Chapter Three

Edna O’Brien’s Position as a Postmodernist Novelist
*House of Splendid Isolation* strikes as a postmodernist novel primarily due to its form, which can be compared to a collage painting as it does not adhere to any linear sequence of events. In this regard Michael Harris writes:

…the novel is suggestive of pastiche in its almost random juxtaposition of diary entries, snippets of poems, a children’s fable, Irish mythology, a 1921 IRA volunteer’s journal, and personal notes (included without any introduction) interspersed throughout its short, staccato sections of narrative. These italicized insertions make it difficult to fit the story within the framework of a known history, a defamiliarizing strategy often employed in postmodernist fiction. The narrative itself proceeds achronologically through fragmented bits and pieces that the reader must fit together.¹

The novel starts with a one page section entitled “The Child”. It is not immediately or even later on clear how this outside of time, unknown first person piece of narrative stands in relation to the rest of

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the work. The voice talks musically and incoherently of history replete with battles and bloodshed among other miscellaneous disjoint things, and then at the end of this short narrative comes a kind of prophesy concerning the battle between Orangemen and Irish army, in which Irish army will win, the voice says that such a thing is written “in the books.”

Such an opening can be nothing but postmodernist. We do not know who the speaker is, or for that matter what is exactly spoken and what is its purport. It speaks in riddles, about such diverse things as history, wilderness of the place, music in the winds, battles, witches, love for one’s land and Irish army defeating Orangemen. This section is a postmodernist work of pastiche-pastiche in thought and style.

The second section titled “The Present” is a variegation of scenes. It is a patch work, a mishmash of many scenes reminding us of the cinematic techniques of camera being shifted from one place to another in a haphazard manner; though this time we can discern a theme. The first scene is about McGreevy, a runaway IRA militant,

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2 Edna O’Brien, *House of Splendid Isolation*, London: Phoenix, 1995, p.4. All the subsequent page numbers given in the parentheses are from the same edition. Where needed, the title will be abbreviated as HS.
who is being searched by police, while he is hiding in a hollow tree. This scene abruptly shifts to the home of Sheila and Rory. Rory, a policeman gets alarmed and disturbed at the news that a terrorist has escaped. Then again we are taken back to McGreevy who sees a cow in labour, and he helps her with delivery. The next fragmented section inserted is about Iain and Roger, in which Roger is asking some money from Iain. We are also given a peep into Teresa’s talk with the guard. She is reporting how McGreevy took her on gun point in her van in order to take him to a certain place. She is afraid that she might be taken as an accomplice. The last fragment of this section is about Josie, who had caught pneumonia and is now shifted back to her home. A nurse visits her. Josie badly wants that the nurse should give her some company. We come to know that Josie is no longer young, and she is all alone in the big house.

The first two sections of the novel *House of Splendid Isolation* are totally different from each other as if they are sections of two different works. The first section is barely more than a page, telling us nothing much definite about anything, then the next section is bigger and simultaneously telling about many stories. Still we can say that
despite these differences they have some similarities too, i.e. disjointedness and fragmentation.

The first section shows us random slides, most briefly, generally and distantly, then in the second section we are zoomed in and brought closer to some particular events and people. The third section veers us in an entirely different direction from the first two. It takes us to the past of Josie O’Meara. In all it consists of fourteen episodes. Some as short as consisting of only a paragraph and some quite long consisting of a few pages. This section tells us mainly about Josie’s past, her marriage with James and the subsequent bitterness between them. But this is done in the most fragmented way and with little time reference except the fact that at one point Josie and James have been married for nine months. There is no clue, when Josie gets with the child, when Paud comes, when James dies and at that time for how many years they had been married. In all the fourteen sections only some parts of four episodes contribute significantly to Josie’s past. Out of these four episodes, the first one reveals Josie’s coming as a bride to James’ house. The eighth one shows that nine months have passed and James abuses Josie and gets drunk a lot. The tenth one tells that Josie goes to a
doctor for an abortion and the thirteenth one shows how James gets killed accidentally by a sergeant, who comes to know from Josie that Paud is hiding some arms in their field. Other episodes that deal with Josie and James are all of insignificant nature. For example, the little hunting episode, in which James and Mick hunt rabbits and place them before Josie. Some episodes are about Brid (Josie’s maid) and Percy (Brid’s boyfriend) and one episode is out of place, dealing with a gipsy girl. The placing of episodes in this baffling pattern adheres to the postmodern literary technique. The narrative style is also what can be termed as postmodernist. At times direct quotes of characters are included and at times the anonymous narrator tells about one thing or the other in a random manner, sometimes giving important information and sometimes nothing significant is conveyed. The narration jumps liberally from one topic to other, rather in a u-turn.

