

Symbolic and Actual Motherhood in Ireland:  
Maternal Identities in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*

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## Abstract

Ireland has long been represented as a woman. In the context of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, the figure of Mother Ireland was established to motivate male Irish nationalists to join the fight against the British coloniser. However, this mother figure, along with religious mother figures such as the Virgin Mary, is experienced as a burden to Irish mothers and women. This experience is depicted, and sometimes negated, in the autobiographical works on motherhood that recently have established a new Irish literary trend. One of these works is Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*. This thesis first shows that this work of autofiction negates symbolic mother figures, such as the Virgin Mary, Mater Dolorosa and Mother Ireland. Then, it discusses that Ní Ghríofa challenges the expectations that those figures have imposed on mothers and women today, such as altruism and domesticity. Ní Ghríofa's work underlines the importance of representations of maternal subjectivity, which has often been left undiscussed in Irish literature. Within a larger feminist context, this thesis argues that Ní Ghríofa's work challenges recent equality movements that depict a diverse group of women through one single female figure.

**Key words:** Symbolic motherhood, actual motherhood, maternal subjectivity, Virgin Mary, Mother Ireland, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, *A Ghost in the Throat*.

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## Introduction

*“This is a female text, written in the twenty-first century. How late it is. How much has changed. How little.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Doireann Ní Ghríofa

This is one of the first sentences of Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s autobiographical novel *A Ghost in the Throat*. A female text, Ní Ghríofa calls it, referring to the etymology of the word “text”: “to weave, to fuse, to braid.”<sup>2</sup> In her novel, she aims to “entwin[e] strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies,”<sup>3</sup> hoping to restore the lost voices of women that have been written out of history. Ní Ghríofa’s main focus is the life of eighteenth-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill and her poem “The Keen for Art Ó Laoghaire” (c. 1773). By discovering more of Ní Chonaill’s life, Ní Ghríofa realises how often female voices have been silenced. Yet, literature today still neglects the individual experiences of Irish women and, in particular, those of Irish mothers: “How much has changed. How little.”<sup>4</sup>

Historically, Ireland has often been represented as a woman. As Shonagh Hill explains, this gendering finds its roots in Irish pagan traditions in which a goddess embodied and ruled over the natural world.<sup>5</sup> Ireland therefore became represented as a woman. The king, as representative of human life, embodied the human world. According to pagan beliefs, these feminine and masculine realms had to be in equilibrium for the land to remain fertile. The pagan goddess therefore had to make love with the head of the king.<sup>6</sup> Even though this equilibrium ensured a more equal representational status for women, the arrival of Christianity in Ireland and, in later centuries, the narratives of Irish nationalism gave way to more patriarchal representations of Ireland as a woman. Indeed, Sean Ryder, who focuses on the rise of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century, argues that in the colonial context of Ireland and Britain, “Ireland becomes a contested female body [...] which has been conquered

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<sup>1</sup> Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2021), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Shonagh Hill, *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, 4.

and possessed by an aggressive and dishonourable male.”<sup>7</sup> One of the key figures in this colonial discourse is the figure of Mother Éire, or Mother Ireland. According to Ryder, she is “a cipher for the Irish nation in general.”<sup>8</sup> This gendering of nationalist symbolic figures establishes a paradox in the narrative of Irish nationalists: Mother Ireland is the figure uniting the nation, yet also the embodiment of the colonial narrative in which Ireland represents a “weak” female nation.

The British colonisation of Ireland strengthened the patriarchal means through which society was ordered. Declan Kiberd argues that “[t]he odds against the crusaders for women’s rights were formidable. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of women workers in industry had dropped substantially [...] Ireland became, in consequence, a society pervaded by male values.”<sup>9</sup> With the independence from the British coloniser in 1922, many Irish women thought this patriarchal society would come to an end as the proclamation of independence from 1916 “addressed itself equally to women as well as to men.”<sup>10</sup> However, not much changed with this proclamation, as it turned out it was not merely the presence of a “male” coloniser that had oppressed the women’s rights. As Kiberd describes, “Michael Collins, leader of the pro-Treaty forces, thanked the women for their work, but offered no clear vision of their part in shaping the new Ireland.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, the women who had fought for independence from the British were marginalised through their own constitution. In 1922, the Marriage Bar was installed, which prohibited married women from pursuing a career.<sup>12</sup> From then on, “woman’s role was redefined in purely maternal and domestic terms,” Kiberd states.<sup>13</sup> The Marriage Bar was lifted in 1973 when Ireland became part of the European Union, with the Marriage Bars in the private sectors following in 1977.<sup>14</sup>

However, married Irish women were not the only ones who suffered under the patriarchal structures of Irish society. Between 1922 and 1996, many Irish women were held

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<sup>7</sup> Sean Ryder, “Gender and the Discourse of ‘Young Ireland’ Cultural Nationalism,” in *Gender and Colonialism*, ed. Timothy P. Foley, et al. (Galway: Galway University Press, 1995), 212. <http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4745>.

<sup>8</sup> Ryder, 213.

<sup>9</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 396.

<sup>10</sup> Kiberd, 400.

<sup>11</sup> Kiberd, 402.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Bambrick, “The Marriage Bar: A Ban on Employing Married Women,” last modified October 14, 2019, <https://ictu.ie/blog/marriage-bar-ban-employing-married-women>.

<sup>13</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 403.

<sup>14</sup> Bambrick, “The Marriage Bar,” <https://ictu.ie/blog/marriage-bar-ban-employing-married-women>.

captive in Magdalene Laundries. These laundries forced women “to carry out unpaid labour for the commercial benefit of four religious congregations” while being physically and emotionally abused.<sup>15</sup> According to Maeve O’Rourke, victims “included those who had given birth outside marriage, who had been sexually abused” or “were considered to be ‘promiscuous’ or ‘at risk’ of becoming so.”<sup>16</sup> This example reinforces the marginalised position of women in a religious and patriarchal society such as Ireland.

More recently, the Irish constitution has been amended in favour of women’s rights. In 2018, the eighth amendment was repealed. This allowed women to have an abortion in Ireland, which had been a criminal offence since 1861.<sup>17</sup> In 1983, Article 40.3.3, also known as the eighth amendment, was introduced, which put the life of the unborn on the same level of that of its mother. E. Ann Kaplan explains that this focus on the foetus had seen a rapid increase since the late 1960s, “following the 1965 publication of [...] progressive photographs of the foetus during gestation.”<sup>18</sup> These foetal images were used during anti-abortion campaigns and marginalised the voices of pregnant women.<sup>19</sup> In the end, Article 40.3.3 proved untenable as “a time would come when somebody would have to decide between [the foetus and the mother],” Ivana Bacik explains.<sup>20</sup> This was the case in 2012, when Savita Halappanavar was refused an abortion and died in Galway University Hospital.<sup>21</sup> Kaplan states that this has happened before and that “the foetus is seen not only as a being in its own right, but a being with its own rights, which are often in opposition to (and privileged over) those of the mother.”<sup>22</sup> In 2018, a referendum to “Repeal the Eighth” was held to make an end to the unnecessary deaths of pregnant women. 66.4% of the participants voted “yes,” which repealed the dubious Article 40.3.3.<sup>23</sup> This allowed Irish women to legally undergo an abortion in their own country.

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<sup>15</sup> Maeve O’Rourke, “Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the State’s Duty to Protect,” *Hibernian Law Journal* 10 (2011): 200-1. <http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15291>.

<sup>16</sup> O’Rourke, 200.

<sup>17</sup> Ivana Bacik, “The Irish Constitution and Gender Politics: Developments in the Law on Abortion,” *Irish Political Studies* 28, no. 3 (2013): 382. doi: 10.1080/07907184.2013.823085.

<sup>18</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Bacik, “Law on Abortion,” 385.

<sup>21</sup> Bacik, 394.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Henley, “Irish Abortion Referendum: Yes Wins With 66.4% - As It Happened,” *The Guardian*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2018/may/26/irish-abortion-referendum-result-count-begins-live>.

This year, 2023, there have already been many debates on another article of the Irish constitution, namely Article 41.2, which states that “mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.”<sup>24</sup> Even though this law was intended to support women’s rights, its wording pins women down to the domestic sphere and therefore solidifies the patriarchal structures it was intended to negate. A referendum will be held later this year to attempt to make this article gender-neutral. If it is repealed, Ireland is one step closer to eliminating gender expectations from the constitution. Consequently, Bacik argues that Ireland “may now be facing a period of genuine constitutional reform,”<sup>25</sup> which is supported by this year’s celebration of St. Brigid. It was the first year that this female patron saint was given her own public holiday, a privilege her male counterpart St. Patrick has had since 1903.

It is not only Ireland’s colonial past, the Irish constitution, and public holidays that reveal patriarchal tendencies within Irish culture. These structures are also apparent in many nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish literary texts. In these works, symbolic mothers are problematically entwined with real mothers. Jayne Steel observes that Irish male authors depicted Irish women as mothers of nationalist men in twentieth-century novels, whether these women were actually mothers or not. The novel *The Whore-Mother* (1973) by Shaun Herron, for example, involves a scene in which a woman is mistaken for a mother, and the protagonist, a male Irish nationalist, hallucinates he is breastfed by this woman. “[T]he reader is left in no doubt as to her symbolic status,” Steel writes, as the woman says she is called “Cathleen the whore-mother,” referring to Cathleen Ní Houlihan, another female figure embodying Ireland.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the symbolic Mother Ireland, represented by a non-fictional woman, is feeding her nationalist sons. Steel adds that this mythic representation of Irish mothers “reveal[s] more about the male psyche than about ‘real’ Irish nationalist women.”<sup>27</sup> This is closely related to Kaplan’s statement that “[t]he mother [...] was usually

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<sup>24</sup> Heather Laird and Emma Penney, “The Issues with Ireland’s ‘Woman in the Home’ Constitution Clause,” *RTÉ*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2023/0308/1201586-ireland-women-in-the-home-constitution-clause-1937-referendum/>.

