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‘Sacred or profane?’: motherhood portrayed in Amanda Coogan’s performance art

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Resumo: Em 1922, a Irlanda adquiriu independência do domínio inglês e passou a adotar políticas que visavam moldar sua identidade nacional. Durante esse período nacionalista, a mulher teve seu papel definido como dona de casa, mãe e esposa restrita ao espaço privado doméstico ao passo que o homem cuidaria do que era de carácter público. Direito ao divórcio e métodos contraceptivos eram proibidos até então. Após as lutas feministas dos anos 60, as mulheres conseguiram romper barreiras que as asseguravam na esfera privada da sociedade e avanços foram alcançados em relação às leis irlandesas. Porém, o direito ao aborto, por exemplo, era proibido até ano passado mesmo em casos em que a vida da mãe estava em risco. Esse artigo se debruça sobre o trabalho da artista performática irlandesa, Amanda Coogan, explica o seu contexto e a forma como ela usa o seu corpo como uma obra de arte e visa analisar a dicotomia de mulher que é sagrada/profana dentro da sociedade irlandesa contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Irlanda. Mulher. Amanda Coogan.

To deconstruct the concept of body is not to negate or refuse this term; it is rather to continue to use them, to repeat them subversively, to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power.
Judith Butler

Last October, the death of Savita Halappanavar at University Hospital Galway in Ireland led to nationwide protests calling for a review of the abortion laws in Ireland. Halappanavar, a Hindu of Indian origin, suffered a miscarriage when she was 17 weeks pregnant and she sought medical attention and treatment at University Hospital Galway. The hospital staff told her and her husband that the foetus was not viable but that they could not perform an abortion under Irish law as the foetus's heart was still beating. During the next several days, Halappanavar was diagnosed with septicemia which led to multiple organ failure and, ultimately, her death.

Subsequently, possible reasons contributing to Halappanavar's death were considered, such as the fact that the day she was admitted to hospital was a Bank Holiday, with the consequence that fewer staff was working and that; therefore, they may not have been prepared for an emergency. Nevertheless, because of the financial crisis Ireland has been experiencing, there were also rumours alleging that Halappanavar's health insurance company would not have authorized the surgery necessary to save her life due to spending cuts. Another hypothesis suggested was that, because Halappanavar was of Indian origin, she may not have been treated properly as a result of prejudice. In short, numerous potential reasons for the incident could be found in the newspapers in the weeks following Halappanavar's death but what transformed it into a national tragedy and led protesters to the streets was the fact that the doctors involved refused to perform the operation due to Ireland's abortion laws and, consequently, a large part of the population considered that a woman's life had been undervalued by Irish law.

Dissidents also demanded that the incident should be analyzed from the gender perspective as the female body is the object of this case. After the wave of protests, on January 1, 2014, an order commencing the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act was signed by Minister for Health, James Reilly. The Act provides for a termination of pregnancy where there is a real and substantial risk to a woman's life from a physical illness, including from the risk of suicide. In order for a termination to

take place, two medical practitioners will have to examine a woman and jointly certify that the risk to her life can only be averted by carrying out the procedure.

On the assumption that the doctors would not operate on Halappanavar because that would cause a miscarriage, the feature at the centre of this case seems to be primarily a gender issue; however, it also appears that this is an extremely tragic and complex case in which to isolate gender from other aspects would be very difficult:

Because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (BUTLER 1999:05)

According to Judith Butler, considering women as a coherent and stable subject is contrary to feminist aims as it refuses the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of women are constructed. This means that, when analysing Halappanavar’s case, historical and cultural aspects specific to Ireland must be considered in order to understand how women’s identity in Ireland has been shaped from the turn of the century up to today.

During the 1970s and 1980s, women all around the world joined forces to fight for their rights. It cannot be denied that after the Second Wave Feminist movements there were clear changes in gender relations in Irish society. However, in relation to political power, women have still been under/misrepresented as it could be discerned in Halappanavar’s case.

Women are different from men and, if these differences are not explicitly acknowledged, political analysis will continue to be an analysis of men. (PHILIPS 1998). Hence, according to Philips, if the State retains its rights over the female body and if the differences and the equality of rights between the genders are not made clear under the Irish Constitution, then there is room for a genuine feminist critique which aims to acknowledge the distinction between being a man and being a woman in that society.

The question raised here is how to determine and represent this difference. The feminist critic, Luce Irigaray, argues that:

Being born a woman requires a culture particular to this sex and this gender. She should not comply with a model of identity imposed upon her by anyone, neither her parents, her lover, her children, the state, religion nor culture in general. It is important, though, for the woman to realize this need without renouncing her natural identity (IRIGARAY, 1996: 27).