In the section “Captivity” the narrative shifts again to the present – this time to the present of Josie, who is in her bed recovering from her illness, and her thoughts flit from “the old days”, and “all-night card games at Christmas” (57) to the horses that James bred and which led to his ruin and to the memory of her husband’s parents’ death.
Following this, McGreevy gets in her house and a few minutes later into her room, questioning her about everything. After he feels satisfied that Josie’s house is safe for hiding, he plans to stay for seven days till “it will be done but as with every job he can’t think it done until it is done” (62-3). Ironically this threat to her life, instead of weakening her, infuses new life into her. Josie who had been too weak to hobble down the stairs was now dragging the chest of drawers across the floor in order to save herself from the intrusion of McGreevy.

This section is also interpolated with other scenes. One is that of Ma Hinchy’s pub, where her twin kids have got hold of a wig. There is a lot of discussion on how the wig happened to be there and whose it could be, between Guard Flynn and Miss Cusack. Later Guard Flynn tells his colleagues that the wig must be that of the runaway terrorist and they send it to the forensic office in Dublin.

There are other interpolations also; we have in this section twice a peep into Josie’s diary, which is dateless. In her diaries there is a bit of thought about McGreevy, a bit of wanton musings like “I can only think of birds, … the widening wings going up, up and I think what it would do if it were suddenly made flightless. Sink. Sink.” (79), these
musings are reminiscent of James Joyce’s writing style. There is also a bit of feminism, “how [a woman] wants to give life, not to take it” and a bit of philosophy too, “Language to each of us is a braille that the other cannot know. Words like justice or love or bread turned inside out or outside in” (87). Then there is a volunteer’s diary, which is anonymous, and has nothing to do with any character in the story. The first entry is dated as January 23rd, 1921 and subsequently as January 29th, February, 8th March ... and the last entry is dated simply May.

There are in total eleven interpolations in this section. Three among them are of Josie’s diary, one of volunteers’ diary, one of Ma Hitchy, one of Jacko Mulcahy, one consisting of few paragraphs of Irish mythology about St Calum who died of a “pestilence known as Crom Chonai” (90), a scene about detective Horan who talks on phone about a person who is suspected as an IRA militant, one that of Aoife and her dad Rory, which is in turn interpolated with a fairy tale which Rory tells his little daughter and finally McGreevy’s letter to Josie.

Although the next section is entitled as “The Love Affair”, and we are misled into thinking that it is the love affair between Josie and McGreevy, but the subtitle alludes to the love affair of Josie with the
priest. So in some episodes we are again taken back to Josie’s past and we see Josie and Father John’s affair in passing. As for Josie’s present, she despite herself feels attracted towards McGreevy and gets a new life, new energy pumped into her and a sharpening of the senses with his arrival. It is Josie who starts conversations with him and each time she sees him, she is noticing him in detail, “What she notices is his colouring, a face bronzed” (73-4) and at other instance “She saw how strong he was and how flexed” (75). In one of her diary jottings she has written: “I see him all the time, particularly his eyes. They are amberish with specks of green in them” (97). She always notices “the fresh pink of his hands and of his face, washed and re-washed”. She has also written in her diary: “I like everything about him except what he does” (98). She fantasizes that McGreevy is trying to put through her ear a little gold sleeper, but sadly “the hole had sealed up” and she writes: “If he were to touch me, shake my hand for instance, I would jump. But he won’t touch me” (99). Her love for him is enshrined in a scene when she gives him her husband’s tackle box as a gift, at that point it seems to her that they are bound together “for a moment in that caesura of winter light, warmed by each other’s company, each other’s breaths”
(92). But McGreevy cannot commit because he has not come to her house to feel, to listen and “fall into the trap of being wooed” (93), and the same thing happens he has to go and he leaves after five days of stay. She follows him, calls him back in frenzy. In the end when Creeena tells her that “Old people know nothing about young love”, Josie can do nothing but raise her “thin bony hand ... up to interject” (120).

