Chapter Four
Sexual Politics
According to Linda Hutcheon, one common element in both feminism and postmodernism is the interest in representation. She writes, “this is one of the sites of the conjunction of interest of both postmodernism and feminisms as they both zero in on the representation of and reference to that body and its subject positions.”¹

Postmodernism is concerned with representations of any kind; it may be that of women, female bodies, food or images, in order to show how these representations in literature or in any other art form contribute to the construction of societal trends, values and ideologies. We can read O’Brien’s works in the framework of how she represents women and their bodies and how their attitudes about themselves are constructed through the forces of society which are patriarchal in nature. Her focus on representation points to how the gendered subject is constructed, so that this “neutral process … is … deconstructed in terms of ideology” and shows women to be “socially and historically constructed through representation.”²

² Ibid., p.139.
In *The High Road*, Anna looks at a picture of a girl hanging on the wall, which she describes as being afraid of something, “somewhere in her limbs and the recess of her frightened being she was trying to find the pluck”. So here a woman is presented in a photograph (which is one of the most influential medium of visual representation) as “frightened” and “apprehensive before sitting up.”³ This is a critique of the way women are represented. They are represented as timid and passive, these representations in turn construct women subjects, who firstly get impressed by such projections of women and want to emulate them, secondly they unconsciously internalize them, internalize the idea of women as “frightened”, timid and passive. Incidentally when Anna is photographed by a magazine group in a hotel, the photographer tells her that she “need not smile” and he wanted her “to look sad” (24).

This kind of representation of women is damaging to them as they try to imbibe the message that these images portray. This is best exemplified by Iris, whom Anna meets in a hotel. Iris is “no longer young, she is extremely slender and to emphasize her slenderness

---

³ Edna O’Brien, *The High Road*, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1989, p.2. All the page numbers given subsequently in the parentheses are from the same edition. Where needed, the title will be abbreviated as HR
….she keeps tightening a snake belt which she is wearing around her waist”. Iris has attained this slenderness, in order to be approved by the male standards of the female body and get approval from the male chauvinistic society. Iris is one of the constructions of patriarchal society, and nothing is more important to her than to be good looking, which she endeavours to make herself. If she finds other women’s bodies beside the mark, she despises them. So when she is sun-bathing and looking around she is embarrassed by the women around, by “their awful bellies, their hideous bikinis, their bags with trade names plastered all over them” (53).

This desire to be liked by men and to be young is so installed in women that if they deviate from the standard of sweet sixteen, they feel very miserable. At one point Anna says:

At that moment, standing in that world of lambent light I would have given anything to have my youth back again, for a year, a month, a week, an instant.( 9)

In this novel Women are shown generally to rate and view each other only in terms of figure, beauty and youth. As Anna passes through
various women near a swimming pool in a hotel, the things that she notices in them are the things of physical aspects:

One with beauty spots, another with a mat of hair under the armpits, a hip that curved so gracefully, it was like the handle of a salt-spoon. On one woman’s stomach birthmarks had formed little blue veins, inroads.(50)

Moving back to Iris, she is all affected by and constructed on capitalist and patriarchal model. She is like one of the inhabitants of The Waste Land, she goes to “Biarritz in August … Milano in September … New York in the late fall …Paris when she felt absolutely homesick or wanted her hair done” (54). Once she is seen by Anna wearing “Very high-heeled suede, mauve shoes, with an ankle strap”, Anna wonders “how she was going to navigate in them” (88). Moreover Iris boasted that “She could eat anything, she could stuff herself and not put weight on” (91). Other women are also worried about their appearance and desire to make themselves very thin. One dress maker who was fat was always found “complaining that her stomach was not like her clients’ stomachs and wonder(ed) why this
was so” (108). Even Catalina is also figure conscious, when she offers Anna a local cake, she assures Anna “that it was not fattening” (141).

The construction of women entraps them in double ways, firstly, they are caught in a web of ideological, cultural and mysogynist gendered constructions, within which it is hard to escape. Secondly, even if women succeed to escape from these trenchant constructions they face harsh retaliations, as Catalina and Anna face, or they have to pay a heavy price in one way or the other, as Josie, Mary and Bergee do. Although Josie is successful in defying construction of her as potential mother, by resorting to painful abortion, without medication and anesthesia, but at times the patriarchal roots are so deep that a woman feels helpless. Greenwood writes that, “Josie does attempt briefly to free herself from ‘Mother Ireland’ constructions by making nationalism her own,”

4 while escaping from McGreevy Josie “hums loudly, a Fenian song, the only one she knows, about a woman gathering nettles” but “very soon she is winded” as the song turns to praise the men “Glorio… Glorio to the bold Fenian men”(HS 80).

