

IRISH MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES: RECLAIMING  
UNMARRIED MOTHERS' BODIES IN V.S. ALEXANDER'S  
*THE MAGDALEN GIRLS* (2016) AND LISA MICHELLE  
ODGAARD'S *THE MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

If some ecofeminists defend the innate connection between women and nature we well as the patriarchal domination of women, this article discredits, following Biehl, that reductionist view of social relations proving that power and violence are also executed by women over other inferior women and arguing that this approach contributes to a greater gender division. Following Butler's gender performativity theory, we will analyse V.S. Alexander's *The Magdalen Girls* (2016) and Lisa Michelle Odgaard's *The Magdalen Laundries* (2017), to prove that gender divisions and moral requirements have contributed to the subjugation of Magdalene women through violence and to the negation of their role as mothers, and yet, how that vulnerable condition could have been challenged by growing resistant.

KEYWORDS: violence, animalism, ecofeminism, unmarried mothers, resistance.

LAVANDERÍAS DE MAGDALENAS IRLANDESES: RECLAMANDO LOS CUERPOS  
DE LAS MADRES SOLTERAS EN *THE MAGDALENE GIRLS* (2016) DE V.S ALEXANDER  
Y *THE MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES* (2017) DE MICHELLE ODGAARD

RESUMEN

Si algunas ecofeministas defienden la conexión innata entre la mujer y la naturaleza, así como la dominación patriarcal, este artículo desacredita, siguiendo a Biehl, esa visión reduccionista de las relaciones sociales probando que el poder y la violencia son también llevados a cabo por mujeres y argumentando que este enfoque contribuye a una división de género mayor. De acuerdo con la teoría de la performatividad del género de Butler, analizaremos *The Magdalen Girls* (2016) de V.S. Alexander y *The Magdalen Laundries* (2017) de Lisa Michelle Odgaard para probar que las divisiones de género y los requisitos morales han contribuido a la subyugación de las Magdalenas a través de la violencia y de la negación de su rol como madres, y, sin embargo, cómo esa condición de vulnerabilidad ha sido desafiada al mostrar una actitud de resistencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: violencia, animalismo, ecofeminismo, madre soltera, resistencia.



## 0. INTRODUCTION

The use and display of sexuality and of the female body had certain restraints in twenty-century Ireland when the Catholic Church, in conjunction with the State, was in control of the education and well-being of women specifically. Even though the whole population of Ireland was ruled and guided by Catholic principles, women were the main target of those Catholic values which envisaged them as mothers and wives in charge of the house and the family. As the Constitution states, women were granted several privileges at home, but no rights were attributed to them beyond it:

Article 41: 2 1° 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.

2 2° 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. (THE STATIONERY OFFICE 164)

As the family was the most important institution in Ireland, so was marriage. Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution states: “3, 1° The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack” (THE STATIONERY OFFICE 164). Marriage was an indissoluble contract and divorce was not considered morally acceptable. However, in 1996 the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution was achieved, thanks to the arduous labour of feminists, which granted access to divorce under certain circumstances:

Article 41: 3, 2° A Court designated by law may grant a dissolution of marriage where, but only where, it is satisfied that –

i at the date of the institution of the proceedings, the spouses have lived apart from one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, at least four years during the previous five years,

ii there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation between the spouses,

iii such provision as the Court considers proper having regard to the circumstances exists or will be made for the spouses, any children of either or both of them and any other person prescribed by law, and

iv any further conditions prescribed by law are complied with.

3° No person whose marriage has been dissolved under the civil law of any other State but is a subsisting valid marriage under the law for the time being in force within the jurisdiction of the Government and Parliament established by this Constitution shall be capable of contracting a valid marriage within that jurisdiction during the lifetime of the other party to the marriage so dissolved. (THE STATIONERY OFFICE 164, 166)

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Thanks to the arduous labour of feminist movements from the 1960s onwards women got gradually involved in matters of the state. The renegotiation of the social and political boundaries women was subjected to allowed them to have a more inclusive role in society with the establishment of a Trade Union, and the gradual introduction of women in politics (FERRITER 569). During the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s women were represented in politics, but they suffered discrimination under the patriarchal laws imposed. The participation of women in politics was restricted being only a few who occupied parliamentary seats; names like Maire Geoghegan-Quinn, Bridgid Hogan-O'Higgins, Mary McSwiney, Mrs Collins O'Driscoll, or Mrs Reynolds are just some examples of women in politics during the 1920s and 1930s. From the 1930s to the 1970s just nineteen women were elected to the Seanad (Upper House of the Oireachtas), as Maurice Manning claims in his article (92-102). The 1970s saw the change of women's conditions thanks to feminist pressures and the introduction of Ireland into the UE. With the increase of women's action in politics, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century, issues such as abortion, sex, women's role in society, marriage, and abuse became part of the public policy in all Europe. In the case of Ireland, women started to form organisations which dared to challenge the Constitution of 1937, especially the power of the Church in determining women's place and role in society (BREITENBACH and THANE 6). It was thanks to them that several amendments to the Constitution were achieved namely, the fifth amendment in 1972 restraining the power of the Church in the State and favouring religious pluralism (Article 44), the eighth amendment in 1983 guaranteeing the right of the unborn, the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments in 1992 granting the freedom to travel or obtain information about abortion, and the fifteenth amendment in 1995 allowing the dissolution of marriage under certain circumstances (THE STATIONERY OFFICE).

