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“Fearful ... and Fearless”: Edna O’Brien’s “The Little Red Chairs” and “Girl”

≈ Resumen

Las dos últimas novelas publicadas por Edna O’Brien, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) y *Girl* (2019) han sido alabadas de forma unánime por la crítica. Philip Roth consideró *The Little Red Chairs* como la obra maestra de la escritora en la cubierta del libro, y para Éilís Ní Dhuibne se trató su novela más ambiciosa (2019), lo cual es mucho decir en el caso de una autora que ha sido un referente en la literatura irlandesa desde los años 60. *Girl*, su última novela, también ha sido reseñada positivamente, entre otros, por nombres tan influyentes como Christina Patterson (2019) y Anne Enright (2019).

The Little Red Chairs se inspira en el episodio histórico de la Guerra de los Balcanes y el asedio de Sarajevo. Dividida en tres partes, la novela dirige a sus lectores desde el oeste de Irlanda hasta los Balcanes, pasando por Londres y el Tribunal de La Haya, en una serie de movimientos que sirven a la autora para ilustrar los intercambios migratorios en la sociedad actual, y que involucran a exiliados políticos, refugiados, expatriados y migrantes económicos. *Girl* ha sido descrita por la propia autora como la novela más dura y dolorosa que ha escrito. En esta ocasión, la historia se basa en el secuestro de más de doscientas escolares por el grupo yihadista Boko Haram en Nigeria, lugar al que la propia autora se desplazó para entrevistarse con numerosas personas involucradas en el trágico episodio.

Nuestro estudio de estas dos novelas se centra en el compromiso ético de Edna O’Brien a la hora de dar voz a las víctimas de los acontecimientos más traumáticos de nuestra sociedad contemporánea, así como en el análisis del uso, a nivel formal, del género de la novela con el fin de reflejar el caos, la complejidad, la dislocación y la fragmentación causadas por radicalismos, violencia política y terrorismo.

Palabras clave:

historia; ética; estética; migraciones; violencia; *The Little Red Chairs*; *Girl*

≈ Abstract

Edna O’Brien’s last published novels, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) and *Girl* (2019), have been unanimously praised by criticism. *The Little Red Chairs* has been acclaimed as her masterpiece by Philip Roth in the book jacket cover, and as her most ambitious novel by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne at the moment of its publication (2019), which is a lot to say about an author who has been a referent in Irish literature since the 1960s. *Girl* has been also praised by influential figures such as Christina Patterson (2019) and Anne Enright (2019), among many other reviewers.

The Little Red Chairs has been inspired by the historical episode of the Balkans War and the siege of Sarajevo. Divided in three parts, the novel takes its readers from the west of Ireland to the Balkans through London and The Hague Tribunal in a series of movements that serve the author to deploy the wide canvas of migratory exchanges in our current society which involve political exiles, refugees, expatriates and economic emigrants. *Girl*, has been described by O’Brien herself as “the hardest and the most painful” novel that she has ever written. On this occasion, the narrative is based on the kidnapping of more than two hundred schoolgirls by the Boko Haram Jihadist sect, after the author’s journey to Nigeria, where she interviewed many of the people involved in the tragic episode.

My study of these two novels focuses on Edna O’Brien’s ethical compromise, giving voice to the most traumatic episodes and traumatized victims of our contemporary society, as well as on her brilliant use of the genre of the novel for recording the chaos, complexity, dislocation and fragmentation caused by radicalisms, political violence and terrorism.

Keywords:

history; ethics; aesthetics; migrations; violence; *The Little Red Chairs*; *Girl*

The well-known courage of the Irish writer Edna O'Brien has not diminished with age and the passing of time. The author who dealt openly with sexuality, abortion, religion and the condition of women in her native Ireland in her famous *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1987),¹ and who dared to fictionalize controversial episodes of the history of Ireland that involved politics, violence and terrorism in novels such as *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down by the River* (1997) or *In the Forest* (2002), has focused on thorny international affairs in her last two novels, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) and *Girl* (2019).