<sup>25</sup> Bacik, “Law on Abortion,” 395.

<sup>26</sup> Jayne Steel, “‘And Behind Him a Wicked Hag Did Stalk’: From Maiden to Mother, Ireland as Woman through the Male Psyche,” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*, ed. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2019), 75. [https://search-ebscohost-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2255856&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s6172330&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-\\_\\_-68](https://search-ebscohost-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2255856&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s6172330&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-__-68).

<sup>27</sup> Steel, 76.



discussed as an integral part of a discourse [...] that was spoken by an Other.”<sup>28</sup> The experiences of mothers and women are often left out of the literary canon and, if they do appear, they are described from a male perspective. However, Kaplan and Steel both agree that it is difficult to depict women truthfully in literature. Steel writes that “literary realism has always relied on stereotypes” as “the dependence on recognisability tends to entrench received ideas.”<sup>29</sup> It is therefore almost impossible to depict the experiences of women in fiction, as the representations need to be applicable to a diverse group.

The strong association of mothers with symbolic ones in Irish literature has implications for Irish women today. According to Ryder, Mother Ireland “figure[s] a particular set of values and expectations concerning the role of the mother in Irish culture.”<sup>30</sup> However, it is impossible to live up to these mythic figures as they are merely fictional. Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill desires change and writes that she wants “to counteract the hoary image of Mother Ireland, and to free myself of the sense that I as a woman am carrying a map of Ireland around on my back.”<sup>31</sup> This suggests that symbolic national figures, such as Mother Ireland, weigh on the shoulders of Irish women. Through poetry, Ní Dhomhnaill hopes to reinvent the myth of Mother Ireland and to establish “a new canon, one that is not defined by what it keeps out,” namely the voices of Irish women.<sup>32</sup>

Besides poetry, multiple works on motherhood written by Irish women have been published in recent years. As these works are highly personal, real experiences of women and mothers enter the realm of literature, challenging the stereotypical representations that literary realism relies on. Tramp Press is an important publishing company within this literary movement. It was founded in 2014 by Lisa Coen and Sarah Davis-Goff. These two women have created a platform that allows a range of marginalised voices to be heard, such as those of Emilie Pine and Doireann Ní Ghríofa. Pine’s *Notes to Self* was published in 2018 and recounts the author’s personal experience with pregnancy, miscarriage, infertility and rape, which are not often discussed in Irish literature - especially from the perspective of a woman. Ní Ghríofa’s *A Ghost in the Throat* was published in 2020 and is a work of autofiction. The work describes Ní Ghríofa’s obsessions with the eighteenth-century female poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, while portraying a vivid image of contemporary motherhood. Both Ní Ghríofa’s

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<sup>28</sup> Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Steel, “From Maiden to Mother,” 70.

<sup>30</sup> Ryder, “‘Young Ireland’ Cultural Nationalism,” 213.

<sup>31</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays*, ed. Oona Frawley (Dublin: New Island, 2005), 57.

<sup>32</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, 58.

and Pine's works have won multiple awards for their revolutionary writings. A few examples are the An Post Irish Book of the Year Award that Ní Ghríofa received in 2020 in the category 'Non-Fiction' and Pine in 2018 in the category 'Newcomer of the Year.'<sup>33</sup> *Notes to Self* also won the Butler Literary Award,<sup>34</sup> which is given to an emerging Irish author every two years.<sup>35</sup> *A Ghost in the Throat* was awarded the James Tait Black Award for biographies in 2021,<sup>36</sup> which is granted every year to the best biographies and works of fiction according to British literary scholars and students.<sup>37</sup> These prestigious awards indicate the importance of such innovative pieces of Irish writing.

As the publications of Irish texts depicting the individual experiences of women and mothers are so recent, not much academic research has yet been conducted on these topics. However, academic scholarship on works regarding maternal subjectivity in general remains scarce. Diane Stubbings writes that "[w]here the mother-figure has been the focus of research, it is generally her familial function that has been explored, with her position within a broader cultural, social or political framework largely neglected."<sup>38</sup> This silence is also noticeable in fiction. Kaplan indicates that, in the 1980s, the fictional mother was widely discussed, "but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration."<sup>39</sup> It is therefore of utmost importance to induct the voices of Irish women, and of Irish mothers in particular, into the Irish literary canon, but also to focus on the representations of these women through academic research in order to close the research gap. *A Ghost in the Throat* is a highly relevant work to analyse in terms of contemporary representations of symbolic and real motherhood in Irish fiction. Not only is this work of autofiction written from the perspective of an Irish mother: it also offers insights into the historical and contemporary discourse of

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<sup>33</sup> "Previous Winners," *An Post Irish Book Awards*, accessed on June 5, 2023, <https://www.irishbookawards.ie/previous-winners/>.

<sup>34</sup> "Emilie Pine Wins the Butler Literary Award," *Curtis Brown Group*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.curtisbrown.co.uk/news/emilie-pine-wins-the-butler-literary-award>.

<sup>35</sup> "University of Limerick Plays Host to Visual Art and Literary Awards Ceremony," *University of Limerick*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.ul.ie/news/university-of-limerick-plays-host-to-visual-art-and-literary-awards-ceremony#:~:text=The%20Butler%20Literary%20Award%20was,author%20in%20English%20or%20Irish>.

<sup>36</sup> Sian Bayley, "Von Reinhold and Ní Ghríofa Win £10k James Tait Black Prizes," August 25, 2021, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/debuts-n-ghr-ofa-and-von-reinhold-win-10k-james-tait-black-prizes-1277855>.

<sup>37</sup> Bayley, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/debuts-n-ghr-ofa-and-von-reinhold-win-10k-james-tait-black-prizes-1277855>.

<sup>38</sup> Diane Stubbings, *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 3.

Irish symbolic motherhood.

Therefore, this thesis addresses the research gap regarding the absence of maternal subjectivity in representations of Irish symbolic and actual motherhood through the following research question: *To what extent does Doireann Ní Ghríofa's novel A Ghost in the Throat challenge religious and nationalist mother figures in its representations of symbolic and actual Irish motherhood?* The project takes a feminist approach to this text by focusing on gender constructs in the twenty-first century. In effect, the project studies tensions between representations of symbolic and real Irish mothers, which is conducted through a close reading of the novel at hand.

To carry out this close reading, the first chapter of this project covers the theoretical framework, discussing scholarship concerning motherhood by Julia Kristeva in particular. It elaborates on religious and Irish mother figures that are important to Irish culture. The second chapter explains how these symbolic mothers are reflected and negated in Ní Ghríofa's novel, whereas the third chapter covers representations of actual motherhood in this novel while addressing the expectations imposed on twenty-first-century mothers. The conclusion recapitulates the answer to the research question, which considers the extent to which *A Ghost in the Throat* challenges religious and nationalist constructions of symbolic and actual Irish motherhood. Furthermore, the conclusion puts the novel in its wider cultural, societal, and historical context with a specific focus on contemporary feminist movements.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

To establish a framework through which Ní Ghríofa's novel can be analysed, it is important to address how academic scholarship has discussed representations of motherhood so far. Six influential mother figures in Irish culture are the Virgin Mary, the Mater Dolorosa, the Lactating Madonna, Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ní Houlihan and the Sean Bhean Bhocht. As the latter two are inextricably entwined with the image of Mother Ireland, the focus in this thesis lies on the first four figures. The religious figures will predominantly be discussed through the works of Julia Kristeva, one of the most influential scholars regarding debates on the maternal subject. This framework will also address notions of essentialism, as Kristeva has often been accused of reducing women to maternal roles. This chapter will then outline the debates on the representability of actual motherhood through literature. The final section will explain how these concepts and issues can be used to analyse *A Ghost in the Throat*.

### Religious Mother Figures

Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" (1985), which is based on Kristeva's personal experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, discusses the representations and implications of various Virgin Mary figures. According to Kristeva, Mary is only depicted with regard to her son's life and is not granted her own history in the Gospels.<sup>40</sup> Mary's physical motherhood is also left undiscussed: "any trace of matrilineality is explicitly disavowed, leaving only the symbolic tie between mother and son."<sup>41</sup> This marginalised position translated to Irish society. According to Ingman, the Virgin Mary was "crucial to definitions of Irish womanhood for a large part of the twentieth century"<sup>42</sup> and that she "was used to control and define women."<sup>43</sup> In other words, the symbolic mother figure of the Virgin Mary was problematically entwined with the lives of actual mothers.

Furthermore, Kristeva points out that, even though Mary is supposed to be a human figure, "the humanity of the Virgin mother is not always evident."<sup>44</sup> Instead, Mary is often portrayed as a divine being. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 officially established her as

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<sup>40</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 (1985): 135-6.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772126>.

