

## Original Research

Received 04 May 2026

Revised 09 June 2026

Accepted 22 June 2026

Natural Resources for Human Health 2026, Vol. 6 (12s): 779–787

### KEYWORDS:

Edna O'Brien, The Country Girls Trilogy, feminism, female identity, patriarchy, Catholicism, sexuality, Irish women's writing, resistance, gender.

## Female Identity and Resistance to Patriarchy in Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls Trilogy

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ORCID ID: 0009-0008-7818-8038 | Scopus ID: 59998372300 | Researcher ID: 2984-2025

**ABSTRACT:** Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls Trilogy, including The Country Girls (1960), The Lonely Girl (1962), and Girls in Their Married Bliss (1964), holds an important place in twentieth-century Irish women's literature. Through Caitheleen Brady and Baba Brennan's experiences, O'Brien explores how female identity is constructed and constrained by patriarchal family systems, Catholic morality, marriage, sexuality, and social conventions. Set in the conservative social and religious context of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, the trilogy challenges the idealised image of the obedient, sexually pure, and self-sacrificing Irish woman. However, O'Brien does not depict female resistance as straightforward or fully successful. The protagonists often internalise the values they resist, and their pursuit of independence frequently leads to emotional suffering, sexual vulnerability, and social sanction. This paper contends that O'Brien's feminist contribution lies in this complexity. Instead of portraying liberation as a linear progression from oppression to freedom, she presents female identity as an ongoing negotiation between male-dominated norms and individual desire. Through Caitheleen and Baba, O'Brien exposes the institutions regulating women's lives and illustrates possibilities for resistance through female friendship, sexual self-awareness, mobility, education, narrative agency, and refusal to conform to assigned roles. The trilogy thus operates as both a critique of Irish patriarchy and an exploration of the challenges in forging an autonomous female identity.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Edna O'Brien is acknowledged as a prominent Irish writer of the twentieth century. Her novels frequently address women's experiences of childhood, sexuality, family, marriage, religion, violence, desire, loneliness, and social constraints. With the publication of her first novel, *The Country Girls*, in 1960, O'Brien gained a reputation for confronting traditional conceptions of femininity in Irish literature. Her early works generated controversy because of their candid treatment of female sexuality and women's dissatisfaction with conventional roles. The three novels comprising *The Country Girls Trilogy*—*The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964)—trace the development of Caitheleen Brady and Baba Brennan as they transition from adolescence to adulthood and marriage.

The trilogy matters not simply for its depiction of girlhood through the upbringing of two young Irish girls but for exposing the social mechanisms that produce and control womanhood. The protagonists grow up in a society where the ideal woman is associated with sexual purity, obedience, domesticity, marriage, motherhood, and religious morality. Their lives are formed by institutions that appear natural and unavoidable yet are fundamentally patriarchal. Family, Church, school, marriage, and community all help define what a woman should be and her place in society.

Scholarship on O'Brien has repeatedly emphasised this dimension of her work. Tsung-Chi Chang argues that the trilogy places Caitheleen within patriarchal power relations operating through family, religion, and society, while also showing her attempts to

unsettle these structures. EdUHK Research Repository: Amanda Greenwood similarly argues that O'Brien's early novels are deeply subversive because they deconstruct conventional ideas of femininity, Irishness, and contemporary sexual ideology. JSTOR Jessica Itzel further argues that O'Brien simultaneously challenges and remains implicated in traditional Irish constructions of womanhood, making her feminism complex rather than straightforward. Emory ETDs

This paper studies the trilogy with particular attention to the construction of female identity and the various forms of resistance to **patriarchy**. It contends that O'Brien demonstrates female identity as a product of social, religious, familial, and sexual expectations, rather than as an inherent quality. The novels also show that women are not simply passive victims; Caitheleen and Baba each develop distinct strategies of resistance, though neither achieves complete emancipation from patriarchal authority.