Edna O’Brien’s intertextuality with the name ‘Mary’ is interesting to note. The name of the protagonist in *Down by the River* is Mary, Breege’s nickname is ‘Ivory Mary’ and Josie is once referred to as ‘Virgin Mary’, in this regard we can say that the intertextuality with the name Mary “suggests the servitude of all three women to the Irish maternal ideal.”\(^5\) It shows the “indictment of social and symbolic orders which continue to construct their women as ‘Madonna’ or ‘Witch’.”\(^6\) The binary model of Madonna and witch reinforces the patriarchal ideal of motherhood- passive, self sacrificing, caretaker- as the only role for women to accept. If women are seen to deviate from this ideal even in the slightest, they fall into disgrace. After it is found that Mary had attempted to procure an abortion in England, she is intercepted by police and send back to her homeland. Her attempt to seek abortion, and thus deviate from the compulsory maternity, makes people to seethe with hatred, and they call her Miss slut, on the radio programme.

In O’Brien’s fiction men too are forced to follow the “hypermasculine republican model of masculinity” as it is part of

\(^6\) Ibid., p.107.
their “national norms of gender.”  

“Men become victims of this pseudo male ideal and they feel forced to do anything in order to uphold this ideal. In order to look masculine, a manqué writer has “cosmetically induced masculine hand” seeing it D’Arcy says in surprise, “Jaysus he sticks the hairs on” (HR 7). Families are the biggest institutions “within which the children learn their gender roles.”

When Anna is observing an English couple and their children she notices that, the father considered his daughter, Fiona, a “water nymph” while as “to the proud mother little Ernest had the making of Hercules” (HR 59). So a boy is constructed on the model of Hercules, whereas a girl is referred to as a water nymph. The importance that boys are given right from their childhood is shown when a boy tells his father that if horses would have enough hay they “would never quarrel and would be very happy” on hearing this the father is so overwhelmed “that he stands up and announces to the restaurant at large that his son has a great sense of justice and that the world has much to learn from him” (HR 60), such importance constructs men as intelligent beings.

---

8 A Greenwood, Enda O’Brein, p.64.
another instance a father teachers his little boy to learn kicking, “baby Michael has got to kick” (HR 52). Whereas “Eily’s son Maddie is shown learning ‘masculinity’ at a children’s party.”

they fought, rival gangs, *Bang bang, you’re dead, I’m not dead*, up and down the wobbly stairs, into the garden, up in the trees, peeing on one another, Kevin squirting the girls from his water pistol….10

Carlos, Catalina’s little son has already grown to love “weapons, war and killings” (HR 115).

‘Masculinity’ is compulsory and it offers little choice of roles for men, “The limitations of the roles on offer are suggested - as in *House of Splendid Isolation*- by O’Brien’s representations of police and republicans alike.”11 Men have to indulge in some sort of aggressive violent behaviour. As such, James is fond of hunting, as he hunts, every squeal indicates another kill, after the ninth squeal he goes to collect the “felled hare or the felled rabbit”, and carries them back “as trophies” (HS 42). Rory also has a passion for “going into the forest and shooting

---

deer” (HS 10), this passion can be compared to the shooting of “young men coming down from up North” and inciting fear “with their guns and their hoods” (HS 9).

In the construction of masculinity, “O’Brien reinforces the co-dependence of ‘myth’ and ‘masculinity’.”

McGreevy is thrusted with Cuchullain construction. He is trapped in to play it well and even if he does not play it well, his actions will be glorified and exaggerated so that, “there’ll be a poem about [it] soon” (HS 177). Due to this pressure McGreevy “is ably to deny the ‘self’ that longs for peace and ‘wains’, just as Rory is able to subsume his affinity with nature to destruction.”