Despite these achievements, motherhood within marriage continued to be one of those requirements considered natural for women. Following Ecofeminism, the western philosophical tradition which divided reality into different categories affected the relationship between men and women being the first associated with reason and the second with nature. That dichotomy implied the devaluation of women and anything which had to do with nature. Later, Christianity and early psychoanalysis maintained that dichotomy through patriarchy. And finally, capitalism, with its focus on production, has contributed to the reinforcement of such linguistic categories which define women as the raw material and men as the producers. Overall, women have been equated to the metaphor of Mother Nature, that is, a provider of life and a controllable object. One of the main concerns of ecofeminists has been the regulation of women's reproduction for which they have actively fought against intrusive techniques used against the female body. So, the main premise of ecofeminism is the defence of a connection between the domination of nature and the domination of women, and the necessity of dismantling and rejecting this oppression caused by patriarchy (GAARD 1-2; BIRKELAND 26; KHEEL 260).

Conversely, we argue that women's devaluation has not only been imposed by patriarchy but by any power relation established between those who are placed above in the social hierarchy and those below. Moreover, we believe that by defending



an innate connection between women and nature we are maintaining those binary categories imposed by normative power which contribute to the devaluation of women. According to Judith Butler's critical genealogy of matter, the body is materialised within discourse, not prior to it, following heterosexual norms. Hence, the materialisation of the body is produced by power discourse but not as an external force acting upon the body, but as the means by which the body comes into being (BUTLER, *Bodies that Matter*; BUTLER, *Gender Trouble*). As Butler claims, we are produced and represented as subjects by power and to be politically and linguistically represented we should be considered subjects first; power determines who is a subject and who is not following certain norms of intelligibility (*Gender Trouble 2*). In our case of analysis, those women in Ireland who challenged or attempted to challenge the stipulated moral requirements for women were labelled as "outcasts" and, therefore, rejected and excluded from the domain of the intelligible; the Magdalene, as a linguistic category created by power referring to those women who were sent to Magdalene Laundries after committing sins, failed to be recognised as subjects according to the juridical system. They were offered no legal representation silenced and rejected by society.

Running from the eighteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth century, Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Ireland hosted thousands of wayward women and their illegitimate children. "First offenders" and "hopeless cases", as they were called, were offered shelter in these homes run by nuns in exchange of laundry work (LUDDY, "Unmarried Mothers" 109-126; O'SULLIVAN and O'DONNELL 7; FINNEGAN 27; SMITH 48-52). Yet, this benevolent depiction of reformatory institutions has been discredited thanks to the testimonies of hundreds of women who have revealed the truth concealed for many years. Moreover, the role of literature in the disclosure of the Irish past has contributed to a wider understanding of this chapter of history. Since the first literary production about Magdalene Laundries published back in 1963 –Patricia Burke-Brogan's *Eclipsed*–, a great number of writers have joined this genre widely known as Magdalene literature. Covering from plays to novels, including also autobiographies, the fictionalisation of Magdalene Laundries and the lives of their inmates have been, and they are, emergent topics offering new insights. We could distinguish two stands within this genre; those fictional accounts of these women's stories, which tend to incorporate fictional elements and generalisations, and those autobiographies which, in a confessional mode, present a traumatised voice which tells their stories in a flashback. What these stands have in common is the period they cover—from the 1940s to the 1980s—, when coercive confinement in Irish Magdalene laundries registered its highest numbers. All these works have contributed to the acknowledgement of a past reality people may be aware of, but which was unknown and concealed by power institutions involved in the establishment and running of these institutions. In this article, we will focus on two of the most recent novels written about Magdalene Laundries by two American novelists namely, V.S. Alexander's *The Magdalen Girls* (2016) and Lisa Michelle Odgaard's *The Magdalen Laundries* (2017).

Previous research on the vulnerability and violence executed against unmarried mothers in Magdalene Laundries has focused on the analysis of Conlon-



McKenna's novel *The Magdalen* and films such as Peter Mullan's *The Magdalen Sisters*, Stephen Frear's *Philomena*, and Aisling Walsh's *Sinners* by scholars such as James Smith, M.<sup>a</sup> Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides, Aida Rosende Pérez, or Paula Murphy. This study contributes to a wider understanding of women's vulnerability produced by gender norms and violent acts through the analysis of two new novels which, due to their recent publication, have not been analysed yet. In the light of the aforementioned theoretical framework, our intention is to analyse these novels arguing that those women in Ireland who did not meet the moral requirements imposed by the Catholic Church were naturalised and animalised suffering violence which rendered them vulnerable and disposable. The loss of human status is clearly seen in these novels where the bodily integrity of young women and of unmarried mothers during pregnancy and during labour is hindered not by men but by other women holding power. At the same time, we argue that, as thousands of real women in Ireland, these characters found strength in their vulnerable and precarious condition to resist it; we will see in these novels how women fight for their rights employing all the possible resources they had.

To fulfil the aim of this article, we will focus on the main protagonists of these novels to see how gender divisions and moral requirements for women have contributed to the subjugation of this group through violence, and to the negation of their role as mothers, and yet, how that vulnerable condition empowered these women who grew resistant towards adversity.