Both narratives are based on or inspired by real cases of terrorism and violence and, as is usually the case in O'Brien's fiction, the author has managed to successfully give voice to the voiceless, to tell new stories that urgently need to be told. Studied together, *The Little Red Chairs* and *Girl* deploy the author's progressive movement from the local to the global, from her native Ireland to remote Nigeria. Furthermore, O'Brien, who offered a privileged and detailed portrait of Ireland and the Irish, is becoming now a witness of the international sociopolitical scene. As was the case with her treatment of Irish affairs, the author is now offering updated reflections on the thorniest episodes of international politics.

“That Primal Innocence, Lost to Most Places in the World”: *The Little Red Chairs*

Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs* (2016) daringly deploys some of the most urgent issues of the social and political current world scene. Thus, the justification as well as the dangers of nationalism and patriotism, or the inevitability and the implications of contemporary migrations in Europe are topics that come to the fore in a novel that, structurally and aesthetically speaking, emulates the fragmentation and the confusion of the present day European context.

The readers of O'Brien's works are quite used to her valiant treatment of difficult topics in her novels and short stories. Thus, sexuality, religion, politics, or violence have been scrutinized in previous works by the author, not without arousing social and critical controversy on many occasions. These questions that affect our human condition appear condensed in *The Little Red Chairs*. And, as usually happens with the author's previous texts, O'Brien's complex and ambivalent treatment of delicate topics skillfully her readers in a difficult position so that taking sides or passing judgment is not an easy task.

The Little Red Chairs dexterously undermines from the very beginning preconceived traditional oppositions such as history and fiction, the local and the global, good and evil, tradition and contemporaneity. The title itself alludes to a historical event that is evoked by means of an explanation in the form of an epigraph that precedes the narrative. Thus, the little red chairs refer to the commemoration of the siege of Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb forces:

On the 6th of April 2012, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the siege of Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb forces, 11,541 red chairs were laid out in rows along the eight hundred metres of the Sarajevo high street. One empty chair for every Sarajevan killed during the 1,425 days of siege. Six hundred

and forty-three small chairs represented the children killed by snipers and the heavy artillery fired from the surrounding mountains. (O'Brien 2015, n. pag.)

The historical episode of the Balkans War and the fictional rendering of some of its protagonists function as a historical backdrop to the fictional story about how the imaginary Irish village of Cloonoila is altered by the intrusion in their lives of a mysterious visitor, Dr. Vladimir Dragan, a character based on the war criminal Radovan Karadžić.²

The use of epigraphs is a well-known and recurrent feature in O'Brien's works. Bertrand Cardin has studied the different types (quotations from literary works, fragments from political speeches or psychoanalytic essays, religious hymns, folk songs, etc.) and the varied function of the epigraphs that Edna O'Brien has included in all of her novels, with the exception of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Cardin distinguishes between paratextual, intertextual, hypertextual and postmodern epigraphs, although I would rather refer to the paratextual, intertextual, hypertextual and postmodern dimension of these passages, since on many occasions, as in the case of the novels under scrutiny, the epigraph fulfils several of the functions associated with these dimensions. Therefore, the contents of the text that presides O'Brien's novel refer to the title of the novel, help to explain the work as a whole, urging readers to play an active part in making sense of the novel – Cardin distinguishes those paratextual epigraphs that echo and justify the title of the novel in question (2006, 69) and help to explain how novels are to be understood (71); notwithstanding, epigraphs such as the one quoted deploy an intertextual function in the sense that “they disrupt the authority of a single voice,” (72) as well as a hypertextual projection, when in cases such as the present one O'Brien “endows the epigraph with a didactic value which is all the more serious as it refers to a historical context” (75–6). Finally, the postmodern stance reflected by the existence of these quotations should not be underestimated since they establish a dialogue between history and fiction, imply the juxtaposition of several voices and intertwine Ireland and its culture with other nations: “O'Brien's epigraphs downplay boundaries by juxtaposing several voices, several genres and several contexts” (79).

