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RHYTHMS OF IRAN, ECHOES OF IRELAND: SILENCED VOICES OF SEDIGHEH DOWLATABADI AND PATRICIA BURKE BROGAN

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Abstract

Beginning with the suffrage movement and gaining momentum after the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist scholarship inquired how history could echo justice if only one gender narrated it. This question has highlighted the necessity of revisiting prominent though forgotten female voices in history. Accordingly, the authors of this article examine and compare the plays of two writers to explain how women's voices are represented as oppressed and silenced subjects who endeavor to break the mental and physical siege surrounding them. Iranian playwright Sedigheh Dowlatabadi (1882-1961) and Irish dramatist Patricia Burke Brogan (1926-2022) attempted to revisit the man-written narratives in their oeuvre in order to challenge the subjugated images of women in their plays *The Dark Life* and *Eclipsed* respectively. Unlike in Europe, the suffrage movement never gained momentum in Iran, though women received the right to vote in 1963. Only recently women's social activism found expression through the Woman, Life, and Freedom uprisings. In this article, within the comparative study framework, the authors not only explore the historiographical aspects of Burke Brogan and Dowlatabadi's feminist dramatic aspects but also revisit their significance within the larger context of women's activism.

Keywords: Drama, Sedigheh Dowlatabadi, Patricia Burke Brogan, *The Sense of Motherhood*, *Eclipsed*.

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Introduction

Feminist historiography[1], influenced by the women's suffrage movements[2] and the emergence of second-wave feminism[3] in the 20th century, arose in response to the enduring need to revise historical narratives that have either ignored or marginalized women's[4] voices, experiences, and contributions. Feminist historiography challenges the patriarchal structures that have traditionally dominated historiographical discourse, aiming to incorporate the experiences of women, who were historically regarded as subordinate, into broader historical narratives. One of the key challenges in the historiography of women is their historical silence and the breaking of this silence in their coming forward to voice their lived experiences. This voicing is often achieved through the agency of literature and the written word. Literature is a genuine representation of a nation, as much so that scholars like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and others have explored literary works to try and find the silenced voices and histories of women. Indeed, the matter that evolved into a pivotal inquiry for theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), which she employed to name one of her significant essays, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", pertains to the act of articulating and depicting the gendered subaltern women within literary contexts. Throughout her academic pursuits, Spivak presents recommendations to authors, critics, and scholars engaged in the discipline of literature. She argues that authors ought to conduct an intense and critical examination of subaltern groups in diverse and heterogeneous societies, taking into account factors such as gender, class, and social and historical contexts. This is due to the fact that the cultural and social representation of such subalterns, devoid of essentialist thinking, is virtually impossible.

In *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (1994), Elaine Aston examines the persistent pattern of omitting women's theatre writing from different historical periods and cultural contexts, a practice often informed by prevailing patriarchal ideologies. She contends that, to deconstruct, at least on a most fundamental level, the widely male-dominated sphere of powerful literary and dramatic compositions, one must initiate this process by contextualizing the historical silence around women's work. Only then can the more protected and assured space for women's future creative works be envisioned. Aston cites Sue-Ellen Case, who contends that each domain or land generates its own historical record and the discursive paradigms that structure that record. Case contends that unless there is a firm foundation laid for recognizing the work of earlier generations of women playwrights in the rewriting of history, women's plays will continue to be concealed, marginalized, devalued, and at best divorced from the energy of the theatrical canon. This segregated land for marginalized sections is not just tolerated but institutionalized, as women's anthropology, women performers, and feminist studies are still walled behind a tall barrier. In other words, if the neglected elements of past prejudices, oppressions, and ignorance are not analyzed, the same oppressive and negating discourse formations that have

enabled the marginality of certain global areas to continue will go on determining the future of those areas. Thus, facilitating improvement and initiating change can be achieved through the re-checking and critical analysis of the past.

Another influential figure in feminist literary criticism is Elaine Showalter, whose seminal work *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) has had a profound impact on the field. In this book, Showalter provides a critical approach to the historical development of women's literature by classifying it in three distinct phases: the Feminine, Feminist, and Female stages. These stages become an important framework through which scholars can examine the shifting status of women writers, from emulating male literary traditions to resisting patriarchal ideology and finally giving rise to a distinct female literary voice. As Dilip Barad (2022) highlights in his article "Elaine Showalter: Towards a Feminist Poetics", Showalter helped to enable a much deeper view into the ways that women have approached the substantially male-dominated literary world using their works both as a mirror and as a response to the gender-based restraints put on them by their societies (3).

