Chapter Five

Dissolution of Ethical Boundaries
Edna O’Brien seems to be preoccupied with everyday life in the late capitalist society, which is dominated by superficial pleasures and moral degradation. She depicts life style and culture of postmodernity in many of her novels, but she does so most extensively in her novel *Night*.

*Night* is symptomatic of the postmodern condition, a condition in which consumer, cynical culture has made human life meaningless. It is devoid of any attachments, values and relations. Life in such a world consists of a series of debaucheries, and that is the case with Mary Hooligan too, the protagonist in *Night*. Her lonely existence and her habit of killing time in inaction and in having reveries reflects her postmodern condition. The narrative focuses on revealing Mary’s thoughts which most often revolve around the relationships she has had with a variety of men. Her relationships with her various paramours do not show any emotional attachment, they are purely physical on both sides. There is no feeling of guilt involved in such shallow and
temporary relationships because every emotion is meaningless in the postmodern world, as Mary once says, “I will laugh or I will cry. There is little difference.”

Night starts with a paragraph which speaks in bizarre contradictions. It says, “One fine day in the middle of the night, two dead men got up to fight” and as the paragraph moves on, it only becomes more incomprehensible. Also one fails to understand the connection between “Milestones, tombstones, whetstones” (7), except that all have stones as the suffix and serves only as a play of words. The use of words for their own sake and without any ulterior signification is a common stylistic feature of postmodernist fiction. Such “literary works ... take pleasure in ‘playing’ with language for its own sake rather than with a moralistic or realistic purpose.”

Subsequently the non sequitur narrator begins to talk again in terms of contradictions. She talks of a life which is “Felt, seen, heard” and yet “not fully felt, most meagrely seen, scarcely heard at all” (7).

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1 Edna O’Brien, Night, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1974, p.46. All the page numbers given subsequently in the parentheses are from the same edition.
2 Tim Woods, Beginning Postmodernism, p.10.
Mary Hooligan is in the bed, it is night and she is struggling to sleep. She has seen better times, “halcyon days” (7), and had such a taste for feelings, but now her feelings for her mother Lil and any other woman or any other person, for that matter, are the same. She is on the outskirts of a city and hears owls howling and the motion of cars at a distance. In order to pass time she tries to count sheep, and then she thinks of counting apples, and leaves the idea as too tiresome. She thinks about the cruelty of passing time, “Buckets of time”. She thinks of men, and she has met a lot of them, of all variety and types “the cretins, the pilgrims, the scholars and the scaly-eyed bards” (8) and most of them were anonymous.

By now we know that Night is about reveries, musings, and memories of a woman during a certain night. She is alone, and in the postmodern world people cannot be otherwise, they are isolated and on their own whatever be the condition. She cannot sleep and hence is at the mercy of her unleashed roaming mind. Her memories of the past come in most random and haphazard manner but nevertheless they tell us something about her. Many times her thoughts take her back to
Coose, her native place and Lil- her mother, Tutsie- her son, and to the thought of running to collect clothes when the ferocious winds would strike. Some of her memories of the past and the associations brought up by them are short and bizarre. They do not make much sense, expect that they tell most painfully about the life which is essentially lonely and in which one should give up the idea of hope altogether, as she says, “Maybe I want to be by myself at last and to be robbed of that stupid, suppurating malady they call hope” (11).

She remembers once posting a letter to her dead mother asking her to guess about the colour of her innards, but remembers after posting the letter that her mother had died recently. This leads her to recollect her mother’s funeral event, which is an example of postmodern farce. She has no emotions of loss and sorrow at her mother’s funeral. Digging of earth reminds her of moles and sprites and their “intricate routes and conduits” (18). Then she remembers the bicycle which she and the other mourners saw standing against a tree and the mourners indulging in all kinds of absurd guesses as to why it was there. Mary recalls seeing a stripling with matchless eyes, who
seeing the coffin and the mourners, asks whose funeral was going on, and on this Mary Hooligan behaves in the most bizarre and unexpected way. In the bed she remembers:

At the crucial moment I made an ape of myself, behaved in the following manner. I jumped in, prostrated myself, bawled, and woe betide, a second, a more ludicrous disaster, I sprained my ankle. I need hardly tell you of the furore that ensued. Excitement craned its head. Maybe that is why I jumped in, to leaven the occasion. I doubt it. I lack the talent for instigating comedy. They put it down to grief. Some said a seizure, some said cracked, some said highly strung. (18)

This episode can be understood only in terms of what Jameson terms as the “schizophrenic art”, in which the repudiation of meaning leads to scenes, words, and emotions of “schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.”³ For him “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality

in the most literal sense, [is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms.”