This section is followed by “Last Days” which deals with the Guards tracking down McGreevy. On one hand the police go for a search all over the locality and particularly to Mrs Bruke, who is a sympathizer. On the other hand Matt and Cormac are placed in a hideout, to monitor from a distance with the help of binoculars the house of Josie. When the police party is on their search they track down Brennan, one of McGreevy’s companions and shoot him. They reach McGreevy’s hideout only to find out to their dismay that McGreevy is not there, but one of his men, Cassidy, is there and they handcuff him. Strangely enough, McGreevy goes back to Josie’s place, where he is spotted by Matt and Cormac. The police are informed about it and Josie’s house is raided. McGreevy finally gets caught and Josie while trying to “remonstrate between him and them” (204) gets pathetically
killed, “Her legs and her lower half drops through the ceiling where she dangles like some grotesque trapeze artiste” (206).

The novel ends with the section “The Child”, which gives it a perfect Postmodernist ending. This section, just a little more than a page, is supposed to be narrated by a child who is not there, a child of Josie, but who is never even born. The child talks of the house, its mother and states “that the same blood and the same tears drop from the enemy as from the self” (216).

*House of Splendid Isolation* is not only postmodernist because of its non-linear, interpolated, and fragmented narrative style but due to many other characteristics also. According to M Harris, “Postmodern works are known for their open endings, gaps, unanswered questions,” and this important postmodernist characteristic is also found in *House of Splendid Isolation*. The novel is non-totalizing in nature, and as such it has many gaps, for example, it is not clear who is the ‘I’ of the first section, what is the relationship of it with the rest of narrative and why is it entitled as “The Child”? In second section “The Present” we meet Roger and Iain having some business with each other, but their

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3 Michael Harris, “Outside History: Relocation and Dislocation in Edna O’Brien’s *House of Splendid Isolation*, p. 133.
whereabouts remain unknown and their business is never mentioned again. In one episode of “The Past”, a gypsy girl mentions a missing pain of glass in the conservatory window and makes a prophesy that through the window “A man will come in and a child go out”. The gypsy girl says it twice and we cannot find its significance, neither can Josie, she herself says, “What did that mean”. Later in this episode we come to know that there is a mystery about this conservatory window, about which James had said that it gets “smashed year after year not by any human hand but by a hand unseen” (41). This mystery is neither solved nor mentioned again in the novel.

In the section “Captivity”, McGreevy decides to stay for seven days till a deed will be done, but in the time in which he stays at Josie’s place he does nothing, no planning and no action. Then there is the episode of Jakko Mulcahy, who is mentioned only in one episode. This episode or the character Jakko Mulcahy is not in any way connected with the story line of the novel. Jakko Mulcahy is shown in a cruiser, he talks of Sir Roland and talks to his dog Nellie. Similarly one can say that the paragraphs of Irish mythology about St Calum and St Caimin are incorporated for nothing.
At the end of this section Josie runs after McGreevy to call him back, while chasing him she herself does not know “What she wanted really” (115).

In the section “The Love Affair”, Josie goes to meet Father John, they have a rendezvous. After waiting for a long time it dawns upon her that he is not coming, she goes back to her home disappointed having no “rose-memory now” and feeling an “awful depletingness” (134). But then in one episode Josie remembers Father John “arriving at the fateful moment when they met by the ruined cottage” and throwing “caution to the wind, his hand like a web drawing itself over hers, fingers plaiting” (141). These two episodes are antithetical, so much so that we do not know whether Father John came on that particular day or not.