The paper therefore addresses the following research questions:

1. How does O'Brien represent the construction of female identity in *The Country Girls Trilogy*?
2. How do family, Catholicism, marriage, and social morality contribute to the oppression of women?
3. What forms of resistance do Caitheleen and Baba employ?
4. To what extent are their attempts at independence successful?
5. How does O'Brien complicate conventional definitions of feminist resistance?

The central argument advanced in this paper is that *The Country Girls Trilogy* constitutes a feminist critique of Irish patriarchy by exposing the social institutions that regulate women's bodies, sexuality, desires, and identities. However, O'Brien's feminism does not rely on depicting her protagonists as fully liberated figures. Rather, she illustrates the difficulties of attaining female autonomy when patriarchal values have been internalised by women themselves.

## **HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT: WOMEN IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRELAND:**

To understand O'Brien's feminism requires attention to the historical environment in which O'Brien wrote this trilogy. Mid-twentieth-century Ireland was strongly influenced by Catholic social morality and traditional conceptions of family and gender. Women were commonly associated with domestic duties, motherhood, sexual purity, and moral responsibility. The family was not merely a private institution but a key part of the social and ideological organisation of Irish life.

The trilogy challenges the idealised image of Irish womanhood by depicting women who experience desire, frustration, loneliness, sexual curiosity, anger, ambition, and discontent. Instead of accepting the conventional image of women as daughters, wives, and mothers, O'Brien interrogates the consequences for women whose emotional and sexual experiences do not conform to these prescribed roles.

This challenge explains the controversy surrounding O'Brien's early novels. Jessica Itzel notes that *The Country Girls*, followed by *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, was condemned by the Catholic Church and banned by the Irish Censorship Board for indecency. Michael G. Cronin similarly identifies the trilogy as part of a wider cultural struggle over sexuality, Catholicism, censorship, and social change in twentieth-century Ireland. The controversy is significant from a feminist perspective. O'Brien's writing challenged not only sexual conventions but also the authority of institutions to determine what women could say about their experiences. Female sexuality became a key site of conflict because control over sexuality was closely linked to control over female identity.

The ideal Irish woman was supposed to embody respectability, modesty, obedience, and sexual restraint. In contrast, O'Brien's female characters possess desires that exceed these expectations. Their experiences reveal the disparity between the idealised image of womanhood and the complications of real women's lives.

## **Feminist Theory and the Construction of Female Identity:**

The concept of female identity is central to feminist literary criticism. Feminist criticism questions the assumption that gender roles are natural and instead investigates how societies construct expectations concerning femininity and masculinity. Beauvoir's famous formulation in *The Second Sex*—"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"—is particularly relevant to O'Brien's trilogy. The protagonist, Caitlyn, is moulded into womanhood. She is taught what it means to be a "good girl" and

an ideal woman through religious upbringing, family expectations, restrictions on her desires, the social setup of patriarchy and her dependency on her father and husband.

In O'Brien's trilogy, femininity is produced through repeated social instructions. Girls are taught how to behave, dress, speak, desire, and relate to men. They are encouraged to become wives and mothers while being discouraged from expressing sexual desire or demanding independence.

The trilogy illustrates a fundamental contradiction. Women are encouraged to desire marriage but are expected to remain sexually pure until then. They are expected to become mothers but have limited control over reproduction. They are encouraged to love men but often expected to subordinate themselves to male authority.

Helen Thompson's discussion of O'Brien emphasises that her fiction foregrounds women's psychological struggles with institutions that attempt to contain them within limited social and sexual roles. JSTOR. This contradiction lies at the heart of Caithleen and Baba's experiences.

O'Brien's feminism consequently operates at two levels. First, she criticises external patriarchal institutions. Second, she demonstrates the psychological consequences of internalising patriarchal values. The women in the trilogy do not simply encounter patriarchy outside themselves; they carry its expectations within their own consciousness.

This is especially evident in Caithleen.

## **Caithleen and the Formation of Female Identity:**

Caithleen Brady is the central consciousness of much of the trilogy. Her development from a rural adolescent into a woman living in Dublin and later experiencing marriage can be understood as a female Bildungsroman. However, it is a distinctly problematic Bildungsroman because social restrictions repeatedly obstruct Caithleen's development.