In this respect, Butler asserts that cultural, historical, social and racial aspects should be taken into account when questioning gender. Meanwhile, Philips believes that if there is no equality of rights when questioning gender a political action should be taken. Irigaray, then, assumes that, to acquire equality a particular culture for women should be created by women. Yet, what would this natural identity be? Or a more pertinent question may be: is it possible to represent women maintaining a multiplicity of cultural, social and political aspects without refusing a woman's natural identity?

Born in Dublin in 1971, the artist discussed here is Amanda Coogan , an actress of contemporary visual arts that operates in the arena of Performance Art. She proposes some of the most exciting and prolific durational performances to date. Her extraordinary work is challenging, provocative and always visually stimulating. Her expertise lies in her ability to condense an idea to its very essence and communicate it through her body. Her work often begins with her own body and challenges the expectations of the contexts.

The analysis here aims at displaying how Coogan confronts in her works the problematic concerning women and motherhood in contemporary Ireland. Moreover, she questions the idealized Irish woman repudiating the perfection attributed to the Mother Figure in social and cultural Irish history.

Coogan was born hearing in 1971 but her parents were deaf. The first language she learned was Irish Sign Language which is a manual-visual sign-language. Thus, the first communication tool Coogan learned was body based and non-verbal. She says:

Since I was born, I have had to communicate everything purely through my eyes and my body. I was brought up to follow the strict rules of visual communication, like: don't start communication until the person is looking at you, and always look someone in the eye while communicating. Everything was expressed through the body and received through the eyes: love, pain, happiness, sadness, hunger, and satiation. (FITZPATRICK 2005: 18)

Having her body as her main communication tool, Coogan explores it in her performing works and thus confronting the problematic that surrounds the image of perfection related to Irish woman. The female body of the performer is used to overlap these tensions between perfection and reality of motherhood. According to Novati, “Coogan offers a feminist critique of the ‘lived body’, a body ‘interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification and representation.” (NOVATI 2009: 181)

Nowadays, it can be said that times have changed and it is relevant to highlight that many sociocultural transformations and legal advances were achieved by women over the past years. However, Irish society is still based on a patriarchal dictating paradigm and much more have to be done, discussed and exposed in order to change the myth of an idealized Irish woman: mother, home-maker, and wife.

In Ireland, the family institution is especially lauded and much effort has been made by the State in order to protect it and to assure the ‘special’ role of women to help in the maintenance of this model of society. The 1937 Constitution of Ireland, for example, makes formal distinctions between men and women, recognising women’s role in the private sphere of society as home-maker, wife and, primarily, mother.

Article 41.2.1 of the Irish Constitution states that, ‘in particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved,’ adding in 41.2.2 that ‘the State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.’

In this way, despite having achieved many advances in postmodern society in relation to the 1937 Constitution, women are still submitted to a patriarchal model of society and their role as mother in the private realm continues to be considered the priority before the law. NOVATI states that “while much legislation has been revised (equality in wages, contraception, etc), Article 41.2 remained unchanged in 2008, exemplifying the ‘phallogocentric’ nature of the Irish Constitution” (NOVATI 2009: 182).

In Ireland, the belief that women should be confined to the private realm was not only established constitutionally but was also expressed in the religious sphere. Gerardine Meaney addresses this issue and highlights the important role of the Catholic Church in the formation of Irish citizens. She argues that:

The specific role of the Irish Catholic Church in this maelstrom of economic, political, social and psychological forces is rather more than one among a number of regulatory institutions. It is, after all, sometimes very difficult to ascertain where church began and state ended in regard to the institutionalization of individuals, public health and education, for example (MEANEY 2011:5).

It seems, therefore, that the Irish Catholic Church was the main regulatory institution regarding the construction of a nationalist ideology in Ireland. Consequently, it was also responsible for the promulgation of a patriarchal model of society and the idealisation of women as mothers only, who should be kept to the private realm. Idealising the Irish Mother was, in fact, a relevant feature that helped in the composition of the nation State. This idealisation was then constructed by the Catholic Church through the analogy it drew between the Irish Mother and the Virgin Mary: "Marianism was a badge of national identity sponsored by the post-independence southern state as well as the Catholic Church" (MEANEY 2011: 7). In this way, both the State and the Church were responsible for the construction of the symbol of sacred motherhood in Ireland. Meaney continues this equivalence attributed to the Irish Mother in relation to the Virgin Mary where she argues:

A highly racialized discourse of nationality was prevalent in popular Catholic devotional literature in twentieth-century Ireland that promulgated the idea of a special link between Ireland and the Virgin Mother. (...) The images that appear to have been most popular were in statue form, Mary as apparition, with raised hands, sometimes standing on the stars, sometimes crushing the serpent and, particularly, the picture of the Immaculate Heart of Mary juxtaposed with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The refusal to countenance any representation of the mother's body as origin of life was paralleled by the predominance of images of the Virgin Mary as mother of an adult son, usually Jesus in the mode of the Sacred Heart, and in general in visions, icons and statues that represented her after her assumption, after her disembodiment (MEANEY 2011:13).