After the burial they sit to eat and cherish the ham and potato salad. There being not enough chairs made the scenario more grotesque, mourners sitting on the edges of chairs, engrossed with cutting and eating ham, whereas “the catsup was thin and scalding and restraint was not executed in the pouring of it” (19).

Mary remembers her mother’s long illness. Her mother, Lil “swallowed with agony, to hear her swallow was to have pity for her, the stitches under her throat, jabb[ed] like needles” (20). Not only this but Lil also haemorrhaged a lot. At times when the pain got less or the morphine got more she prayed, and at times she admitted that she was losing her faith. Yet Mary was not willing to nurse her mother during her serious illness, she went to nurse her grudgingly, and meanwhile would think of and plan for Christmas holidays. Understanding that her daughter wants to leave her, her eyes would become like “daggers asking not to go, not, not to go” (22). Lil would rave as her daughter

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4 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p.9.
would do nothing to soothe her, even when she knew what bothered her mother. Mary is completely dehumanized by the postmodern social forces.

As Mary leaves the memories of her mother’s illness and her funeral behind, she thinks of different methods of killing time which are both pathetic and funny. For some time she kills time with a feather “I twirl it and it responds. I blow on it, and it responds. Nice when something responds” (25). Then she kills her time by squinting and seeing its effects on the wallpaper. Then her thoughts go to her lovers, she thinks may be it is because of a certain Nick that she cannot sleep. Although now lovers do not knock at her door, but she thinks that she has had a fair share of lovers. She has had “A motley crew, [of] all shades, dimensions, breeds, ilks, national characteristics, inflammatingness, and penetratingness” (27).

Mary remembers how once Nick, his wife and she herself were at a dance floor. Nick and Mary were dancing and Nick’s wife came to separate them “prancing about like an old lioness. ... then ousting [Mary] out of place she tried levering herself on to him. ...She started to
undress. He commenced on [Mary’s] necklaces, started untugging. ...[they] were no longer dancers, [they] were performers, three, at each other”. But in this performance Nick’s wife is a loser as he “flicked her in the air and unerringly she came down” (28). In the end she allowed Mary and Nick to be together. Mary has no remorse for betraying another woman; in fact she “wouldn’t mind living it all over again” (29). This is not the only relationship with men based on utter debauchery and only sexual in nature, in the postmodern world, Mary Hooligan is adept at having a series of such relationships and without any remorse, without any dream, for ‘real’, ‘true’, ‘everlasting’ love or relationship.

One of her night reveries leads her to the thought of her first sexual encounter, with a man from city. This was a one-night stand and that too on St Peter and St Paul’s day, i.e. on the holy day of obligation. Afterwards she quietly, without letting anybody know, goes to London for an abortion. Next comes the memory of Maurice P Moriarty, who spends some time with her, but he eventually leaves on the pretext that he is going to buy cigarettes and never comes back. This in turn led her
to the reverie of an occasion when she was with a duke in some restaurant. There she gets impressed by a waiter. When they -Mary and the waiter- see each other, it gets decided between them that they have to have a liaison. So Mary feigns a headache and gets rid of the duke, with whom her relationship is nothing more than give and take. She says that I “stroke his forehead, do a bit of palming as we called it. That was one of my favours, that and donning suspenders, in return for which I got treats, dinners, bunches of flowers and numerous little bottles of bath essence” (42-3).

Back at home Mary is expecting the waiter, her desire is purely sexual and nothing else. It distresses her when this waiter starts to talk about his difficult life, his poverty and his struggle, instead of some sweet love talk. Mary kept on trying to stop him and asked questions about libido, but he still kept on talking about his deceased father and his illness. Meanwhile Mary begins to notice the nails of his hands, which are black and soft. She slowly loses all her desire for him, tells him to leave and threatens him that her lover, who is a gangster, might do some harm. But “He knelt, he crawled, he imprecated, he dribbled,
he slobbered” (45). He begs her to have the act; eventually Mary agrees and grants his request. He leaves while Mary attends to herself without any trace of compunction.

When it is not about the liaisons, it is about such events which are nightmarish, surreal and subhuman. In one such incident Mary meets a young man while she had gone out, she sees in him a nice catch and invites him for tea. Mary prepares her house for his arrival, but this young man arrives with a girl named Daphne. Both sit and eat at her place, Mary pretends to be nice, although she is disappointed that she missed her chance. At one point Daphne is seen by Mary seducing the man, at other point, when he is showing his etchings and snap shots, Daphne is swinging from the ceiling. Soon afterwards the man and Daphne start to make love in the presence of Mary, who says that “One of my tasks was to undress her for him” while the room gets filled by their “vapours ..., so gentle, so pervasive like stream” (56).