From childhood, Caithleen learns that female identity is connected with obedience. Her relationship with her father is particularly important because the paternal figure represents authority, fear, and economic power. The family becomes one of the first places where she encounters the unequal distribution of power between men and women.

Chang identifies the intimidating father figure as a central manifestation of patriarchal authority in the trilogy. EdUHK Research Repository: Caithleen's experience demonstrates that patriarchy does not begin with marriage; it is introduced into female consciousness within childhood and family relationships.

The father's authority also reveals patriarchy's economic dimension. A woman who lacks economic independence remains vulnerable to male authority. Caithleen's mother, for example, cannot simply escape an unhappy domestic situation. Her vulnerability demonstrates how emotional and economic dependence reinforce one another.

Caithleen internalises contradictory lessons. She seeks affection and security yet recognises that the institutions promising these may also cause suffering. She desires freedom but has been conditioned to equate female respectability with obedience.

Her movement away from the countryside represents an attempt to escape these restrictions. Dublin offers new possibilities such as friendship, romantic relationships, employment, and greater personal mobility. Yet moving does not automatically produce liberation. Male-dominated structures continue to operate in new forms.

## **Baba Brennan: An Alternative Model of Female Resistance:**

If Caithleen represents a more reflective and emotionally vulnerable form of resistance, Baba shows a more openly rebellious attitude toward social conventions from a young age. Baba is significant because she refuses many restrictions that govern Caithleen. She is more practical, confident, and willing to manipulate social expectations. Her relationship with sexuality is less burdened by the romantic idealism that characterises Caithleen.

However, O'Brien does not portray Baba as a straightforward feminist heroine. Baba's rebellion may involve cynicism, emotional detachment, and accommodation to patriarchal realities. At times, she uses the very structures she resists. Through Caithleen and Baba, O'Brien presents contrasting situations: Caithleen embodies inner desire unrealised due to patriarchal constraints, while Baba enacts a more pragmatic expression of that desire. This complexity prevents categorising women as

'good' or 'bad' feminists. Instead, Caithleen and Baba exemplify different survival strategies: Caithleen pursues emotional and romantic fulfilment, whereas Baba seeks greater practical control over her circumstances.

The friendship between Caithleen and Baba creates an alternative space where female identity is observed and negotiated outside direct male authority. Their conversations, common experiences, and contrasting personalities allow O'Brien to show that women can help one another interpret the social world imposed upon them.

The friendship between the two girls, and later between two women, therefore becomes a subtle form of resistance. Patriarchy tends to isolate women by making them compete for male approval or defining them through relationships with men. O'Brien instead gives the relationship between two women significant narrative importance.

## **Patriarchal Family and Female Oppression:**

The family appears as one of the trilogy's most significant institutions. While it is ostensibly intended to provide love, security, and belonging, O'Brien consistently depicts the family as a site where gender hierarchy is perpetuated.

Vesna Ukić Košta's study of the Irish family in the early novels of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien argues that the family in O'Brien's trilogy functions as a repressive force that supervises women and restricts their desires. Anglisticum. Kate's mother is poor; she does all household duties and responsibilities. She cares for her daughter and works on the farm all day. She worries about Kate's future. Though she suffers from her marriage and her drunken husband, she manages her house.

Caithleen's family demonstrates the tension between the idealised family and women's lived experience. The patriarchal family grants authority to the father while women are expected to endure emotional and material difficulties. The first chapter ends with the phrase "weep, and you weep alone". This phrase suits Kate, as she weeps and faces loneliness throughout the trilogy. She responds to every situation with shame.

The mother represents another dimension of female oppression. She has internalised the expectation that a woman must remain connected to marriage and family even when those structures produce suffering. Her position demonstrates that patriarchy does not depend exclusively on male violence; it also survives because women are made to accept and reproduce its values by patriarchal social setup.