<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2007), 74.

<sup>43</sup> Ingman, 116.

<sup>44</sup> Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 134.

such: this council “declared [Mary] *Aeiparthenos*, forever virgin.”<sup>45</sup> This position made Mary “not merely the Mother of man or Christ but the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, [...] thus deifying her once and for all.”<sup>46</sup> The deification of this important mother figure had implications for Irish mothers: Ingman argues that “Irish women, with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them, were to embody the purity of the Irish nation,”<sup>47</sup> and that therefore women who were “sexually loose” were seen as “anti-Irish or ‘foreign’.”<sup>48</sup> This underlines how much Mary’s virginal status impacted Irish women. They were defined through a divine mother image, just as Mary was defined only in connection to Jesus’ life. Women were expected to live up to an “ideal that no individual woman could possibly embody.”<sup>49</sup>

Another image of the Virgin Mary gained popularity in the West around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, namely that of the Mater Dolorosa.<sup>50</sup> According to Kristeva, the Mater Dolorosa depicts “an altogether human image of a mother of flesh and blood.”<sup>51</sup> She adds that this representation, which depicts Mary’s suffering after Jesus’ death, “comes closer than early images to women’s ‘real life’ experience.”<sup>52</sup> In Ireland, the image of the Mater Dolorosa became so popular that Cardinal John Henry Newman, a well-known theologian who founded University College Dublin,<sup>53</sup> gave an elaborate speech emphasising Mary could only be worshipped through Jesus.<sup>54</sup> Stubbings states that “the very need to devote such a lengthy discourse to refuting Mary’s entitlement to be worshipped in her own right suggests [...] the excess with which [M]ariolatry was practised in Ireland.”<sup>55</sup> The Mater Dolorosa figure might have gained such popularity in Ireland as its depiction ties in with other existing lamenting female figures that were already present in Irish culture. For example, the Irish tradition of keening includes figures such as the banshee, who wails or screams to herald a death in the family, and the Sean Bhean Bhocht, or “Poor Old Woman” figure. This latter figure,

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<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, 137.

<sup>46</sup> Kristeva, 137.

<sup>47</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ingman, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 141.

<sup>50</sup> Kristeva, 143.

<sup>51</sup> Kristeva, 141.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva, 141-2.

<sup>53</sup> “About John Henry Newman,” *University College Dublin*, accessed on June 5, 2023, <https://www.ucd.ie/newman/aboutjohnhenrynewman/>.

<sup>54</sup> Diane Stubbings, *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Stubbings, 6.

according to Ryder, is “powerless, apart from her power to lament or keen.”<sup>56</sup> Kristeva’s analysis of the Mater Dolorosa is similar to this depiction: “her only pathos (which is sharply distinguished from the sweet and somewhat absent serenity of the lactating Madonnas) comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse.”<sup>57</sup> Apart from lamenting the loss of her son, Mary has no real power of her own - yet she was still worshipped for her intercession. Another frequently used image of the Virgin Mary that ties in with the Mater Dolorosa is the image of the Lactating Madonna. Either smiling or indifferent to the child tugging at her breast, the Lactating Madonna ensures, according to Kristeva, that “the stiffness of the Byzantine icons is slowly overcome.”<sup>58</sup> However, these arguably more realistic mother images of the Mater Dolorosa and Lactating Madonna are still confined to the existence of Jesus, whose miraculous conception sets an unrealistic ideal for the desexualised Irish mother.

### **Irish Nationalist Mother Figures**

The position of Irish women was challenged even further in the nineteenth century with the rise of nationalist movements. Like Ryder, Ingman points out the gendered colonial relation described in eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry: “On a symbolic level, [...] Ireland was constructed as woman victimized by the colonizing English male. She was Hibernia, Mother Ireland, [...] the Shan Van Vocht [Sean Bhean Bhocht], Cathleen Ni Houlihan.”<sup>59</sup> These female figures all embodied Ireland as a defeated nation. Tina O’Toole explains that the Mother Ireland figure in particular “was deployed to inspire young men to take up arms for the nationalist cause.”<sup>60</sup> In this narrative, “men were Mother Ireland’s sons who were to sacrifice their lives for her” whereas “women were to be passive embodiments of Irish virtue” after the image of the Virgin Mary.<sup>61</sup> The contrast between the symbolic and the real mother within an Irish context, therefore, became even more stark. Stubbings observes that “the familial mother must practise service and obeisance, while the mythical mother was potent, revered and to be served.”<sup>62</sup> Even though narratives in which the woman is reduced to a presence in the life of a male superior are not unique to Ireland, the way in which “the

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<sup>56</sup> Sean Ryder, “Gender and the Discourse of ‘Young Ireland’ Cultural Nationalism,” in *Gender and Colonialism*, ed. Timothy P. Foley, et al. (Galway: Galway University Press, 1995), 213. <http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4745>.

<sup>57</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 144.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Tina O’Toole, *The Irish New Woman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 88.

<sup>61</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Stubbings, *Anglo-Irish Modernism*, 7.

mother's role became caught up within Nationalist and religious discourses” seems to be more specific to this country.<sup>63</sup> “[S]uch discourses,” Stubbings states, “[seem] to offer the mother a privileged role in the liberation of Ireland.”<sup>64</sup> Yet, she adds, “her eternal rewards did little more than tether her to private spaces and distance her from the source of genuine political power.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, Mother Ireland and religious mothers figures such as the Virgin Mary marginalised the lives of Irish women, distancing them from positions of power, while simultaneously setting unrealistic expectations for these women.

After the Irish Civil War of 1922 and 1923, which followed establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, the freedom of Irish women was further restricted and “redefined in purely maternal and domestic terms,” as Declan Kiberd mentions.<sup>66</sup> Jayne Steel observes that this position of the Irish mother is prominent in Irish popular culture of the 1970s: these cultural products “repeat[ed] the figure of the domestic auxiliary who, in turn, complement[ed] earlier Irish nationalist iconographic images of Mother Ireland,”<sup>67</sup> illustrating that representations of mythical women persisted long after they were created, in this case fifty years. In turn, these symbolic images continued to limit the lives of actual women and mothers. This has caused their individual experiences to remain undiscussed in literature for a long time. For example, Kristeva argues in 1985 that there was complete “silence concerning the mental and physical suffering associated with childbirth and, even more, with the self-denial implicit in making oneself anonymous in order to transmit social norms which one may disavow for oneself but which one must pass on to the child, whose education is a link to generations past.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, the mother was trapped within idealistic representations of motherhood as these were the social norm. In turn, the child would grow up living up to the same unequal expectations, even though the mother rejected them - they were ingrained into society. This silence of female and maternal subjectivity still persists today. Nina Holmes states that Irish feminist movements have not succeeded in overthrowing the marginalising symbolic mother figures:

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<sup>63</sup> Stubbings, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Stubbings, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Stubbings, 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland, The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 403.

<sup>67</sup> Jayne Steel, “‘And Behind Him a Wicked Hag Did Stalk’: From Maiden to Mother, Ireland as Woman through the Male Psyche,” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*, ed. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2019), 73. [https://search-ebscohost-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2255856&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s6172330&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-\\_\\_-68](https://search-ebscohost-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2255856&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s6172330&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-__-68).

<sup>68</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 149.

“[d]espite developments in Ireland’s political and ideological landscape [...] – demonstrated by events surrounding women’s liberation and advances in women’s employment rights and reproductive rights – the dominant role of motherhood has remained as an ideal which was presented across the spectrum of visual culture.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Essentialism**

As discussed above, the figures of the Virgin Mary, Mater Dolorosa, Lactating Madonna and Mother Ireland have been influential within representations of Irish motherhood. However, it was not only mothers who were associated with these figures: these representations set expectations for all women. Reducing women to a maternal role is a process of essentialism. Kristeva accuses Christianity in particular of being essentialist: “Christianity is no doubt the most sophisticated symbolic construct in which femininity, to the extent that it figures therein - and it does so constantly - is confined within the limits of the Maternal.”<sup>70</sup> However, Kristeva is often accused of essentialist approaches herself by important feminist scholars, such as Judith Butler.<sup>71</sup> Kristeva’s concept of the *chora*, which is a “preverbal functional state” associated with a uterus from which all things begin, has been the greatest point of essentialist criticism.<sup>72</sup> As Kristeva believes this *chora* exists prior to culture and connects the concept to the maternal body, Butler argues that Kristeva sees gender as a concept that exists before culture, instead of identifying it as a social construct. In contrast, Söderbäck argues that Kristeva actually “returns to the maternal body in part to free women from this very reduction.”<sup>73</sup> Kristeva’s scholarship, according to Söderbäck, “provides women with a past (a genealogy of their own, a community of women, a history hitherto repressed) and, simultaneously, with a future (in the sense of liberating them from pre-defined roles and positions - from motherhood as the only form of subjectivity available to them).”<sup>74</sup> In this light, Kristeva’s work does counter the essentialist representations of prominent mother figures, whereas her *chora* remains an ambiguous concept.

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<sup>69</sup> Nina Holmes, “Maternal Subjects: Representations of Women in Irish Government Health Ephemera, 1970s-1980s,” *The History of the Family* 24, no. 4 (2019): 707. DOI: 10.1080/1081602X.2019.1610667.

<sup>70</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 133-4.

