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Changing Ireland: Representation of the Gradual Degeneration of a Patriarchal and Agrarian Nation in John McGahern's*Amongst Women*

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Studies and criticisms of Irish literature, even today, succumb mostly to a number of well known stereotypes. An artistic representation of Ireland and its landscapes is expected to be dominated by the ethos of Romantic mysticism and exoticism, a constricting Celtic twilightism, notions of rural arcadia in the dramatization of peasantry and Big Houses, patriarchy etc. This is largely a result of the purely Romantic construction of Irish otherness and the mystification of its "horrible beauty" in the 19th century British literary representations of Ireland like Maria Edgeworth's*Castle Rackrent*(1800). At the same time the Irish Literary Renaissance which was integrally related to the Irish Cultural Nationalism in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries used the folkloric, fairy-tale, magical and mystical image of Ireland as a leitmotif and the essential soul of the so called "Wild West" myth. The strangeness and distinctiveness of Celtic culture have been extolled in the works of W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey where its folklores, beliefs, primitive rituals, agrarian Big Houses and patriarchal social set-up have been given almost a surreal dimension. But this romanticisation of the landscape began to yield place to the realistic representation of the fast changing Irish society in the postcolonial era where age-old values and socio-cultural constants came under the direct influence of modernization and the late 20th century globalization. The mythic and folkloric representations of Ireland needed a drastic change. The late 20th century Irish writers realized the need of portraying this change authentically to give the account of another Ireland that has come to the being beyond the well-known stereotypes like patriarchy, agrarianism, ritualistic religion,

folklores etc. Seamus Deane comments on this need to change-

> The territory of Ireland, with all its nationalist and all its gothic graves, with all its mouldering estates and emerging farms, its Land Acts and its history of confiscations, was in need of redefinition by the early years of the century. (Deane 34).

So despite the tendency of Irish writers to evoke the mysticism of arcadia, many readings of rural Ireland unambiguously portray the inevitable social changes in a starkly realistic manner. Two prominent pillars of Irish society, i.e., patriarchy and agrarianism, were first two things that came within the periphery of this change. Major novelists after 1960s like John McGahern and Edna O'Brien have repeatedly caught this potential change in Irish society authentically in their novels.

Arguably the most significant Irish novelist of the 20th century since Samuel Beckett, John McGahern (1934-2006) is widely considered to be one of the greatest chroniclers of the changing face of traditional Irish society and culture. *Amongst Women*(1990) is his best known novel and it has been a faithful study of the fast changing Irish values and social symbols like his other novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun (2001)*.This modern Irish magnum opus is both a study of the shortcomings of Irish patriarchy and a dirge for a lost time. Here McGahern evokes beautifully a world and a landscape he knew well in his youth and looks back on it with sufficient critical concern from the vantage point of the 1990s. At the outset the novel is an engaging family drama dealing with the life of Michael Moran, an IRA veteran who fought in the civil war of the 1920s, "amongst women" of his family, i.e., his wife, Rose and his three daughters who love and fear their father. Moran has two sons also, Luke and Michael, but they somehow try to evade the dominating altitude of their father. Luke escapes the suffocating atmosphere of County Leitrim following a violent face-off with Moran, settles in London to partner with a cockney man in his business of "buying old houses and converting them into flats for sale"(37), never to come back. Michael also grew up into a womanizer and, naturally, feels the essential urge to escape the red eyes of his father.

Actually, McGahern has represented Moran as a symbol of dwindling Irish patriarchy. Ireland has often been viewed as a predominantly patriarchal society, mainly as a result of "its "traditional stance" on reproductive rights and the low participation of women in labour forces" (O'Connor 3). The Irish constitution also accepted a

number of laws in 1937 that "encouraged the maternal and submissive roles expected of women through which they were meant to improve their country's fate" (Barros del Rio sp). The nation emphasized the morality and home-making roles of a woman and even the education which was provided to the young girls reasserted the duties they are expected to perform after being married and having a family. But with the beginning of Ireland's economic development in the 1960s and 1970s the gradual change of the country from a rural, agricultural economy to an urbanized, industrial one became writ large. With the church-state bond weakening, women in larger numbers began to participate in the work-force situating a change in the socio-cultural, political and religious faces of traditional Irish society. Again, the women's movement towards gender equality got momentum with the collective rejection of the patriarchal ideology of rural Ireland by many Irish women who organized Dublin's first women's liberation group in 1971. But this Irish movement towards gender equality cannot be juxtaposed with the ideals of orthodox Western feminism. It was rather an attempt of heightening the nation's awareness of the political and social stagnation of Irish women who were in an urgent need to be known as individuals beyond their roles in home. The immense popularity of this national movement had led O'Donovan and Ward to describe it as "femocracy" (O'Donovan and Ward 93) and with the formation of National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI), the movement finds a firm and systematic direction.