Similarly PJ is compelled to mask his natural self and appear strong and emotionless before his colleagues and officials. When the Attorney General meets him:

Suddenly he is not Jock, or rather he is the other Jock, the one Geraldine [his mistress] recoils from, the one who will not suffer contradiction or tampering with his great office. The

---

13 Ibid.
smiling blushing gallant put to one side now like one photograph overlaid with another; cold, pugnacious. (DR 179)

The ones who fail to adhere to the rules of ‘masculinity’ face strong rejection by the society, as is the case with Luke. He is a poor street musician, who helps Mary by sheltering her in his house out of sympathy. But such men are dismissed as “lice upon the locks of the nation” (DR 195) therefore, “The ‘feminised’ sons of ‘Mother Ireland’ are perceived as parasitic.”

Apart from focusing on the representation of women, The High Road also engages in the complicitous critique of society. Linda Hutcheon writes that “postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge,” and elsewhere she writes that complicity and critique “is another point of overlap [between feminism and postmodernism] that might be theorized.”

In this novel Anna serves as a vehicle of complicitous critique of patriarchy. On the one hand she perpetuates and reinforces the

---

16 Ibid., p.145.
stereotypical desire of women, who need sympathy, love of man, warmth, home and affection. She wants to “find a room and burrow there like a Steppenwolf, eking out the days, waiting for some kind of redemption” (HR 5-6). But on the other hand she is consciously trying to break from these feelings which have been inculcated in her subconsciously by society. She goes to some Mediterranean small town where she wants to start a new life for herself. She wants to forget the man who raised so many hopes in her, only to be smashed. She realizes that she has degraded herself by crying in front of him because of the oncoming chill between them. She realizes that:

he did not cry with me, did not even commiserate and I saw how reduced I had become in his eyes. Gone the days when he saw me as beautiful, queenly or even formidable. The time had come to throw me off like an old garment.(HR 16)

But Anna wants to leave all these crippling emotions behind, she is determined to find a way out and live a better life and tries to live independently of men.
This Mediterranean town is like a refuge to women, who want to do away with their dependence on men and live on their own, no matter how miserably. Wanda is one such woman, Portia another, and Anna yet another. Although these women are trying to find their ground and be on their own, but it is not easy, there is some danger, they are not safe, they are vulnerable as is evident from the actions of Celestina. While giving key to Anna, Celestina takes Anna into a shed and points “to a dark corner behind some wood shavings and bricks and with her fingers to [her] throat, demonstrate(s), an attack” (HR 1). So an “attack” always hangs over the heads of women, and this comes true in the case of Catalina.

The plight of women in patriarchal society is shown in subtle ways. Anna sees old women outside the chapel, the years of hardship and toiling have made these women to look alike. Their faces are impassive like stones, but their eyes reflect their sad story. Anna feels daunted by these women and follows them as if “they were calling [her] to their camp, to their way of life, to a repentance and a contriteness”. But Anna stares
back at them and in staring [she] believed that [she] was defying [her] own mother who had pervaded and begrudged every moment of [her] sleeping and [her] waking life, persisting even after death. In their eyes, as in hers, were uncharted vortexes of hurt and rage that [she] believed went back to their own mothers and their mothers’ mothers, figures who had usurped their lives from them. (HR 19)

This all shows that patriarchy makes women like automatons, who sacrifice, repent and forgo their lives. These women do not defy, they pass their legacy to their daughters. But Anna wants to be a departure from all this. She has not decided on sacrifice and suffering, she has decided to look for jouissance. That is the reason why she has come to a Mediterranean town. Her first attempt at jouissance is with a magazine troop where she feels a “moment of pure life” and a “stream of abstract love” (HR 27). She lets herself get abandoned in the company of magazine staff members, who ask her to change her outfit, and wear some make-up. While the make-up artist is putting make up on her, Anna feels happy at the prospect of becoming someone else and
escaping being herself for a night at least. She is deriving pleasure from this indulgence and company and from the metamorphosis and escapism that make-up brings her.

The search for jouissance makes Anna to seek for bonding with women. She tries to build up relationships with women rather than with men. There are three women with whom she tries to develop friendship. Firstly, there is Charlotte. In this attempt Anna cannot at any cost befriend and bond with her, because she was one of those women who was totally ossified by patriarchal upbringing, where “within that particular framework, women are able to communicate only as rival objects.”\textsuperscript{17} Charlotte has already set the dictum that she will tolerate Anna only as “long as [they] kept to [themselves] and ate at different times” (HR 18). As a result, they do not want to remain with each other. They cannot communicate, they cannot sympathize. This leads Anna to leave the house at once.