<sup>71</sup> Fanny Söderbäck, “Motherhood: A Site of Repression or Liberation? Kristeva and Butler on the Maternal Body,” *Studies in the Maternal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 2. doi: 10.16995/sim.95.

<sup>72</sup> Söderbäck, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Söderbäck, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Söderbäck, 3.



## Representability

In “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva openly expresses her critique on Christianity for failing “to take account of what a woman might say or want of the Maternal, so that when today women make their voices heard, the issues of conception and maternity are a major focus of discontent.”<sup>75</sup> Even though it is true that the voices of mothers have often not been expressed, it is still debated whether actual motherhood can be represented truthfully through art. Kaplan argues that “the ‘real life’ mother’ [...] lies outside my discursive scope, because I believe she is ultimately not-representable as such.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, Steel states that she is “sceptical about the ability of literary realism to accurately reflect or transparently reveal reality. Indeed, literary realism has always relied on stereotypes, creating many new ones of its own.”<sup>77</sup> In her opinion, then, it might not be possible to write on the maternal without relying on the traditional representations of motherhood that are already ingrained into society. With the rise in popularity of memoirs and autofiction on motherhood, there might just be another stereotype of motherhood in the making. Ingman, however, is more optimistic about the representability of real mothers. She emphasises that “[b]y applying Kristevan theory to fiction which delineates the struggles of particular women to reconcile their gender with their nation, this study hopes to keep faith with Kristeva’s emphasis on the particularity of the individual woman.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, as long as there is a focus on the individual experiences of mothers, the creation of a new stereotype might be avoided while still putting the mother within a more realistic framework. This thesis will show that this is exactly what Ní Ghríofa attempts to accomplish through her novel *A Ghost in the Throat*.

The academic debate regarding representations of symbolic motherhood helps create a framework through which Ní Ghríofa’s novel can be analysed. In turn, this thesis intends to contribute to conversations regarding these representations and their implications on the lives of mothers. Furthermore, this thesis hopes to break the silence regarding maternal subjectivity within literature and feminist debates in order to close the research gap. It will attempt to do so by analysing *A Ghost in the Throat* and to discover if, and to what extent, this novel challenges religious and nationalist representations of motherhood. First, the novel will be

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<sup>75</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 135.

<sup>76</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.

<sup>77</sup> Steel, “From Maiden to Mother,” 70.

<sup>78</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 4.

analysed through the symbolic figures of the Virgin Mary, the Mater Dolorosa, the Lactating Madonna and Mother Ireland. Then, this thesis explores how these figures have influenced actual motherhood in Ireland and how this has affected the novel. In the same line, it will be considered whether *A Ghost in the Throat* is able to represent actual motherhood and whether it succeeds in refraining from producing yet another symbolic mother figure.

Regardless, it is important that the individual voices of mothers are recorded, heard and analysed. Too long have they been overshadowed by idealised figures who have relegated mothers to a domestic sphere in which their lives are at the service of their husbands and sons. Indeed, as Kristeva claims: “Those interested in what maternity is for a woman will no doubt be able to shed new light on this obscure topic by listening, with greater attentiveness than in the past, to what today’s mothers have to say not only about their economic difficulties but also [...] about malaise, insomnia, joy, rage, desire, suffering, and happiness.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 147.

## 2. Symbolic Motherhood

So far, this thesis has outlined how the individual voices of women, and those of mothers specifically, have often been silenced and marginalised in Irish culture. Representations of motherhood have traditionally been depicted through male narratives, which caused misconceptions about mothers to be repeated throughout literary history. The rise of religious and nationalist discourses reinforced the popularity of traditional mother figures and established new icons, such as Mother Ireland and Cathleen Ní Houlihan. According to Stubbings, these “[s]ocial and symbolic structures bind the mother by confining her to spaces in which she is rendered silent and powerless.”<sup>80</sup> She adds that “the mythical mother acted [...] as a siren, seducing men to service in the cause she personified.”<sup>81</sup> This illustrates how the implications of mythical mothers for women themselves are ignored: the mythical mother acted not only as national symbol for men, but in the end also became a figure of restraint for women. Ní Ghríofa’s *A Ghost in the Throat* can be seen as an attempt to free mothers from these marginalised spaces. In the novel, Ní Ghríofa recounts her own experiences as a mother of four, while focusing on the life of the eighteenth-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. Ní Ghríofa does not shy away from detailed descriptions of sexual desire, suffering and physical motherhood, and she focuses primarily on mother-daughter relationships. By writing such experiences and themes into a new literary tradition, Ní Ghríofa negates the representations of symbolic mother figures and therefore frees mothers of the expectations these figures impose.

### **The Virgin Mary: (De)sexualisation and Desire**

As discussed above, mother figures are generally placed into a desexualised position, instigated by the Virgin Mary figure. Teguh Wijaya Mulya, who compares and contrasts the figures of the Virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon, argues that Mary “is continuously disassociated from sex, thereby maintaining her uninterrupted state of ‘perfect purity’.”<sup>82</sup> He points out that Mary is already “named and known by her sexuality,” just like “the Whore of

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<sup>80</sup> Diane Stubbings, *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 12.

<sup>81</sup> Stubbings, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Teguh Wijaya Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary: The Virgin Mary, the Whore of Babylon, and Sexual Violence,” in *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion*, ed. Caroline Blyth, Emily Colgan and Katie B. Edwards (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 52. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-70669-6\_4.

Babylon.”<sup>83</sup> In turn, these desexualised representations of traditional mothers have significant implications for mothers and women today. Mulya argues that the “desexualization of Mary reproduces patriarchal discourses of female purity, obedience, and submission as symbolized by the subject positions of a virgin and a mother.”<sup>84</sup> Heather Ingman adds that, in Ireland specifically, “Irish women, with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them, were to embody the purity of the Irish nation.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, Irish women were expected to live up to the ideal of sexual purity as represented by the Virgin Mary.

These desexualised female figures alienate real mothers from their own sexual desires, leaving them “without any sense of their sexual autonomy or self-identity.”<sup>86</sup> This incapability of mothers to identify and express desire is illustrated by Ní Ghríofa when she recalls her own teenage days. She writes that it were rock bands that “allowed [her] to express the beginnings of desire.”<sup>87</sup> She used to stare “obscenely at strangers from the bus windows, [...] met their eyes and held them until she saw her own lust stir there.”<sup>88</sup> However, Ní Ghríofa later adds that she was not aware that lust could also play a part in the life of a mother. When she rereads Eibhlín Dubh’s poem, she writes: “I was startled to find Eibhlín Dubh pregnant again with her third child, just as I was. I had never imagined her as a mother in any of my previous readings, or perhaps I had simply ignored that part of her identity, since the collision of mother and desire wouldn’t have fitted with how my teenage self wanted to see her.”<sup>89</sup> Following this quote, there seems to be an assumption that mothers are sexless and, in the eyes of a teenager, even boringly so. This ties in with how the mother figure of the Virgin Mary is portrayed - sexless. However, even the sexless image of Mary is a contested one. Mulya claims that Mary “was accused of being ‘not-a-good-woman’ by the men around her, based on their own assumptions about her sexual experience.”<sup>90</sup> If women are chaste, they lack something, namely sexual experience. If they are promiscuous, they are categorised as the “Whore of Babylon”.

Through her fascination for the way Eibhlín Dubh is able to express desire, Ní Ghríofa herself starts rediscovering ways to voice these feelings. When describing how it must have

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<sup>83</sup> Mulya, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Mulya, 53.

<sup>85</sup> Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2007), 7.

<sup>86</sup> Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary,” 54.

<sup>87</sup> Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2021), 15.

<sup>88</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 16.

<sup>89</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 17.

<sup>90</sup> Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary,” 56.

been for Eibhlín Dubh to see her future husband Artur Ó Laoghaire for the first time, Ní Ghríofa writes, “Nelly’s eye clung to his body as it moved. Nelly found herself desiring an introduction. Nelly found herself desiring.”<sup>91</sup> Ní Ghríofa first describes how Eibhlín adheres to a socially accepted form of female lust – she wants to be introduced to Art rather than introducing herself to him. However, Ní Ghríofa reveals the very core of such a wish – Eibhlín Dubh is *desiring*. This revelation also enables Ní Ghríofa to identify and express her own sexual desires. For example, when she and her husband drive back from a date night, she writes, “I’m not sure I can wait until we get home for his fingers, and maybe, I think, maybe I could ask him to find some quiet gateway, some secret spot where we could – just for a minute –.”<sup>92</sup> By writing about such experiences and feelings of lust, while simultaneously addressing the difficulty of finding the words to express herself sexually, the traditional narrative of the virginal mother is deconstructed.

At the same time, Ní Ghríofa refrains from positioning herself at the other end of the biblical binary, namely as “the Whore of Babylon,” for she also addresses how motherhood has affected her sex life. After she has given birth to her third son, she experiences how “every flicker of want was erased from me with such a neat completeness that I felt utterly vacant. [...] I still experienced powerful physical urges, but they were never sexual. I was ruled by milk now, an ocean that surged and ripped to the laws of its own tides.”<sup>93</sup> Through such honest descriptions, Ní Ghríofa illustrates that she is neither “characterized by an excess of sexuality,”<sup>94</sup> like the Whore of Babylon, nor does she portray “an *absence* of sex,”<sup>95</sup> like the Virgin Mary. Ní Ghríofa is therefore able to free mothers of the sexually pure image of Mary, while at the same time refraining from positioning mothers as that of an oversexualised female figure such as “the Whore of Babylon”.