So, McGahern situates his riveting family saga at a time when the traditional Irish society was at the crossroads of change. The novel begins with the description of Michael Moran in his twilight years. This once powerful guerilla fighter is now well past his prime and heads a big farmhouse in his native County Leitrim. So at the very beginning of his novel McGahern makes two aspects of Moran's life evident to the reader-first, Moran has been an epitome of Irish patriarchy in the battlefield and later in his family and second, he represents the preoccupations of the rural and agricultural Ireland through his present profession of a farmer. Keeping in mind the time the novel is set in, these two aspects of Moran's life are to experience the process of gradual change operating in different spheres of traditional Irish society. The very opening lines of the novel reflect this crisis in Moran's life to a great extent-

> As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters. This once powerful man was so implanted in their lives that they had never really left Great Meadow, in spite of jobs and marriages and children and houses

> of their own in Dublin and London. Now they could not let him slip away. (1)

It is not very difficult to purport the cause of Moran's fear. With the gradual loss of his youthful vigour Moran has lost his natural command on his family and this losing hold of a leading position and living at the mercy of Rose and three daughters make him depressed. His daughters and wife understand this and plan to revive Monaghan Day to cheer his fallen spirit up-

> All three girls planned to come to revive Monaghan Day. They had to explain to their stepmother Rose what Monaghan Day was. She had never heard of it in all her time in the house. The end-of-February fair in Mohill was Monaghan Day. McQuaid came every year to the house on Monaghan Day. He and Moran had fought in the same flying column in the war…. 'If we could revive Monaghan Day for Daddy it could help to start him back to himself. Monaghan Day meant the world to him once'.(1)

Mc Quaid comes on the day but the meeting fails to exert any positive impact on Moran's frustrated spirit. Rather we discover Moran as a bitter old man disillusioned with the socio-political equations of the post-independence Ireland. He says-

> 'What did we get for it? A Country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own Johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half of my family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.' (5)

Mc Quaid, his one time subordinate in the battlefield is now a big farmer of the locality, far bigger than Moran, because, unlike Moran, he shows a necessary flexibility in dealing with the post-independence changes. He is a practical man. He criticizes Moran's decision of refusing IRA pension to be emotional and unrealistic-

> 'It makes no sense you not taking the IRA pension. You earned it. You could still have it in the morning', Mc Quaid said.
>
> 'I'd throw it in their teeth'. Moran clenched and unclenched his hands as he spoke.
>
> 'I never question the colour of any man's money. If I'm offered it I take it', (15)

This initial episode throws light on the angry, stubborn and egoistical aspects of Moran's character and these early revelations about his nature will help the reader to judge his authoritative treatment of his children in his household as McGahern soon will take recourse to flashback to describe Moran's life "amongst women".

The way McQuaid's married life goes on discloses to some extent the marginal importance of women in a rural Irish household-

> They had married young and their three sons married young as well. They lived alone now in the big cattle dealer's house with the white railings in the middle of the fields. He was seldom in the house except to eat or sleep and when he was all he ever did was yell, 'Get the tea. Polish the boots. Kick out that bloody cat Get me a stud. Where's the fucking collar?' 'In a minute, Jimmy.Coming.On the way. It's here in my very hand,' his wife would race and flurry and call. (13)

But quite contrary to McQuaid, Moran Values his family over everything but runs it in the same military discipline and dictates he used to control a large militant group in his IRA days. We are given a detailed account of an atmosphere of muffled tension in the Moran household where three sisters, Maggie, Sheila and Mona and their little brother live in utmost awe for their strict and ill-tempered father. Moran "had been a widower for many years"(23) and in the absence of their mother and the eldest child, Luke, it is Maggie who has taken up the responsibility to run the household smoothly, looking after the needs of her father and the siblings who go to school. She had to sacrifice her own education for this end. The most remarkable aspect of Moran's family in this particular phase is a milieu of utter discord or a lack of connection between the father and his offspring. Moran works hard on the field and the others have to help him regularly, as a devout Catholic he makes sure that they say the Rosary without fail and at the same time, he pays proper attention to the progress of Sheila, Mona and Michael.