In the section “Last Days”, it is shown that McGreevy is with his other companions in a hide- out and it is planned that they have to assassinate an English judge, but suddenly McGreevy leaves the hideout and goes back to Josie’s mansion. We do not know “What want in him has brought him back? Why had not he stayed in that shed” (182-3). Also why does Josie not inform the police about McGreevy
when Cassidy informed her that McGreevy was sorry about something he wanted to do, implicating the assassination he was going to carry out. Instead she goes to Mrs. Bruke and Creena who cannot betray McGreevy and Josie knows that.

One explanation of including episodes like Fairy Tale, mythology or pages of an anonymous diary might be an attempt to include little narratives, which are an end in themselves and hence not contributing or leading to the grand narrative.

One of the elements of postmodernist fiction is that it is anti-teleological in nature, i.e. “possessing no overall design or universal plan; resistant to totalisation or universalisation.”

We can see that there is no search for unified underlying reality or quest for metanarratives in O’Brien’s fiction. If we take Edna O’Brien’s writing style into consideration, not only in the *House of Splendid Isolation*, but also in *The High Road, Night* and *Down by the River*, it is fragmented and disrespecting chronology. These novels are written in, what can be called as ‘little narratives’, i.e. small episodes that are an end in themselves. As such, these little narratives either resist or do not lead to

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4 Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p. 4-5.
a single explanation of reality, morality or truth. Hence the contradictions, moral questions and the need for judgment that are raised in these novels do not get resolved. For example, *Down by the River* tugs

the reader along at suspense thriller speed, it bounces among short scenes, flashing the story at the reader in jugged glimpses of horror comparable to the shifting photography of television news, even as the fervent language transforms each scene into a small story or lyric poem.\(^5\)

As mentioned above these small stories or lyrical poems resist the movement towards totalization.

_Down by the River_ is a novel about such serious issues as incest, rape and abortion. It makes us confront the pathetic situation of a teenage girl forced by the State to carry on a forced and unwanted pregnancy. As such it remains a novel which forces on making an ethical judgment both on the part of the writer and on the part of the reader. But Edna O’Brien nowhere in her narrative gives an overarching theory, so that we as readers cannot “construct a grand

\(^5\) Charlotte Innes, “review” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, p. 227.
narrative that will account for the complexities of guilt and victimization in the novel, or legitimize any general criteria of ethical or political judgment.”

Similarly *House of Splendid Isolation* “articulates no single, pre-determined ideological perspective; instead, it allows us to engage in a reading process of constructing various, inescapably ideological explanations of characters’ acts.” The narrative style of *House of Splendid Isolation*, which incorporates several interpolations, snatches of poems, diary jottings, and Irish myth, also makes this novel polyvoiced. This typical “postmodernism’s obsession with fragments or fractures is a resistance to the totalizing system which seeks to explain everything under a single rubric.” This strategy used in the novel shows the relativeness of truth. The understanding of reality is one thing for the IRA terrorist-McGreevy and something else for Rory and the police squad who want to hunt him down. No preference is shown for any type of ideology, everyone talks for themselves, so that we have different viewpoints from different people on the plight of Ireland.

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7 Ibid.
The real Irish post-partition political scenario is dealt with, in detail in *House of Splendid Isolation*, in which every contrary voice is allowed to speak for itself. For example, McGreevy says that he wants “to get the British out of Ireland”, and by that achieve “justice for all. Peace. Personal identity. Racial identity” (HS 77). For him, no matter what others believe, it is wrong that the British army is in their streets. He asks Josie, “What do you think would happen if Irish soldiers patrolled their streets and their shires?” (HS 191) But Matt believes differently, he believes that ‘these guys are without conscience, without ideals and with only one proclamation, money and guns and murder, guns and money” (HS 187). Once Josie calls McGreevy and people like him as “maggots”, she says to him, “that is what you are, you and your lot with, homilies about justice... peace and dignity” (HS 110). Josie thinks that “politics ha(s) become a racket, [of] hijacking, robberies [and] mindless assassinations” (HS 54).