He keeps her asking about rich people and horses, and keeps treating Daphne cruelly. Then Mary reconciles them by making them to sit together and make love. They start making love the second time in
the short stay at Mary’s house and Mary again assists them, guides them by lying next to them and getting a little pleasure for herself also. Soon after this act the man leaves and the two women begin to have a good time. They open up to each other, begin to share and sympathize. Daphne proposes that they will be friends for life, they would be like sisters and she would open a stall and Mary would be her partner. Mary is very happy about this event in her life, she even wants to thank God that she met such people only to find out that she had been robbed off her salary, which she had kept in her purse.

Two days after the theft episode, Mary Hooligan finds herself posing nude for a group of artists. She had to sit “lotus wise” on a tea-chest which was very prickly, “surpassing even the old horsehair sofa” (59). She still feels that there are many splinters left intact in her skin and nobody to weed them out. She had to stay like a wall painting before the artists, even if the “leader” kicked her with his corduroy slipper. After hours of staying still, the supervisor was not happy with the outcome of what his students had sketched and he tells the students to move in on her. The leader again misbehaves with Mary giving a bit
of jolt to her pelvic bone. Not only that but even the amateur artists are also every rude to her. Mary Hooligan does not protest; after all she will be paid for it. She bears her plight by letting her thoughts wander around such diverse topics as Lil-her mother, fallopian tubes, Holy Moses and haemorrhage. But then all of a sudden she starts yelling at the leader, “Don’t ye baw’ at me”. She involuntarily gets up and continues to shout and hurl abuses at him. Due to this outburst she is thrown out with her clothes after her and without a penny for her “excruciating services”. The horrid event does not end here. The leader comes out with an instrument and threatens to abuse her, where upon she runs down the street naked and yelling “Don’t ye baw’ at me” (62). It is sad that Mary does not protest her commodification and even when she leaves, it is too late.

This scene is very important in terms of the postmodernist critique. Here “the postmodern strategy of parodic use and abuse of mass-culture representations of women … work to disrupt any passive consumption of such images.”5 This feminist postmodernist parody of

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nude tradition in the mass and elitist culture de-naturalizes the representation of women. This de-naturalizing points to the maleness of the gaze, that turns “‘looking’ as a morbid activity engaged in by men to the detriment of women, who are reduced consequently to mere objects of voyeuristic attention.”

The next reverie is about her stay in Liverpool, where she shared her room with other three lodgers, a shy girl called Maid, a bossy lady called Moira and a man who believed that he was going to become a count. It was there that she had meet Dr Flaggler, her future husband. After this memory her thoughts lead her once more to the memory of one of her sexual adventures, which happens to be a recent one. She meets this new man in a park and tells him directly, “I’d like to sleep with you” (68). The next thing is that Mary reaches his home, sleeps with him, which she describes as having “no forgetfulness in it or no spark”. Afterwards she goes clownishly to the bathroom to wash herself off, thinking of cows and their composure. In the bathroom, she feels disappointed with the act and thinks “I hadn’t played enough. I hadn’t

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played at all, I’d simply participated the way he wanted” (70). Even in the postmodern world, which has liberated those at the margins, women continue to have compromised subjectivity. Mary Hooligan thinks that she needs practice and perhaps she is not happy with the episode, perhaps it did not went the way she wanted, that is why she says, “There was a great boulder in my chest [and] I wanted to [be]… ridded of all life’s paraphernalia” (71).

Next she remembers her husband, Dr Flaggler and the trip they had taken across some European parts and during which the friction between them had mounted so much that Mary knew that separation was inevitable. On that trip across Brussels, she meets a young courier, very smarmy. They decide to meet in the woods. But it turns into a fiasco, as her husband Dr Flagger comes to know about her plans somehow and he locks both of them (Mary and himself) in a little wooden bedroom. What was worse it was very hot inside. Later on when they are taken up to a mountain, Mary thinks about escaping, “I was in a fog that was vast, a great marquee into which everything and everyone got absorbed. I thought how simple, how elementary, to ditch
him up there, to vamoose” (86). She starts to run into the horizon and escape but then she hears that the tour party is looking for her, so she has to return. Soon afterwards their relationship ends in a public conveyance.