## 1. VIOLENCE AGAINST THE FEMALE BODY; DENIED MOTHERHOOD AND REPRODUCTION

Set during the 1960s, the time when higher imprisonment rates in reformatory institutions are registered by O'Donnell and O'Sullivan (7), *The Magdalen Girls* and *The Magdalen Laundries* tell the story of some adolescences who ended up in Magdalene laundries sent either by priests or relatives for being on the verge of falling, that is, of having sexual relations outside marriage. Educated according to patriarchal and Catholic values, Teagan's and Nora's families represent the heteronormative principles in which Irish people were instructed. Concerning fathers, Cormac –Teagan's father (ALEXANDER)–, Gordon –Nora's father (ALEXANDER)–, and Oran –Maren's father (ODGAARD)– represent the authority within home and outside it while the mothers, Shavon –Teagan's mother (ALEXANDER)–, Agnes –Nora's mother (ALEXANDER)–, and Naomh –Maren's mother (ODGAARD)– embody ideal womanhood, in charge of the home and the education of their daughters as Article 41 of the Constitution states. This patriarchal system, supported and encouraged by the Catholic Church which believed women to be in need of male protection, caused the precarisation of the female members who had to respond to a strict disciplinary system which rendered them vulnerable and subordinated to the male authoritarian figure. The notions of respectability, chastity, frailty, delicacy, self-sacrifice, and subordination fostered by the Victorians continued in twentieth-century Ireland to conform the image of the "good wife" relegated to the private



sphere of the home. Overstepping the limits imposed for women was translated into a defiance of the stipulated moral requirements. In Maren's family, it was the mother's task to educate her children, but it was the father who decided the females' future, especially concerning marriage. In the case of Oran, he considered Faolán a good match for Maren but not at an early age: "Sixteen years old was not nearly old enough for Maren to be flirting with the opposite sex. Regardless of how highly he regarded Faolán, he wasn't about to lose Maren to him just yet" (ODGAARD 12). This patriarchal system was supported and encouraged by the Catholic Church which believed women to be in need of male protection due to their weak nature and proneness to fall.

Apart from the father, this authority was extended outside the home in the person of the local priest who, together with their fathers, made the decision to enclose these women in Magdalene Laundries. In Alexander's novel, Teagan's secret encounters with the new priest and her sexual attraction to him led her to be punished (ALEXANDER 10-32), and Nora suffered the consequences of not behaving according to moral standards after her attempt to convince her boyfriend not to abandon her through sex (ALEXANDER 27-28). In the case of Odgaard's novel, Maren's confession to Father Seanán about her attraction to Faolán implied her preventive confinement in a reformatory institution (ODGAARD 12-33). Ceara, an unmarried mother Maren met in the Laundry, had been brought there by the local priest after being betrayed and abandoned by her boyfriend (ODGAARD 80-81). Nora's and Ceara's confinements could be justified since they did commit an immoral act, but what is interesting to notice here is that both Teagan and Maren were unjustly confined in response to a confession instead of being offered help. This makes us question the Catholic Church's proclamation of tenderness and care towards the weak.

It is believed by some scholars like Butler that confessions liberate us, however, we can see here how confessions are means of control through which the abject being is purified of sin (BUTLER, *Undoing Gender* 165-167). Father Mark had immoral thoughts about Teagan, so he felt it necessary to make a confession to Father Matthew (ALEXANDER 37-38). The oldest priest showed himself understanding, but the next day, he told it to Teagan's father at mass. Consequently, Cormac sent Teagan away as a punishment for her behaviour and her lies (ALEXANDER 41-42). Aware of the sexual attraction between Maren and Faolán, her mother warned her about not falling in love with him and committing a mistake (ODGAARD 24-25). Her mother's warning words concerning sin is a representation of how religion was used at that time to instil fear on young girls forcing them to behave according to moral standards: "[...] Sins of the heart are as bad as sins of the flesh. Whenever you look at a man with lust in your eyes, it is a disappointment to the Lord. And what it can lead to condemn you if you give in to it" (ODGAARD 25). As a result of this talk, Maren went to confession: "[...] she found herself worrying that she was on the road to hell, and only a priest could restore the grace of her salvation back to her" (ODGAARD 25). It was Father Seanán's decision, without her parent's consent, to confine Maren in a Magdalene Laundry as preventive work (ODGAARD 41-42). Finally, Ceara was betrayed by her boyfriend Douglas who, after being aware of Ceara's pregnancy, confessed to the priest he would not marry her since she was a



whore; as a result, Father Marcus enclosed her in a Magdalene Laundry (ODGAARD 81). In all these cases men's elision of responsibility was granted by the conspiracy of silence which existed at that time concerning unmarried motherhood and Magdalene Laundries, as well as the double standards of morality which targeted women as the only responsible for sinful acts (FINNEGAN 46-47; SMITH 149-150).

Since an early age, women's sexuality and desire was restrained and controlled by fathers and priests in a patriarchal society that conceived marriage as the only legitimate form of sexual relation. The naturalisation of sex within the marriage bond left other forms of sexual encounters out of the normative conception of gender and sexuality for women. Therefore, those who challenged Catholic rules were, as Maren, Ceara, Teagan and Nora, deprived of their rights to be sexually free and punished to be confined in a Magdalene Laundry for their reformation. So far, ecofeminists' claims about the connection between women and nature and their devaluation under patriarchy apply here (GAARD 1-5; KHEEL 260; VANCE 133). Nevertheless, we believe that to reduce the domination of women to patriarchal forms of power is a simplistic view which overlooks other existing potential forms of domination. In Biehl's words, "attempts to reduce the ideology of dominating nature exclusively to the domination of women by men serves to obscure the complex relationship between nature and society that has emerged" (54). As we are about to see, women-nuns-exerted the same power over young women which leads us to affirm that power relations are not only established between women and men but at all levels, and that domination is not only directed by men but by anyone who owns the means to subjugate others. Once they entered the Laundry, these women's bodies and souls became the property of the nuns who obliterated them through strict measures such as hard work, fasting and prayers. Both Sister Anne (ALEXANDER) and Sister Líadan (ODGAARD) can be seen as extended representations of male authority in society. Within the convents, they established strict norms-work, surveillance, and prayers-women had to follow to be reformed. Yet, extreme measures were adopted by the nuns when inmates did not behave according to the rules. Apart from work, prayers, fasting and surveillance-all of them punishing practices which contributed to the undermining of these women's sense of self and to the forgetting of their past (FINNEGAN 28)-, these women were educated through physical and psychological punishment which damaged their corporeality and sense of self.

