

# Contemporary Irish Women in the Novels of Emer Martin

---

Fanjek, Jana

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2024

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:258940>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#) / [Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-01-25**



**Sveučilište u Zadru**  
Universitas Studiorum  
Jadertina | 1396 | 2002 |

Repository / Repozitorij:

[University of Zadar Institutional Repository](#)



Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku  
Studij anglistike

**Jana Fanjek**

**Contemporary Irish Women in the Novels of  
Emer Martin**

**Završni rad**

Zadar, 2024.

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku  
Studij anglistike

# **Contemporary Irish Women in the Novels of Emer Martin**

Završni rad

Student/ica:

Jana Fanjek

Mentor/ica:

Doc.dr.sc. Vesna Ukić Košta

Zadar, 2024.



## Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

Ja, **Jana Fanjek**, ovime izjavljujem da je moj **završni** rad pod naslovom **Contemporary Irish Women in the Novels of Emer Martin** rezultat mojega vlastitog rada, da se temelji na mojim istraživanjima te da se oslanja na izvore i radove navedene u bilješkama i popisu literature. Ni jedan dio mojega rada nije napisan na nedopušten način, odnosno nije prepisan iz necitiranih radova i ne krši bilo čija autorska prava.

Izjavljujem da ni jedan dio ovoga rada nije iskorišten u kojem drugom radu pri bilo kojoj drugoj visokoškolskoj, znanstvenoj, obrazovnoj ili inoj ustanovi.

Sadržaj mojega rada u potpunosti odgovara sadržaju obranjenoga i nakon obrane uređenoga rada.

Zadar, 2024.

## Table of contents:

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction.....  | 5  |
| 2. Searching for freedom: Women in the Irish diaspora.....    | 8  |
| 4. Irish womanhood vs. patriarchy.....                        | 15 |
| 5. Women's bodies and sexuality.....                          | 17 |
| 6. Conclusion.....  | 22 |
| 7. Works Cited.....   | 23 |
| 8. CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF EMER MARTIN..... | 25 |
| Summary and key words.....                                    | 25 |
| 9. SUVREMENE IRSKE ŽENE U ROMANIMA EMER MARTIN.....           | 26 |
| Sažetak i ključne riječi.....                                 | 26 |

## 1. Introduction

Ireland underwent great social, economic, and political changes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We can argue that one of the most important aspects of Irish identity is its tradition of emigration and it did not slow down for much of the last century. Ireland has one of the oldest and longest migration histories, with people leaving their native land in search of better opportunities and experiences.

Many Irish women fled the country during the last wave of migration in the 1980s. Reasons are rather complex and consist of many intertwined elements, most rooted in gender inequality. In 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland women were marginalised across all sectors of society and could not take part in decision-making processes in the economic, cultural, and social spheres. Gender inequality was further reinforced by strong gender role stereotypes, both within the family structure and a highly conservative Irish society. Pat O'Connor states that such discrimination against women was present at a fundamental legal level, including documents like the Irish Constitution which was passed in 1937. According to the constitution, women were expected to support the state by managing the household and were discouraged from working outside the home, so as not to neglect their domestic responsibilities. Their contribution to Irish society was undervalued, as the work they did at home was not regarded as real work (46).

Women were not only controlled by the patriarchal society but also by the strict doctrines of the Catholic Church, which were manifested in all aspects of their lives. According to Catholic beliefs, there was only one role acceptable for a woman. She should be in a heterosexual relationship and bear children, not experiment with her sexuality or pursue different life aspirations. Or she could enter a convent, turn her back on any kind of sexual life

and experience, and become a nun. If they dared to defy any of the traditional Irish values they got punished. For instance, women who got pregnant out of wedlock had their children taken away from them. Not only were they denied abortion, but also had limited access to any information on sexual and reproductive health. For many women, this became a crucial reason for leaving the country in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Unsurprisingly, Irish women writers address many of these issues in their works. According to Heather Ingman, Irish women's writing in the last decade of the 20th century focuses on the complexity of understanding women's identity within the context of the Irish nation. Focusing on the female experience, such writing presented a fresh and innovative approach to literature. As the country itself underwent rather drastic changes at the turn of the century, fiction played an important part in forming the “new” Ireland. Moving away from the traditional Irish society, the last decade of the 20th century represented a period of a more diverse vision of the nation (1). Women writing in the nineties wanted to give insight into what it was like for those who wanted to break free from the bounds of the Irish family and the Catholic Church. Writers introduced contemporary Irish protagonists who challenged many of the themes that were part of the traditional literary canon. For centuries, Irish women's writing was overshadowed by the male-dominated Irish literary and critical tradition. Taking this into consideration, the emergence of new female voices at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was neither an easy nor a simple journey.