### **The Mater Dolorosa: Keening Mothers**

The image of a suffering Mater Dolorosa, as described in the previous chapter through Kristeva’s work, and the suffering Mother Ireland that must be saved by her nationalist sons give a one-dimensional image of what it entails to suffer as a mother. Ingman states that “The identification of Irish women with suffering Mother Ireland, reinforced by Catholic doctrine

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<sup>91</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 122.

<sup>92</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 161.

<sup>93</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 21.

<sup>94</sup> Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary,” 53

<sup>95</sup> Mulya, 53.

of the Virgin Mary, [...] has weighed heavily on Irish women's lives."<sup>96</sup> She explains that "Catholic and nationalist ideologies idealized the mother figure with little emphasis on the physical realities of maternity and little practical help for the mother [...] idealized mother figures or, alternatively, martyred mothers, usurped the space which could have been occupied by attention to the realities of Irish mothers' lives."<sup>97</sup> Even Kristeva seems to be influenced by the traditional images of the suffering mother: "One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once delivered moves in for good. Obviously you can close your eyes, stop up your ears, teach courses, run errands [...] But a mother is also marked by pain, she succumbs to it."<sup>98</sup> Kristeva seems to deem actual mothers as inherently suffering beings, which is quite paradoxical as it aligns with her depiction of the suffering Mater Dolorosa that she rejects: "her only pathos [...] comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse."<sup>99</sup> In an Irish context, this suffering is exactly what gives power to traditional Irish female figures. According to Ryder, "[t]he sean bhean bhocht, like the young queen of the aisling, is powerless, apart from her power to lament or keen."<sup>100</sup> Ní Ghríofa illustrates how powerful such keens can actually be. It is Eibhlín Dubh's poetry about the keen for her husband that entices the young Ní Ghríofa: "A woman rides in to kneel over him, her voice rising in an antique formula of breath and syllable the teacher calls a 'caoineadh', a keen to lament the dead. Her voice generates an echo strong enough to reach a girl in the distance with dark hair and bitten nails. Me."<sup>101</sup>

However, Ní Ghríofa tries to reposition the mother in such a way that she is no longer a suffering individual. By positioning her keening among a chorus of other mothers, she shows how it can empower and unify women. The first chapter of the novel expresses that "[t]his is a female text, which is also a *caoineadh*: a dirge and drudge-song, an anthem of praise, a chant and a keen, a lament and an echo, a chorus and a hymn. Join in."<sup>102</sup> She explains that a *caoineadh*, which is Irish for 'keen', is not just a lament: it is also a celebration of someone or something that once was, "an anthem of praise." Ní Ghríofa adds that such

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<sup>96</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 75.

<sup>97</sup> Ingman, 75.

<sup>98</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 (1985): 138.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772126>.

<sup>99</sup> Kristeva, 144.

<sup>100</sup> Sean Ryder, "Gender and the Discourse of 'Young Ireland' Cultural Nationalism," in *Gender and Colonialism*, ed. Timothy P. Foley, et al. (Galway: Galway University Press, 1995), 213. <http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4745>.

<sup>101</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 10-1.

<sup>102</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 4.

keening is not done alone – it is a “chorus.” When Ní Ghríofa experiences complications during the birth of her first daughter, her fourth child, she recounts how she was able to express her grief with other mothers of having to leave her daughter behind in the Neonatal ICU: “It is dizzying to let my body express intimate fears in such a public place, but I do, I let my cries echo those of the others who are also stuck in this room, crying too. It’s a chorus. I join in.”<sup>103</sup> Ní Ghríofa shows that suffering is an experience to be shared between mothers. Together they can let their voices, their experiences, be heard, and their shared lament might ease some of the pain. Keening is an empowering, unifying experience.

### **The Lactating Madonna: (Dis)comforts of Breastfeeding**

Mother figures such as the Lactating Madonna idealise and deify the breastfeeding mother. However, this static image does not address the lived experience of breastfeeding. The Madonna is either depicted as smiling or indifferent to having her son tugging at her breast. This, along with popular phrases such as “breast is best,”<sup>104</sup> add to the belief among mothers that “breastfeeding represent[s] ‘good’ mothering.”<sup>105</sup> However, the mother’s experience is marginalised in these narratives. Kaplan suggests this dispositioning happens “almost from the moment of conception”<sup>106</sup>: “the foetus now begins to take center stage. [...] the mother is dramatically re-positioned [...] and her needs now subordinated to those of the foetus, who becomes the new subject.”<sup>107</sup> Ní Ghríofa also depicts the child-centred advertising surrounding breastfeeding in her novel. When she has given birth to her daughter in the hospital, “[a] poster in [her] room blares MOTHER’S MILK IS BEST.”<sup>108</sup> This in turn implies that breastfeeding is something that is expected of a ‘good’ mothers – it is the best care she can grant her child and therefore is imposed on her.

As the mother’s well-being is positioned as inferior to that of her child, the actual experience of breastfeeding is ignored. This lived experience does not often align with that of the smiling lactating Madonna. In their study, Virginia Schmied and Deborah Lupton found that “[m]ost women were prepared to ‘persevere’ with breastfeeding to achieve their identity

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<sup>103</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 57.

<sup>104</sup> Virginia Schmied and Deborah Lupton, “Blurring the Boundaries: Breastfeeding and Maternal Subjectivity,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 23, no. 2 (2001), 238. doi: 10.1111/1467-9566.00249.

<sup>105</sup> Schmied and Lupton, 238.

<sup>106</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), xiii.

<sup>107</sup> Kaplan, xiii.

<sup>108</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 54.

as a breastfeeding mother.”<sup>109</sup> This phrasing, “to persevere,” implies that the smiling Madonna figure might not be an accurate representation of a breastfeeding mother. A mother reporting on her first time breastfeeding in Schmied’s and Lupton’s study stated that “‘nobody told me breastfeeding would be like this’,” illustrating how the experience of breastfeeding mothers is systematically ignored and marginalised.<sup>110</sup> Schmied’s and Lupton’s research also showed that mothers either experienced breastfeeding as “pleasurable and intimate, a vital means of emotional connection to their infants,”<sup>111</sup> whereas other mothers found it “difficult, unpleasant and disruptive.”<sup>112</sup> Within motherhood, therefore, there are different experiences of breastfeeding – something traditional one-dimensional mother figures neglect.

In order to negate these static characters, Ní Ghríofa elaborates on the experience of breastfeeding itself, which enables future mothers to get a clearer insight into what it actually feels like. For example, she describes the sensations of using a breast-pump: “The sensation at nipple level is like a series of small shocks of static electricity, or some strange complication of pins and needles. Unlike feeding the baby, this process always stings, it is never pleasant, and yet the discomfort is endurable.”<sup>113</sup> Ní Ghríofa also describes the experience outside of the breastfeeding itself and how her whole world was dictated by her milk flow: “For years, my sleep is broken by milk. Occasionally, as I’m tugged awake, I take comfort in imagining how often this precise moment has been enacted not only by my own body, but by other mothers, again and again and again, each a mirroring of the same elements - the milk, the mother, the baby, the dark, the milk, the mother, the baby, the dark, the milk, the milk, the milk.”<sup>114</sup> Again, Ní Ghríofa emphasises the comfort a mother can get out of a shared experience, yet she also addresses the feeling of being overwhelmed, as suggested by the repetition of “the milk”. Making these breastfeeding experiences heard can contribute to the well-being of actual mothers as they no longer expect only the comfort and intimacy the Lactating Madonna portrays. All in all, Ní Ghríofa is able to present a more complete representation of motherhood compared to the smiling breastfeeding Madonna figure.

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<sup>109</sup> Schmied and Lupton, “Blurring the Boundaries,” 238.

<sup>110</sup> Schmied and Lupton, 239.

<sup>111</sup> Schmied and Lupton, 239.

<sup>112</sup> Schmied and Lupton, 239.

<sup>113</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 9.

<sup>114</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 210.



### Patrilineality / Matrilineality

Images such as Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary only portray mother-son relationships. After stating that Mary's individual story is left undiscussed, Kristeva explains this is connected to the Christian focus on patrilineality: "On the rare occasions when the Mother of Jesus does appear in the Gospels, it is in order to signify the fact that the filial bond has to do not with the flesh but with the name; in other words, any trace of matrilineality is explicitly disavowed, leaving only the symbolic tie between mother and son."<sup>115</sup> Mother Ireland is depicted in a similar narrative. Ingman explains that "[w]omen were to be passive embodiments of Irish virtue; men were Mother Ireland's sons who were to sacrifice their lives for her."<sup>116</sup> In revolt to this men-only form of nationalism, the feminist group *Inghíníde na hÉireann*, or "Daughters of Ireland," was founded around 1900.<sup>117</sup> These women fought alongside male revolutionaries to establish an independent Ireland. However, this movement did not cause a change in cultural representations: "[t]he iconization of the mother-son relationship in both Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism ensured that for a long time the mother-daughter story remained unwritten in Irish literature," Ingman concludes.<sup>118</sup>

To counter these traditional representations, Ní Ghríofa attempts to write the mother-daughter relationship back into Irish literature. She is aware that the stories of women are often left out of mainstream history and tries to retrieve them by visiting archives and writing down the stories of the women in Eibhlín Dubh's life. This research shifts her focus as to what is *not* in a text, as can be seen when Ní Ghríofa visits the grave of Eibhlín's husband and son: "Now three generations of the family lay together, their bones mingling in the final embrace of father and son and father and son. No female name appears on the gravestone, but the absence of a female name is not evidence of the absence of a female presence. Could Eibhlín Dubh be here too?"<sup>119</sup> Having acquired the insight that women are often present in absence, Ní Ghríofa primarily writes on the relationship with her only daughter to break this silence that still exist in Irish literature. For example, she addresses the matrilineality present in Eibhlín's middle name, "dubh" meaning "dark" in Irish, and links this to her own relationship with her daughter: "The 'Dubh' in Eibhlín Dubh - the darkness in her - comes from her

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<sup>115</sup> Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 136.