Charlotte (or Portia) is the best example of a woman who ceases to explore her real self and models herself upon the patriarchal values and ideals of femininity, i.e. a shallow and false femininity

\textsuperscript{17} A Greenwood, Edna O’Brien, p.65.
endeavouring to achieve “legendary waist” and having “milk baths”(HR 29). The result of such femininity is always tragic, because instead of modeling themselves on substantial things or qualities, such women commodify themselves, and their use can be only up to the point that commodity is in fashion and then they are dated.

The other woman Anna tries to befriend is Iris. Here also she cannot connect with this imperious woman, because she too is a product of patriarchal society. Iris has noticed Anna, because she has seen the final volume of Remembrance of Things Past, (a male canonical book) on Anna’s table. This makes Iris to give good response to Anna and Iris invites Anna to her apartment. But in Iris, Anna finds a type of woman whom she had met before also and “they had frightened [her] their brittleness, their heartlessness had made [her] cover” (HR 92). When Anna comes to know about Iris’s personal tragedy, her son’s suicide, Anna wants to embrace her but somehow the coldness and the cleverness of Iris deter her from taking the step. Anna thinks “that if I could say … something tender would occur between us and the stone inside her [Iris] would dissolve … I knew that I could not take those
few but immeasurable steps between me and her,” (HR 95). So in the end their bond does not attain accomplishment.

This failure of connection between women makes them weak, isolated and renders them powerless. Anna feels helpless, she is in a fix. On one hand she fully knows the dissatisfaction and victimization of a woman in a heterosexual relationship and on the other hand she cannot make a bond with any woman. The disgust of Anna towards the patriarchal heterosexual social set up and the subsequent slavery under this system comes from the words of Wanda. She is driving Anna to some place, at one point she sums up the situation, she says that “before you know where you are … [ and ] just when you think it’s all working out, the bastard ups and leaves”(HR 75). Then Wanda recounts the reality of many women under such system. She narrates Anna her “true” nightmare, under which Wanda was still reeling:

It was of a man who kept all his women, herded, in a dormitory… no, not a dormitory … more like an institution or a prison. He wore a jock strap and he came over each one but it was ugh … it was rusty … it was filthy. She, Wanda, was
told to go to her cell, at the end of the corridor, and wait there. She would hear the other getting their gout of rust and she was to make herself excited, but not too excited and wait her turn. Hell, she thought, do I want this, do I want him… and turning to [Anna], …, she admitted that he was someone she knew in everyday life and hadn’t given a thought to. (HR 75-6)

Anna is frustrated and contemplates suicide. However it is Catalina’s buoyant and bold nature which comes to rescue Anna. Before Catalina comes, Anna vacillates between the overpowering depression and the desire to beat it, to find sustenance. When Iris is called by a beau, Anna feels more disappointed and even begins to cry. Earlier she had sought sustenance in “Bach or Mozart”, in the hope “that [her] interest in life might reburgeon with those sublime and beautiful chords, an interest that would replace this wasting passion for him” (HR 57). Both Bach and Mozart fail to bring sustenance to Anna, as both are the by-products of patriarchal culture. She needs to break free from all that and find a world based on woman’s bonding, understanding and companionship. This companionship comes in the
form of Catalina. When Catalina comes with flowers, she signals life and the possibility of bonding among women and hence jouissance and liberation:

[Catalina] crossed the room and laid the flowers on a little bureau and then she turned and smiled … [it filled] [Anna’s] mind with something other than death … [Anna] could not do it, not then, she had by her sudden arrival hauled [her] back. (HR 45)

Later Anna says, “how could anyone not want to remain alive, in a world where such tender things exist” (HR 48). Catalina and her flowers infuse a new life, a new hope in her, the mere thought of her gives Anna the desire to live:

In the evenings when I had a drink or two I would allow myself to think of her as I might a painting or a beautiful garden. I would dwell on her body the way I never allowed myself to dwell on my own, exploring it with invisible hands, invisible eyes, touching her tentatively and without shame. (HR 77)
Interestingly when Anna stops to buy a picture of “Madonna and Child”, symbolizing women as an epitome of suffering, Catalina drags her away. She actually drags her away from suffering and self sacrifice towards pleasure and self-satisfaction.