This is one of O'Brien's most important feminist insights. Women can be both victims and transmitters of patriarchal ideology. The young Caithleen inherits a model of womanhood before she is old enough to question it. Her development partly consists of learning that the supposedly natural roles of daughter, wife, and mother are socially constructed.

## **RELIGION AND THE CONTROL OF FEMALE DESIRE:**

Religion is another major mechanism of patriarchal control in the trilogy. Catholicism shapes the moral vocabulary through which the female body and female sexuality are judged. O'Brien does not simply criticise individual religious beliefs. Instead, she examines how religious morality becomes institutionalised and shapes women's understanding of themselves. Female sexuality is particularly heavily regulated. Sexual desire in women is frequently associated with shame, guilt, sin, and social disgrace. Male sexuality, by contrast, is often treated more permissively. This double standard exposes the gendered nature of morality.

The conflict between sexuality and Catholic morality is important because O'Brien's protagonists are not devoid of religious consciousness. They have internalised the moral system and judge their desires. As a result, resistance becomes psychologically complicated. A woman can reject the Church's authority mentally while still feeling guilt emotionally. This psychological conflict is central to the trilogy. The female body becomes contested territory between personal desire and social regulation. Caithleen shows her fear of religion when she describes their convent as, "The convent was a grey stone building with hundreds of small square curtainless windows, like so many eyes spying out on the wet sinful town." – *The Country Girls*.

Kaddouri and Louahala argue that *The Country Girls* exposes the construction of a restrictive Irish Catholic female identity and explores the conflicts and compromises involved in Irish women's identity in relation to society, nation, and religion. ResearchGate+1

O'Brien's feminist intervention thus entails rendering female desire visible. In a cultural context where society expects women's sexual experiences to remain concealed, the mere representation of women's sexuality constitutes an act of resistance.

## Sexuality as a Site of Resistance:

Sexuality is one of the trilogy's most controversial and significant feminist themes. O'Brien rejects portrayals of women as sexually innocent figures whose identities are determined solely by marriage. Her protagonists experience attraction, curiosity, disappointment, vulnerability, and desire. However, the narrative makes clear that sexual freedom does not necessarily equate to liberation. The trilogy shows that women may seek sexual autonomy while remaining embedded in unequal social relationships. A woman's sexual relationship with a man can offer pleasure and emotional fulfilment but may also result in exploitation, abandonment, pregnancy, social judgment, and emotional trauma. O'Brien, therefore, resists equating sexual liberation with feminist emancipation. The female body remains subject to male authority, and women who exercise sexual agency continue to face social judgment distinct from that directed at men.

The controversy surrounding O'Brien's novels demonstrates how threatening this representation was. The novels' treatment of sexuality contributed to their censorship in Ireland, showing that female sexual representation was itself politically significant. OUP Academic+1

O'Brien thus transforms the female body into a site of political and cultural struggle. Who has the right to speak about female sexuality? Who determines whether a woman's desire is acceptable? Who decides what constitutes respectable womanhood? By allowing women to narrate desire, O'Brien challenges patriarchal control over female representation.

## Marriage and the Myth of "Married Bliss":

The third novel, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, is especially important to understand O'Brien's critique of marriage. The title is ironic. "Married bliss" suggests happiness, security, and social fulfilment. Yet the women's experiences show that marriage does not necessarily resolve female loneliness or provide equality. Traditional Irish culture often presented marriage as the appropriate destination for women. A married woman could achieve social respectability and fulfil expectations concerning femininity. O'Brien questions this assumption. Marriage does not eliminate patriarchy. Instead, it transfers women from the father's authority to the husband's. Only her place shifts, but the slavery remains.

This transition is significant in Caithleen's development. Her move from daughter to wife might seem like maturation, but O'Brien shows that becoming a wife can involve another form of dependency. As a wife, Caithleen remains loveless, lonely, and miserable. She is not allowed to behave like a girl or a wife; her father and husband govern her. She finds no contentment in married life and remembers her mother, Mama. Kate sees her mother's silent suffering from an unhappy marriage. This makes Kate dislike marriage, and she confesses: "I am going to be a nun when I grow up; that's what I was thinking" (CGT 8).