A writer who successfully sheds light on women's experience in her native Ireland is Emer Martin. She deals with the issues of sexism, patriarchal society, the Catholic Church, the Irish diaspora, and complex family dynamics in her first two novels, *Breakfast in Babylon* (1995) and *More Bread or I'll Appear* (1999). In the interview with Kofi Forson, she talks about her upbringing and teenage years, and how it affected her writing later in life. Martin was born and grew up in Ireland, but she hated the years spent there, as she considered Ireland a dark and

extremely repressive place. She just wanted to leave: “There was nothing there for me and I didn’t fit in anywhere. I had not found my place at all” (Forson).

Her first novel *Breakfast in Babylon* follows a young Irish drifter Isolt. She is determined to live a vagabond lifestyle to escape the bounds of traditional Irish society and the Catholic Church. She leaves Ireland at the age of sixteen and travels. She is homeless and hangs around European metropolises with other vagabonds, drifters and junkies. She steps into this harsh and unpredictable day-to-day life with no ties to her Irish past except her mother’s ring on her finger. Her life on the streets is difficult and becomes even harder when she comes close to death herself. Isolt marries Christopher, a psychotic drug dealer who is referred to as the “Hoodoo man” in the novel. She is locked up, starved, physically and mentally abused by him. By the end of the novel, she manages to escape from the extremely abusive relationship and flees to America.

In the second novel *More Bread or I’ll Appear* the narrative revolves around a complex and dysfunctional family dynamic, the Irish diaspora, and the influence of Catholicism. The main character is a 28-year-old Irish woman named Keelin. Along with her siblings she sets off on an international journey to find Aisling, their missing sister. Aisling, the eldest of five siblings, left Ireland fifteen years ago and no one knows where she is or why she even left. The novel mostly focuses on Keelin and Siobhan, one of her sisters. The two adopt a nomadic lifestyle and meet many different people who help them locate their missing sister. By the end of the novel, Keelin finds Aisling on a secluded beach in Central America. The novel has an international setting as the sisters search for Aisling across three continents. The story only returns to Ireland in the form of childhood flashbacks at the beginning of the novel. Throughout this novel, Martin reveals the deep consequences of Aisling’s disappearance on all family members, unraveling a web of lies and secrets among them.



The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Martin portrays the above-mentioned issues in the selected novels. She focuses on the portrayal of “new” Irish women who subvert many of the values of traditional Irish society. Irish womanhood will be analysed as we will be focusing on the issues of patriarchy, harmful relationships, female sexuality and body image. I will also explore the representations of the Irish diaspora, specifically women’s experience of diasporic life, and the loss of Irish identity among contemporary protagonists.

## **2. Searching for freedom: Women in the Irish diaspora**

The experience of migration is closely related to Irish identity. Along with Irish pubs, or St Patrick’s Day, the Irish diaspora can be perceived as one of the most recognizable tokens of Irish identity. As already mentioned, Ireland has had one of the longest and oldest histories of emigration, in which both men and women engaged. However, as Vesna Ukić Košta claims, when it comes to Irish women in the diaspora, their experiences have been traditionally marginalised and under-represented (172). According to Mirjana Morokvašić, only until recently were Irish literary works characterized as “gender blind”, as women were only seen as subjects not worthy of further examination. With such limited representation of Irish women came a serious problem of recognizing and understanding their experiences. This issue is highly problematic, as the majority of migrants since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century have been women (358). The widespread Irish diaspora had many waves of emigration. It started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and lasted almost until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the purpose of this paper, we shall focus on the last wave of emigration in the eighties and compare it to the more traditional diaspora throughout the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Irish women were under the strong influence of Catholicism, a patriarchal society and a conservative state. These power structures affected

them to the point of having full control over all areas of their lives, placing them in a subordinate position to men. Many women were forced to leave Ireland for economic and political reasons. However, many women migrated for different reasons during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Breda Gray argues, they emigrated to escape complicated family situations, strong Catholic influence, heterosexism, and patriarchal control that defined Irish culture. Another reason was the lack of sexual freedom in the country, including the inability to obtain abortions or even keep a child outside of marriage. It was regulations like these that deeply affected their lives, enough for them to leave everything they knew behind (1). It can be argued that there are noticeable differences between migration patterns throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the last wave of migration in the eighties.