Later on, I shall refer again to the epigraphs that preside *The Little Red Chairs*, as well as in the case of *Girl*, when arguing about the meaning and significance of the writer's most recent contributions to literature. Notwithstanding, it is worth considering that the mere existence of these epigraphs already announces the formal as well as thematic particularities of the novels.

Paying attention to the plot and contents of O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs*, the narrative departs from a rural, apparently idyllic atmosphere of a small village in the West of Ireland. *The Little Red Chairs* deploys a narrative that, at the level of plot and setting, goes from the local to the global; and, with regards to form, progressively displays the complexity and fragmentation necessary to render in fiction contemporary social circumstances.

The small western Irish town of Cloonoila, that “takes its name from the river” (O'Brien 2015, 3) is the initial setting of the novel. A rural village in the past, the place displays the effects of the Celtic Tiger boom that has turned it into an incipient cosmopolitan area moving towards modernity:



Had he ventured in further, the stranger would have seen the flags of several countries, an indication of how cosmopolitan the place has become and in a bow to nostalgia there is old farm machinery, a combine harvester, a mill wheel and a replica of an Irish cottage, when the peasants lived in hovels and ate nettles to survive. (3)

Cloonoila is, thus, a contemporary Irish village that has suffered the changes brought about by modernity: basically, the abandonment of the rural way of life and its labours due to depopulation. It has become a memorial to a past whose traces are now commodified for the sake of summer tourists. It is, notwithstanding, the recipient of economic immigrants (“a mixed group, Irish, Burmese, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Slovakian, Polish,” 49) who have come to work at the local Castle hotel: “The Castle with its turrets and ivied walls was a five-star hotel which attracted celebrities and regulars who came for the fishing and shooting” (O’Brien 2006, 39). Therefore, the natives of the village are mainly women (widows, spinsters), religious figures (nuns and priests), and the only middle aged men who have remained in the area are small businessmen (shopkeepers, barmen).

The tranquil and boring life of the town will be irreversibly altered by the arrival of Dr Vladimir Dragan, a professed political exile who turns out to be a Balkan war criminal in hiding. This mysterious man soon acts as a storyteller that awakens the villagers from their soporific lives. He enthralls them with his account of the connections between Ireland and the Balkans:

Celts, he was told, had lived in the gorges of the Dolomite Mountains and along the river Drian in the centuries before Christ and the link between Ireland and the Balkans was indisputable. Scholars who had studied hieroglyphics in scrolls and artifacts in the several museums had traced the resemblance in the type of weaponry and armour that was worn. (O’Brien 2015, 8)

Besides, he vindicates the connections between the Catholic and Orthodox religions so as to appease the conscience of the local priest; and keeps on telling tales about Siddhartha, and Rasputin that engage his new neighbours’ attention. He announces the imminent opening of a clinic as *Sex Therapist* that, confronted with the reticence of the religious inhabitants of the village, he more than readily changes and advertises as *Holistic Healing in Eastern and Western Disciplines* (2006, 31). Thus, he shrewdly appeals to the most human and basic instincts of his fellow beings, their bodily and spiritual needs. In a western village in which men are in short supply, it is no wonder that his clients are basically women, among other nuns such as Sister Bonaventure in search of relaxation, and disappointed childless wives like Fidelma, who desperately wants to be a mother.