The novel therefore questions the conventional female Bildungsroman. In a traditional developmental narrative, adulthood provides increasing freedom and self-knowledge. For O'Brien's female characters, however, adulthood can produce new forms of restriction.

The Spanish scholar María Amor Barros del Río's research on the trilogy considers it in relation to the female Bildungsroman and emphasises its relationship to feminist and deconstructive approaches to women's experience in Ireland. Portal Científico UNED

The trilogy thus suggests that women cannot attain authentic maturity solely by fulfilling socially prescribed roles. Genuine self-development necessitates the capacity to define oneself beyond the categories of daughter, wife, and mother. In this context, female identity is commonly overshadowed by expectations tied to womanhood and motherhood.

## MOTHERHOOD AND THE FEMALE BODY:

Motherhood is another important component of patriarchal identity. Women are often defined by their biological roles. The ideal woman is expected to become a mother, and motherhood is often presented as the natural completion of female identity. O'Brien questions this assumption by representing motherhood alongside anxiety, vulnerability, and social pressure.

The female body becomes a political object because reproduction is not simply an individual matter. Society, religion, family, and marriage all attempt to regulate women's reproductive decisions. This is why female sexuality in the trilogy cannot be separated from questions of motherhood. Sexual freedom can produce pregnancy; pregnancy can produce social consequences; and those consequences are distributed unequally between women and men. The burden falls primarily upon women.

The trilogy therefore exposes the connection between sexual morality and reproductive control. When society controls women's sexuality, it also controls the possibilities available to women as individuals.

Helen Thompson's work on O'Brien similarly emphasises the importance of sexual and reproductive capacities in understanding the operation of Irish patriarchy in her fiction. JSTOR

## **Female Friendship as Resistance:**

Although the trilogy contains many relationships between women and men, the friendship between Caithleen and Baba is central to its feminist significance. Their relationship provides an alternative to the structures of heterosexual romance and patriarchal family life. Caithleen and Baba are very different in nature, and their family backgrounds are also portrayed differently. The picture of their parents is also different: Caithleen's parents represent poverty; her father is a worthless person who loses her land to alcohol addiction. On the other hand, Baba is from a rich family. Her father is a veterinarian. Caithleen is sensitive, romantic, and pensive, while Baba is more pragmatic and assertive. Their differences allow O'Brien to represent multiple forms of female identity.

Neither woman provides a perfect model of feminism. Instead, their friendship shows that women can share knowledge and experience outside male authority. Female friendship also becomes a space where women can speak about sexuality, men, marriage, hunger, desire and social expectations. Such conversations challenge the muteness surrounding women's experiences. This is especially important in a society in which respectable women are expected to remain silent about sexuality. By giving women language through which to discuss their own lives, O'Brien makes female speech itself a form of resistance.

## **Movement, Education, and the Search for Freedom:**

Physical movement is another important form of resistance in the trilogy. Caithleen and Baba move from rural Ireland to Dublin's broader social environment. Their movement represents a desire to escape restrictive communities and find alternative possibilities. The countryside is associated with surveillance, family authority, Catholic morality, and social conformity. Dublin offers greater anonymity and opportunities for experimentation. Yet O'Brien does not suggest the city is a completely liberated space. Patriarchy follows the women. They continue to face male authority, sexual inequality, emotional dependence, and social judgment. This movement produces an important feminist insight: oppression is not located in one place but embedded in social structures. Leaving home can create opportunities, but genuine autonomy requires an identity transformation.

Education and intellectual development similarly offer possible paths to independence. However, women's education is complicated by the reality that society may provide educational opportunities without conferring equal social power. O'Brien presents freedom as an ongoing process rather than an unchanging endpoint.