Martin's women in *Breakfast in Babylon* and *More Bread or I'll Appear* take part in the last wave of migration in the 1980s and 1990s. These women feel the need to "fulfil" their unsettled souls. As they leave Ireland they do not care about breaking bonds with their families, native land, or Catholic beliefs. They are ready to do just about anything to free themselves from the repressive Irish society. Martin's contemporary protagonists travel all over the globe with no intention of settling down. Consequently, these novels are not set in Ireland, but all over the world. *Breakfast in Babylon* takes place in European metropolises, as Isolt temporarily stays in Paris, Amsterdam, London, and New York. In *More Bread or I'll Appear*, on the other hand, the narrative is set across an even wider context, with exotic destinations like Hawaii, Japan, and Honduras. Irish setting is present only at the opening of the novel in the form of flashbacks. The protagonists are scattered all over the world and explore other forms of identity, striving for more freedom and independence. They have no desire to settle down and start a traditionally large Irish family. Instead, they "hop" from one place to another in the course of the book.

Isolt in *Breakfast in Babylon* finds freedom in being a drifter, moving from one place to another, completely detached from Ireland where she spent her childhood. Her ability to leave everything she knew behind speaks volumes about Irish women's experiences at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The only time she revisits her family's home is in her dreams in which she buries the excess flesh of her body in the back garden. Her childhood home and Ireland can be seen as symbols of all the unwanted, loathed parts of herself that she is trying to escape. The only link to Ireland seems to be her mother's ring. When she loses the ring on the train she seems to lose the last trace of her Irish past.

Isolt wants to dissociate herself not only from Ireland but from something far bigger - society as a whole. She simply refuses to be part of the society and lives on its fringes as a homeless person and a drifter. Such a vagabond lifestyle on the margins of society suits her perfectly, as she wants nothing to do with the norms and regulations of Western society. She does not want to work or have a traditional family and is highly critical of Western civilization in general. We can say that she even becomes an anarchist; at numerous points in the novel, she criticizes mass tourism and globalization. Isolt believes that all humans are 'programmed' to think and act in a prescribed way. She views tourists she encounters daily as 'puppets' of the multi-million-dollar tourism industry: "They are peasants forced by big industry to travel great distances..." (*Breakfast* 87). Her negative judgment of tourists reflects her broader critique of society. She also criticizes globalization, pointing out how everything is led and influenced by corporations: "Kodak, Coca-Cola, Christianity, all unadulterated highly structured cannibalism" (*Breakfast* 87). It turns out that Isolt is not merely running from her "Irishness", but from society in general, rejecting the entire structure of Western civilization and its expectations. Living on the fringes of society is her way of expressing rebellion.

On the other hand, in *More Bread or I'll Appear* the focus is placed on the Irish family. This fictional family begins to break apart as the siblings leave Ireland and their mother, Molly.

This creates significant turmoil between them. Keelin, for instance, is on the verge of securing a permanent teaching position and is the only one in the family who plans to stay in Ireland. Molly deeply misses Aisling, her eldest child, and wants all her children to return safely and be home for Christmas. However, she is aware of the lack of opportunities in Ireland, as she explains it to Keelin: “Ireland is a hard place, Keelin. There’s no work here” (*More Bread* 30). Nevertheless, searching for a new job and settling down seems unimportant for most of the protagonists in these novels. Both Isolt in *Breakfast...* and Aisling leave Ireland as young women and never return there. They want excitement and never seem or want to settle down. They completely detach themselves from their families. Such behaviour might be surprising coming from Aisling, especially given the positive flashbacks of her childhood. However, when her siblings finally trace her down, her reaction is that she “scouted the earth... Everywhere, families grasping at one another for meaning. I was looking for something else and I found it” (*More Bread* 232).