Showalter argues that the "Feminine Phase" (1840-1880) was a period during which female writers strove to establish their legitimacy within a literary culture predominantly defined by men. To avoid social criticism, these women often adopted male pen names and even altered their writing style to align with prevailing norms. Thus, the feminine phase symbolized the complex agency these female writers exhibited in response to societal pressures for conformity in an environment that was often hostile to overt expressions of female autonomy. The "Feminist Phase" (1880-1920) represented a pivotal movement in women's literature, one that embodied direct critique and opposition to patriarchal norms. During this period, writers increasingly utilized literature as a tool to challenge deeply entrenched legal inequalities, social limitations, and stereotypes that restricted women's rights and freedoms. This era highlighted the significance of literature as a mode of socio-political activism.

The "Female Phase" (1920–present) represents a period in which a distinct feminine voice emerged in literature, operating outside the realm of male-dominated literary works. During this phase, female writers delved into the depths of identity, self-reflection, and psychological complexity, as their narratives explore the personal and internal worlds of their female characters. This stage, marked by existential and postmodern themes prevalent in 20th-century literature, signifies a period of self-discovery, in which female authors were able to craft stories that genuinely portrayed their own lives, free from the intervening influences of patriarchal societies.

For this reason, we begin by reviewing the history and social conditions of Iran and Ireland in the mid-19th and 20th centuries, particularly regarding women's lives, to illuminate the events hidden behind the biases, traditions, and patriarchy that led to the creation of such plays. This comparison between playwrights from Iran and Ireland aims to go beyond a purely literary analysis and provides us with a deeper understanding of the social and cultural impacts

on women who were subjected to pressure in these two societies. Furthermore, to advance this article, Showalter's model is employed to more precisely analyze the works of Sedigheh Dowlatabadi from Iran and Patricia Burke Brogan from Ireland. This model helps us assess whether these frameworks, based on cultural and historical differences, can be generalized, and whether the similarities and differences between these two playwrights reflect similar views on the oppression and challenges faced by women in different societies. Additionally, the question arises: What do women convey through their plays about the lost history of their gender? Dowlatabadi's *The Sense of Motherhood* or *The Dark Life* and Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed*, by portraying the suffering, resilience, and agency of their female characters, present narratives that may have been largely forgotten. In her work, Dowlatabadi addresses the social constraints imposed on Iranian women, uncovering the intersections of tradition, familial expectations, and religious and social structures that limit women's autonomy. In contrast, Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* explores the experiences of women forcibly placed in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries, where they were subjected to punishment and exploitation under oppressive religious and social conditions. Through this, Burke Brogan critiques the religious and social systems that maintained gendered dominance, while also highlighting the importance of female solidarity and action within such repressive environments.

This comparison, extending beyond mere literary analysis, helps us gain a deeper understanding of history and various cultures through the study of these works, especially in terms of women's resilience and resistance against oppressive systems. Thus, this examination not only broadens the scope of literary readings but also contributes to changing perspectives and literary norms, as it allows for the voices of women who have been silenced throughout history to be heard once again and facilitates the rewriting of history from a gendered lens.

"Why Has My Name Been Erased from Your Memory?"[5]

The question "Why has your name been erased from memory?" highlights an important point for our case studies. Sedigheh Dowlatabadi wrote her play, *The Sense of Motherhood* in 1938. Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed*[6] was primarily produced in 1992 and then published in 1994. The discussion in this article is not limited to chronology of the plays, as the issues both writers address stem from silenced voices in different historical contexts, carrying the same weight of women's struggles through time. Dowlatabadi wrote in an era when women's lives and motherhood were defined by a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture in Iran, which resulted in increasing social, political, and religious subjugation of women. The dominant discourse in Iran at the time focused on authority, absolute obedience, political male dominance, sanctity, and the connection between rulers and religious scholars, all tied to a central power structure. Indeed, providing a comprehensive and accurate picture of women's lives in Iranian culture during this period is very difficult. Over the centuries, there has been little documented

work about Iranian women, especially concerning the historical literary influence of them. In fact, the history of Iranian women is like a scattered puzzle, where a person must gather pieces from various sources over time to form a somewhat complete history of their lives.[7] This suggests that, at least until today in Iran, the term "woman" is framed and understood differently in society and literature, reflecting an inherent inequality. The concept of "being a woman" in a traditional, religious, and patriarchal society places women in the confined roles of wife and mother, limiting their rights and opportunities. Anything beyond these two roles is deemed inappropriate. Thus, writing about women in their own words, given the social, religious, and traditional upbringing, has often led to equate their freedom to immorality.