As regards Catalina, she is a rare woman who has escaped the stereotypical construction, because “There was something untamed about her” (HR 48). This escape from her construction, this being untamed brings her to a tragic end, because such a woman cannot be tolerated by patriarchal society. Early in the story D’Arcy says “another Catalina stigmatist and saint … mark the name” (HR 4), it seems that Catalina was destined to die, in a society where men are constructed to be violent, and women are expected to be passive and submissive. Under such a system a woman who breaks the conventions as Catalina does, is bound to suffer. There is another reference to Catalina, when Anna asks a waiter about her and says him that she is vivacious, to this the waiter concedes and replies that she was “also a little tragedienne … there is one in every village … our mountain Carmen” (HR 77). Again it is hinted that Catalina is fated to destruction because she does
not conform to the patriarchal mode of life, she deviates from it, hence her imminent death.

Catalina defies gendered construction by society and family. Her own father wants to mould her as a weak person who will easily give in. Once Catalina says to Anna that “yesterday … he just wanted to break me” (HR 82). Catalina’s father was forever challenging her and each time his daughter would defeat him and show him to be stronger. The father does not want his daughter to be strong and teases her, but because they do not have a son, Catalina has already gained prodigal strength by working on land with her hands and where even the plough could not reach. Catalina is never cowed down by her father. She matches every outburst and every fist of his with her own, emphasizing her fearlessness by standing near him, or prodding him with the end of a toasting fork, then returning to the store and refusing to accept whatever barb he had just issued. At one point she ran and poured hot water on to the crown of his balding head. (HR 105)
Catalina is a free spirit, she borrows a scooter and drives fast with “her blouse that … ballooned out” (HR 84). She can be described as “one with the wind”. She lifts Anna on her scooter and speeds through the towns, spending the day in fun and enjoyment. When two girls from a restaurant look strangely at her, “She looked back at them and suddenly expressed the longing to be in some strange country, alone, free, independent, unfettered” (HR 85). It is because of this free uninhibited spirit that people hate her. Anna notices that “People disliked her, there was something in her that provoked malice, envy” (HR 117-8). Once trekking with Anna, Catalina expresses the desire to live somewhere there with the goats and the grasshoppers. In fact she had already started to build a house and has dragged stones and the cement up, in a wheel barrow. Looking at the cement and stones she again expresses the desire of living independently. It is this trait which makes people to dislike her, which makes the hotel manager say, after she does not come for her work, that “wherever she had fled to, it was in self-interest, because she never did anything that did not suit herself” (HR 119).
The personality of Catalina in itself provoked hostility from the society towards her, but the hostility turns to a volatile hatred when people notice Catalina going one step further and making an unusual relationship with Anna. It all starts when Catalina and Anna set out on a safari to mount a mountain top. This trip is a manifesto of freedom, of female bonding, companionship and a life dedicated to liberty and pleasure. On their way they see a little ruin that was covered with wild grass and brushwood. In one of its corners there was a bed made of grass and leaves and beside it was a stump of red Christmas candle, half-burnt. Catalina, who always wants to have an independent existence, gets very excited to find the cottage and shouts “‘Home’, … with a flourish, designating the place as [their] cave with gongs, tapestries on the wall, deer being roasted, skins on the beds, us women and children” (HR 144).

They climb forward, over the sheer rocks which at times were almost perpendicular. When they reach the summit, Catalina lets “out a holler, to inform the world that [they] had conquered”. While returning they both feel that the day was too enthralling to bring to an end, so
they decide to go back to their “little cave and bivouac” (HR 149). It is when they sleep together that Anna realizes how satisfying the bonding between women can be:

As I lay beside her I could feel, not our bodies, but our hair touching, ribs of hair touching mine, ... I lay there stiffly, quietly confiding to myself that I wanted to hold her, be held by her, but in her sleep, so that our night-selves might reach out, and give each other that thread of sustenance that we craved, the invisible sustenance, not what we sought form men, something other, womanly, primordial.(HR 155-6)

At last that moment of consummation occurs which both women have desired unconsciously:

Then I felt the thwack of her arms around me and the clasp of her hands, and I stretched out and cleaved to her, through her opening to life; arms, limbs, torsos, joined as if in an androgynous sculpture, the bloods going up and down merrily, two bloods, like mercury in a heated thermometer. Even the cheeks letting go all of their scream and all their grumble and
their thousand unspent kisses, tenderness, rabidness; hunger, back, back in time to that wandering milky watery bliss, infinitely safe like wine inside a skin or sap inside a tree, floating, afloat; boundaries burst, bursting, the mind as much as the body borne along, to this other landscape, that was familiar yet unfamiliar.(HR 157)

It is not for the first time that Anna had desired a woman’s contact. She has come across such an encounter with a girl earlier also. After meeting this girl in a café Anna goes home later with her, and there as the girl stood by the window Anna

slowly began to undress her … and then [she] laid her down … all of [Anna’s] advances she received without either dismay or flutter. Throughout she remained courteous and did not seem in the lest nonplussed by [Anna’s] touch but then within [Anna] something occurred, some baulk, some dread, some hesitation and [she] knew that [she] could not go through with it. In fact [Anna] began to weep.(HR 156)
At this junction of her life Anna had not been able to fully free herself from the clutches of patriarchal conditioning of her sexuality, and as such she fails to establish a relationship with a woman. But this time with Catalina, Anna has passed that stage, she is very well disillusioned with her relationship with men, which all end with making her more miserable and unfulfilled.

But the fulfilment of desire comes at a price for both Anna and Catalina, as this consummation, this act, this fulfilment of desire is not in accordance with the patriarchal society. Therefore this little act of liberation and fulfilment brings tragic repercussions for them, from both men and women, women because they too have inherited the patriarchal mode of thinking; they too resent this odd pairing between two women. It is common for men to be homosocial, as said by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, but for women to be homosocial cannot be tolerated as it can confer power on them. According to Heather Ingman, this relationship remains just a brief episode because Anna and Catalina

---

“have trespassed against the family and against the Catholic religion, twin imperatives as powerful in Spain as in Ireland.”\textsuperscript{19}

Anna realizes it as soon as she reaches her hotel where Rosario, Catalina’s sister, knocks at her door saying “puta … puta”, “Whore … Whore” (HR 160). Rosario tells her that she had ruined their family name and had destroyed their honour, because whole town had come to know about the fact that Anna and Catalina were together for the whole night and the word ‘Lebos’ had been painted on their walls for all to see. Rosario blames Anna for everything. Anna comes to know that Catalina’s father had beaten her savagely, in front of the neighbours, and he might have killed her but for her grandmother who had intervened to save Catalina. Interestingly, Anna had been warned about her relationship with Catalina before also. A lady had accused her of tainting Catalina’s character. She had said that the land was her life, not restaurants and scooters.

Anna gave no heed to Rosario, because she wanted freedom, coming into her bedroom, Anna mused:

I could see a tiny portion of mountain through bars, six iron bars with seven oblong spaces, showing me a patch of mountain trees clinging to a breast of rock. Was this my life, was this my vision, as limited, as petrified as this and through bars, from some unnamed prison. (HR 121)

So there was no going back for Anna. Anna thinks that she can escape this growing resentment of people. She goes to D’Arcy who paints other walls also with “Labos” and then she goes to a priest to have a mass said and announce their innocence, but she knows little that Juan, Catalina’s husband, has already hatched a plan to murder her.

Anna is delivered a message that some woman wants to see her after dark. Thinking that it must be Catalina, Anna reaches there only to hear “a roar followed by a splutter of roars, so awful, it was as if a heard of swine was being slaughtered again and again” (HR 174). When Anna reaches the scene, she comes to know that it is no one else but Catalina who has been killed by her husband Juan, he had cut her throat. Anna comes to know about the whole plot. It was Juan and not Catalina who had sent the message to Anna and his purpose was to kill
her. Catalina somehow had come to know about it and she went to meet her husband and try to reconcile the matter, but her violent husband does not want to reconcile on anything. Catalina is killed knowingly and gruesomely by Juan. In this context Ann Norton says that “following the woman’s symbolic baptism into a new life of equal empathetic sexual love, Catalina’s estranged husband murders her for the double transgressions of adultery and homosexuality.”