As the protagonists search for “something else” they travel from one country to another, meet new people, and experience different cultures. By never settling in one place for too long, they avoid the stability and responsibility that comes with having a traditional home. Instead, they find their “home” and “family” in the people they meet along the way. Aisling in *More Bread...* comes from a traditional, large Irish family and replaces it with an alternative that subverts traditional values. As we will see later in our analysis, when she is finally found by her siblings she lives with another woman who is pregnant. When the baby is born, Aisling’s unconventional family intends to move to one of the poorest countries in Africa, challenging typical notions of diasporic life.

### 3. Fading roots: The loss of Irish identity

According to Fiona O'Donovan, identity is understood as a complex notion constructed of many factors, such as nationality, religion, and gender. Due to these factors, identity should be explored as a social construct rather than a definite idea. Consequently, an individual's identity is subject to change based on their surroundings and personal beliefs. In this sense, the notion of identity is characterized by its flexibility and continuous rebuilding (95).

These traits are particularly evident in Irish identity, as the sense of Irishness has changed throughout history. For centuries, Irish identity was closely linked to religion. To be Irish was to be Catholic - the two identities were inseparable. As Bourke Richard and Ian McBride suggest, a crucial element of this connection is the long history of Catholicism in Ireland, which dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, Ireland was an English colony and was seen as a threat because of its Catholic Church. England wanted the colony to stay loyal to the Church of England. However, the English plan to turn Irish Catholics to Protestantism failed. The Catholic Church remained dominant among the Irish through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and its influence only grew stronger in the following centuries (293). According to Daithi O Corrain, religious power reached its peak in the 1950s. However, just a decade later, the Catholic Church began to lose its authority and dominant position over Irish society. During this time an ideology of secularism came forward and caused the link between the two identities to weaken. The purpose was to separate the religious and national identity, implying that Catholicism should not influence the political and social spheres of people's lives in Ireland. By the 1970s the role of Catholicism has dramatically changed (712).

According to Tom Inglis, contemporary Irish Catholics are far less loyal to their religious tradition. While they continue to believe in the core values of their faith, they are much less involved with the Church (206). Despite these changes in religious practices and devotion

to the Church, Ireland is still considered a very Catholic country. According to the 2002 census, 90% of the Irish population identified as Catholics (205).

This contemporary approach to religion is present among the women in the selected novels. The protagonists of *Breakfast in Babylon* and *More Bread or I'll Appear* do not practice religion as they are simply not bothered by religious adherence any more. However, they often recall religious events from their childhood. For example, in *More Bread...* the sisters often think about their childhood evenings spent praying with their priest uncle. Yet, neither of them seems to care about Catholicism any more. Similarly, Isolt in *Breakfast...* does not care much about her Catholic identity either. Despite the hardships of her vagabond lifestyle, she does not turn to the religion that she once practised: "All her hard times in the city had almost turned her back into a Catholic" (*Breakfast* 3). On the other hand, Aisling in *More Bread or I'll Appear* seems to be even more detached from her Catholic identity. For Aisling, religion appears to have never been a significant part of her life, despite being raised in a Catholic family and participating in religious rituals as a child.

According to Bronwen Walter, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church held strong power over society, promoting specific gender assumptions. Catholic influence shaped expectations for women, requiring them to embody innocence, obedience, and the ideal of the Virgin Mary. The only acceptable roles for women were to be married mothers or nuns. These restricted roles made women inferior and easily controlled by men (18). Aisling in *More Bread...* rejects these expectations, and certainly does not look up to the unattainable Virgin Mary. Instead, she is a single woman who unashamedly explores her sexuality and speaks unapologetically about her views on sexuality and religion: "I worship Fatima's pussy. That's my alter" (*More Bread* 258).

Just like Aisling, Isolt rejects Catholic teaching which fosters the asexual and passive ideal of Irish womanhood. However, unlike Aisling, Isolt gets married. She marries

Christopher, an American drug dealer, to whom she is dangerously attracted. She wants to help him obtain legal papers, and we can argue that marriage is here reduced to a mere document. This deliberate detachment from the sanctity of marriage reflects Isolt's overall rebellion against the traditional roles imposed by both Irish society and the Catholic Church.

