—un thème pourtant récurrent dans la fiction féminine irlandaise et un phénomène social persistant dans les cultures occidentales. L'analyse s'appuie sur la théorie de la phobie postféministe de la vieille fille, développée par Anthea Taylor. Les résultats de cette étude révèlent qu'O'Neill s'inscrit dans une tradition

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littéraire subversive visant à remettre en question la stigmatisation des femmes célibataires. Son recours à des cadres narratifs anachroniques met en lumière la persistance de la phobie du célibat féminin dans l'Irlande contemporaine. Sa construction des personnages, quant à elle, déconstruit l'idéalisation du mariage et redéfinit le célibat comme un espace de résistance et d'affirmation de soi.

Mots clés : Célibat, Stigmatisation, Fiction irlandaise, Louise O'Neill

Introduction

One of the persistent mechanisms that have historically shaped women's oppression in Ireland is the demonisation of the unmarried woman, who is pejoratively referred to as the spinster. Initially referring to women who spin and weave for a living, the concept of spinster takes a negative connotation when it is ultimately used to designate not a woman who spins by profession but one who spins because she turns too old and fails to enter marriage, which is regarded as the only best way a woman can succeed (Auerbach, 1982, p. 111; Bell & Yans, 2008, p. 1; Haskell, 1988, p. 18; Mustard, n.d.; Weigle, 1982, p. 30). In Catholic patriarchal Ireland, this spinster stereotype was even more remarkable and worrying. While natural circumstances like the post-famine economic hardships and emigration have largely contributed to the increasing number of singles (Clarkson, 1981, pp. 237–255; Horgan, 2001; Strassmann & Clark, 1998, p. 38), the rigid religious morality continues to restrict the ideal female identity to a virgin girl, a wife, or a nun (Byrne, 2008, p. 16), making the condition of the single woman both shameful and hardly correctible. Singlehood or, in stereotypical terms, spinsterhood is regarded as “a deviant social identity,” a selfish refusal to conform to the patriarchal norms. The spinster is also considered as a pitiful woman in distress, a woman who is “troubled by her own self-imposed shame and lack of confidence” and desperately “longs to be like other normal women” (Wan-lih Chang, 2015, p. 48).

Irish women's fiction, which explored intersections of religion, nationalism, and domestic ideology (Coughlan, 2004, p. 75; Hogan, 2013, p. 18; Ukić Košta, 2014, p. 61), has also significantly responded to this societal marginalisation of the single woman. As Ann Wan-lih Chang observes, women use the figure of the spinster as a subversive

narrative strategy. The negative spinster stereotype “can be seen as a narrative device used by Irish female writers to expose a strategy used by society as a means both to intimidate women who intend to stray from the confines of the marriage enclosure and to condemn women who fail to accomplish this goal in life” (Wan-lih Chang, 2015, p. 56).

Born in 1985 and engaged in fiction writing in 2014 with six novels so far, Louise O'Neill follows the steps of these influential literary figures, engaging critically with the cultural repression of the single woman. This thematic preoccupation is largely overlooked in the scholarly discussion of O'Neill's works. Most of the criticism of O'Neill's work focuses on *Only Ever Yours*, *Asking for It*, and *The Surface Breaks* and investigates how she explores the themes of women's objectification, contemporary norms of beauty, sexual violence, and consent. Ekaterina Muraveva (2018, p. 133) explores how *Only Ever Yours* reflects and dismantles the fashion and beauty industry discourse of femininity, using parody and repetition to reveal the commodification of femininity. As Muraveva writes, “in using lower-case letters for the characters' names, reminiscent of the first name address in the ads, O'Neill minimizes their significance and individuality within her dystopian setting. Lost behind the rows of diminished first names, her characters unconsciously parody the many similar images of women boldly appropriated by beauty discourse.” O'Neill symbolically erases individuality to critique how commercial beauty culture standardises and dehumanises women. In the same vein, Juan F. Elices (2016, p. 84) positions *Only Ever Yours* in Irish feminist dystopian writing, focusing on the objectification and marginalisation of women under scientific and aesthetic control. Heather Braun and Jean-François Lebel offer similar readings of the novel as an exploration of women's oppression. While Braun (2018, p. 71) sees it as a narrative of bodily erasure and political control that “illustrates how political dominance works upon and ultimately destroys vulnerable and deprived female bodies,” Lebel (2019, p. 48) claims that the novel highlights the damaging effects of female rivalry through a dystopian world that subjects all females to “a culture of comparison.” For Elices (2016, p. 84), this exposure of women's oppression establishes O'Neill's novel as “a powerful indictment addressed at the objectification and sexualisation of women in contemporary societies.”