The portrait of Dr Vladimir Dragan, Vlad, Vuk, Doc, sex therapist, holistic healer, “a doctor, a philosopher, a poet and a healer” (11) is highly complex. The multiplicity of names by which

he is referred to conveys the varied layers of his portrayal. His beguiling personality casts a spell not only over the rest of the characters of the novel but similarly appeals to the readers, who are quickly engaged by a mysterious protagonist described as physically attractive, widely read, successfully articulate, and who is constantly pleading his cause in a tireless effort to captivate and manipulate his audience, as his defense during the La Hague trial exemplifies and is reflected in the following and highly revealing passage:

In his opening address he was *conciliatory*, confessing to feeling handicapped in his plea and likely to appear more as an amateur, and for this, *he begged the chamber to excuse his lack of form*. But then, with *schematic zeal*, he set about reminding the audience of the world’s ignorance of the conflict. He had been a martyr to his people, he had done everything to avoid war, had told his own parliament that it was going down the road to hell. It was only when he realized that his country and his people were about to be torn apart that he became a reluctant player. His corps never once neglected the laws of war, the legitimate customs of war [...]. Yes, he drew up borders, because he had to. If in a multi-ethnic society, as he argued, peoples could not live together, surely common sense dictated that they live apart. In territories in which he was accused of ethnic cleansing, people had left of their own accord [...]. Lies, falsehoods, bogus evidence squeezed from witnesses and manifestly partial. Military observers sat in their shelters gathering information from Muslim and other sources with a total sloppiness, unable even to discern who had died on the front and who had died natural deaths. Mass graves, bones, amputees, were from old wars and not his war, he told the chamber with a *blase assurance* [...]. ‘Genocide, genocide, genocide,’ he *thundered*, saying yes, hundreds of thousands were killed, but by whom. It was not established beyond any reasonable doubt where snipers’ rounds or mortar fire had come from. (2006, 262–4, emphasis mine)

The previous long passage illustrates how Vladimir Dragan’s is able to progressively modulate his tone, as well as his ability to make his point, deploying thus his incredible linguistic and reasoning powers in front of any audience.

He concludes his long plea affirming that “If I am crazy then patriotism itself is crazy” (265). The recognition of Vladimir Dragan’s appeal forces readers, as well as the rest of the characters with which he comes into contact, to wonder about the source of evil in the world. In other words, the novel poses the metaphysical question of when and how a healer, a poet, a philosopher, a cultured man such as Dagan metamorphosed into an unscrupulous murderer, a question that inevitably remains unanswered at the end of the novel. Therefore, there are no easily identifiable villains and culprits in O’Brien’s fiction as had happened in previous novels, equally dealing with delicate topics such as sexual abuse, politics and violence (*Time and Tide*, 1992; *House of Splendid Isolation*, 1994; *Down by the River*, 1997; or *In the Forest*, 2002).



After the local authorities discover the true identity of Vladimir Dragan and send him to prison, the setting of the novel moves to a London populated by immigrants, the place where Fidelma has travelled to, fleeing from the village once the identity of Dragan is unveiled and she discovers she is pregnant after desperately resorting to the Doc, with whom she had had sexual intercourse. Fidelma goes as far as to The Hague following Vladimir Dragan's steps. Therefore, the setting of the novel goes from the remote area of Sligo in Ireland to a cosmopolitan London full of immigrants and to La Hague, the heart of Europe, deploying thus the intimate and inevitable connections in our contemporary society between the rural and the urban, the local and the global, the personal and the political.

This blurring of boundaries also serves O'Brien to reproduce the wide canvas of contemporary migrations in Europe, and the author gives room to the stories of political exiles, refugees, economic emigrants, answering thus Nikos Papastergiadis's demand in his seminal work *The Turbulence of Migration* that '[a] more subtle vocabulary on migration is necessary' (2000, 55). Papastergiadis vindicates the need to widen and specify the meaning of 'migrancy' and he begins by distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary (forced marginal) migrants (57). O'Brien certainly pays attention to the different type of migratory movements across Europe and, furthermore, she gives voice to the variety of causes and circumstances that force people to abandon their homeplace: "They are there because they have nowhere else to go. Nobodies, mere numbers on paper or computer, the hunted, the haunted, the raped, the defeated, the mutilated, the banished, the flotsam of the world, unable to go home, wherever home is" (O'Brien 2015, 203). In this sense *The Little Red Chairs* proposes an ethic effort to avoid treating migrants as "Cargo culture", in Ashley Dawson's terms, and to "reflect the conditions of extreme duress of those who are trafficked from one part of the world to another," giving true expression to the experience of global migrants (Dawson 2010, 178–9).