## **Self-Representation:**

One of the most significant ways O'Brien challenges patriarchy is through narrative technique. The trilogy grants readers access to women's thoughts, desires, fears, and memories, making the narrative perspective itself politically significant. Whereas traditional literary representations of women have often been mediated through male perspectives, O'Brien enables her female characters to function as subjects rather than objects of representation. Caithleen's narrative consciousness is especially notable; her emotional feelings, romantic fantasies, anxieties, fears, loneliness, and disappointments are treated as legitimate literary subjects. Experiences traditionally dismissed as 'private' are thus rendered political. Issues such as loneliness, sexual desire, marriage, frustrated childhood, imposed motherhood, family conflict, and female friendship are shown to be determined by social structures. O'Brien thereby envisions a central tenet of feminist thought: the personal is political. Her depiction of women's interior lives also challenges the stereotype of the passive Irish woman. Even when Caithleen appears externally powerless, her active consciousness and narrative agency persist.

## **RESISTANCE AND ITS LIMITATIONS:**

A major strength of O'Brien's feminism is that she does not present resistance as simple or always successful. Caithleen and Baba resist patriarchal expectations but also reproduce some of them. They desire men while criticising male authority. They seek marriage while fearing dependence. They desire sexual freedom while experiencing social consequences. They seek independence while sometimes relying on relationships with men.

These contradictions are not weaknesses in the novels. They are central to O'Brien's representation of female identity. Itzel's research is valuable here because she argues that O'Brien both contests patriarchal constructions of womanhood and at times remains complicit in them. The women are also punished for their transgressions. Their attempts at freedom do not produce an uncomplicated feminist victory. This makes O'Brien's feminism more psychologically realistic. Women cannot simply step outside patriarchy because patriarchal values have already shaped their understanding of themselves. A woman may resist one aspect of patriarchy while remaining dependent on another. She may reject religious morality while still fearing social judgment. She may reject marriage while longing for emotional security. O'Brien represents these contradictions rather than eliminating them.

## **Caithleen and Baba as Two Models of Resistance:**

The contrast between Caithleen and Baba provides the trilogy with its central feminist dynamic. Caithleen's resistance is largely emotional, psychological, and narrative. She questions the expectations imposed upon her and seeks love, freedom, and self-understanding. Her sensitivity makes her particularly vulnerable to patriarchal power, but it also gives her a powerful capacity for self-reflection. Baba's resistance is more pragmatic. She is willing to challenge social expectations and adapt herself to difficult circumstances. She does not place the same faith in romantic notions as Caithleen. Yet Baba's pragmatism also reveals the compromises required for survival within patriarchy. Neither character can escape the system. Their difference therefore allows O'Brien to reject the idea that there is a single form of feminist resistance. Resistance may involve rebellion, sexual experimentation, economic independence, friendship, geographical mobility, emotional self-awareness, or simply the refusal to remain silent.

## **O'Brien's Challenge to the Myth of Irish Womanhood:**

One of the major achievements of *The Country Girls Trilogy* is its challenge to the myth of the ideal Irish woman. This ideal combines several characteristics such as sexual purity, religious devotion, obedience, domesticity, motherhood, emotional self-sacrifice, loyalty to family, and acceptance of male authority. O'Brien's protagonists do not fit comfortably into this model. Instead, her protagonists desire independence. They experience sexuality. They question marriage. They experience dissatisfaction. They form relationships outside traditional structures. They speak about experiences that respectable women are expected to keep private.

Through these representations, O'Brien exposes the gap between cultural mythology and lived female experience. Kaddouri and Louahala describe *The Country Girls* as a text that deconstructs the myth of Irish women by exploring the conflict between women's identities and the social, national, and religious structures that define them. ResearchGate+1

O'Brien's feminist intervention can therefore be understood as a process of demythologization. She does not simply say that women should be liberated, but she asks what women have been forced to become before they can even begin to imagine freedom.

## **Patriarchy as an Internalised System:**

Perhaps the most sophisticated aspect of O'Brien's treatment of patriarchy is its psychological dimension. Patriarchy functions not only because men possess authority but because its values become internalised. Caithleen's fear, guilt, desire for approval, romantic expectations, and anxieties about respectability reveal how deeply social ideology has entered her sensibility. She is always shown fearing her father. The first novel, 'The Country Girls', opens with fear of her father. Caithleen states it as:

"I woke up quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. Only when I'm anxious do I wake up easily, and for a minute I do not know why my heart is beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home" (CGT 1).