When we look at a broader scope, we realize that this issue is not unique to Iran but is part of a larger patriarchal tradition. A structure where the agent subject, both politically and socially, is male. As a result, when men are defined as the center of a narrative, women (and other genders) are marginalized. Women in Ireland are no exception. Due to the country's traditional patriarchal society, they were confined to the home, and a one-dimensional role was assigned to them. In the early years of the newly established Irish state, ideology and constitutional changes created formal and informal barriers to the participation of women, especially married women and mothers, in public life (particularly as part of the workforce). As women became increasingly alienated from their own identities, the role of motherhood was socially and legally portrayed as the "natural" role of women in Ireland. 154 years before Patricia Burke Brogan's play was produced, the establishment of the first Magdalene Laundry in 1767 on Leeson Street, Dublin, cast a dark shadow over the lives of many Irish women. The Magdalene Laundries, run by Roman Catholic organizations, operated from the 18th to the late 20th century. Between their inception and 1996, thousands of Irish women were forcibly confined in these laundries, labeled as "fallen women" due to their non-conformity to prescribed social norms. These women were exploited under the pretext of atonement for sins, subjected to forced labor and numerous forms of abuse. It was not until 1993 that the unmarked graves of 155 women were discovered in the grounds of one of the laundries, leading to media exposés and a formal state apology in 2014 (Humphreys 2003)[8]. Despite these revelations, the religious organizations running the laundries refused to contribute financially to the compensation fund for survivors.

Therefore, the literary outcomes of Iran and Ireland show how the laws and symbolic language constructed by patriarchal and religious interpretations were used as tools of suppression and control over women. Patriarchal religious and traditional norms were imposed on women to create a submissive and repressed female identity that reinforced male dominance. Our selected works serve as voices for the telling of women's history, which, due to suppression, remained silent for years. Although the dates of these works vary, the themes and concerns they address are rooted in a long history of social, religious, and cultural oppressions experienced by women in both Iranian and Irish societies.

Both works, when considered together, depict women as systematic underdogs of repression, where restrictive social, religious, and gender roles have profoundly impacted their lives. Sedigheh Dowlatabadi and Patricia Burke Brogan have both sought to break the silence, offering narratives of women who, for centuries, have lived under the dominance of patriarchal and religious structures.

Sedigheh Dowlatabadi

Sedigheh Dowlatabadi (1882–1961) is considered one of the leaders of the Iranian pro-feminist movement, advancing women's rights at a time when social norms significantly curtailed women's autonomy. Born in 1882 in Isfahan, Dowlatabadi began her impetus for the development of women through involvement in Iran's Constitutional Revolution, where she would become one of the most effective advocates for women's participation in society. She was one of the founders of the Association of Patriotic Women, which upheld constitutional rights and freedoms, thus becoming one of the first pioneering figures of the women's rights movement in Iran. To further her cause, she established a periodical *Zaban-e Zanan* (The Language of Women) in 1919. It was one of the first and pioneering feminist publications in Iran dedicated to issues and rights of women, providing a unique platform for the debate on women's social, political, and legal rights.

Dowlatabadi's individual life and experiences were significantly influenced by her dedication to autonomy. When she was only fifteen, she married Dr. E'tezad al-Hakma; however, this marriage ultimately ended, exemplifying her steadfast determination to transcend the limiting norms of her time. In 1917, Sedigheh Dowlatabadi founded Maktab-e Shar'iat, one of Iran's very first primary schools for girls. This was a pioneering institution in the promotion of education and literacy among Iranian girls, marking a milestone toward gender equality in education. Setting up Maktab-e Shar'iat, Dowlatabadi broke social taboos and created an avenue for the emancipation of women, establishing a precedent for educational reform in the male-dominated Iranian society. This confrontation with the gender roles of the time often brought about the gravest of social backlashes. In one instance, after she had been arrested for her behavior, a police chief told her, "Madam, you were born a hundred years too early. To which Dowlatabadi responded, "Sir, I was born a hundred years too late; if I had been born sooner, I would not have allowed the women to be so degraded, shackled, and chained" (Nazarzadeh 2020, 45).