As was stated earlier, the analogy between the Irish woman and the image of the Virgin Mary was long promoted by the Catholic Church in Irish social and cultural history and, in this way, this image profoundly penetrated the imagery of Irish families and "Our Lady" came to be a constant presence in the tradition of Irish life. The fact that women should be confined to the private realm was not only established constitutionally but also stated in a religious sphere. The image of Irish women was then compared by the Catholic Church to the image of Virgin Mary and thus Novati

says that: “the chaste, modest and humble virtues of Irish women and mothers grew apace with their penitential devotion to Our Lady...an ideal-type figure that was fecund and female and yet remained virgin and pure.” (NOVATI 2009: 182)

These transformations in social relations concerning the process of reproduction are also discussed in the work of one of Ireland’s most remarkable contemporary writers, Anne Enright. Born in Dublin in 1962, the Irish writer Anne Enright is considered by many critics to be an especially gifted writer. In her works, Enright demonstrates her own deep concern about how womanhood is represented in contemporary Irish literature and she aims to dismantle the ideal of a perfect, virginal and pure Irish woman. The critic Anne Mulhall claims that, “[i]n place of the real mother, Enright had observed that Irish Writing has traditionally either appointed ‘the iconised mother figure’, or posited an absence” (MULHALL 2011: 69). In her non-fictional book, *Making Babies*, Enright “tries to move from the reality that is informed by the patriarchal dictating paradigm to one that is inspired by a more feminine, interactional approach to things.” (SCHWALL 2011: 212)

The main deconstruction of traditional patriarchal hierarchies happens in Enright’s privileging of the body rather than the mind in her literary works. In this novel, *The Gathering*, Enright’s protagonist, Veronica Hegarty, demonstrates an awareness of the relationship between the body, mind and history:

History is only biological – that’s what I think. We pick and choose the facts about ourselves – where we came from and what it means. What is written for the future is written in the body, the rest is only spoor (ENRIGHT 2007: 162-163).

In this passage, Enright’s protagonist displays a discussion around the importance of the body when talking about history. Veronica denies the veracity of a verbal history because she says that “we pick and choose the facts about ourselves”, whereas bodily history cannot be erased or changed, it is eternal and true.

Enright’s citation on this essay is due to her protagonists’ demonstration of her concern about the female body. Womanhood representation in Enright’s contemporary Irish literature is provocative and innovative and it aims to dismantle the ideal of a perfect, virgin and pure Irish woman. When asked about the importance of the body in her literary works, Anne Enright replied “we have nowhere else to be. The body is where we are, the body is the problem” (BRACKEN 2011: 22). In this

way, she questions if this space by which we are all constrained is actually a private, guarded place of intimacy or if it is public, mobile and open to social conveniences. Therefore, Enright and Coogan share the same aim in her works, the difference is that while the first one operates through a verbal approach, the other uses her own body to perform these tensions in relation to women's role in a patriarchal society.

In order to portray a new image of the female body in her performances, Coogan challenges conventions and dogmas when reimagining some established figures from the history of Western Culture. According to Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith:

Coogan's appetite for iconoclasm is voracious. Over the past five years she has energetically worked her way through a dizzying procession of ironically reimagined figures from the history of Western culture. While her chosen sources include Classical myth (Medea, Athena), Christian iconography (the Madonna, the Sacred Heart) and European art history (Michelangelo's David, Manzoni's signed bodies), she displays a democratic indifference to distinctions between high and low culture, and ranges in reference across a variety of art forms (LÉITH 2005: 8-9)

When promoting the destruction of religious icons and many other established symbols in Western Culture, Coogan's performance arts break the nationally accepted image of perfect Irish woman and expose a female body out of the patriarchal paradigm dictated by society. Inasmuch she challenges the conventional images promoted by the male supremacy in Irish culture, Coogan performs a conscious filling in the gap between the image of the perfect woman/mother/wife and reality within Irish tradition.