Physical punishment was justified by Sister Líadan just for not saying the prayers correctly, for not working properly or for rebelling: "Twice in the afternoon Maren had observed girls forgetting to pray aloud, and they had received sound whippings on their already red and wrinkled hands from the stout ruler Sister Mary carried in her apron pocket" (ODGAARD 58). The nuns' power dared not to be challenged otherwise the consequences would be terrible. This can be seen in one particular scene in which Amy was saying her prayers wrong and when Líadan told her off she stumbled and stained the nun's gown. As a consequence of what the Sister considered a lack of respect, she was about to hit her when Ceara intervened. She confronted the nun saying: "You cannot treat us like we are pigs in a stable, mindless and stupid and only following your orders because you dump some slops in front of us once or twice a day. How can you live with yourself?" (ODGAARD 107).



Líadan threatened Ceara and she attempted to hit the nun, but she was stopped and bitterly hit with a brush until she collapsed:

With Ceara finally in one spot, the nun continued her assault, beating every inch of Ceara's body that faced her. She stood with her feet planted squarely on either side of the unconscious girl, bringing her weapon down harder and harder on whatever was presented to her. Several small trickles of blood ran out from under Ceara's hair, and a few spots of dark red began to grow on the grey dress she wore ... (ODGAARD111)

The same ill-treatment of inmates can be observed in Alexander's novel; the first episode of violence is experienced by Nora at her entrance when she is slapped for the fuss she was causing and locked in a room for hours –the Penitent's Room (ALEXANDER 70).<sup>1</sup> During some nights, Teagan and Nora went out on the roof to smoke and speak for which they were punished when discovered by Sister Anne:

[...] 'You will lie here in the position of the Cross, until you learn your lesson. You will understand what Jesus suffered. You will not eat, nor drink, nor soil yourself.' She brushed the rod near Nora's face. 'When the evil has been removed from your spirit, you'll be able to join us. I do this out of love, so you will know Christ and His ways.' (ALEXANDER 102)

Nora spat on Anne's feet and she was punished further—she was made the sign of the cross with a pin on her palm (ALEXANDER 102). This physical punishment caused the women a deep sense of humiliation: "Teagan shook her head and smoothed down her apron. 'I've never been so humiliated—and by someone who claims to 'love' us.' There was a desperate bitterness in her voice, 'She's a bitch,' Nora said" (ALEXANDER 105). The social vulnerability of our bodies is an essential characteristic of any human being, as Butler claims, but inequality and dependency are granted by the social relations of dominations which render us vulnerable and disposable (*Undoing Gender* 24; *Precarious Life*). Both young girls and unmarried mothers, in the case of Ceara, underwent a process of animalisation and naturalisation by being deprived of their human status through blows and humiliations:

Just as women are naturalized in the dominant discourse, so too, is nature feminized. "Mother Nature" is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are "penetrated" and her "womb" is to be put into service of the "man of science" [...]. Language fuses women's and animals or nature's inferior status in a patriarchal culture. We exploit nature and animals by associating them with women's lesser status, and, conversely, dominate women by associating women with nature's and animal's inferior status. (WARREN, "Towards an Ecofeminist" 190)

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<sup>1</sup> This room was a separate cell where inmates were sent to when they misbehaved. They could stay there for days fasting and in darkness. The aim of this punishment was to convince the inmates that their behavior should be changed. Yet, this type of torture only aggravated their condition and hindered their reformation.



As a necessary requirement to reform these wayward women, physical punishment was justified against the inmates who were treated as wild animals in need of restraint and correction. We are who we are by the social relations we are engaged in; we depend on others as others depend on us. The social dimension of our bodies renders us vulnerable to others who impose certain demands on us. Yet, in that scale of human vulnerability some people are more vulnerable than others. Those Irish women who did not follow the norms were dehumanised falling out of the category of the subject and therefore considered unreal, so violence against them was justified in the sense that they did not really exist (BUTLER, *Precarious Life*). The privileged group—the pure/the nun—was in charge of educating women, but far from it, the social relationships established between both nuns and inmates was one of power and control by which the Magdalene was dehumanised and rendered invisible. Regarded as a matter of state intervention, the femininity and reproductive power of women in Ireland were controlled first by the Church and the state sending women to reformatory institutions, and later by the nuns in charge of the reformation of inmates. In either case, these women were deprived of their reproductive rights and of their freedom of choice.