Although some critics have found that Edna O’Brien’s works depict “nihilism and violence generated by existing social and symbolic
order,”⁹ but she does not give a remedy for this existing nihilism, nor does her sympathies lie with her female characters, may it be Eily Ryan, Catalina or Josie. We cannot see any standardized theory in her works. This has led to the:

Reluctance of feminist literary critics to engage with O’Brien’s work … [because], Anglo-American feminist literary criticism is still, predominantly concerned with defining contemporary feminist texts as those that contain significant gender identification. O’Brien’s writing … fails to qualify through its representation of women’s social and political powerlessness with no apparent attempt to analyse those conditions.¹⁰

In The High Road there is no straightforward assertion that women should try to be homosocial, i.e. women should bond with other women. Even up to the end we are not sure whether Anna and Catalina have any solid bond between them or not, because up to the very end both women desire the relationship with men. Catalina, in spite of being a maverick elopes and leaves her job for a man. Besides this thematic ambiguity, the “nonconsecutive form”, “and a series of

more or less free-standing narratives”, “[put] usual notions of meaning in question,”11 making the novels’ meaning fluid and relative.

Similarly in *Johnny I Hardly Knew you*, the motive of Nora’s crime is never reached at. The question why she killed Hart, when he had an epileptic attack cannot be answered. We are tempted to make connection that it might be because Nora wants to take revenge on men, because she feels that she has always been a victim of men, “Haven’t I always been attending to a him, and dancing attendance upon a him, and being slave to a him and being trampled on by a him?”12 And in avenging herself she wants to avenge all of “Us Gerties, us Nancies, us Dellas, us Kittys, us Kathleens” (J 92). So in Hart, Nora kills the symbol of man. But the question still remains that why Nora doesn’t kill any other brutal man she had met in her life. Why she killed a good, innocent, young boy, half her age. The anti-totalizing element is kept, for Nora throughout the novel keeps on stressing that she does not know why she killed Hart, “I do not know why” (J7) and she keeps telling the readers that she really loved Hart.

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Not only the narrative style and the thematic component of Edna O’Brien’s fiction follow anti-totalization, but the characters in her fiction also defy totalization. In her fiction the treatment of male characters is very complex. They are “portrayed as victims, as well as victimizers.” In the Forest reflects “the cultural contexts of [both] the slayer and the slain” with equal detachedness. O’Brien remains completely unbiased in showing that Eily Ryan (or Imelda Riney) is not the only victim, but Mich O’Kane (or Brendan O’Donnell) is himself also a victim of brutalization by the community he lives in. His family, his society, the orphanages he is sent to, all fail him. At a tender age he is brutalized by the older boys and sexually assaulted by a priest, who ought to have taken care of him. All these things are responsible for transforming Mick O’Kane from a ‘country boy’ into a ‘Kinderschrek’. All these social factors make him what he has become.

James Macnamara in Down by the River is another character, who despite his despicable act of raping his daughter, is not portrayed as a monster. He is himself “a victim of social and symbolic orders along

with his daughter.”¹⁵ James shows great tenderness and dedication in helping a mare to deliver a foal, “With a taut and terrible delicacy, as if it is a child that he is assisting into the world.”¹⁶ At that moment Mary recognizes “that if she could be a child, maybe if she can be truly a child and make her needs known, he can feel as a father” (DR 71).

Again James McGreevy is a hugely contradictory character. He is an amalgam of a wide spectrum of shades, good, bad, human, mythical, making it impossible to know who really is McGreevy. He is always reported differently. Some associate McGreevy with Christ, for some he is the “reincarnation of Cuchulain,”¹⁷ for Josie “he is decorousness itself” and yet for some his name “represents the most vile violent psychopath” (HS 99). We as readers also cannot decide for ourselves the nature of McGreevy. He is a man who has “twenty murders if not more to his name” and one who held a girl on a gun point “made her drive him fifty miles, then putting tape over her mouth and leaving her in the middle of nowhere handcuffed, with four flat tyres” (HS 106). At one point McGreevy is presented in a very poor light rather as an

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animal. When he is reported to have said to a little girl (Aoife) that “he was starving, he’d eat a young child” (HS 100). But for Cormac “he was a model prisoner… Made no trouble at all… Did the sewing for the others, sewed on buttons and patched their jeans…” (HS 184). Also when McGreevy sees a cow in labour, he helps the cow to deliver the calf. This shows the human side of an otherwise ‘dangerous’ and ‘inhuman’ terrorist.