The different settings in which the story takes place, and the wide canvas of characters whose stories are voiced in the narrative affect the structure and formal features of the novel. Therefore, *The Little Red Chairs* has three parts (marked in the text), each of which has several sections of different length and with varied protagonists. Formally speaking, the reader discovers a fragmented narrative with diverse styles (realist episodes are interspersed by the reproduction of dreams, or the telling of tales) and the multiple voices of the most diverse protagonists convey the feeling of the Tower of Babel that contemporary society has become. The different sections include episodes reproducing Vladimir Dragan's thoughts and dreams, the point of view of various inhabitants of Cloonoila, including the perspective of a small child from the village on the occasion of an excursion with the Doc, or the voices of the immigrants working at the Castle:

Andre, the Polak, is next. He coughs a few times, apologises for his English and begins very seriously, 'In my small town, they say Ireland good place, good wages. Homeless for one month when I arrive to Dublin. I go to one shelter and another and another, ask *Can I please spend night here*. Mattresses on floor, many men in one room. I keep one eye half open, for I fear I lose my flash lamp, my one

possession. In morning, janitor hand out small dishes with cornflakes and we all go out search for work. Anything, anything. After two weeks I get job down in Limerick working with cows. Place very lonely. Only cows and shed where I sleep. I ring my mother and she say *You won't make it Andre ... come back*, but because she say that, I am determine to make it. (O'Brien 2015, 52)

There were many people waiting, all silent except for one man with a black patch over his eye, talking ceaselessly – 'Me Sierra Leone, war war war, *guerre guerre guerre*, we want to believe it don't happen, that is how we get by, we try to escape, we come here, we shout at persons that jump the queue before us, and live rough. My cousin he move back, he hate it here, he say come for a holiday and I go for one month and after one week I am edgy. I paint a wall, dig up weeds, play ball with kids in the street and make small vegetable garden for my auntie. I come back to this city, where I know no one and do my hating alone.' (157)

In the second and third parts of the novel the constant mingling of voices and the recurrent exchange of stories convey a faster rhythm to the narrative so that the atmosphere of multicultural London is brilliantly reproduced and contrasts with the slower tempo of the first part that covers the monotonous routine of village life in the west of Ireland.

The Little Red Chairs is a book about politics – at a given point it is said in the novel "everything in this world is political" (212) – but mostly about the source of evil in the world, the mysterious origins of evil and the ungraspable nature of the evil that springs out of or is summoned after ill-conceived notions of home. At the end of the novel, in a Centre for migrants in London, a theatrical performance takes place, and the participants end their play precisely referring to home:

For the finale, the word *Home* was to be sung and chanted in the thirty-five different languages of the performers.

At first, even after many rehearsals, it was awry, the voices grated, the very harmony they had aspired to was missing, and then one woman stepped forward and took command, her voice rich and supple, a wine-dark sea filled with the drowned memories of love and belonging. Soon others followed, until at last thirty-five tongues, as one, joined in a soaring, transcendent Magnificat. *Home. Home. Home*. It rose and swelled, it reached to the rafters and through the walls, out onto the lit street, to countryside with its marsh and meadow, by graveyard and sheep fold, through dumbstruck forests, to the lonely savannahs and reeking slums, over seas and beyond, to endless, longed-for destinations.