One day, Nora managed to escape and the penitents were punished for it; they were tortured with freezing water and fire in a display of power against those who challenged the norms (ALEXANDER 129-130). After her obliged return, Nora confessed Teagan she was pregnant, but she concealed it until it was too obvious (ALEXANDER 170-171). The day of Nora's birthday she fainted and was told off by Sister Roth who discovered her pregnancy and informed Sister Anne (ALEXANDER 188-190). She was humiliated having to roll her uniform up in front of the other girls (ALEXANDER 191). Teagan tried to defend her friend but was silenced with a slap and punished with cleaning the convent. As for Nora, she was locked up in a room (ALEXANDER 192). One of the cruellest measures taken by the nuns was the deprivation of these women's illegitimate children, as Ceara claims: "They... they will take the child away from me. It's not worth anything to them, just the bastard son or daughter of another wanton young girl who got herself caught out. They'll take it soon as it's born, they always do, you know, so there's no bonding" (ODGAARD 132). The convent's politics concerning illegitimate children was clear; no bond should be set between first offenders and their offspring since they will be deprived of their illegitimate children to be given in adoption (SMITH 48-52; LUDDY, "Unmarried Mothers" 109-126). In August Nora was sent to a hospital where, after delivering a premature baby boy—Seamus—she was reminded of her baby's fate (ALEXANDER 244):

She knew what was going to happen to her son. Nothing in the world could change her baby's fate. He would be suckled by her, then by a wet nurse, and later put up for adoption [...]. Even the kind doctor and nurses at the hospital told her the truth, telling her she should enjoy her baby while she could. Everyone knew what happened to a child born out of wedlock. Many "deserving" Catholic families would welcome Seamus because they couldn't bear children of their own. (ALEXANDER 245)



The medicalisation of women's bodies as an intrusive practice affecting women's corporealities is aggravated here by the deprivation of these women's babies to be given in adoption. Seen as mere reproductive objects, women were taken away their right to decide during and after their labour.

The medicalization of childbirth has been linked to the mechanization of the female body into a set of fragmented, fetishized and replaceable parts, to be managed by professional experts. Pregnant women are viewed not so much as sources of human regeneration, as the 'raw material' from which the 'product' – the baby – is extracted. (VANDANA 26)

Since she knew she would be separated from her child, Ceara concealed her pain the day she started her labour. Her only aim was to give birth alone to be with the baby for a while. Ceara gave birth to a little girl with the help of Maren; during the process, she did not scream although she did not receive painkillers or sanitary towels. Trusting Jesus's help only, she delivered the baby, but the cord strode her and she died. Despite the event, Ceara felt gratitude to God for allowing her to be with her child and for avoiding her daughter so much pain (ODGAARD 136-145). After her delivery, she felt a pain and asked Maren to call the nun. Sister Dáirine came and told her she had expelled the placenta. The nun took the dead baby as it was garbage and Ceara was not attended medically (ODGAARD 150). We cannot assure Ceara would have been attended by a doctor properly if she had told the nuns, but judging by the way Sister Dáirine treated the dead body of her daughter and by how inmates are normally taken care of, we come to the conclusion Ceara would have suffered the same ill-treatment during childbirth. According to the nuns, the way their children were conceived was a lustful one, hence, they should suffer the consequences of their sin. For the Catholic Church, having a child out of wedlock was a mortal sin women had to pay for. To do penance, women were not supplied with painkillers or attended by proper doctors – they had to endure the pain as a form of punishment (PÉREZ-VIDES 6-9).

Although the Irish legal system defends the bodily integrity of persons, low-class-unmarried-pregnant women seem to fall out. These women's personhood was attacked and even deprived of the subject-status of embodied subjects, seen as mere reproductive bodies within marriage. Whereas the status of the foetus was elevated to that of a human being (1937 Constitution), the mother's subjectivity and rights were disregarded; Article 40, 3° acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and the equal right of the mother, but the reality and the rest of the Constitution distanced from this law (THE STATIONERY OFFICE). As a result of the high rates of illegitimacy from 1923 to the 1970s, different laws were enacted to control and regulate women's sexuality: "By 1928, with the publication of the report of the Commission of the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, the unmarried mother had been clearly identified as both a social and political problem" (LUDDY, "Unmarried Mothers" 111). It was not until the 1970s that attitudes towards unmarried mothers did not change; thanks to the Commission on the Status of Women (1972), allowances to unmarried mothers were introduced, and thanks to the Social Welfare Act of 1973,



social assistance to unmarried mothers and their children was provided (OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL). It was thanks to second-wave feminism, with the establishment of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement, that a committee on women's rights was set in 1968, which resulted in the establishment of the First Commission on the Status of Women (1970) and in the formation of the Council for the Status of Women (CSW) in 1972 (FERRITER 539). Moreover, different associations were created to help these women and to avoid their discrimination in society (LUDDY, "Unmarried Mothers" 109-126).

During their stay in the Laundry, the body and mind of the Magdalene were further punished by the poor health conditions, especially when women had their menses. On a particular occasion Maren and some other girls got their period at the same time but instead of being understanding with the girls, they were treated as abject beings: "That's most likely the only way you'll get out of work around here, if your pain is bad. They also don't like the idea of girls with 'the curse' doing the laundry, anyway; it might soil the garments—figuratively, I suppose—with their 'uncleanliness'" (ODGAARD 83). They were offered no care:

The night before, when she had discovered her menses, she had no choice but to strip the case off the pillow and fold it neatly into a small pad to place inside her drawers. The pillowcase had absorbed most of the blood, but Maren had been uncomfortable all night with the bulkiness between her legs and the horrible smell of the filthy pillow she had been given. Now she wondered if there was a supply of menstrual pads here in the convent, for if there weren't, she didn't know what she would have to do. (ODGAARD 84)

Moreover, they were humiliated; Sister Líadan entered Maren's room abruptly accusing her of lying. She was taken to a room with the other menstruating girls who were asked to put down their knickers to prove they were saying the truth. Maren was brought by the ear and when she fell down for the pain she was kicked all over her body (ODGAARD 87-89):