Such anti-totalizing portrayal of characters “urges readers to see all the characters as unique human beings rather than religious, political, or gendered stereotypes.” Such ambiguous portrayal of characters leads to the critique of subjectivity, which is in line with postmodernism’s “acknowledgement that subjectivity is decentered and multisited; and that what was previously held to be an autonomous agent of power is now dispersed into anonymous fields of language structures and matrices of power relations.”

The other Postmodernist feature that *House of Splendid Isolation* exhibits is to show how the truth is manufactured, distorted and

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exaggerated depending on power, person or situation. Edna O’Brien questions the reporting business to show the manipulation and sensationalization of truth done by it. For example, in an early scene in the novel, there is a mention of an IRA militant who had been shot. The details of this incident are “well reported, discussed again and again, the number of rounds fired, the angle at which the guard shot, the type of wounds, the time it took [the] man to die” (HS 9), so much so that the whole thing becomes frivolous and the essence of the tragedy is lost in documenting and reporting.

The business of reporting has no other end but to be able to manipulate the ‘truth’, to any detail and distortion, in order to sell it, market it better. The ambiguity of ‘truth’ is also mentioned at the time when James gets killed “no one knowing exactly what happened, opinions varying at the inquest” (HS 53), but this fact is most beautifully and forcefully put down in one of Josie’s dairy. She has written:

This house will be notorious for the fact that he hid here.
There will be exaggerations. How I was chained or put under the stairs, bits of me cut off. They won’t know the truth. The
truth always gets lost, big truths, small truths, no matter what. Lost. (HS 86)

In another episode, Matt and Cormac, the two men who spy on Josie and McGreevy, distort the truth. They interpret the innocent act of Josie and McGreevy’s chasing the wasps out of their room as something vile, as an “orgy ... An orgy” (HS 192) and later Matt says that “he saw something no one else saw, lewd, disgusting, the pair of them on the floor, writhing, then going out to finish it off” (HS 208). But what Matt believes is not the truth, reality is something else, and it gets lost.

In the end when Josie gets shot and McGreevy is arrested, journalists and cameramen arrive to manufacture the ‘truth’ and make it spicy for selling purpose: “With the tapes and cameras they [were] retracing the lines of fire, tracking where the bullets came from, where they went, mapping the progress of the woman going from room to room”. And all the while sergeant Slattery is thinking that “He will have to answer for her death to the powers that be” (HS 210), and of course he will not tell the truth that Josie got shot accidently, Guards
mistaking her as another gunman, so he will have to distort the reality, the truth for his purpose.

The novel also deals with the construction of history, it mentions that: “History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the sub-soil. Like rain, or hail, or snow, or blood. A house remembers…. A people ruminate. The tale differs with the teller”. This is the small paragraph with which House of Splendid Isolation opens, and this is very crucial in understanding the work. This novel is deeply concerned with history. The opening of the novel pinpoints the fact that we do not know much about the truth of history because “The tale differs with the teller” (HS 3). Thus the authenticity, the truth of history is questioned and the critique of historical credentials is in tandem with the postmodern preoccupations. In this respect Michael Harris writes that Edna O’Brien “consistently critiques history as a crude and static straitjacket imposed on the complex dynamism of life.” Postmodernism is also concerned with the construction of subjects. The protagonists in House of Splendid Isolation are constructed by history, which is referred as a “yoke” (HS 66).