You would not believe how many words there are for home and what savage music there can be wrung from it. (O'Brien 2015, 297)

When Europe is confronted with the problem of immigration, and the European nations are debating what to do with refugees from Syria, Bosnia and Africa, O'Brien has tackled in this novel one of the most delicate issues of our contemporary society, and has managed to expose the dangers of naively trusting the stranger at the same time that she has reproduced the ethical need of listening to the other and his/her circumstances. Native inhabitants of Cloonoila such as Fidelma, her husband, Sister Bonaventure or the schoolteacher are forced to lose "that primal innocence, lost to most places in the world" (28), and the cases of Vlad Dragan as well as that of the myriad of migrants that we discover in the novel exemplified the tragic aftermath of losing it.

Edna O'Brien had already announced, with the inclusion of her epigraph about the 11,541 red chairs in Sarajevo's main street, that her novel was to bridge the gap between fiction and history, Ireland and the world, and that her work would give voice to and stand as testimony of the voiceless. Similarly to the little chairs that remind one of the children killed during the 1,425 days of siege, her novel deploys the difficult coexistence of innocence and evil in our contemporary society.

"I Was a Girl Once, But Not Any More": *Girl*

As in the case of *The Little Red Chairs*, O'Brien's latest novel, *Girl* (2019), has also been inspired by international affairs, deals again with violence and cruelty in the context of contemporary international politics and terrorism, and is equally intended to preserve and provide testimony about one of the darkest and most violent enterprises carried out by radical terrorism. The story was inspired by the kidnapping and rape of more than two hundred schoolgirls by the Boko Haram Jihadist sect in Nigeria. The author, despite her advanced age, visited Nigeria and interviewed some of the girls who had managed to escape from their captors. In fact, the novel includes four pages of acknowledgements, in which she mentions how she met and interviewed doctors, aid workers, trauma specialists, and local journalists, but emphasizing that what she really wanted was "to meet girls who had been taken by Boko Haram. [...] I would meet Rebecca, Abigail, Hope, Patience, Fatime, Amina, Hadya, and many others, all with stories to tell but constrained by their reserve and delicacy" (O'Brien 2019, 228). A notice in a journal and her experience in Nigeria led her to write what she has described as the hardest and the most painful novel she has written to date (O'Hagan 2019).

Girl narrates in first person the traumatic experience of Maryam, who tells us "I was a girl once, but not any more" (O'Brien 2019, 1). Maryam, together with other schoolgirls, is kidnapped by Jihadists while at school and they are carried on trucks to a compound. There they are forced to work as cooks and cleaners for the terrorist soldiers who, from time to time, take them to the Blue House to rape them. Similarly to Dragan's plea in *The Little Red Chairs*, the reader discovers the terrorists' attempt at justifying their violent enterprises in front of the captive girls:

The he [the emir] lambasted those we had been taken from. Infidels. Thieves. Our president, our vice presidents, our governors, our police were all rotten. They were sultans of the banks, trawling their wealth, sitting in their big villas, on their golden thrones, watching Western movies on their big television screens. Their fat wives had accrued so much money,

so much gold, so many pearls, that they had to build extra dwellings to contain this hoard. Even Muslims among these people were contaminated, drawn into that miasma of corruption. (10–11)

Nevertheless, despite the author's giving voice to all the parties involved in the conflict, what the girls witness is public rape, mutilations, and even stonings. The most beautiful of the captives, provided that they are not pregnant, are given as brides to the bravest soldiers, as is the case with the protagonist, who marries Mahmoud, the first man to approach her with a certain degree of tenderness. Although Maryam repeatedly says "I knew that I did not love him" (50), she is able to feel compassion towards him, when he confesses that he became a Jihadist terrorist so as to be able to help his mother economically, and tells her that he feels as if he has become an animal:

In the morning he touched my lips, delicately with his forefinger and he told me his mother's name. Onome. She was the person he loved most. He had enlisted to save her from starvation. The Sect were always scouring villages to recruit young men of a fighting age, promising them big sums of money. [...]