Anyone of them who agreed to pull down their underwear would suffer the mortification of revealing something incredibly private to both the nun and the other girls, but any girl who refused to show her the evidence of her menstruation would be deemed a liar and sent to work extra hard in the laundries as punishment. (ODGAARD 89)

The connection between women and nature is clearly seen here in the consideration of women's menses as filthy and in need of purification. Among the possible techniques of purification used by the nuns, hard work, punishment and poor healthcare caused the degeneration and ultimately the death of some women inside the laundries, as in the case of Odgaard's novel:

One of the youngest girls in the convent, barely fifteen and eight months pregnant, had collapsed at the workstation next to Maren's, her eyes rolling back in her head. Maren gasped as she saw a pool of blood beginning to form under the girl's smock,



and she called out for the nun on duty to help. Sister Dáirine had rushed over, but it was too late. The girl had suffered a miscarriage haemorrhaged massively, and died a few minutes later as two of the nuns were carrying her out ... (ODGAARD 63)

What these women experienced was an internal and external erosion that was justified by the nuns as necessary for their reformation. Yet, all these inhuman practices young women were subjected to can only be interpreted as a display of power which aimed at controlling and making these bodies docile. Far from a social and reformatory work, this disciplinary system was detrimental for all those women whose minds and bodies became altered.

## 2. DISRUPTING NATURE-WOMEN RELATIONSHIP; GENDER DIVISION AND MORAL REQUIREMENTS RESISTED

According to some ecofeminists, the legitimate way to put an end to women's oppression is to dismantle patriarchy. However, we believe, as Warren and Biehl claim, that the problem is not to be found in patriarchy but in any form of social domination that imposes a dualistic view of reality and consequently subjugates the most vulnerable group (WARREN, "Introduction" 26; BIEHL 5-6). According to Butler's performative theory of power, the law is neither fixed nor natural but produced and maintained by reproducing it. Power, as she continues, cannot be destroyed but redeployed; through our speech and bodily acts, that is, not citing the law, we can resist power and norms of recognition in society:

Importantly, however, there is no power, constructed as a subject that acts, but only [...] a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an "act", singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power. Hence, the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names invariably cites the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power... (*Bodies that Matter* 171)

Before their entrance in the Magdalene Laundries, these characters display a determined attitude to do away with social impositions. Through the conversation Teagan had with Father Mark at the beginning, we become aware of her resistant nature contesting patriarchal values:

We women are supposed to bear children and cook. I guess that's it, but I have bigger plans... I think women should do more than just cook, clean, and have babies. I want to continue my education, so I can contribute to the world. That's what living is about, isn't it? Getting better? I don't want to be like ... (ALEXANDER 32)

As for Nora, she shouted and spat at her father when she was going to be sent to the Laundry (ALEXANDER 66). All of them resisted their confinement in these reformatory institutions, but they could not elude their inevitable fate. Contrary



to the rest of the inmates who were too soiled to fight, Teagan, Nora and Maren challenged the authority of the nuns by adopting a rebellious attitude: Teagan and Nora were always thinking of escaping (ALEXANDER 53,78-79); at one point, Nora thought of suicide, but she rejected the idea saying: “What is happening? I can’t give up. I won’t let them beat me” (ALEXANDER 196); and Maren refused to succumb to the power of the nuns: “I’ll not bend to these nuns like they have. I will keep my dignity” (ODGAARD 50).

Surrounded by a hostile atmosphere in the Laundry, the protagonists of these novels adopted a resistant attitude challenging power constraint. In these novels, we can highlight different subversive techniques employed by the inmates to resist power and control. Contrary to the rules of isolation and silence, in both novels the main protagonists set bonds to bear their stay and even developed a sign language in order not to be punished (ALEXANDER 84; ODGAARD 75). Moreover, they did not keep silence about the injustices carried out there; at one point, Teagan was determined to spread the truth about her confinement. She confronted the nun defending her innocence, but the nun’s response shows the dictatorial authority they were subjected to:

‘You’re holding me through a veil of lies fabricated by a priest’ [...]. ‘Let me clear my name. I’ve done nothing wrong. Let me phone my mother, it’s the least you can do’ [...]. ‘Hear me out’, the Mother Superior said. ‘Your parents want nothing to do with you. I have papers signed to that effect’ [...]. ‘I have it in writing, and by word, that you are here because you seduced a priest. You had carnal thoughts regarding him which led to actions [...]. ‘If I must, I’ll go to every authority I can to secure my release from the Sisters of the Holy Redemption’ [...]. Sister Anne laughed. ‘Who would take the word of a Magdalen over that of a priest?...’ (ALEXANDER 117-118)

Despite this conversation, Teagan asked the delivery boy to post some letters, but they were discovered by Sister Anne (ALEXANDER 171-173). She was betrayed again and threatened by the Sister, but Teagan confronted her: “You don’t have any idea what love is about. All you care about is keeping your prisoners in line and making money ... There’s no love in this place” (ALEXANDER 173). Anne threatened her to kill her with a rod and to be sent to an asylum, but Teagan did not mind dying (ALEXANDER 174). That lack of recognition and representation Magdalene women were subjected to is challenged here by these characters that raised their voices against an imperative of silence which undermined their identity.