Similarly Mary Hooligan’s relationship with a duke, whom she had met in a café is not an abiding one. She describes their first meeting as a recreation because of the “wine, the company, and all that epicurean guff” (88). The duke admits to be a sensualist and entices Mary to come to his place, and she is too happy about it. But this relationship also breaks up, gets “keyboshed, like so many others, like all the others” (89). Although it started with fabulous courtship, it ended on a supper party to which he had brought her. There a highlander asked her out to a balcony and asked what she did. Mary replied that she was a “lady of leisure” (94), but before she could go out with him to a balcony or to a night club, the duke comes in and the highlander has to go and look for his pleasures elsewhere. To her utter surprise, duke proposes her very solemnly. Mary freezes at listening to his proposal because she has no faith in the social norm called
marriage. Besides she does not believe in long term relationships nor can she stick to any commitment. She has no purpose in her life and as such she is given into “hedonism, playfulness, individualism and living for the moment.” Mary straightforwardly rejects the duke’s marriage proposal, he tries to coax her, without any success. As a last attempt, he tells her, “But soon you will be on the shelf”, to which Mary bluntly replies “So will you”. In the end it turns out that the duke was in no position to marry as he had a wife to come to terms with. Mary thought that the duke was a man after her own heart, because he too was a “fancifier” (95).

After the duke, Mary begins to think of her next Romeo, a Finn. She goes to the sea with him and enjoys the time with him even when she knows that he is married. When he leaves, she goes to Spain to meet him where he is with his wife. In a hotel Mary sends him (the Finn) a note. She gets the reply from his wife who writes that her husband is away and he might be back perhaps next week or perhaps not. This leaves Mary with no other choice than to go back to her

home. After some time she starts receiving letters by Finn which repeatedly mention that he might come to visit Mary the next time. This ‘next time’ never comes. So Mary writes him back most bluntly, “If I said I loved you, dismiss it. … It was all lies, junk. … Forget it, Buster” (102).

At one point she thinks that she can hardly sustain to remain awake in bed, revering for the rest of the night, but there is nothing else she can do, so she slips again in thinking about her past life. She remembers how as a young girl she had gone to America to promote Coose, and remembers the taxi driver José and buying of quails eggs and then meeting a woman in a pub and coaxing her to eat one of the eggs. Between all these insignificant memories Mary becomes serious and mulls about how things are changing. “One has to admit that things are thinning out, handshakes getting more limp, birthdays getting forgotten or ignored, people dying or emigrating to Australia, people going bonkers, or taking umbrage for the remainder of their lives” (108).
Mary remembers Madge with whom she once shared a flat. Mary wanted companionship, she “craved to stay with someone, … to have chats and unions in the evening” (108). But like relationships with men relationships with women are also doomed in the postmodern world for want of any abiding stability. Madge picks a quarrel with Mary on a silly point and does not limit herself to verbal abuse only, she hits and punches Mary. Mary has to leave; while leaving she gets a fake farewell.

Mary’s last revere before the daybreak is the memory when she goes to her native place Coose. She goes to her parental house and meets her father Boss; both of them remain sullen, their presence to each other hardly matters. The next day they decide to go to a cousin “who had had a bereavement,” and they decide to “scrounge the tea out of him” (117). Marty, the cousin they visited was not able to reply or respond when they tried to sympathize with him.

At last Mary gets up, after the long sleepless night full of reveries. She moves around with a feeling that she has a “liking for everything” (120), only to find out a telegram informing that the
owners of the house, where she was working as a care-taker were returning. At that point in her life she felt that everything was slipping away from her. She has to part with everything, Tig, Jonathan, Boss, Lil and believes that “It is time for memory to expire” (121). But as a truly postmodern citizen she does not give in to pessimism and has the determination to live “before the all-embracing dark descends” (122).

In O’Brien’s other novel The High Road the depiction of postmodern culture is not as extensive as it is in the Night, in which it serves as one of the major themes. Nevertheless The High Road gives a peep into postmodern society in three vignettes.

In the late capitalist society or in the age of postmodernity there is no place for religion. In The High Road when Anna cannot find Catalina, she feels downcast but she does not deliberately go to church for solace. She is just walking aimlessly and eventually finds herself going up to the church, “entering, genuflecting, uttering childish prayers in a sing-song, distracted voice, that was devoid of devotion”. Church in itself has lost all the aura of sacrament. Anna comments, “Without the phalanx of accusing women I saw the various statues as
fading and grotesque testaments to gore and suffering.” Elsewhere she compares lips of a woman to a prayer book, “Her lips were thin and met tightly like the leaves of a prayerbook” (120).