'I'm an animal [...] I am an animal,' he said, fiercely. (53–4)

Maryam's marriage problems increase when she gives birth to a baby daughter (Babby) instead of the expected boy. When Mahmoud comes back injured in one leg, and begins to feel stranded, the village is bombarded by the forces of the Nigerian government. Mahmoud gives Maryam some money and helps her to escape in the company of Buki, another girl who remained captive at the compound.

The quickness of all the initial events described in the novel contrasts with the slower path of the narrative when describing the suffering of the two girls while travelling through the menacing forest, trying to survive without food or water, and carrying a baby with them. The feeling of sisterhood that is established between Baki and Maryam is not exempt from episodes in which the girls confront each other and deploy their desperation in such adverse circumstances.

One of the most dramatic scenes is the one that describes Buki dying after being bitten by a snake, and Maryam trying to bury her in a respectful way. When on the verge of collapse because of hunger and thirst, Maryam and her baby are rescued by a group of nomadic women, who help them in their path to freedom. Once released and in the hands of the Nigerian authorities, Maryam is received as a heroine, taken care of by doctors and therapists, and honoured by the government. Notwithstanding, the narrative deploys the farce of a series of festivities intended to promote the false idea that the nation was protecting their citizens and that they were the victors:

But make no mistake, we are winning, we have seized back territory and swathes of land that they have stolen. Our top military brass is equal to any country in the world, even the United States. A

vast amount of our national budget is spent fighting this war. We are upgrading weapons and machinery to wipe them out and they know it. (141)

Maryam is advised to smile in front of the cameras and, above all, to be careful with what she says, avoiding “gruesome stories”; “Nothing negative...nothing negative”, an aide keeps whispering in her ear (137). This public reception and the effort of the authorities to falsify the condition of the country explain one of the epigraphs that the author included in *Girl*, and that, as we have also seen in the case of *The Little Red Chairs*, helps to interpret the novel:

We have helicopters now that can fire four thousand rounds per minute. A truly devastating piece of military hardware. A game changer.
Nigerian government statement
in response to Boko Haram. (2019, n. pag.)

These displays of authority and force contrast with the lack of protection suffered by Nigerians such as Maryam, and the narrative is full of passages in which the readers discover a devastated country: “Further on we came on the burnt villages, trembling shells of blackness, the bamboo stalks, on which huts had once stood, charred and buckled and weird black fungus sprouting everywhere” (161); a nation whose inhabitants have been forced to flee or to suffer in the most adverse circumstances: “In this country up to two million people have fled their homes, 1.9 million people are currently displaced, 5.2 million people are without food and an estimated 450,000 children under five suffering from severe malnutrition” (O’Brien 2019, 117).

Not only the authorities want to silence Maryam. Her own family receives her with a mixture of relief and shame, since she is now considered as a “bush wife” (135) and a “stigma” (166). The following passage illustrates how both Maryam and especially her baby daughter are rejected by their own community:

A nurse followed soon after with Babby in her arms and I sensed a certain chill as they recoiled. Not one of them rushed forward to admire her.

‘She has the same little frown in the centre of her forehead as you,’ I said to Mama, and they all looked at me with revulsion.

Auntie began to explain to me that the government did not approve of bush wives bringing back their children, but instead found crèches for them to live in. I felt so hurt at being called a bush wife, and not by my name. (135)

Maryam will be separated from her daughter, and only with the aid of nuns will she be able to finally abandon her native village and

her family and be reunited with her baby in religious institutions, till she is finally offered a job as a teacher by the nuns in a remote Nigerian village.