Another way of resisting the nun’s power was through changing their names. On her entrance, a girl told Maren they did not use their real names as a way of forgetting. Although she decided to maintain her real name, she changed it after a while in the Laundry (ODGAARD 48). The fact that she changed it to Cassán—how her father called her—implies her true identity was being eroded by the treatment she was receiving (FINNEGAN 47): “Maren Bradigan, it seemed, had ceased to exist” (ODGAARD 58). Yet, she resisted that deprivation by adopting the nickname her father gave her. She could have chosen any name, but she chose that particular name as a display of the close bonds with her father and her resistance to forgetting



about her past. Ceara's chosen name was Maelisa—a servant of Jesus. Her name was given by the decision she adopted to serve God. Butler claims that the name is what confers us a stable identity and recognition, and in heteronormative societies, the name is normally determined by one's gender (BUTLER, *Bodies that Matter* 41; BUTLER, *Precarious Life* 130). Yet, during a conversation between Ceara and Maren we realise their new names are male names (ODGAARD 71-72). This disassociation between their gender and their names can be a result of the blurring effect their stay had on their identities, but also a form of empowerment that allowed them to break social conventions.

Another mechanism of resistance was breaking the rule of confinement by escaping. One day Nora left the Laundry hidden in the delivery man's van when Sister Ruth fell asleep. She got out of the van in Northbrook Road to Charlemont. Everyone was looking for her, so she went to a refuge for food and clothes where Magdalenes, delinquents and prostitutes were not welcomed. She was helped and she stole some money before escaping when she realised she had been discovered by the woman who had called the police. She was determined to face her parents and ask them to welcome her back (ALEXANDER 118-126). But when they met, her father rejected her saying her daughter was dead and even spat at her before threatening her to call the guard. Then, she decided to visit Pearse as the person responsible for her misfortune. But on her way, she was approached by a Garda; she had been denounced by the refuge's woman and by her father. She gave up and got into the car. Once there, the Garda bribed her—she had sex with him in exchange for his protection. After that, he brought her to his flat and hid her in exchange for sex. One day she escaped to see Pearse to find out that he had married and that her wife was pregnant. During a walk she encountered Pearse but it was a plan designed by him and Sean; they planned to deliver her to the nuns. They returned her to the Laundry and as a punishment for her escape, she was confined in the Penitent's room (ALEXANDER 139-155). This episode shows us the rejecting attitude society adopted concerning Magdalene women as well as how corrupted society was. Nora used her body, her only possession, to save herself but she was deceived and punished further. But, as many feminists like Butler claim, the body is also a site of political struggle, so we should interpret Nora's use of her body not as a lustful act but as one of protest claiming her ownership over her own body (BUTLER, *Precarious Life* 25).

The day Nora started labour Teagan decided to escape. She went to Cullen's house first who helped her and respected her that night. Next morning, she went to her parent's house: "She left dirty, like a tramp, sneaking out of a man's room at dawn, even though nothing had happened" (ALEXANDER 235). At home nothing had changed except for her portrait which was missing. It seemed she did no longer belong to that family; her existence was concealed to the rest of society—when a neighbour came she discovered her mother did not mention her daughter to anyone and she had made new friends who did not know her. She invented an excuse saying she had been away with her aunt in New York (ALEXANDER 238-239). She wrote a letter to her parents explaining her escape and asking for their forgiveness. After that, a car arrived with a district detective and Cullen; one of Cullen's neighbours denounced her having seen her out of Cullen's window (ALEXANDER 241-242). This



episode shows the persecution and rejection of Magdalene women by all members of society including their families; the stigma attached to Magdalene women did not leave them once they entered a Magdalene Laundry (SMITH 30-31; FINNEGAN 73; LUDDY, *Women and Philanthropy* 124-127).<sup>2</sup>

Another resisting technique adopted by mothers was the attachment to their offspring. As we have already mentioned, Ceara concealed her pain the day she started being in labour in order to have her child for a while before the nuns took her/ him away. It is true that the baby was born dead due to this imprudence, however, this was the only feasible way Ceara had of enjoying her labour and her child. In the case of Nora, after delivering her baby he was moved to the orphanage. Not willing to accept her baby's fate, she deceived the nun in charge of the orphanage and went there during the night. After a while, she returned to her bedroom forgetting the candle and the matches within a wardrobe where she hid. This imprudence resulted in a fire which caused the death of her son (ALEXANDER 244-256). These women's willingness to survive granted them the power to demolish the normative power that reduced them to mere objects. They became subjects reclaiming their rights over their bodies and their identities.

Finally, for those who could not escape, the alternative was to turn to religion to bear their confinement as it is the case of Ceara, something Maren did not accept (ODGAARD 97-98). Some scholars such as Anna Harper, Kenneth Pargament and David Aldridge consider spirituality as a useful source to overcome trauma and to maintain a coherent identity (HARPER and PARGAMENT 349-367; ALDRIDGE 67). On the contrary, Maren adopted a rebellious attitude rejecting religion and trying to convince Ceara they did not deserve that suffering: "I will not bend to these nuns like they have. I will keep my dignity" (ODGAARD 50). Maren, who had been educated in Catholicism, went through a crisis of faith caused firstly by her unjust confinement and secondly by the ill-treatment she received by those who were supposed to act in the name of God. Yet, Maren recuperated her faith little by little after several mystic revelations. One day Ceara started to sing and Maren remembered it was the song she had heard through the Laundry's wall that day with her father. It was as if they were connected spiritually even before they met. Maren realised they were near home and they could send a message to her father to rescue them. This episode shows the secretive attitude of religious members of the Church who confined women illegally:

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<sup>2</sup> Motherhood outside the conjugal frame was a stigma that delegitimised women in society and by which they were excluded and removed from the public gaze confined in reformatory institutions and lowered to the status of the prostitute (LUDDY, "Sex and the Single Girl" 85). During the twentieth century, Irish society and the state supported the Catholic teachings concerning sexuality and morality. Hence, those who were confined in Magdalene Laundries were regarded as deplorable subjects; even after their release, when they were supposed to be reformed, these women continued to be targeted as "Magdalenes" which shows that the stigma never left them (FINNEGAN 103; SMITH 66).