This emphatic depiction of women as victims, which is a characteristic of O'Neill's style, has recently provoked varied critical

opinions, opening more interesting trends in the discussions of O'Neill's fiction. While it has led some critics like Donna Michell (2017, p. 177) to read Gothic elements in O'Neill's writing—particularly the posthuman horror of artificial femininity and the monstrous consequences of technological surveillance, it has led Paige Reynolds (2023, p. 3) to label O'Neill's style as the “stubborn mode of modernism,” a deliberate aesthetic strategy through which O'Neill revives modernist tropes such as fragmentation, disillusionment, and narrative interiority, to expose the persistent structural violence that continues to shape women's lives in contemporary Ireland. This focus on women's victimhood even sparks condemnatory criticisms, particularly by Jennifer Mooney (2021, p. 5), who claims that O'Neill's works have failed to question the essentialist ideals of womanhood and to condemn sexual violence. As she writes about *Asking for It*, “O'Neill's interpretation of Ireland as a ‘rape culture’ is in danger of entrenching traditional conceptions of male and female genders and adding to White feminism's ideological grounding in ‘gendered victimology’.”

Collectively, these previous studies demonstrate how O'Neill's fiction engages with women's oppression in contemporary society, particularly with themes of sexual violence and bodily autonomy. However, so far, little scholarly attention has been paid to how her work interrogates the persistent stigma surrounding female singleness, especially through the lens of postfeminist cultural critique. This study fills in this gap. Focusing on *Only Ever Yours* and *After the Silence*, it investigates how O'Neill represents female singleness and analyses why this portrayal of singlehood is important in her works, both as an Irish and a contemporary writer. The analysis is carried out through Anthea Taylor's theory of postfeminist spinster phobia. Analysing popular media narratives, including reality television and popular romance, Taylor (2012, p. 6) theorises that contemporary media culture, through its representation of the single woman, engages women to fear, resent, or attempt to correct singleness. Singleness in these media narratives is depicted as “an inherently undesirable lifestyle or identity that can (and must) be eradicated,” thereby reinforcing the traditional idea that being single is a temporary or pathological state that must be overcome by romantic coupling. I hypothesise that, as a contemporary Irish writer, O'Neill continues Irish women's literary tradition of challenging the spinster stereotype, exposing and challenging how

singleness is still framed as a form of social deviance, even in a supposedly progressive and feminist era like the twenty-first century. I first examine how the narrative structure in each novel offers a critical reflection on the fear and shame of singleness as a persistent cultural reality in the contemporary West. Then, I analyse how her characterisation functions to reframe this phobia of singlehood as a form of political resistance and individual agency.

1. The Repression of Singleness as a Persistent Reality in Ireland

Published in 2018 and marketed as O'Neill's first novel written for adults, *After the Silence* is set in a fictional Republic of Ireland called Inisrún. The narrative revolves around the mysterious murder of the young girl Nessa Crowley, who is found dead in the yard of the couple Henry and Keelin Kinsella the next day of a party that they have organised. While the murder and its resolution are central to the story, the narrative is more thematically ambitious, offering a powerful critique of the societal rejection of female singleness that Taylor laments about contemporary postfeminist media culture. This critique of the unmarried woman phobia is operated through the narrative device of anachronism, the deliberate or accidental "mistake in dating" events in literature and art, which makes them temporarily inconsistent with the work's production time (Dupriez, 1991, p. 33).