<sup>116</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 7.

<sup>117</sup> Brian Hanley, "Inghíníde na hÉireann," *Dublin City Council*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.dublincity.ie/library/blog/inghinidhe-na-heireann>.

<sup>118</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 75.

<sup>119</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 243.

mother. I wonder what darkness I may leave embedded in my daughter.”<sup>120</sup> This female line is also emphasised when Ní Ghríofa looks at her body after having had her last child: “My bellybutton grimaces there, the invisible cord that will always connect me to my mother, just as hers connects her to her mother, and on, and on, and on.”<sup>121</sup>

However, as women and the mother-daughter relationship have long been marginalised, Ní Ghríofa also reflects on the challenges this relationship poses. On the one hand, Ní Ghríofa wants to free her daughter of society’s expectations and the disposition society puts women in, yet she also wants her daughter to fit into society: “as we prepare to leave the house, I do something I never did for her brothers. With her fluffy tangle of toddler hair, her inherited shorts and t-shirt, she looks just like them, until I force her hair into tight, tidy ponytails. She squeals and complains and smacks my fingers away, and still, I am compelled to tug her into girlishness.”<sup>122</sup> Ní Ghríofa is painfully aware that this is not her or her daughter’s wish, but that society imposes looks on girls and women. Moreover, Ní Ghríofa shows that society also expects a certain behaviour from women. When she takes her children to an indoor playground, her daughter finds a foam ball in the ball-pit, which clearly makes her daughter happy. However, a boy appears behind her, “weeping, his hand opening and opening. My daughter’s eyes follow my gaze and return, seeking guidance. Should she run, holding her precious discovery clutched to her breast? Or should she give it away for another’s sake? I am torn between wanting to encourage her, and wanting to save her from becoming like me.”<sup>123</sup> Ní Ghríofa is unsure whether she should teach her daughter to be of service to others and to be submissive, as society expects of women, or to empower her against society’s expectations and have her keep the ball. This dilemma is also addressed by Kristeva. She argues that motherhood involves a form of “self-denial implicit in making oneself anonymous in order to transmit social norms which one may disavow for oneself but which one must pass on to the child, whose education is a link to generations past.”<sup>124</sup> In other words, a mother has no choice but to pass on social norms to their child, whether she agrees with these norms or not - it is part of her role as a parent. By bringing these difficulties to light, however, and by fixating on the mother-daughter relationship, Ní Ghríofa negates

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<sup>120</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 130

<sup>121</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 216-7.

<sup>122</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 132.

<sup>123</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 133.

<sup>124</sup> Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 149.

traditional representations such as the images of Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary, who are constructed through the relationships with their sons.

### 3. Actual Motherhood

Representations of symbolic mothers also set expectations for historical and contemporary mothers. As discussed above, the image of the Virgin Mary set a sexually pure standard for women, whereas the Lactating Madonna suggested that breastfeeding is an intimate and comfortable experience. These symbolic mother figures have greatly influenced representations of mothers in literature. Steel argues that it is especially male-authored literature that “tap[s] into misconceptions about women generally, relying on an archetypal, iconographical and ‘patriarchal’ framework that is common to Western countries.”<sup>125</sup> Ní Ghríofa, like Steel, questions these representations written by men: “I think again of all those blunt, brief sketches presenting [Eibhlín Dubh] in the thin roles of aunt and wife, occluded by the shadows of men. How might she appear if drawn in the light of the women she knew instead?”<sup>126</sup> She takes it upon herself to depict Eibhlín Dubh more truthfully: “Perhaps I could honour Eibhlín Dubh’s life by building a truer image of her days, gathering every fact we hold to create a kaleidoscope.”<sup>127</sup> However, Ingman points out that “maternal subjectivity is still a silence in writing by Irish women,” showing male-authored texts are not the only ones neglecting truthful depictions of women’s experiences.<sup>128</sup> Ní Ghríofa suggests that this silence might be the aftermath of the strong oral tradition that was present in Irish society: “literature composed by women was stored not in books but in female bodies, living repositories of poetry and song.”<sup>129</sup> To compensate for the silence of individual maternal voices in literature, Ní Ghríofa recounts the difficulties of finding her own individuality within motherhood. She does so through negating expectations that burden mothers today, while refraining from creating another stereotypical mother. Ní Ghríofa’s struggle for individuality is an active call to readers to foster communities among mothers while nevertheless emphasising the individuals within this group.

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<sup>125</sup> Jayne Steel, “‘And Behind Him a Wicked Hag Did Stalk’: From Maiden to Mother, Ireland as Woman through the Male Psyche,” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*, ed. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2019), 71. [https://search-ebscohost-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2255856&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s6172330&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-\\_\\_-68](https://search-ebscohost-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2255856&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s6172330&ebv=EK&ppid=Page-__-68).

<sup>126</sup> Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2021), 75.

<sup>127</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 70.

<sup>128</sup> Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2007), 75.

<sup>129</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 74.

## Individuality

Traditional and symbolic mother figures have long been represented through the male gaze. They are valued through their relationship with men - most often as mothers to important sons, both in biblical settings (such as Jesus) and in political contexts (such as Irish nationalism). This dependence on men has implications for the representations of actual mothers. Women are either depicted in relation to the life of a man or not represented at all. For instance, Ní Ghríofa is furious when she sees how Eibhlín Dubh is introduced in the resources she finds: “Wife of Art O’Leary. Aunt of Daniel O’Connell. How swiftly the academic gaze places her in a masculine shadow, as though she could only be of interest as a satellite to male lives.”<sup>130</sup> Ní Ghríofa tries, with great difficulty, to find more information on Eibhlín apart from her role in the lives of men. Ní Ghríofa’s only hope to retrieve such personal data is the notebook of Eibhlín’s son, Cornelius O’Leary. However, when she finds this book at last, he does not mention his mother. Ní Ghríofa is devastated: “There she is, our Eibhlín, as she is [*sic*] always is: gone. Another erasure from another male text. If I can’t find her here, in her own son’s hand, then I will find her nowhere.”<sup>131</sup>

Ní Ghríofa finds passion in her anger and writes *A Ghost in the Throat* to break the silence surrounding the lives of historical women. In attempting to find out more about Eibhlín’s life, she focuses on the lives of the women that Eibhlín knew. While doing so, she not only writes the stories of these women back into history: she also grants these women their own individual stories outside of the lives of their male counterparts. For example, she decides to depict the personality of Eibhlín Dubh’s mother Máire: “As a boss and as a mother, she prized in a quickness of intellect and a certain audacity in conversation, which others responded to, remembered, and recounted.”<sup>132</sup> Later, she imagines how Mary, Eibhlín’s twin sister, must have felt while waiting for the love of her life: “How often did her gaze read the horizon in search of a ship? How long did hope pulse within her?”<sup>133</sup> Interestingly, both these women are named after the Virgin Mary, the archetype of a woman defined and silenced through another man’s existence. By writing down their individual personalities and experiences, Ní Ghríofa is not only giving silenced women a voice: she is also refuting traditional expectations of women set by figures such as the Virgin Mary.

That the purpose of *A Ghost in the Throat* is to emphasise the individuality of women

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<sup>130</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 70.

<sup>131</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 262.

<sup>132</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 83.

<sup>133</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 117.

is highlighted even more by Ní Ghríofa's detailed history of Art Ó Laoghaire's mare. She first narrates the beginning of this female horse's life: "The horse who is galloping through our thoughts now is a female being, conceived, born, and reared in Europe. [...] we watch her birth, swimming hoof-first from the warm ocean of her mother's body [...] Once weaned, she is schooled in servitude. Her life's purpose, she sees, will be to bear a human weight, and she learns it quick."<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, Ní Ghríofa points out that an important part of this mare's identity has been neglected – her name: "no matter how many academic works respond to [the *Caoineadh*], one detail is always missing. We never learn this horse's name. I cannot bring myself to invent one. Instead, I honour her among The Unnamed, a further absence among all the other female absences that are missing from this tale."<sup>135</sup> A name is an important part of identity – it sets one apart from the rest and is therefore a crucial aspect of individuality. The fact that Ní Ghríofa notices that the mare is unnamed, and therefore gives her a name, highlights the extent of the author's need to offer women their own individual story.