The irony is that the man who has done such a gruesome murder, is not targeted by people, instead people hate Anna because she has dared to be different, she has dared to bond up with a woman. Anna “occupies a powerless position within a rigged system that turns a blind eye to masculine infidelity but roundly condemns unsanctioned female sexuality.” When Anna enters the room where Catalina’s dead body is kept, she is told by the women present there to get out and is pushed out of the room. Outside men were waiting for her:

---

Men in the garden had been waiting … they gathered round [Anna], heated, obstreperous. There were about ten of them, some recognizing [Anna] and telling the others who [she] was, the Whore … One of them tapped [her] chest, quick insolent taps as if it were a drum-skin or a table-top. …

In jest one of them lifted [her] hair, gave a lewd sniff and then pulled [her] by it to the gate. [Anna] saw a van and saw us go towards it. … and in the swoosh of light [she] saw their legs and their feet in high heeled leather boots, then their faces, some chalky, others with sideburns and moustaches. [Her] assassins. (HR 178)

Anna is saved by D’Arcy, by Catalina’s mother and by her own strength. According to Ann Norton, this complicitous critique in The High Road “in spite of this violent, pessimistic conclusion… presents a potential remedy for women’s mistaken erotic obsessions suggesting the specific embrace of lesbian love as a healthy replacement for men’s cruelty and domination.”

---

House of Splendid Isolation can also be read as a postmodern instance of paradox installing and reinforcing as much as undermining and subverting which it nevertheless wants to highlight, deconstruct and challenge.

House of Splendid Isolation is a complex novel dealing with many issues. At one level this novel is about complicitous critique of patriarchy and the frustrations, misery and defiance of women under it. Apparently the illustrations of male cruelty against women may seem to install and reinforce and glorify the male denomination over women, but at a deeper level of scrutiny, the same is undermined and subverted by defiant women.

Josie is not happy with her marriage, she has a vague fear and a realization that the entry into the big house would trap her, make her subservient. On entering the house she thinks, “if she should escape there and then, go back, get her trunks and run”. As she took steps towards the house, she “regretted each step leading her to the blind and stony darkness that was her future”.
For James the interest in Josie is primarily to have a progeny. He thinks of her as “A good mare.” Elsewhere Josie is referred as “wet fields, brown clay through the blades of grass, fields like graveyards, undug” (43). “This can be read in the context of nationalism, which affects not only ‘mother country’ but Josie as potential mother.” It is implied that James wants children from the good mare. Josie senses it or gets intuition about it. On her wedding night she asks Bird, her maid servant, about the local doctor and later “The bedroom, the nightgown, the undressing kept assailing her”. Thereafter she is constantly reminded of her role, of her duty, i.e. procuring children. James and James’ brother Mick make an oblique reference to progeny through a mayfly the day Josie comes as a bride. James describes the mating of the mayfly, “dancing and mating and whatelsing for two days and on the third day with piles of eggs in her, making the journey back into the water and dropping down and hitting the water and every time she hit, more egg’s, more progeny” (34). Interestingly mayflyies die after laying eggs, by implication Josie could also die in childbirth. Then

---

23 Edna O’Brien, *House of Splendid Isolation*, London: Phoenix, 1995, p.29. All the page numbers given subsequently in the parentheses are from the same edition

there is Jacko who keeps on telling her to have children. When Josie meets him for the first time, he tells her that “There’ll be a couple of children before long”, and then he “nudge(s) her and repeat(s) that a couple of children would make James happy, tie him down” (38), and again he advises her “A couple of children, that’ll lift the curse” (39). This pressure for procuring children starts making Josie’s life miserable, she thinks of Brooklyn and realises what a mistake she had made to come home.

In addition to the thrusted role of motherhood, Josie gets disillusioned for other reasons also. On entering the dining room, on her first day, she swings around the room and thinks that it is hers and she is the mistress of the house. Though it is her husband’s house by all means, she has to work there, produce children, preferably sons in order to be the owner of the house.

In due course of time we find that Josie has not conceded to the role of motherhood. Josie does not relent to the pressure of James, Jocko and Irish society to take on the role of motherhood. She is determined not to conceive and is determined to realize the dream of
being the mistress of the house. She always thought that the house was hers, “it is mine, mine” (31). First step in fulfilment of this dream was to remove the big hurdle Mick, James’ brother. Josie starts to nag him about his brother and eventually James had to tell his brother to go. As regards children, nine months pass and there is no news of a child. Brid says that “the Missus didn’t want a baby … wore corsets that were too tight” (45), and says that the Missus had said that she was told by a specialist that she may never have children. This thwarted desire for children leads James to sexually assault Josie. He “mounts her without a word … he takes the shoehorn, the bone one and presses it into her mouth until she groans and moans and emits a sort of stubborn sound that is neither come nor non-come”. Each time James thinks that, “she will have a child, she will have issue, a son” (44). But whatever he does, commandeering, sexual assaults and violence, “she does not get with child” (45).