This lacuna is occupied by Coogan's performance art in many levels as her works deal with what is visual and what is visceral and internal; her performances are provocative and visually stimulating promoting a link between the artist and her public; with her appetite for iconoclasms she challenges the established high arts in culture and bring them to what is popular. About that, Novati claims that:

The essence of Coogan's work, with its post-modern indifference to any kind of distinction between high and low culture, is neither an object nor an act, but the relationship between her shamelessly exposed body and the Irish patriarchal logic of gender." (NOVATI 2009: 180)

Two of Coogan's performances in which the questioning of the motherhood in Irish Culture in relation to a patriarchal logic of gender is presented are going to be

here analyzed. The first one, *Madonna in Blue* (O'REAGAN 2005: 49) was performed in 2001 and it is part of a sequence of works named *Madonna series*.

Wearing an unbuttoned blue silk shirt and cupping her exposed right breast, the artist doesn't look directly to the audience. In this way, at the same time she seems to be absent (pure, naïve, virgin), she is inviting when offering her right breast (profane, whore). Therefore, Coogan displays in her performance in *Madonna in Blue* a sophisticated critique about the virgin/whore dichotomy existing around the figure of the mother in a patriarchal society. According to Elizabeth Grosz in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*:

the conflict between the two terms of the virgin/whore dichotomy does not admit mediation because patriarchy, in its attempt to preserve the contradictory role of the mother (as pure and seducer), consciously removes this contradiction by projecting its features onto two different types of women: either virgin or whore, subject or object, asexual or only sexual, with no possible mediation. (GROSZ 1990: 129)

In *Madonna in Blue*, Coogan demonstrates being a talented performer when exposing, at the same time, the image of the sacred and pure mother (related to the Madonna religious image and her absent gaze) and the image of the profane woman who exposes her breast and offer it to audience. In an interview, Coogan explains where the inspirations for this performance and its dichotomous message, she says

the core image of this piece is on the one hand the physical reproduction of a sacred painting exhibited in the National Gallery of Ireland, and on the other hand one of the many nameless girls who advertise their body for sex through their pictures in the telephone booths and magazines. (FITZPATRICK 2005: 186)

In *Madonna in Blue*, Coogan combines elements of high art and popular culture filling the gap between the representation of the pure/virgin mother and the 'Real' one. As it was said before, the analogy between the Irish woman and the image of Virgin Mary was for long proposed by the Catholic Church in Irish social and cultural history and, in this way, this image deeply penetrated the imagery of Irish families and "Our Lady" meant to be a constant presence in the private realm of Irish life. In her non-fictional book, *Making Babies*, Enright synthetizes this image of the Virgin and the act of breast-feeding:

The country was awash with milk. Kitchens and bedrooms were hung with pictures of the Madonna and child. Still, though general all over Ireland, breast-feeding was absolutely hidden. The closest the culture came to an image of actual nursing was in the icon of the Sacred Heart, endlessly

offering his male breast, open and glowing, and crowned with thorns. (ENRIGHT 2005: 43)

According to Enright, although the image of the Madonna and child was present in Irish houses, the act of breast-feeding in daily routine was hidden. Therefore, Coogan's performance in *Madonna in Blue* is also relevant because when cupping her exposed right breast, she proposes a public act of breast-feeding challenging the hidden ideals embodied in the Irish patriarchal society.

Mary O'Brien deepens the question regarding the place of women in a male dominated society when she argues that the ideologies mentioned above are part of a major struggle to keep women in the private sphere of society. According to O'Brien:

In the case of the struggle with women, the ideological creations are the 'principles' of patriarchy and potency, which serve to legitimate the realities of segregation of women in the private realm, the creation of a public, male realm of freedom and control and the objectification of assorted 'principles' of continuity, including the public realm itself, which takes on a 'constitutional' capacity to transcend the individual lifespan (O'BRIEN 1980: 142).

O'Brien concludes that there are some principles of patriarchy that maintain this order, thereby creating a public male realm and a private female one. Hence, it is up to the State to keep the question of abortion under constitutional control and not to yield it to women's agency, which is supposed to be kept within the private sphere.

As mentioned previously, in Ireland, the patriarchal model of society is still operating and family continues to be one of the primary respected institutions. In this way, although some changes and advances have occurred in recent years, women's agency is still restricted and control over the female body in relation to abortion is still exercised by the State and its Constitution (as demonstrated by Halappanavar's case). In relation to that, Conrad says:

The fetus is taken out of the context of the narrative of the pregnant woman of which it is inextricably a part and re-narrativized as a separate autonomous subject (...) the pregnant woman is reduced to the maternal environment, a kind of passive landscape of fetal growth and life (CONRAD 2001: 158).