In *After the Silence*, the years 2000s represent a past in characters' lives, as is the case for Keelin, who is said to have been a student in 2001 (O'Neill, 2020, p. 329). This temporal reference establishes Inisrún as an epitome of contemporary Ireland, as it clearly hints that the events occur in the twenty-first century. Paradoxically, however, this fictional Ireland is ideologically reflective of post-independence Catholic Ireland, where the single woman was stereotyped as the "spinster" and regarded as "a comic, grotesque, ugly, dull woman, or as an alienated misfit who displays a pitiful prudery and who is incapable of a human connection due to her 'failure' to achieve a relationship with a man" (Auerbach, 1982, p. 111; Wan-lih Chang, 2015, p. 47). As we learn from Olivia—Henry Kinsella's mother—when she recollects her youth in the 1960s, Inisrún was a society where when someone turns "thirty ... and unmarried and never seemed to date anyone, people were beginning to talk" (O'Neill, 2020, p. 151).

As the narrative progresses, and we get into the intimate lives of characters, we learn that this intolerance of singleness is not just a

practice of the past but still a reality in women's lives, despite the latter's deep entrenchment in a feminist lifestyle pertinent to their twenty-first century Inisrún. Keelin is a good example. Like women in contemporary Ireland today, Keelin is a feminist-conscious woman who trained and pursued a career as a counsellor, specialising in domestic abuse and helping women escape or heal from domestic violence. Yet, her response to her own abusive husband, Mark Delaney, is both ironical and disappointing. Not only does she endure her victimisation for an extended period, but when she finally decides to take action, her alternative is to remarry with Henry Kinsella. This reveals how life without a husband is made repulsive in her social environment. Mooney's claim that "O'Neill's depiction of Irish society in *Asking For It* ... offers a problematic and unrealistic reflection of contemporary Irish society at the time of the text's setting and now" (Mooney, 2021, p. 124) is not only reasonable, but it also applies to *After the Silence*. Inisrún is set in contemporary Ireland yet evocative of the Catholic patriarchal Ireland's demonisation of the unmarried woman. Mooney (2021, p. 124) goes further to claim that this mode of writing "suffers under the weight of her (O'Neill's) agenda to challenge the idea that Ireland is a gender-equal country, and, more broadly, the perception that contemporary Western societies no longer require feminism." While I agree with Mooney that O'Neill's depiction of Ireland is inconsistent with contemporary Ireland, I do not agree that this anachronism downplays the feminist politics of narrative.

Far from hindering the novel's critique of gender power in contemporary Ireland, the novel's anachronistic structure serves as an effective device to highlight the persistence of the social rejection of the single woman in contemporary Ireland. As J. A. Cuddon (2013, p. 31) observes, anachronism may be used to "underline a universal verisimilitude and timelessness—to prevent something being 'dated'." The anachronism in O'Neill's fictionalisation of Ireland serves this function of highlighting continuity. By juxtaposing a fictional contemporary Ireland with the spinster phobia of the post-independence Catholic Ireland, O'Neill compellingly draws attention to the persisting injunction of women to avoid or correct singleness that postfeminist cultural critics like Angela McRobbie, Susan Faludi, and Anthea Taylor note about popular media narratives. Analysing reality television series like "Tough Love", "The Bachelor", and "The Farmer Wants a Wife", Taylor (2012, p.16) claims that :

The single woman is implored to discipline herself in particular ways to transcend or makeover this inherently undesirable identity ... dating reality television operates essentially as a form of 'makeover' television, not simply through its pronounced attempt to make women unsingle, but in how it monitors and seeks (to varying degrees) to regulate single women's behaviour.

Contemporary popular media continues to produce normative representations of women where being single is framed as a deviation that requires correction and marriage as a symbolic guarantee of female legitimacy. The anachronist structure enables O'Neill to illuminate this cultural repression of female singleness. By fictionalising a typical contemporary Ireland that ideologically embraces the past anti-single woman ideologies, O'Neill compellingly warns that despite the socio-political advances and the increasing feminist consciousness of twenty-first-century Ireland, the fear of the unmarried woman remains embedded in the collective consciousness. Taylor (2012, p. 6) claims that the power of popular media to engage women to fear singleness resides in the fact that they are pervasive and massively consumed by those women. O'Neill's warning is reasonable in this logic. Even when overt religious morality has receded, as consumers of these media narratives, Irish women are continuously exposed to the subtle yet powerful representations of singleness as failure and incompleteness.