Since Irish and Catholic identities were closely intertwined for a very long time it comes as no surprise that as the protagonists' Catholic identity weakens, so does their sense of national belonging. What is quite obvious in both novels, is that female protagonists show little to no attachment to their Irish identity or pride in their homeland. Keelin in *More Bread...* seems to be the only protagonist who genuinely loves Ireland. She even tries to persuade her sister Siobhan to go back to Ireland. Their mother Molly, however, serves as the embodiment of unwavering national pride. Her devotion to Ireland is evident in her decision never to leave the country, and her deepest wish is for her children to come back home. Molly, as a mother waiting for her children to come home, could also serve as a metaphor for Ireland itself. Molly's children could symbolize the fading of Irish national identity, as they turn their back on Ireland and gradually lose their sense of Irishness.

Isolt in *Breakfast...* and Aisling in *More Bread...* completely detach themselves from their Irish identity as they leave Ireland and decide never to return. They both want to form their "new" identity by rejecting the values and beliefs they were taught in Ireland. They refuse to be wives, housewives, mothers, or 'good' Catholic women. Instead, it seems as though they were quite happy to face all the hardships of living in the diaspora far away from their native country.

#### 4. Irish womanhood vs. patriarchy

The identity of Irish women during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and religious forces. O'Connor suggests that patriarchy and male control are the root of women's problems. The dominance of men in economic, political, and social spheres relegated women to subordinate roles, significantly reducing their opportunities for self-improvement. Women were expected to remain silent, their primary responsibilities confined to domestic work and childcare. This under-representation and marginalisation of women was further reinforced by ideologies like Catholicism, which legitimized and perpetuated these gender norms (81). Contemporary Irish women tend to defy traditional notions of womanhood. As Sara O'Sullivan highlights, the gender roles of Irish women underwent a significant change in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The shift in Ireland's economic and labour structure led to an increase in women's participation in the paid workforce. Consequently, this resulted in a change in gender norms (qtd. in Sheehan et al. 162).

Male characters in these novels are often openly dismissive of how women envision their lives. Christopher, Isolt's extremely abusive husband, is one of them: "Barefoot and pregnant is what they should be at all times. Chained to the kitchen stove" (*Breakfast* 181). We can say that this misogynistic statement captures the way Irish society perceived women for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Martin's female characters often find themselves victims of a patriarchal society, and Isolt is one of them. Isolt might be far from conservative Ireland and its strict rules, and yet she falls prey to an abusive and manipulating misogynist. Once she realizes that she does not want to fit into the stereotypical image of the submissive wife/housewife/mother, she manages to break free from the bonds of this toxic marriage. Christopher also often refers to women as "baggage" as he believes that they only make his life harder and more complicated. He enjoys dominance and control over the opposite sex and is



threatened by the idea of women gaining power. It can be argued that in Martin's fictional world, Christopher stands for all those harmful aspects of patriarchy and misogyny.

Soon after marrying Christopher Isolt uncovers his "dark" side. He supervises her every move and takes full control of her. He even made her sign a ten-point contract she had to adhere to. The contract consisted of several drastic points, stripping her of any choice or freedom. She is under constant supervision and must obey him without objection. Such a relationship dynamic was not uncommon up until the last few decades in Ireland, with the presence of sexual abuse and material violence. Isolt and Christopher's relationship shows aspects of extreme patriarchal control in the marriage sphere. Portraying their marriage, Martin seems to demonstrate all the negative aspects of a traditional heterosexual union. In this case, their union is extremely violent, abusive and toxic. Many Irish women suffered at the hands of an extremely toxic patriarchal society and felt helpless, and Isolt does not want to be one of them. Contemporary Irish women, like her and the female protagonists in *More Bread ...* refuse those stereotypical roles and build different lives and different identities for themselves. Towards the end of the novel, Isolt manages to escape from her husband and even moves to another continent to save her life and preserve her sanity. It seems that everything revolving around Isolt is extreme including her marriage.

In *More Bread or I'll Appear*, a patriarchal Irish society where women have fewer opportunities than men is also one of the significant issues. For example, Molly, the mother of the large fictional family, is not allowed to play golf on weekends merely because she is a woman. She does not question it, but Keelin is furious with such obvious gender discrimination. "I'd blow up the clubhouse if I were you" (*More Bread* 44). This simple interaction between a mother and her young daughter highlights the contrast between traditional and contemporary Irish womanhood. "New" Irish women no longer blindly follow the rules and expectations set by men. Not only do the female protagonists oppose men, but some even express their hatred

and disapproval. Becky in *Breakfast in Babylon* complains to Isolt: “I hate men. I hate all their big macho world. I hate their macho Gods” (Breakfast 18). Although exaggerated, this comment serves as an excellent depiction of how many women feel living in this “macho”, men-oriented world. Women in both novels mostly appear to be in subordinate positions to men. However, Martin’s women manage to break free from the boundaries society sets on them and constantly challenge traditional gender norms.