In her work *The Fountain* (O'Regan 2005, 46) also performed in 2001, Coogan keeps addressing her critique to the dichotomy sacred/profane in relation to the

representation of the female body. During this performance, she sits on the floor exposing her genitalia and then urinates in front of audience.

When bringing to the public what is meant to belong to the private realm, Coogan also challenges the ideals of internal/external in society. In popular culture it is acceptable to see a man urinating on the streets but it is not to see a woman. It seems that in the collective imagery it is eligible for a man to expose himself to the public. However, it is shocking when a woman ruptures what is nationally admissible as feminine and breaks into manhood world.

However, what is really relevant for the analysis of *The Fountain* performance and what links it to the discussion about the Virgin Mary in *Madonna in Blue*, is the inspirational story for this work. Coogan says that:

The piece really comes from the Anne Lovett story. A teenager, secretly pregnant, went to a grotto on a freezing January night and gave birth, alone, with the statue of the Virgin Mary watching over her. Both mother and baby died in the event. It's an iconic feminist story, a tragic story and quite specific to Ireland. (FITZPATRICK 2005: 17)

Ann Lovett was a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl from Granard, County Longford, Ireland who died giving birth beside a grotto on 31 January 1984. Her baby son died at the same time and the story of her death played a huge part in a national debate in the country at the time on women giving birth and abortion laws. The metaphor existing in *The Fountain* is extremely powerful: the image of the Virgin Mary watches the agony of a mother giving birth to a child conceived in sin and witnesses the pain and death of both mother and baby in a freezing January night. Again, Coogan displays a sophisticated critique of the idealized mother in Irish culture when dealing with some legal and religious implications of motherhood in Ireland.

In some of her works, Coogan deals with the symbolisation of motherhood as a subject position. She finally proposes a different gaze when gathering the representation of a mother who is to be considered object but who is portrayed as subject. This theme brings us back to the reference to Halappanavar's case at the beginning of this study: she is an example of a mother who is a subject but became an object for the baby and, consequently, for the State.

In relation to *Madonna in Blue* and *The Fountain*, Novati asserts the importance of Coogan's performance in contemporary Irish arts concluding that:

What is at stake in the performances not only involves Coogan's personal feminist critique of Irish icons and beliefs about womanhood but also issues surrounding sexuality, especially abortion, are still highly emotive. By displaying the co-existence of the virgin/whore dichotomy on the one hand, and the uncanny performance of the feminine abject on the other, Coogan explicitly challenges patriarchal symbolization, thereby proposing a new image of womanhood. (NOVATI 2009: 190)

The dichotomy of Virgin/Whore acquired a paranoid intensity in twentieth-century Ireland due to the urge to promote an essential Irish identity: pure, white, Catholic, patriarchal. Coogan clearly demonstrates the deep marks left by these discourses concerning the nation's formation but, more than that, it represents the struggles engaged in by contemporary Irish women to counter these discourses.

From my analysis of Amanda Coogan performance art, I assume the term body was used subversively in order to deconstruct the patriarchal paradigm as suggested by Judith Butler. In addition, it can be said that most of Coogan's characters break free from the structure they are trapped in and, even when they don't emancipate themselves, the structure of the performative narrative points to a path that would lead them to take on a particular culture that is created by females, as proposed by Luce Irigaray. In this way, Coogan, through her characters, deconstructs the image of the perfect mother that has been shaped by the Irish Constitution.

When treating this issue of motherhood in contemporary Irish Culture, Coogan treats as body performance what cannot yet be admitted as fact. Consequently, she explores what is repressed in a male dominant culture and can be considered a privileged point of insight into history.

Abstract: In 1922, Ireland conquered its independence from the British rule and adopted some policies that would shape its national identity. During the Irish nationalist period, women had their role defined as homemaker, mother and wife who would be restricted to the private realm of society while men would take care of the public affairs. To this extent, contraceptive methods and divorce were not allowed. After the feminist movements during the 60s, women have managed to break through barriers that locked them to the private sphere of society and advances have been achieved in relation to the Irish law. However, abortion rights, for example, were not allowed until last year, even in cases when the mother's life was at risk. Taking that into account, this article looks at the work of the Irish performer artist, Amanda Coogan, explains her context and the way she uses her body as a work of art and analyzes the sacred- profane woman inside its dichotomy in contemporary society in Ireland.

keywords: Ireland. Women. Amanda Coogan.

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