The critique of the spinster figure is a common trend in Irish women's fiction, with famous writers such as Mary Lavin, Emma Cooke, Mary Beckett, and Angela Bourke, who variedly theorised the spinster stereotype, demonstrating how the woman is vilified and marginalised. The short story writer Mary Lavin, for instance, sets her stories in rural Ireland. Through her protagonists Miss Holland in "Miss Holland" and Isabel in "A Single Lady," she portrays the unmarried woman as being in a permanent "internal exile" (Arndt, 2002, p. 112), that is, marginalised by her family and broadly by the community. It is for this reason that Wan-lih Chang (2015, p. 56) claims that the figure of the spinster in Irish women's fiction functions as "a narrative device" for revealing "a strategy used by society as a means both to intimidate women who intend to stay from the confines of marriage enclosure and to condemn women who fail to accomplish this goal in life." O'Neill continues this Irish female authors' denunciative tradition of exposing the social mechanisms that marginalise unmarried women.

However, while her predecessors usually portray the spinster as “a tragic heroine victimised by a culture which traditionally devalued and dehumanised women as well as one which is particularly hostile towards single women” (Wan-lih Chang, 2015, p. 51), O’Neill attempts a more revolutionary mode. Beyond denouncing the cultural repression of the single woman figure, O’Neill’s writing is a direct invitation to outgrow the shame of being single, even though some critics reproach her for failing to explore possibilities of resistance in her narratives. Writing about *Only Ever Yours*, Mooney (2023, p. 89) claims that “despite being fictionalised as post-feminist and post-human,” women in O’Neill’s novel “do not reflect any sense of the empowerment which has characterised feminist studies on gender power, in recent decades,” particularly those by critics like Sandra Lee Bartky, Monique Deveaux, and Lois McNay.

These critics (Bartky, 2003, p. 37; Deveaux, 1994, p. 244; McNay, 1992, pp. 32–33), who theorised gender power from a Foucauldian perspective, claimed that while Foucault’s theories were valuable for understanding power dynamics, they needed critical feminist adaptations. According to Bartky (2003, p. 37), for instance, Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power did not take into account the specific gendered character of bodily regulation. Unlike men, women are subjected to a disciplinary regime of femininity that produces docile bodies through “rituals of beauty” like dieting and makeup. McNay (1992, p. 41) takes issue with Foucault’s overemphasis on the body as solely a “site of the operations of power” that “poses no resistance,” a criticism corroborated by Deveaux, according to whom, for a feminist analysis to “avoid the omissions and problems of Foucault’s understanding of power,” it must “take seriously the issue of women’s empowerment, their capacities for self-determination and freedom, and the conditions in which these flourish” (Deveaux, 1994, p. 244). It is this failure to theorise the complexity of women’s experience of gender power that Mooney observes in *Only Ever Yours*. Yet, this reading of the eves as entirely devoid of agency overlooks the subtle forms of resistance that O’Neill embeds in her characterisation.

I agree with Lebel (2019, p. 103) when he claims that the eves are “figures of dissidence” with “great lucidity” and “capable of an analytical, critical eye.” O’Neill’s representation of women may be bleak, or, to quote Reynolds (2023, p. 158), may be characterised by “the modernist tradition” of “bleak conclusions” that “refuse the

escapism and satisfying resolution often promised by genre fiction.” But characters do resist their condition. This is the case with isabel¹ and Johanna, respectively, in *Only Ever Yours* and *After the Silence*, who significantly attempt to transcend their shame of singleness, compelling readers to question the disparagement of the single woman produced by popular media culture.

2. Demystifying Wifehood as the Ideal Female Identity

Indeed, from the 1980s, the representation of the figure of the spinster in Irish women’s fiction as primarily a means to expose the Irish society’s repression of singleness evolved to embrace the values advocated by the feminist movements, such as female autonomy and self-confidence. But again, this feminist appropriation of the single woman figure has not gone beyond attempts to challenge the assumption that spinsterhood is the result of women’s selfishness. As Wan-lih Chang (2015, p. 51) observes about Mary Beckett’s literary woman in “The Literary Woman” (1990) and Angela Bourke’s Miss Carty in “Beauty Treatment” (1996), Irish women writers strive to demonstrate that spinsterhood is not always a failure but often a choice made by some women who “have been victims of sexual violence.”