Not only does Ní Ghríofa create an individual story for historical women: she also emphasises the individuality of mothers today. When she heads to the milking parlour of the hospital, she writes: "Beyond this door, I find the other mothers: the blonde teenager in a Snoopy nightie, the teacher with pearls in her earlobes, the farmer, the smoker, and all the others. [...] In this room, we laugh more than we cry, but we are all exhausted and terrified. One woman wears a niqab, the rest of us are in pyjamas and slippers, and we are all in hell together."<sup>136</sup> By describing each mother individually, Ní Ghríofa avoids creating another abstracted mother figure. She does, however, express the sense of community between these mothers. They are all going through a rough period in their lives, but Ní Ghríofa resists reducing these mothers to a Mater Dolorosa figure as she grants them a sense of individuality in the face of their struggles.

### **Domesticity**

Apart from neglecting the experiences of mothers and generalising those to construct and impose a single mother image, Irish literature has also often depicted mothers as the centre of the domestic sphere. Stubbings explains that "[t]he image of the 'good mother', subject to the needs of her family, bound the mother to the hearth and, more broadly, contained women

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<sup>134</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 146-7.

<sup>135</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 148.

<sup>136</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 59.

according to the dictates of the patriarchy.”<sup>137</sup> In a sense, Ní Ghríofa fits well into this traditional depiction of motherhood. She stays at home while her husband is at work: “I no longer have a paying job”<sup>138</sup> - yet it remains unclear if this is an involuntary position. Instead, Ní Ghríofa tends to the housework: “This is a female text, composed while folding someone else’s clothes. My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow, while my hands perform innumerable chores.”<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, she raises the children and sings them nursery songs and lullabies: “This is a female text borne of guilt and desire, stitched to a soundtrack of cartoon nursery rhymes.”<sup>140</sup> However, Ní Ghríofa gives these songs her own twist, therefore ensuring an individual representation of motherhood in the novel: “I can never think of a lullaby, so I resort to tunes from teenage mixtapes instead. I used to rewind ‘Karma Police’.”<sup>141</sup>

Ní Ghríofa also expresses a passion for doing housework. At first, it seems that adhering to this traditional expectation of motherhood is her own choice – a convenient coincidence: “When my husband is home, we divide the chores, but when I’m alone, I work alone. I prefer it that way. I like to be in control.”<sup>142</sup> Even though she seems to enjoy doing chores around the house, Ní Ghríofa does not assume all mothers feel the same, which again highlights her need to depict maternal subjectivity: “I wonder whether [other mothers] love their drudge-work as I do, whether they take the same joy in slowly erasing a list like mine.”<sup>143</sup> However, Ní Ghríofa’s passion for housework later becomes obsessive. She no longer sits down with her children to watch a cartoon: “Instead, I hurry to the kitchen, finish mopping, empty the bins, and then check those tasks off my list with a flourish.”<sup>144</sup> This obsessive behaviour suggests that Ní Ghríofa has internalised the expectations imposed on her as a mother. She might not like the chores themselves, but rather the distraction they give her from the challenges that life in a marginalised position pose.

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<sup>137</sup> Diane Stubbings, *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 7.

<sup>138</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 8.

<sup>139</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 3.

<sup>141</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 5.

<sup>142</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 6.

<sup>144</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 8.

## Altruism

Another expectation set by cultural representations of motherhood is that of dedicating yourself to a greater good, which in this case is a child. Stubbings argues that this illuminates the considerable difference between expectations of real and symbolic mothers: “the familial mother must practise service and obeisance, while the mythical mother was potent, revered and to be served.”<sup>145</sup> This service and obeisance is widely discussed in *A Ghost in the Throat*. Ní Ghríofa explains that “[i]n choosing to carry a pregnancy, a woman gives of her body with a selflessness so ordinary that it goes unnoticed, even by herself. Her body becomes bound to altruism as instinctively as to hunger. If she cannot consume sufficient calcium, for example, that mineral will rise up from deep within her bones and donate itself to her infant on her behalf, leaving her own system in deficiency.”<sup>146</sup> Here, Ní Ghríofa suggests altruism is innate to motherhood. These biological instincts are once again emphasised when her family asks when she will wean her daughter: “instincts scold me to tolerate my petty exhaustion and focus instead on giving my daughter all she needs - she takes such comforts from her moments of milk that to deprive her of it seems not only selfish, but somehow cruel.”<sup>147</sup>

However, Ní Ghríofa also suggests that this servitude, this act of giving oneself away, is part of a social role taught to young women. For example, when Ní Ghríofa sees pictures online of young girls donating their hair to charity, she immediately spots that all the girls’ cheeks are “burned balloons of blush-pride.”<sup>148</sup> She sees something of herself in them: “I recognise a glint I know well, and wonder what they will give of themselves next.”<sup>149</sup> Ní Ghríofa here alludes to her own donations, such as giving her mother milk to the babies of strangers and signing up to donate her body to science after her death. Still, Ní Ghríofa cannot help but feel that her “own small efforts seem so prim by comparison.”<sup>150</sup> She can never give away enough of herself.

Throughout the novel, Ní Ghríofa reveals that she knows she has lost her own identity through the selflessness of her altruistic actions. Dedicating her life to those of others has become part of her identity as a mother in such a significant way that she asks herself: “What will become of me, in the absence of this labour, all this growing and harvesting? Without

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<sup>145</sup> Stubbings, *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal*, 7.

<sup>146</sup> Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*, 35.

<sup>147</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 213.

<sup>148</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 136.

<sup>149</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 136.

<sup>150</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 135.



milk, how will I see? Without milk, who will I be?”<sup>151</sup> Ní Ghríofa realises she has, just like traditional expectations of house mothers, internalised expectations of altruism. When talking about the pain she endures during sex after childbirth, she writes: “I *convinced* myself that it must be good to endure such pain as it facilitated the pleasure of another.”<sup>152</sup> Even her most motherly act of service, giving her milk to children in need, are questioned: “I *make* myself a life in which whenever I let myself sit, it is to emit pale syllables of milk, while sipping my own dark sustenance from ink.”<sup>153</sup> This illustrates that the milk donations, just like other acts of altruism, are not always a voluntary act, but something Ní Ghríofa has imposed on herself as she has internalised it is what good mothers are supposed to do.

### **New Mother Figures: Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill**

To cope with the realisation of her lost identity, Ní Ghríofa’s relies on structures she already knows – symbolic mothers. This time, however, still heeding her need for individuality, Ní Ghríofa establishes a symbolic mother out of a historical one: Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. Ní Ghríofa’s obsession with Eibhlín Dubh’s life causes her to want to live up to Eibhlín’s form of motherhood, neglecting her own identity once again. For example, after Art Ó Laoghaire is murdered, Eibhlín Dubh writes in her *Caoineadh* that she drank the blood from his body. Following Eibhlín’s narrative to a less extreme form, Ní Ghríofa writes about the tests carried out on her new-born daughter: “I press my lips to her heels when the tests make her bleed, my mouth tidying droplets of blood until her skin is clean.”<sup>154</sup> Eibhlín Dubh has set an example that Ní Ghríofa feels obliged to follow. When Ní Ghríofa is naming her daughter, Eibhlín’s life again serves as an inspiration: “I had always hoped to name a daughter for the ocean, but lying under the long fluorescent bulbs outside the birthing room, I changed my mind. On impulse, I chose a name that means Light; I don’t remember why.”<sup>155</sup> Ní Ghríofa subconsciously made the decision to name her daughter after the light, resonating with the ‘dark’ in Eibhlín’s middle name – ‘Dubh.’

Even though Ní Ghríofa wants to imitate Eibhlín’s form of motherhood, she soon realises this is an impossible task. For example, Ní Ghríofa wants to feel the same sexual desires Eibhlín expresses in her *Caoineadh*, but finds herself unable to do so after each pregnancy. Her husband tells her that “he would happily wait until the exhaustion had passed

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<sup>151</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 215.

<sup>152</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 22-3.

<sup>153</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 25.

<sup>154</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 59.

<sup>155</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 131.

and I wanted him again,”<sup>156</sup> yet Ní Ghríofa feels that she needs to live up to Eibhlín’s standard: “I found that I could not accept this gift. So I lied. I made of desire another chore to suffer.”<sup>157</sup> It is only when her husband undergoes a vasectomy that Ní Ghríofa feels the burden that has weighed upon her as a mother. She writes that “I could see how he had married a woman who loved the drug of birth, who habitually drowned herself in nursling-love, a woman who flung herself to her knees in housework, and merrily made of herself a shadow to the tyranny of lists.”<sup>158</sup> Again, she illustrates that her identity has become tied up with being a mother, and she is afraid of letting that part of her life go: “I wanted to ask what I would do without a baby to attend to.”<sup>159</sup> Yet, she deems her husband’s procedure “a strange sort of gift”<sup>160</sup> that “is not only freeing himself, he is snipping me free too. If I cannot hold another infant, then maybe I will begin to grow something else - something I can’t quite imagine yet.”<sup>161</sup> Ní Ghríofa can now live life as an individual first and a mother second, meaning she no longer feels the heavy burden of having to dedicate her life to her children and having to live up to expectations set by symbolic mother images.