Josie’s silent defiance makes James to break down, he starts to drink more heavily. He would stay at a pub for “a day, a night, a second day or even a third” (43), and eventually he had to be brought home
and there would be in “all of him a vacancy, like a lost stunned animal, far from home” (44).

Then ultimately Josie has a child, which she never wanted to have, naturally she felt that, “It cried inside her” and felt that it was not a normal child, “She prayed for it not to be … she prayed that she would lose it” (46).

Her pregnancy puts Josie in great trouble and dilemma, because she does not want to yield to the construction of Irish ideal womanhood and to the pressure and cruelty of her husband and give him what he wants. But she does not know what to do with the child, she desires for a miscarriage. It is in the section “Last Days” that we come to know what Josie did with her predicament. She has written it in a letter, with the words ‘To be opened after my death”, written on the envelope. It is because she wants the future generation to know about the plight of a woman who “was not ready for a child” (195) and “There was no one she could tell. There was no one she could talk to” (48). In the letter she mentions a woman Onnie to whom she goes for help. She writes, that Onnie
gave me a dose, brown jollop… Then I lay on a cot bed and she got the wire and started to root and unsettle … My whole insides were raw. If I screamed or roared she would stop. She told me so… Then I heard something gush inside me, like a dug well. (195)

When she reaches home, Brid, “had to draw buckets of water from the pump and leave them outside the door… [Josie] bled like a pig. [Brid brings] towels, first one, then another (196).

Meanwhile James suffered more deterioration. He would just go out and walk and walk, “God knows how many miles he covered doing the rounds of the fields and the lake shore and then up to the house and back again, loath to go in. Looking for something … The child he did not have” (49). When his delirium’s increased, Josie had dispatched him to a monastery.

Slowly Josie gains control over James and the house. When James insists that he will shelter Paud, she says “not to her house, not to her house”, and again after insistence from James, she says “her house was her house”. Eventually James slaps her and hates “her not
only for Paud’s sake, but because of the way she had won out with everything, no thoroughbreds any more, no ponies, … [and] the humiliation of being given a few shillings each Saturday like a serving boy” (53).

Not only this, Josie is indirectly responsible for James’ death also. After their quarrel over Paud, James is determined to hide Paud, but Josie here too disagrees to comply. She slips an anonymous letter under the sergeant’s door and the guards unknowingly kill James, who happens to be there. After his death, Josie “could not enter the house, [she felt that she] did not deserve the house, even though he had signed it over to her, years before” (57).

In this sense House of Splendid Isolation is not only a story of an IRA terrorist meeting an elderly woman, but it is also a story of a house (as the word ‘house’ in the title signifies), which a woman makes legally her own despite all odds, despite being childless. Once when Josie is moving from room to room, she feels “Her house seems so precious to her, even its decay, her house should not have to suffer this” (73).
So in the end Josie wins the game, despite her many problems. She makes James to say that, his brother Mick must go, and she succeeds in acquiring his property, home and land, but her biggest victory is denying James paternity. If these victories of Josie would have been presented straightforwardly, then *House of Splendid Isolation* would be an overtly feminist text, but her victories and defiance is undercut by the cruel treatment she receives from her husband, who often assaults her sexually and once beats her ruthlessly when he mistakenly thinks that Josie cuckolded him. While she was being chased by James, who was flogging her, she had almost succeeded to escape from a window,

when he burst in, caught her beam and with a savage alacrity slammed the window down so that she was half in and half out, the wooden sash wedged into her flesh.

A fierce flagellant lather of joy possessed him on account of the pain that he could feel issuing back from her, his energy prodigal as he beat her for every drink she had ever grudged
him, for his poor brother whom she dispatched to an exile’s death, for the offspring which she did not give him. (135)

This type of strategy allows O’Brien to “acknowledge the need for new social and symbolic orders for men as well as women,”25 and that the “hate and wrong” (216), “which needs to be resolved exists not only between political factions but also between men and women.”26

26 Ibid., p.90.