Maryam’s narrative in *Girl* is interspersed throughout the novel with the stories of many other characters that she meets, who are equally desolated and affected by traumatic experiences, and whose narratives are rendered in the text in italics such as, among others, John-John, the eleven-year old boy she meets at the compound; the occupant of the cab that takes her and her mother back to their native village; Rebeka, the girl who escaped from the truck of the kidnappers and who has been ostracized by her family out of fear of Jihadist revenge; Daran, the old man she encounters at a camp when she abandons her village so as to recover her baby; or even the story of the woman she meets at the religious camp towards the end of the novel. Therefore, the reader discovers the urgent need that all these victims share of voicing their experiences so as to try to live with trauma. The succession of stories told and reproduced in italics are not the only formal feature that *Girl* conveys with a sense of chaos and fragmentation that reinforces the sense of dislocation suffered by the protagonist and the traumatic and complex nature of her experience. Thus, Maryam’s own narrative combines realistic, almost naturalistic episodes with the girl’s dreams about her family when she is suffering most, reminiscences of her past life, projections of imaginary scenes, self-conscious and feverish states of mind, or passages from essays written by the girl such as the one about the trees that was awarded with a prize at school. Furthermore, *Girl* includes references to and quotations from popular songs, fables, or even paragraphs from Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.

The ending of *Girl* is, similarly to the case of *The Little Red Chairs*, symbolically charged. If a performance and the word *Home* chanted in thirty something languages conveyed a sort of closure to O’Brien’s penultimate novel, in *Girl* the students that Maryam is going to teach have devised a triptych whose pieces are respectively entitled *War*, *Home* and *Harvest*:

The first was a panel of red, hard and obstinate slabs, with ochre vergings of blood dripping off the edges of the paper. It was called *War*.

The second was a drab grey, with a crush of children’s faces staring out of a window, in a sustained and silent scream. It was called *Home*.

The third was a leafy green vista, full of growing things – maize, corn, rye and sorghum, all ripening together. The effect was lifelike, as if a cool breeze had made those leaves quiver, as it would before a shower of rain. It was called *Harvest*. (224–5)

Consequently, once again, we find how the writer summons art (a performance in *The Little Red Chairs* and a painting in *Girl*) as the means, the most appropriate conduit, for both rendering and transmitting past conflicts, and projecting an alternative, more optimistic, future.

Edna O’Brien, in a recent interview on the occasion of the publication of *Girl*, stated that she would like “to go

as someone who kept to the truth” (O’Hagan 2019), and she has certainly managed to dedicate and to put her artistry to the service of truth, beginning with the disclosure of the hidden reality of her native Ireland and, progressively, as we have seen in both *The Little Red Chairs* and *Girl*, “fearful and fearless” exploring new territories and giving her voice to reveal the silenced truths of their occupants.⁴

Edna O’Brien began her literary career addressing some of the most fearful circumstances that the Irish, especially Irish women, had to confront, such as the limitations, rejection, and even violence they were subject to in their native country, and she has been able to maintain her project of fearlessly giving voice to the voiceless, the oppressed and the silenced of the world. Furthermore, she is overtly vindicating that art and, in her case, literature, should be put at the service of the victims’ right of, at least, being listened to.

Both *The Little Red Chairs* and *Girl* address two urgent international conflicts, and O’Brien’s intention seems to have been, first, to make readers reflect on the violence that pervades the international world scene; second, to give voice of the victims of those conflicts; and third, to project an ethical dimension of art.

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Notes

1 The novels that conform the trilogy are *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964).

2 Fiona McCann (2016) has detected in O’Brien’s novel echoes of Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*.

3 In a recent BBC documentary by Alan Yentob, the author described her state of mind when departing for Nigeria as “fearful ... and fearless” (Yentob 2019).

4 The recent publication of *Girl* has been accompanied by a controversy in the media. The appearance of a profile of the author written by Ian Parker for *The New Yorker*, titled “Edna O’Brien is still writing about women on the run” (October 7, 2019), has been considered by academics such as Maureen O’Connor and Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado as an attempt at trivialising and ridiculing the figure and the literary trajectory of O’Brien. While these lines are being written, the prestigious specialist on O’Brien’s work, Professor Maureen O’Connor is trying earnestly to publish a rebuttal letter in *The New Yorker*, and Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado has already reacted in defence of the brilliant and valiant Irish writer with a piece published in *The Irish Times* (2019).

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y “Girl” de Edna O’Brien

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