This bleak atmosphere of the household changes with the advent of Rose whom Moran used to meet at the village post-office, becomes attracted to her calm but strong demeanour and decides to marry her after a lot of hesitations. Rose was also smitten by the helplessness of this once strong man and marries him against the approval of her family. The awkwardness of an old man's marriage, the apprehensiveness of the girls about the new member of the family and their ultimate sense of release from

a claustrophobia of existence have been brilliantly represented by McGahern in his characteristic serio-comic style. With her loving and caring nature Rose wins the hearts of all and plays the role of a good anchor to the family and her calm resistance begins to null the dominating practices of Moran as well.

Actually, in Rose we have a glimpse of the gradually changing face of Irish womanhood. Before her marriage Rose has worked in Scotland and has seen the changed perspective of woman empowerment there. She feels the need of these girls to go beyond their traditional household and agricultural roles. She becomes instrumental in doing something meaningful for them –

> Rose changed everything. She was able to organize her day so that even though she seemed to be less harassed than Maggie the meals were always delicious and on time …
>
> What was also clear was that the house's need of Maggie had disappeared. Rose brought this up very gently to Moran.
>
> 'She'll have a roof over her had as long as I'm above ground', he responded aggressively.
>
> 'She'll have that as long as I'm here too but I think she should have more. 'What more does she want?'
>
> 'She's almost nineteen. The day is gone when a girl waits around till some man needs a wife. She should have the protection of some work.'
>
> 'What job of any good would she get here? She left school at fourteen. She was not all that good at school either.'
>
> 'There's a shortage of nurses in England. I always regretted I never trained. I've spoken to her and she's interested.'
>
> 'You were very quick off the mark, weren't you? A lot of our people go wrong in England.' (48-49)

We can easily assume that Moran is referring to Luke who left home forever following a steep tussle with Moran when "Luke had tried to get Maggie to go to England to learn nursing against Moran's fierce opposition"(49). But now Moran's resistance cannot withstand the power of Rose's will. Then Sheila and Nora excels in examinations and goes to Dublin to join civil service also.

In *Amongst Women*McGahern has showcased the power of women to overshadow masculine authority. After the girls are gone and find their foothold in the world outside, Moran begins to wait for their homecoming and begins to be happy like a child when they are back. His Herculean will has been weakened after living among some loving, caring and strong women for a long time. This feminizing effect is evident in Michael also. He grows up being pampered by Rose and his sisters, shows equal distaste to studies and field works, becomes fond of gardening etc. But after the girls depart he begins to discover his masculinity in a newer way-

> Though it was in its September glory Michael lost all interest in his garden; the falling petals stayed unswept and the flowers wilted and fell into a tangled mess…. His involvement in the little garden was not strong enough to survive without their praise. (91)

He soon begins to bunk school, falls in love with an elderly woman, Nell Morahan and eventually leaves for London to seek the help of Luke in London to escape Moran's anger. Later he marries a British school-teacher there. Luke never comes back, even after repeated requests from an old and ailing father and his sisters. He remains firm on his belief that

> '….Only women could live with Daddy.' (133)

Again, the dedication and love that the girls offer to their old father and, which the sons do not, show a reversal of gender roles. As Sheila comments towards the end after Moran's funeral-

> 'Will you look at the men.They're more like a crowd of women'. (184)

Again, the migration of the family folk to the big cities also marks a significant social change from a rural / agricultural economy to an urban/industrial one. Moran believed in the relative importance of education and farming and, so, whenever the girls came back home from their workplaces he unfailingly made them work on the field. But now he begins to perceive the huge gap between their respective lifestyles. When Maggie decides to marry Mark O'Donog- hue and brings him to seek Moran's approval, Moran is angry with his trendy dress and frank urbanized body language. Moran says reflectively to Rose-

> 'We are made up at last. We'll have the town poor in the family next.' (139)

The gap becomes so unbearable to Moran that he involves himself in a bitter quarrel with Sean, Sheila's husband, when he says that it is not necessary for an educated person to know all the pros and cons of farming. Towards the end of the novel we discover a bitter and disillusioned Moran who recognizes a huge gap between two different generations of Ireland. This bitterness goes to such an extent that the grandchildren are now a nuisance to him. Moran's final resignation and farewell to his dear farm, so, situates the end of a particular socio-cultural value system-

> Whether the hay was won or lost grew matterless. The bulk of the cattle were sold before the grass died and the few that were left managed on what they could get under hedges about the fields. A fall of snow that set neighbours worrying about sheds and fodder became a pleasant break that helped time pass. (172)

So, under the garb of an engrossing family drama, John McGahern's*Amongst Women* remains a faithful study of a very important juncture in Irish history. The death of Moran, in a way, marks the gradual decline of Patriarchal and agrarian Ireland.

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