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20 M Harris,“Outside History: Relocation and Dislocation in Edna O’Brien’s House of Splendid Isolation”, p. 123.
A constraint that forces one to act in socially accepted, but personally self-destructive patterns. James for instance, is killed as a result of allowing the IRA to hide cache of arms on his property-something he feels obliged to do- even though Josie opposes it. It is as if James and the hired man Paud feel obliged to perform roles in a patriotic play not of their own choosing.\textsuperscript{21}

The characters in \textit{House of Splendid Isolation} seem to be “products of a fragmented island, and ... fated, ... to act out the parts assigned to them by place.”\textsuperscript{22} And as such, they are acutely conscious of history and its workings. Miss McCloud, Paud’s teacher, has “dinned into him and others day after day, how their country, their beloved country had been sacked, plundered and raped by the sister country” (HS 50). Paud was so much brainwashed that “he had taken the oath to save his country” (HS 52).

James thinks that he hears the chains of ghosts on the stairs in their house, then subsequently these chains are described as “the chains

\textsuperscript{21} M Harris, “Outside History: Relocation and Dislocation in Edna O’Brien’s \textit{House of Splendid Isolation}”, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.123.
of history, the restless dead and the restless living, with scores to settle” (HS 73). When James gets shot, Josie feels “the dark threads of history looping back and forth and catching her and people like her in their grip, like snares” (HS 54). She thinks that “History [is] holding them ransom, when it should all be put to rest in the annals” (HS 53).

It is believed that “unlike the heroic modernist, who created works out of pure imagination, the postmodern artist works with cultural givens, trying to manipulate them in various ways (parody, pastiche, collage, juxtaposition) for various ends.”23 Edna O’Brien in her three novels House of Splendid Isolation, Down by the River and In the Forest also works with “cultural givens” for her own ends. As we know House of Splendid Isolation is a novel about Irish situation, it has actual Irish political turmoil as its background. McGreevy is a Northern Irish IRA gunman (based on republican terrorist Dominic McGlinchey), who is searched by police helicopters, but succeeds in escaping and reaches the South, where Rory is already frightened and outraged after listening the news that a militant has run away from the North. He is yelling at the news cast that “how the British Army, the

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RUC, guards and an entire operation could let a guy... go into a field and vanish” (HS 11). Along with Rory the whole country is in the grip of insecurity and fear. “A war... was going on, ..., young men coming down from up North, coming down to rob banks and post offices, ..., ordinary folk too in dread of these faceless men with their guns and their hoods” (HS 9).

With this real political background Edna O’Brien weaves a fictional story of Josie - her past with James and her present with McGreevy. This mixing of the real and the fictional characterizes postmodern fiction. As such, House of Splendid Isolation can be seen as an example of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. It “is clearly a form of historical novel which also reflects on the construction of various kinds of narratives.”24 Similarly Down by the River and In the forest also include mixing of the historical and the fictive.

Down by the River is based on “the famous ‘x’ case of 1992 involving a 14-year old girl made pregnant by her best-friend’s

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24 Stephen Baker, The fiction of Postmodernity, p. 73.
This teenage girl was denied abortion in Ireland as it was an illegal practice under the Irish law. Later she tried to go to England for procuring an abortion, but was prevented by the Irish High court from taking this step. This led to a huge international pressure on the Irish government which ultimately had to reverse the order, thus allowing the girl to go to England for an abortion. But before she could take the benefit of the court decision, she had a miscarriage. *Down by the River* therefore follows the main line of events of the x case very closely, yet the treatment of these events is purely fictional.

Similarly *In the forest* is based on the true story of Imelda Riney, aged twenty-nine, and her son Liam, aged three. They lived in country Clare and went missing in April 1994. A few days later Father Joe Walshe, who was a curate of country Galway, also went missing. The Police found their bodies in Cregg Wood, all of them had been shot. In this connection Brendan O’Donnell, a young man, who had recently come home from England, on remand from prison was arrested. He was charged with the murders of Imelda Riney, Liam and Father Walshe. He received life sentence for these crimes. In the following year (July

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1997) he was found dead by the staff in the central mental hospital in Dublin.\textsuperscript{26}