While travelling around Europe and the world, we see that women in both novels meet many people, leading them to form many different and often rather complex friendships and relationships. These relationships play a crucial role in forming their “new” identity. Isolt from *Breakfast in Babylon* experienced the end of a strong friendship when her close friend Becky tragically died. Together, Becky and Isolt experienced life on the streets and were often among the few women in the squats. Losing a friendship like that made her feel alone and lost for a long time. She often thinks about her friend and wonders what she would be doing now if she were alive. Perhaps Isolt would not be married to Christopher if she still had a friend like Becky by her side. As mentioned above, the dangerous relationship with Christopher nearly cost her life.

## **5. Women’s bodies and sexuality**

Another important aspect of female identity in the selected novels is the lack of control over their bodies, distorted body image, and even body hatred. According to Liz Frost body hatred refers to a negative and angry projection of feelings of insufficiency and weakness. What is closely related to body hatred is the shame that accompanies it. This link between being a woman and feeling shame relates to the notion of being “looked at”, as women are judged by their appearance far more than men (10).

Both novels explore themes of body hatred, which play a significant role in the formation of women's identities. Precisely, they address topics of body image and eating disorders like anorexia. It can also be noted that the presence of these issues varies between the two genders. The male characters do not seem to have any concerns regarding their body image or how their appearance is judged by others in society. Women appear to be the ones concerned about their bodies and appearance, often as a result of male judgment and negative perceptions. In *Breakfast in Babylon*, Christopher significantly contributes to Isolt's poor body image and the shame she feels about her weight. He often tells her that she is "a short girl, you should watch your weight more" (*Breakfast* 78). On the other hand, we never see female protagonists make similar comments about men or their bodies. The negative perception of the female body is strong among Martin's women and is even manifested as a form of self-hatred. Isolt speaks negatively about her own body and is concerned about her appearance: "She fantasized about having a huge knife and chopping all the excess skin off" (*Breakfast* 78). She criticizes herself every time she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and tries to avoid full-length mirrors altogether.

In *More Bread or I'll Appear*, women's bodies are explored in even greater depth, particularly addressing the issue of eating disorders. Siobhan is an anorexic young woman whose appearance is often judged, even by her sisters. Siobhan also exhibits characteristics of body dysmorphia, as she constantly worries about body weight. For example, when she comments on other people at a bus station: "Everyone is so slim. We must look like monsters" (*More Bread* 69). Ironically, Siobhan is so slim that it causes her sister Keelin to worry about her a lot. Siobhan's health condition affects her everyday life, but she still does not consider herself underweight or in need of help. Such misperceptions about body image reveal how deeply concerned the female protagonists in the novels are with their body image, leading to low self-esteem and feelings of shame regarding their bodies.

All of the mentioned issues regarding Martin's women and their body perceptions can be understood as a consequence of years spent in conservative Ireland and the strong influence of Catholic education. It seems as if these young women cannot "shake off" the feeling of Catholic guilt and shame. Whenever an Irish woman wanted to know more about her body, reproduction, sexuality, and sex, she was silenced by the Church and the state. These issues were never talked about and were considered taboo topics in Ireland throughout much of the last century. These women cannot seem to break free from the sense of inferiority. Irish women were always supposed to be inferior to men in this highly patriarchal society. Perhaps this is why Martin's women struggle to gain confidence and control over their bodies, resulting in bad body image and struggles with self-love. Although they manage to leave Ireland without ever looking back, they are not able to disengage completely from the Irish/Catholic ethos. However, such personal struggles make these characters more relatable. It shows that although Martin's women seem to be independent and know what they want, they still have room for personal growth.