Religion or preaching of religion has lost all the sincerity of heart and has become merely a business practice. When Anna goes to a priest, she is surprised to see the priest’s door to be opened by a boy on roller-skates, and when she enters she sees a party is in progress. There she sees a boy “had put a hand over the priest’s eyes to stop his seeing something on television. On the screen, in a black and white film, a couple were kissing” (165). The priest is described by Anna as no longer young, and it becomes obvious to her that his appearance mattered greatly to him. He wore a brunette toupee that was lighter and finer than his own hair. Anna has come to ask to have a Mass said and wants the priest to exonerate her and Catalina publically. For this service Anna has the money ready. The priest accepts it without any qualms. After taking a huge amount of money for agreeing to announce in a mass that Anna and Catalina are innocent and pure, the priest asks

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8 Edna O’Brien, *The High Road*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989, p. 119. All the page numbers given subsequently in the parentheses are from the same edition.
Anna if she wants him to hear her confession. Anna without thinking what to say says she is ready. Before hearing her confession the priest makes himself formally ready for the ceremony by donning a purple stole over his turtle-neck sweater. As Anna starts muttering something, her “absurd spectacle” (166) of kneeling before the priest makes kids to laugh and get amused, while the priest becomes quite theatrical as he spouts the absolution.

The other episode shows the superficial life of a woman, named Iris through the eyes of her abandoned son, Andy. Anna happens to be at Iris’s place and by chance plays a record, which had been recorded by Andy before committing suicide. Andy says of his mother: “You were so busy, mother, with your lovers, your secretaries, your dressmakers, your charities, your friends and your art collection”. Iris would never get time to meet Andy, to talk to him, even his Christmas presents would be laid there in his room without his mother handling them to him. His mother would be busy all the time; she would have appointments for lunch, and then she needed siesta, and at tea-time acquaintances would come and then she would be again out as some
earl would take her out for drinks, and she would get into one of her creations, which were so many that “they would fill the Titanic”.

Iris would call her son in the morning and ask him what he would like to have for breakfast, but then would soon add in a smattering of French and English that he could have “anything so long as it did not have to be cooked” (93). In a voice already half dead, Andy utters “Too late, Mother … it’s working, eight cans of Special Brew and now the last fistful of pills … if only I knew where you were … are you at some party … or are you having an evening in … your TV supper on a tray … all I wanted was time … Ti…me” (94).

Then we have the story of Portia, who is an English debutante, “with clusters of men around her, boyfriends, ex-boyfriends” (28). Her story is the story of postmodern culture when real, personal or fabricated stories are sold to newspapers to make money. In such a world money is the only god. Real is reel and reel is real, the whole world a place of debauchery and deception.
Portia is going to get married to Pirate, but she already fears that he will not turn up for the marriage. She thinks that pirate’s mother, who “thought Portia [was] a nymphomaniac and called her Miss Slut” (30), was against their marriage. Actually Pirate himself was not interested in Portia, perhaps because he was gay. He had a relationship with Portia’s father, “He had done it in the grotto and she had come on them, with their pants down” (34). When Portia and Pirate are married, “they were met by bevy of photographers and journalists”. She was asked questions on her honeymoon plans and where she would have breakfast, and in the end, “She allowed herself to be weaned of the name of the hotel and sent flocks of cameramen flurrying to the one available phone booth, to give the first part of their story while promising a torrid second” (31). Portia tells the driver to do a bunk in order to get rid of the paparazzi. Soon after official marriage, Pirate leaves and does not turn up. In fact he never comes back; just after getting married he slips to Amsterdam. The radiant photographs of Portia and startled Pirate are all flashed in the morning newspaper, the news that Pirate has gone straight to Amsterdam is also flashed.
Initially Portia is desperately “downing goblets of the sparkling wine” and calls her husband “the biggest shit in the world” (32). This setback does not last long. Soon Portia is absolutely fine and swears that “she would screw [Pirate] for money, every last penny”, and would sell “her story to the newspapers” and in selling her story she was determined that “There was nothing she would not tell, both what happened between the sheets and in the back rows of the cinemas, which was the only place he could get it up” (34).

In no time Portia again resumes her way of life. She is “back to the various haunts, making little jokes about herself and Pirate being so scatty they had gone on the spur of the moment to the Registry office, having been on their way to market to buy flowers” (34). Not only this, in no time she also picks up another man, Martin. After getting a divorce from Pirate, Portia marries Martin and “In every paper the next day Portia was kissing Martin or about to kiss Martin” (35). But as happens in the postmodern world, this marriage also does not work.