Through the characters of isabel and Johanna, O’Neill goes much further, challenging the shame about singleness. Set in a post-deluge world composed of four continents—the Africa-Zone, the Euro-Zone, the America-Zone, and the Chindia-Zone—the society in which isabel is living is a technologically advanced society. Women, called “eves,” are created in laboratories and trained in a Girls’ School to self-beautify and please their male counterparts, the Inheritants. From its name (the Euro-Zone) to its advanced technology and media culture, this fictional world eloquently evokes contemporary Europe. Yet, like Inisrún in *After the Silence*, its ideological organisation recalls Catholic

¹ In *Only Ever Yours*, spelling functions as a narrative device. While female names are spelt with lower-case letters, names of consumer products like “ice cream” and “telephone” are deliberately distorted as “Kream” and “fone,” respectively. Through this manipulation of spelling, O’Neill emphasises the nature of the eves’ world as a misogynistic posthuman dystopia and uses it as a critical reflection on the commodification of women, the manipulation of language, and the branding culture that permeates contemporary society. This linguistic distortion mirrors how language is co-opted by capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, reducing both identity and communication to artificial, market-driven constructs.

patriarchal Ireland, where, as Anne Byrne (2008, p. 16) observed, singlehood was “disparaged and stigmatized, constraining the identity possibilities for women.” Once again, this echo of the past is significant as it highlights the persistence of a cultural logic that continues to subordinate women’s value to their marital status. Throughout their career in the Girls’ School, Isabel and her peers are trained to play three social roles: either a companion (a wife to an Inheritant), or a chastity (a teacher in the Girls’ School) or a concubine (a sex slave for the Inheritants).

Each of these roles is passed off as a means for an eve to prove her social importance: “Anyway, as the Father said, it is your duty to provide value for your existence, whichever third you may be assigned to” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 29). But the category of companion is idealised as the golden third, while the other roles are treated as the default functions and symbols of failure, as can be observed in this warning by Freida to Isabel: “If you keep gaining weight, you’ll never become a companion. You won’t even be good enough to be a concubine ... I’m afraid they’ll make you become a chastity” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 30). The mystification of the role of the companion is operated through Chastity-Ruth’s teachings:

The demands of belonging to this third are many, but the rewards are just wonderful. Naturally, I am sure that all of you want to become companions, to enjoy the wonders of supporting your husband and raising healthy sons, but alas, only the privileged few will be chosen (O’Neill, 2015, p. 164).

By presenting it as a privilege, a symbol of success and happiness yet hardly accessible, Chastity-Ruth nurtures in the eves a generalised desire to be categorised as a companion. In the context of Ireland, the terms “companion” and “chastity” carry significant historical resonance, reminding the reader of the social intolerance towards singleness that marked Ireland (Byrne, 2008, p. 35; Ryan, 2011, p. 117). The concept of “companion” in the society of the Euro-Zone can be understood as a metaphor for the socially accepted role of the married woman, whose worth and legitimacy are contingent upon her ability and will to serve a male partner. In the same vein, the “chastity” figure pertinently symbolises the religious nun, a woman who, though unmarried, is granted socio-moral legitimacy akin to that of a married woman thanks to her dedication to religious life.

While her peers are ultimately trapped in this desire for marriage, isabel shows an overt disinterest in the highly appraised category of companion. Though initially humiliated by her peers and punished by the school for failing to control her body size, isabel is still declared the favourite of the Original Father at the end of the training, who publicly declares his intention to take her as his companion. As suggested by the patriarchal discourse of the society of the Euro-Zone that Girls' School promotes through chastity-ruth's teachings, becoming a companion is a great achievement for an eve, and being the Father's companion is even more prestigious. Yet, despite the promising prestigious life that this potential union implies, isabel accepts and later declines the Father's proposal. Living in a dystopic society where escape is not possible due to a rigid system of control and surveillance, isabel resorts to suicide, forcing the Father to ring back to the school for a replacement : "It has been hectic this evening, fone² calls back and forth with the Euro-Zone, frantically trying to arrange a replacement. Quite selfish of isabel to leave the Father hanging, if you'll excuse the pun. She shrugs" (O'Neill, 2015, p. 293). Suicide here represents a rebellious act, just like hunger strikes, and plays a significant role in O'Neill's narrative.