In Martin's fictional world, many women are comfortable exploring their sexuality. In *More Bread or I'll Appear*, for example, Aisling is the most complex character in this respect. Throughout the novel we find out that she works as a prostitute in Japan, she likes cross-dressing, and when her siblings finally trace her down, we see her living in a lesbian relationship. Even Keelin, the most 'normal' sibling in this family, starts to explore her sexuality and indulges in some wild sexual escapades while travelling around the world. Such examples of sexual exploration contradict Catholic expectations of what an Irish woman should be and how she should behave. "Sex in Ireland: what a thought!" (*More Bread* 55). Martin defies Catholic teaching that determined Irish womanhood for too long and portrays female sexuality openly and unashamedly.

Aisling in *More Bread or I'll Appear* explores her sexuality more than any other character. By becoming a prostitute, she goes to extremes and chooses a completely different path in life from a typical Irish woman. Aisling appears to fluctuate in her sexual identity, sometimes identifying as straight, sleeping with men, and other times as lesbian. When living in Japan she sleeps with men for money, and later she falls in love and settles down with Fatima who is pregnant. We can argue that Aisling is an extreme character in many ways. Her unorthodox family contradicts the traditional Irish family (father, mother and many children) and most of traditional Irish values, but Aisling seems to be happy and content. Martin's main character is thus a far cry from the image of an Irish woman fostered by the Catholic church and state.

Another important aspect related to female bodies addressed in both novels is abortion. There is a close link between the issue of abortion and the Irish Catholic Church. As we have already seen, Irish womanhood was heavily determined by Catholic teaching and abortion has always been a hot potato, so to speak. As Cara Delay suggests, the process of legalization started with powerful debates on the topic of abortion during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even more attention was placed on the issue of abortion with the formation of "pro-choice" and "pro-life" discourses. During this period, "pro-life" activists considered abortion as anti-Irish and as something that comes from non-religious people. They believed that by losing their roles as mothers, these women would also lose their Irishness and would become uncontrollable and free (313). Therefore, such secular and modern notions were perceived as a threat to traditional Irish culture and beliefs. What is clear is that anything different and new to traditional aspects of Irishness was to be feared and avoided. This way, Irish identity would be secured and protected from the "outside" world and the negative influence of the "others".

The issue of abortion is addressed in *More Bread or I'll Appear* when Aisling's younger sister Orla gets pregnant as a teenager. The conversation that the family members have after Orla gets pregnant shows a clear contrast between the traditional and new Irish women. Their mother Molly, a woman who belongs to a generation of submissive and subservient Irish women, considers abortion to be a sin and tries to persuade Orla to keep the baby. However, Aisling does not share this opinion, as she thinks that her sister should get an abortion and focus on her career. She wants to help her sister by accompanying her to England where she can have an abortion. Aisling shuns the teaching of the Catholic church and the way it sees women's bodies: "Fuck the Church. This is her whole life at stake here" (*More Bread* 20).

However, Orla gives birth to her baby boy persuaded by Molly and Uncle Oscar. Like many young women during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, she has limited choices available to her and no control over her reproductive choices. She gives birth in America and has no other option but to give her baby up for adoption. Orla is one of thousands of Irish women who were forced to give up their children for adoption only because they were unmarried mothers. She worries about her son and wants to be part of his life. Even after fifteen years, she tries to form a relationship with him. Orla's experience sheds light on the trauma of losing a child in a cruel system that shows no support for women.

Isolt in *Breakfast in Babylon* gets pregnant with Christopher but knows from the start that she does not want to have his child. She manages to get an abortion after leaving him and is desperate to pick up the pieces and move on without him in her life. Isolt feels that she is not ready to become a mother and is not bothered by what Catholic teaching tells her. She has the procedure done and moves on as quickly as she can. We see Isolt show great courage when she leaves the abusive relationship and manages on her own. Isolt is here a young woman who belongs to the new generation unbothered by Catholic beliefs and ready to make decisions for herself.

## 6. Conclusion

In this final paper, I have analysed how Emer Martin, a contemporary Irish writer, portrays women in *Breakfast in Babylon* and *More Bread or I'll Appear*. I have focused on women's experiences in the diaspora at the turn of the century and their struggles while living away from Ireland. Moreover, I have attempted to demonstrate how Martin's women gradually lost their Irish identity as they explored various new identities. I have also dealt with the concepts of patriarchy and misogyny and how Irish patriarchal society affects Martin's women. Lastly, I focused on issues related to women's bodies like body image, sexuality, and abortion.