Liberation requires more than changing external circumstances. A woman may leave her father's house and still carry his authority inside herself. She may reject the Church and still feel guilt. She may reject traditional marriage and still desire the emotional security it offers. O'Brien presents female identity as a site of ideological struggle. The female subject is divided between inherited expectations and personal desires. This psychological complexity distinguishes O'Brien from simplistic oppositional feminism. Her characters are neither completely submissive nor fully liberated. They are women negotiating their identities inside an unequal society.

## Resistance through Writing and Representation:

Finally, the trilogy itself can be understood as an act of resistance. O'Brien wrote about subjects that had been marginalised or censored, particularly female sexuality and women's dissatisfaction with conventional social roles. The controversy surrounding the novels demonstrates the political significance of such representation. O'Brien gives literary form to experiences that were frequently silenced. Her characters are not simply symbols of Irish womanhood; they have distinct desires and contradictions. The novels therefore resist reducing women to cultural stereotypes. O'Brien's feminist contribution rests not only in what her characters do, but also in creating a literary space where women may speak, desire, remember, question, and narrate.

## CONCLUSION:

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* offers a complex and intense exploration of female identity and resistance to patriarchy. Through Caitheleen Brady and Baba Brennan, O'Brien shows how women's identities are shaped by family, religion, sexuality, marriage, motherhood, and social expectations.

The trilogy demonstrates that patriarchy is not confined to the authority of individual men. It runs through a network of institutions and cultural beliefs. The family teaches girls obedience; Catholic morality regulates sexuality; marriage establishes gendered expectations; social respectability disciplines female behaviour; and cultural myths define the ideal Irish woman.

Against these structures, Caitheleen and Baba develop different forms of resistance. Their movement away from the countryside, their friendships, their sexual experiences, their rejection of established expectations, and their attempts to establish independent identities all contest traditional constructions of femininity.

Yet O'Brien refuses to transform resistance into a simple story of liberation. Her women continue to experience dependence, vulnerability, guilt, loneliness, and social punishment. They often reproduce the values they resist. Their contradictions reveal the psychological power of patriarchy. The trilogy's feminist significance therefore consists in its complexity. O'Brien does not create an imaginary world in which women simply escape oppression. Instead, she shows how difficult it is for women to construct autonomous identities inside a society that has already defined what womanhood should mean.

Caitheleen's development matters because her journey does not lead to a neat resolution. She gradually recognises the limitations of the identities available to her, yet recognition does not immediately create freedom. Her struggle represents the wider struggle of women attempting to move beyond inherited definitions of femininity.

Baba offers a different model of resistance, showing greater pragmatism and a stronger readiness to challenge convention. Yet she too must negotiate male-dominated systems rather than simply escape them.

Together, Caitheleen and Baba reveal that no single way exists to resist patriarchy. Female resistance may occur through speech, friendship, sexuality, mobility, education, economic independence, self-awareness, and narrative representation.

O'Brien's representation of female sexuality is particularly important because it questions the cultural assumption that respectable women should be silent about desire. By bringing women's sexual and emotional experiences into literary discourse, she challenges the authority of institutions that attempt to control female bodies.

The trilogy can consequently be read as a feminist text not because it presents perfectly liberated women but because it exposes the structures that prevent women from becoming fully autonomous subjects.

Ultimately, *The Country Girls Trilogy* transforms the personal experiences of two women into a wider critique of patriarchal Irish society. O'Brien demonstrates that female identity is neither fixed nor naturally determined. Social expectations produce it, but women can also question, negotiate, and resist it.

The trilogy's enduring importance lies in this tension between conformity and rebellion. O'Brien's women are neither simply victims nor uncomplicated heroines. They are complex subjects attempting to create identities inside structures that continually seek to define them. By giving these women voice, desire, contradiction, and agency, O'Brien helps transform Irish women's literature and provides a strong examination of the struggle for female autonomy.

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