In his article "Fragility as Strength: The Ethics and Politics of Hunger Strikes," the critic Guy Aitchison explores the complex political dynamics and ethical considerations of hunger strikes as forms of sacrificial resistance. According to Aitchison (2022, p. 537), hunger strikes are subversive acts that challenge oppressive systems through self-inflicted suffering, a practice that combines communication, coercion, and expression. Drawing parallels to Aitchison's framework, isabel's suicide is not merely an act of despair but one of protest. It aligns with this idea of hunger strikes serving as "peaceful, self-oriented violence" (Aitchison, 2022, p. 547), challenging oppressive institutions by demonstrating autonomy over one's body even under systemic control. As Aitchison (2022, p. 537) notes, the hunger strike "mobilizes sacrificial suffering to provoke outrage, empathy, and shame," which can be seen in isabel's refusal to be commodified within the patriarchal system of the Euro-Zone. isabel's brave decision to put an end to her life rather than becoming the Father's companion mirrors an extreme version of the coercive power of the hunger striker, turning her own life

² O'Neill's spelling of telephone.

into a means to expose and destabilise her society's dehumanising practices.

This suicide that Isabel imposes on herself takes the power dynamics of hunger strikes even further, functioning as a form of non-verbal protest—a way to assert her agency when no other avenue is available. Her act forces the authorities to confront the existence of a woman who refuses to fit into their rigid roles, much like hunger strikers force their oppressors to recognise their physical bodies as sites of resistance. Through her choice of suicide, Isabel poses an unprecedented act of resistance in the Euro-Zone, as she demonstrates both her awareness of the society's intolerance toward singleness and her willingness to sacrifice her life to denounce this oppression. Like the hunger strike, Isabel's suicide acts as a political statement, compelling the society to acknowledge the legitimacy of the single woman as a valid identity. This self-sacrifice of Isabel stands not only as a daring challenge to the patriarchal order but also serves as a call for the recognition of alternative forms of female existence, as she clearly demonstrates to her peers that there is the possibility of being different from the predefined categories. Thus, Isabel's choice becomes an act of defiance which forces her community and, by extension, the reader to confront the possibility of change.

In the context of contemporary Ireland where like in the rest of the West, "the single woman is implored" through popular media narratives to correct her condition (Taylor, 2012, p. 16), the choices of the character of Isabel convey a significant message to the reader. The tragic choice of suicide that she makes functions as a powerful narrative device, enabling O'Neill to deconstruct this cultural narrative. It is a means to speak to contemporary readers who, as consumers of these media discourses, are being transformed and pushed back into the patriarchal anti-single woman sentiment, compelling them to recognise difference in terms of female identity, not as a failure but as a legitimate and valuable mode of existence. Through her rejection of the predefined roles of wifehood, domesticity, and sexual servitude, at the cost of her life, Isabel exposes the inherent coercion within these apparently empowering choices, urging both her peers in her fictional world and readers in the real world to confront the restrictive nature of female identity under patriarchy and the possibility of change.

Johanna, in *After the Silence*, takes this resistance to spinster phobia some steps further. Unlike Isabel, whose dystopic social context does

not allow any possibility of defiance beyond suicide, Johanna appears more mentally detached from the patriarchal sense of shame about the spinster stereotype, standing as an eloquent symbol of revolution. A teacher and a principal, Johanna's lifestyle and self-perception as a literate woman set her mentally different from her fellow women in Inisrún, particularly her best friend Keelin, whose fear of singleness blinds her to her husband's violence. This is illustrated in her marital status and the way she perceives it. During a discussion in which she and Sean (a friend of hers and Keelin) are complaining about Keelin's over-protective attitude toward her son Alex, she suddenly realises that she has spoken badly of Keelin and starts making her apologies. This takes us into her intimate life, providing us thereby with an important hint about her marital status :

Maybe it's time . . .' Jo paused, glancing at Keelin uncertainly. 'Maybe it's time to what?' 'Alex is almost an adult,' her friend said. 'He'll be off to college soon. You won't always be there to rescue him, Keels.' 'I'm not trying to "rescue" him; he's my son. I just want him to be happy. I don't think that's a crime, is it? Especially after everything he's been through.' 'Of course.' Johanna put her arm around Keelin's waist and squeezed tightly. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. You're the most loyal, supportive person on Inisrún. That's why we love you, isn't it, Seán?' Their friend snorted and told them to leave him out of this. 'And I don't even have kids,' Jo said. 'What do I know?'(O'Neill, 2020, p. 46).