They drove me around for hours on the way here, hours! There was black paper over the windows, too, so I couldn't see out. And now I know why they did that; it was to confuse me! If I thought we were so far from home, I'd never dream of trying to escape. We're in Dublin, Maelisa, and Somhairle is only moments away from here! My father is only moments away from here! [...]. We have to get a message to him. He could come and get us out of here! (ODGAARD 159)

Consequently, Maren and Ceara planned a breakout (ODGAARD 159-160). As many real women in Ireland and scholars have affirmed, once women entered a Laundry their release was uncertain. The nuns did detain thousands of women indefinitely until they considered it appropriate to leave them free. For the vast majority, the only feasible alternative to leave the laundries was to escape or to be rescued by a relative (FINNEGAN 66; LUDDY, *Women and Philanthropy* 131; SMITH 66). This is exemplified in Odgaard's novel when Maren asked about her release and Father Seanán says:

'When it is time', he said consolingly. 'Maren, we all must do penance for the wrongs we have committed. Here you will learn how to guard your heart against the evil that all men possess. You will learn the sanctity of your body and your womanhood. When you have learned the right way to go about your relationships, you will go home.' (ODGAARD 43)

One day, after a year of confinement and abuse, Maren's father came to the convent to rescue her, but the nuns did not allow him to see her. She heard his voice and ran to him but was stopped by Sister Sorcha. Her father put the nun aside violently and broke in to see her daughter there (ODGAARD 192-193). Her brother had found the letter and he found her thanks to Father Seanán: "I've been searching for you so long. Never did I believe you would have ended up here! Father Seanán helped me with my search... I can't believe he wouldn't have known you were here" (ODGAARD 193). Sister Líadan tried to impede her release but her father fought back:

Sister Líadan crossed her arms in front of her bony chest and glared at him. 'I'm afraid that's not at all possible. You see, someone who was very concerned about her welfare brought Miss Bradigan here to be admitted. He did the right thing by bringing her here; she is dangerous and a menace to society and herself. She must complete her penance before we can allow her to leave. I am afraid she has become very belligerent and rude, and in fact has been caught several times sneaking out to meet boys' [...] I'm sure you would much rather have her here under our competent supervision than bringing her home to have her running around with that stable boy of you again.' (ODGAARD 195)

Due to their insistence on resisting the normative power which confined them in Magdalene laundries and the power of the nuns, these women were able to reclaim their bodies and identities. However, not all achieved their freedom. Unlike Maren and Teagan, who were offered an opportunity to start anew, Ceara refused to leave alleging her parents brought her there and they would never rescue





her, and Nora remained in the convent for the rest of her life having lost her head after the death of her son.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The naturalisation of women has justified the devaluation and domination of women under patriarchy following certain constraints on sexuality. That mentality of controlling and managing nature has been connected, from an ecofeminist perspective, to the control of women seen as vulnerable and wild. That identification of women with nature since ancient times has led to the control and restraint of women; so, the main aim of ecofeminism has been to defend a connection between the domination of nature and the domination of women in order to put an end to patriarchy. However, we have discredited this theory as reductionist since it only considers that power executed by men over women, at the same time it is essentialist considering patriarchy and that nature-women connection as natural.

Using the example of women in Ireland and the existence of Magdalene Laundries, we have demonstrated that there are different sources and forms of domination. The State-church relationship that was established since the nineteenth century in Ireland contributed to the establishment of strict moral requirements for women; a Catholic habitus not all women followed for which they were punished. The confinement of thousands of women in reformatory institutions amounted to the establishment of a coherent identity in Ireland displacing the “outcast” out of the public gaze. This should be considered a form of domination and control, but physical punishment and the deprivation of women’s rights should also be counted. We have ascribed to feminist thinking in the defence of the idea that women in Ireland were devaluated involved in power relations which subjugated them.

In V.S. Alexander’s *The Magdalen Girls* (2016) and Lisa Michelle Odgaard’s *The Magdalen Laundries* (2017), we have seen how quite a few women were neglected and deprived of their freedom of choice concerning their sexuality. Both unmarried mothers and young women were naturalised and animalised suffering violence which rendered them vulnerable and disposable. Even though these novels are fictional representations of the Magdalene Laundries, they can be considered, despite certain flaws, faithful depictions of the real life thousands of women in Ireland endured. Judging by oral testimonies of survivors and by historical accounts, we can affirm that all those techniques mentioned in the novel which were used by the nuns to reform wayward women were true –fasting, prayers, isolation, punishment, surveillance, and deprivation of their illegitimate children.

This dehumanisation process, carried out by nuns, caused the internal and external death of these women but not without fighting first. These characters found strength in their vulnerable and precarious condition to resist it; we have seen in these novels how women fought for their rights employing all the possible resources they had—they confronted the nuns, they escaped, they attempted to reveal the truth, and they maintained their names. It was through these subversive practices that they were able to reclaim their bodies and identities. Yet, not all of them were saved;



as for real Magdalenes, the Magdalene Laundries and what they experienced there left an internal wound in them difficult to heal. As Butler claims, power cannot be destroyed but we can challenge it by not citing the law in order to maintain the integrity of our bodies and identities.

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