We can argue that Martin's female protagonists subvert everything Irish as they turn their back on Ireland, Irish/Catholic identity and almost every value associated with 20th-century Ireland. This way, Martin's women oppose the image of 'good' Irish women who were supposed to be silent and submissive. In these travel narratives, the protagonists show independence, resilience, and curiosity as they explore their new identities. They are not afraid to take risks and voice their opinions. Martin reconstructs the image of Irish women at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and gives voice to unapologetic, brave, and strong women who are finally ready to break free from repressive social forces like the Catholic Church and the State. We can say that Martin creates a new Irish woman who is unafraid to cross boundaries and willing to explore her identity, even to the extremes.

## 7. Works Cited

- Bourke, Richard, and McBride, Ian. *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*. Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Corráin, Daithí Ó. "Catholicism in Ireland, 1880–2015: Rise, Ascendancy and Retreat." *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, edited by Thomas Bartlett, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 726–764.
- Delay, Cara. "Wrong for Womankind and the Nation: Anti-Abortion Discourses in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland." *Journal of Modern European History*. vol. 17, no. 3, 2019, pp. 312–325.
- Frost, Liz. *Young Women and the Body: A Feminist Sociology*. Palgrave, 2001.
- Gray, Breda. *Women and the Irish Diaspora*. Routledge, 2004.
- Inglis, Tom. "Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition1." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol 22, no. 2. 2007, pp. 205-220.
- Ingman, Heather. *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender*. Routledge, 2007.
- Martin, Emer. "Confessions of a Banshee" *White Hot Magazine*, Jan. 2009.  
<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/kofi-forson-interviews-emer-martin/1739>  
 Accessed 2 June 2024.
- Martin, Emer. *Breakfast in Babylon*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.
- Martin, Emer. *More Bread or I'll Appear*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.
- Morokvašić, Mirjana. "Gendering Migration." *Migracijske i etničke teme*, vol. 30, no. 3, 30 Dec. 2014, pp. 355-378.
- O'Connor, Pat. *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society*. Institute of Public Administration, 1998.



O'Donovan, Fiona. "Irish identity is far from ideal." *Socheolas: Limerick Journal of Sociology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 95-115.

Sheehan, Ashling & Berkery, Elaine & Lichrou, Maria. "Changing role of women in the Irish society: an overview of the female consumer." *The Irish Journal of Management*. vol. 36, no. 3, 2017, pp. 162-171.

Ukić Košta, Vesna. "Kompulzivne putnice ili irkinje u dijaspori u romanima Breakfast in Babylon i More Bread or I'll Appear Emer Martin." *Riječ, časopis za nauku o jeziku i književnosti*. no. 9, 2013, pp. 171-188.

Walter, Bronwen. *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women (Gender, Racism, Ethnicity)*. Routledge, 2001.

## 8. CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF EMER MARTIN

### Summary and key words

This final paper sets out to analyse two selected novels by Emer Martin: *Breakfast in Babylon* (1995) and *More Bread or I'll Appear* (1999). The paper focuses on contemporary Irish women trying to find their place in the world at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper analyses various aspects of Irish womanhood such as the influence of the Catholic Church and an extremely patriarchal society on the formation of women's identity and sexuality during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper also attempts to demonstrate how contemporary women break free from the bonds of traditional Irish values.

**Key words:** women, Irish diaspora, Irish identity, Catholic Church, patriarchy, sexuality

## 9. SUVREMENE IRSKE ŽENE U ROMANIMA EMER MARTIN

### Sažetak i ključne riječi

Ovaj rad analizira dva odabrana romana spisateljice Emer Martin: *Breakfast in Babylon* (1995) i *More Bread or I'll Appear* (1999). Rad se fokusira na suvremene irske žene koje pokušavaju pronaći svoje mjesto u svijetu krajem 20. stoljeća. Rad analizira različite aspekte irske ženstvenosti, poput utjecaja Katoličke crkve i izrazito patrijarhalnog društva na formiranje ženskog identiteta i seksualnosti tijekom 20. stoljeća. Rad također nastoji pokazati kako se suvremene žene oslobađaju okova tradicionalne irske vrijednosti.

**Ključne riječi:** žene, irska dijaspora, irski identitet, Katolička crkva, patrijarhat, seksualnost