As she clearly admits in this attempt to make up for her rude words to Keelin in the discussion, Johanna is neither married nor has she experienced motherhood before. Keelin is a childhood friend of Johanna, and is said to be "forty years old" (O'Neill, 2020, p. 245), which hints that Johanna is an approximately forty-year-old woman. Yet, she has been neither a wife nor a mother, a perfect example of the single woman who, in Ireland, was treated as "an evil witchlike figure" or recently as "the unhappy single woman" in popular media through famous fictional figures like Bridget Jones in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996) and film adaptations. The narrative provides no details about whether that marital status at such a late age is a personal choice or a failure, but the simple fact that Johanna is able to mention it in public discussions constitutes a significant act of defiance, as it

clearly demonstrates her indifference to what the external world thinks of her.

Like the demonised spinster in Catholic Ireland whom the hostile social environment forced into an “internal exile,” these contemporary cultural figures present the unmarried woman as “grieving for a man shortage” (Faludi, 1991, p. 1) and “desperate to meet Mr Right” (Taylor, 2012, p. 102). Through these negative representations, the status of the single woman is reinvested as a marker of shame and fear in the collective consciousness of contemporary women, despite these women’s status as “postfeminist,” that is, women who, thanks to the feminist movements’ achievements, theoretically possess social, political, and sexual autonomy, and are presumed to have transcended traditional gendered constraints.

Besides, the spinster stereotype usually succeeds in creating a sense of guilt and discomfort in single women. As the Critic Eileen Yeo (2008, p. 52) observes about single women in Victorian and Edwardian Britain and the way they coped with their condition, “to get around the understanding of a public woman as a prostitute and also to combat accusations of selfish shirking of feminine duty, publicly active single women employed chastity and sacrifice as bywords in their vocabulary”. In a spinster-phobic culture like Inisrún, one would expect Johanna to feel uncomfortable with her situation and engage in a similar self-verbal regulation like the Victorian single women. But in contrast, Johanna reveals and assumes her status as an old, childless, unmarried woman. By openly acknowledging her unmarried and childless status without the embarrassment or self-deprecation typically expected of unmarried women, Johanna demonstrates her transcendence of this internalised patriarchal consciousness that conditions women to fear being single, which marks her as a figure of resistance against the enduring stigma attached to the singleness in Western culture.

It is also a common practice in patriarchies and in Catholic patriarchal Ireland in particular that single women find themselves socially pressured to devote their singleness to community care as a means of redemption for their failed social duty. As we learn from Ann Wan-lih Chang (2015, pp. 55–56), women who do not get married and grow old in their parents’ home are blamed for being selfish to reject the predefined dichotomic roles of married mother or nun and “regarded as available to provide free service” by taking care of elderly parents or looking after the family. Johanna not only proudly chooses

celibacy and childlessness but also does not abide by this norm of redemption through caring service. Instead of committing herself to the provision of such “free service,” she takes control of her life and uses the time that her childless celibacy affords her for personal growth and self-realisation. As a result, she becomes a school principal: “Jo rented a place in Schull, near the school where she’d recently been made principal”(O’Neill, 2020, p. 125). Far from conforming to the traditional norms of caregiving, Johanna’s role as a school principal represents a significant departure from the patriarchal expectation of community service that has characterised Catholic Ireland.