### **New Mother Figures: Doireann Ní Ghríofa**

Through the struggle of finding an identity stripped of traditional and self-made mother images, Ní Ghríofa establishes yet another figure. This time, however, it is one she can actually live up to – herself. Ní Ghríofa first presents herself as a symbolic mother to Eibhlín Dubh. She feels Eibhlín inside her as though she were an unborn child: “I hoovered and scrubbed [...] and all the while, inside me, she was beginning to feel more and more real.”<sup>162</sup> Her milk flow even reminds her of Eibhlín’s existence: “my body responded to my daughter’s hunger with a rush of milk, and then my mind responded to the milk by rushing back to the scattered jigsaw of Eibhlín Dubh’s days.”<sup>163</sup> The time Ní Ghríofa invests in finding more information about Eibhlín’s life feeds Eibhlín’s narrative, through which she as a character, and symbolic child, grows. Ní Ghríofa puts so much of herself into the service of rewriting Eibhlín’s life that she eventually falls back into the burdensome expectations of maternal altruism: “Of all that I desired in my own small life, the discovery of another woman’s days

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<sup>156</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 22.

<sup>157</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 22.

<sup>158</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 275.

<sup>159</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 275.

<sup>160</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 277.

<sup>161</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 277.

<sup>162</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 122.

<sup>163</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 119.

had become what I wanted more than anything else. More, even, than sleep. In pursuing this struggle, my principal nemesis was myself. I was weary. No, I was exhausted, and yet, my determination outweighed my body's desires."<sup>164</sup>

After her husband's vasectomy, Ní Ghríofa realises that this altruism focused on Eibhlín Dubh is once again detrimental to her own well-being: "I have held her and held her, only to find that she holds me too, close as ink on paper and steady as a pulse. Only now do I see that I can't continue to grip her like this, in quiet selfishness."<sup>165</sup> Ní Ghríofa feels the urge to share this new insight as she feels it has set her free of traditional expectations and might set other mothers free too. She recounts the moment when she started writing *A Ghost in the Throat* on the final page: "When I get home, I think, maybe I'll try to cheer myself up by opening a new notebook from my stash. This time, I won't let myself begin by writing Hoover or Sheets or Mop or Pump. Instead, I'll think of new words, and then I'll follow them. As I turn the bend towards home, I find that I already know the echo with which that first page will begin. This is a female text."<sup>166</sup> This meta-narrative adds another layer to the reading of the novel. When reading it for the first time, the reader only notices the struggles Ní Ghríofa faces with breaking free from expectations and traditional role models. Yet, as the reader finds out at the end, the novel is purposefully written as a warning to other mothers not to attempt to live up to these figures. In this way, Ní Ghríofa is presenting herself as a symbolic mother, heeding her readers, or symbolic children, for the dangers of generalised representations. Instead, Ní Ghríofa pleads for individuality by telling her readers about her own experience and underlining the importance of finding one's own form of motherhood. Ní Ghríofa's novel aligns with what Ingman calls "Kristeva's emphasis on the particularity of the individual woman."<sup>167</sup> Ní Ghríofa has found her own individual form of motherhood by engaging with and overcoming traditional expectations. This personal understanding has proven to be most sustainable and free from society's ongoing prejudices and unachievable norms.

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<sup>164</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 122.

<sup>165</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 280-1.

<sup>166</sup> Ní Ghríofa, 282.

<sup>167</sup> Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 4.

## Conclusion

This thesis has answered the research question regarding whether and to what extent *A Ghost in the Throat* challenges religious and nationalist mother figures. It has first discussed what mother figures have been influential in an Irish context, referring to a variety of scholars such as Kristeva, Stubbings and Ingman. It has used these traditional mother images to analyse how *A Ghost in the Throat* challenges depictions of motherhood. The chapter “Symbolic Motherhood” has shown that Ní Ghríofa negates the desexualised figure of Virgin Mary by depicting feelings of lust and desire. It then illustrated how Ní Ghríofa defies the image of the Mater Dolorosa by presenting the act of keening as a chorus to join. The Lactating Madonna figure, that Kristeva deems a more truthful mother image, is negated through detailed descriptions of the discomforts of breastfeeding. Lastly, Ní Ghríofa refutes the mother-son relationships that are inherent to both religious and Irish nationalist mother figures by focusing on matrilineality and exposing the difficulties of raising a daughter in a patriarchal society.

The chapter “Actual Motherhood” has demonstrated that Ní Ghríofa also challenges traditional mother roles that are imposed on mothers through symbolic figures. She aims to give all women mentioned in her work an individual story, and she largely succeeds - only the experiences of the nurses in the hospital are left undiscussed. Therefore, Ní Ghríofa amends the flawed depictions of women that male authors have created, and she breaks the silence of maternal subjectivity in Irish literature. Furthermore, Ní Ghríofa expresses her joy in housework and the ability of her body to serve others, but she adheres to these expectations so obsessively that she suggests that these domestic and altruistic parts of traditional motherhood are a coping mechanism to deal with the difficulties she faces as a mother, refuting ideal representations of the roles of motherhood.

This thesis also addressed the research gap considering the discussion of representations of maternal subjectivity that still exist within both literature and a wider academic discourse. It has attempted to contribute to closing this gap by focusing on maternal subjectivity in Irish literature through Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s novel *A Ghost in the Throat*. Even though Ní Ghríofa initially establishes a new figure through eighteenth-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, she soon finds out that any mother image, whether imposed or self-made, is untenable. Instead, she starts presenting herself as yet another mother figure, but this time it is not one that others must – or can - live up to. Rather, she stresses and represents the individuality of all women, including the hardships they may face, largely freeing women of

traditional expectations. This thesis has shown that *A Ghost in the Throat* primarily focuses on maternal subjectivity and therefore has contributed to the academic discourse that has not yet extensively addressed this topic. However, there is a growing awareness that maternal subjectivity is often left undiscussed, both in academic scholarship and in literature. At the time of writing this thesis, Helena Wahlström Henriksson, Anna Williams and Margaretha Fahlgren have published a collection of academic essays on motherhood called *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing* (2023).<sup>168</sup> The essays in this work mainly focus on representations of maternal subjectivity, for example in Swiss and Norwegian literature.

This scarcity of research cannot directly be attributed to a lack of academic interest. Rather, publishing companies have only recently decided to focus on creating platforms for formerly marginalised voices, such as those of mothers. Through this new literary trend, scholars can examine how contemporary mothers have been influenced by symbolic figures. Ireland specifically has seen a rapid increase in the publishing of autobiographical works regarding motherhood. For example, in 2007, Heather Ingman stated that “it remains largely true that maternal subjectivity is still a silence in writing by Irish women, though Anne Enright’s recently published autobiographical memoir, *Making Babies* (2004), on the physical, psychological and social aspects of childbirth and motherhood, goes some way to filling that gap.”<sup>169</sup> More recently, in 2019, Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self* was published, a collection of essays discussing Pine’s own experience with rape, pregnancy, miscarriage and infertility. Ní Ghríofa’s autobiographical novel *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020) was succeeded by the work of British author Claire Lynch, who is also a professor in Irish literature. In her work *Small: On Motherhoods* (2021), Lynch engages with her Irish family roots and addresses motherhood in a same-sex marriage.<sup>170</sup> These publications enable scholars to engage more easily with topics that have often been left undiscussed, such as same-sex parenthood, infertility and, in the case of *A Ghost in the Throat*, maternal individuality. Even though this thesis contributes to academic scholarship, it is limited to only one of these

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<sup>168</sup> *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, ed. Helena Wahlström Henriksson, Anna Williams, and Margaretha Fahlgren (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), <https://directory.doabooks.org/handle/20.500.12854/99272>.

<sup>169</sup> Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2007), 75.

<sup>170</sup> Helen Cullen, “Same-sex Parents: ‘There Isn’t a Predesigned Idea of How Things Will Work’,” *Irish Times*, June 26, 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/same-sex-parents-there-isn-t-a-predesigned-idea-of-how-things-will-work-1.4596984>.

recently published works on motherhood. Future research could explore other undiscussed aspects of motherhood through one of the works mentioned above, or even across cultures, such as the works mentioned in Henriksson's, Williams's and Fahlgren's collection.

The recent shift in focus to maternal subjectivity in literature also resonates with other feminist movements in Ireland, for example the installation of the public holiday of St. Brigid that was realised by the Irish feminist platform Herstory in February 2023. St. Brigid, one of the patron saints of Ireland, was long overshadowed by her male counterpart St. Patrick. Granting St. Brigid her own public holiday is a crucial step towards a more gender-equal Ireland, but the first public celebrations of Brigid in 2023 also established a new figure of symbolic womanhood. On their website, the contributors of Herstory write that “this extraordinary triple goddess of fire, water, and the arts, should be the celebrity of Modern Ireland.”<sup>171</sup> Artists, who represented Brigid through various art pieces, aimed to “forg[e] a new understanding of Brigid – Goddess and Saint – and how she can be presented as a modern icon and role model.”<sup>172</sup> St. Brigid, consequently, becomes yet another symbolic figure that Irish women have to live up to. Even though Herstory aims to present as many forgotten stories of Irish women as they can, the platform might be going one step too far by wanting to celebrate all these individual women through one single female figure. If important men are celebrated as individuals, then so should women, according to the feminist aim of equal rights. This is why *A Ghost in the Throat* is a revolutionary piece of literature and such a crucial work in modern-day society. Ní Ghríofa challenges and negates religious and nationalist structures, but most importantly also presents part of a solution through her focus on individuality. This is a female text, a network of female stories - let each story be heard.

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<sup>171</sup> “The Campaign,” Herstory, accessed June 4, 2023, <https://www.herstory.ie/the-campaign>.

<sup>172</sup> “The Campaign,” <https://www.herstory.ie/the-campaign>.

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