As a principal, Johanna takes herself to a leadership position—a role that represents authority, decision-making, and influence. This is symbolically significant because, in contrast to the passive caregiving roles typically assigned to single women, being a principal positions her as a figure of power and control within the educational system. Leadership in education is not merely an extension of caregiving but rather an active form of shaping minds, policies, and the future of the community. By occupying this position, Johanna asserts her autonomy and agency, embodying a rejection of the patriarchal norm that confines single women to subordinate roles. Her choice defies the stereotype of the unmarried woman as “a source of free labour” (Wan-lih Chang, 2015, p. 53) and reclaims celibacy as an opportunity for professional leadership and personal achievement. In this sense, Johanna’s resistance to the unmarried woman stereotype is not only about rejecting caregiving but also about challenging the broader patriarchal system that limits women’s roles. Her position as a school principal reflects her determination to lead and influence rather than be relegated to a supporting role, making her defiance of patriarchal norms a complete and mature experience that defies the phenomenon in all its complexity.

It is argued that spinsterhood is a lifestyle with significant feminist implications. According to Alison Oram (1992, p. 417), for instance, women in the period between the 1900s and the Second World War chose celibacy because it would enable them “to channel their energies into the public world of increasing employment and educational opportunities.” It is reported that in 1851, the British female population was estimated at 405,000 more than its male counterpart. This demographic reality gave rise to a growing devaluation of women with frequent use of pejorative descriptions in the press, such as “excess” or

“surplus” women (Jeffreys, 2019, p. 87). Some commentators like William Rathbone (Greg, 1869, p. 37) even went as far as to suggest the implementation of a policy of emigration as a solution to this demographic imbalance:

We must restore by an emigration of women that natural proportion between the sexes in the old country and in the new ones, which was disturbed by an emigration of men, and the disturbance of which has wrought so much mischief in both lands ... The first difficulty is chiefly mechanical. It is not easy to convey a multitude of women across the Atlantic or to the Antipodes by any ordinary means or transit. To transport the half million from where they are redundant to where they are wanted, at an average of fifty passengers to each ship, would require 10,000 vessels, or at least 10,000 voyages.

According to Sheila Jeffreys (2019, p. 88), women in Victorian Britain, in reaction to this general misogynistic appreciation of the overpopulation of women in comparison to men, deliberately opted for celibacy “because they regarded marriage as a form of humiliating slavery and dependence upon men.” Johanna exemplifies this feministic appropriation of spinsterhood. By willingly and shamelessly choosing neither to marry nor to bear children and opting for a self-realising career, she not only defies her society’s demonising vision of spinsterhood but also opens a venue to question the over-appraisal of the married woman.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Only Ever Yours* and *After the Silence* reveals that O’Neill’s writing goes beyond the exploration of sexual violence and the critique of the oppressive and objectifying discourses of the beauty and fashion industry. O’Neill’s writing is deeply rooted in the Irish women’s fiction tradition of critiquing the spinster stereotype. O’Neill portrays singleness not as a failure or deficit but as a socially constructed site of shame and control that demands interrogation. By using anachronistic settings, O’Neill demonstrates that the cultural rejection of single women persists despite Ireland’s progression into a more feminist and secular society. Her depiction of Inisrún in *After the Silence* and the Euro-Zone in *Only Ever Yours* blurs the boundaries

between past and present, warning that old patriarchal ideologies endure beneath new social veneers. In both novels, singleness is still perceived as a threat to the normative social order that must be corrected, erased, or rendered invisible. However, O'Neill does not stop at critique. Through characters like Isabel and Johanna, O'Neill reclaims singleness as a potential site of agency and resistance. From her refusal to conform to society's prescribed female identities to her tragic pursuit of singleness, Isabel becomes an accurate figure of resistance as she not only exposes the brutal coercion behind the celebration of wifehood but also shatters the vision of singleness as inherently undesirable. Johanna offers a more pragmatic, lived form of resistance by unapologetically embracing her unmarried and childless identity while pursuing a leadership role in her community. Both characters challenge the internalised and institutionalised phobia of the single woman and model the possibility of female fulfilment outside of marriage. Ultimately, O'Neill reframes singlehood not as a symptom of failure but as a conscious mode of life based on self-love and self-confidence. Her fiction continues the subversive tradition of Irish women's fiction while speaking urgently to contemporary audiences still navigating the cultural pressures of romantic fulfilment. Thus, O'Neill expands the feminist conversation on gender and identity, encouraging a reimagining of singleness as a valid and even empowering mode of womanhood in the twenty-first century.

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