As a social reformer, educator, and journalist, Dowlatabadi expanded her activities beyond social activism into the realm of arts and drama in particular. She used drama as a strong tool to raise questions about the limitations that a patriarchal society imposed on Iranian women. Her works manifest Showalter's "feminist phase," revolving around the shifting of attitudes from passively bearing to actively challenging gender inequity. Through her pioneering work, Dowlatabadi defied tradition and culture that had predetermined roles of women

by calling for literacy, education, and visibility in the public sphere—goals that contrasted sharply against the norms of society during her time. This view often invited much opposition, she being both a change-maker and the opposition under fire within her community.

Dowlatabadi's play, *The Sense of Motherhood*, offers a vivid portrayal of the struggles faced by Iranian women within a rigidly patriarchal framework. Written in the 1930s as a three-act play for the Women's Center in Tehran, it examines the emotional and psychological impact of social repression on women, particularly mothers, critiquing the limitations imposed by male-centric values. Dowlatabadi underscores the significance of education and empowerment through her character portrayals, contextualizing her protagonist's anguish within a larger framework of societal inequity. This text serves as a prime illustration of feminist writing by chronicling the individual and communal challenges faced by Iranian women, while also contesting conventional narratives that have historically sidelined or overlooked their lived experiences.

The Sense of Motherhood (1930)

The Sense of Motherhood or *The Dark Life*, narrates the story of Irandokht[9] a 30-year-old woman, who embodies the great alienation and psychological suffering of Iranian women in the early 20th century. As one of the first Iranian plays written by a woman, this work highlights how Irandokht's identity is confined within the roles of wife and homemaker, as defined by the societal norms of the time. Despite her youth, Irandokht is stigmatized as a divorcée, as if she has committed a grave mistake in life. Dowlatabadi skillfully creates a sense of mourning, tedium, and lack of free will that dominates the lives of women under the weight of gender-based rules, conveyed through the musings and dialogues of Irandokht. This portrayal reflects the broader struggles faced by women of her time, as they navigate a patriarchal society that seeks to define their lives and worth based on rigid gender expectations. Irandokht's soliloquy stresses this point:

> What should I write? The phrase, This dark life, this artificial life full of sorrow and grief, a monotonous life! Oh God, I'm tired of this lonely life. (Dowlatabadi 45)

These lines compellingly illustrate not only Irandokht's individual anguish but also the widespread despondency experienced by numerous women during her era. This dialogue carries the heavy existential frustration that the patriarchy has attended women with, encapsulating the essence of Showalter's feminist period, in which female protagonists open their mouths to rebel and voice their disappointments toward the patriarchal norms that oppress their being and identity. The dialogue between Irandokht and her friend Simin emphasizes further the protagonist's high dissatisfaction with social norms. In her outburst on

"unfaithful men," Irandokht reveals her frustration with the tedium that fills the existence of women, and Dowlatabadi pushes readers to reflect on the complex inner conflicts and dissatisfaction of Iranian women at that time. Irandokht's disgruntlement is visible in her declaration: "These unfaithful men! Believe me, what I said was based on conviction" (Dowlatabadi 45).

Indeed, the declaration that "a dull and lonely life is tiring" finds echoes in the lives of women who not only challenged but who at moments resisted the suffocating norms that defined their lives. In such affective interactions, Dowlatabadi critiques men's roles in reproducing the societal structures that oppress women, thereby bringing forth the conflict between external roles and individual selves that women strive to create. Given the absence of modern character descriptions or scene settings, Dowlatabadi relies heavily on dialogue as the primary vehicle for expressing social critique, using it not only to challenge male dominance but also as a central mechanism in her feminist discourse. In one very sarcastic and bitter dialogue, Irandokht comments on the status and power of men in society: "These self-righteous men, as soon as they have power, they push us to the edge of the wall" (Dowlatabadi 49).

In *The Sense of Motherhood*, Irandokht asks the serious question: "Do you think our lives matter to them at all?" (Dowlatabadi 50), that here her words here criticize the traditional role of men and their constricting impact on women's lives, which further supports the writer's opinion about a patriarchal society that denies female identity. Dowlatabadi's play provides a critical exploration of resistance and identity, emphasizing the intersection of personal and political struggles faced by Iranian women. Through Irandokht's story, she illustrates how societal constraints, rooted in Iran's patriarchal culture, shape women's self-identity. These constraints, stemming from a political and religious system of male dominance and submission, limit women's freedoms and opportunities. Irandokht's shifting responses, between resignation and defiance, highlight the psychological toll of a society that confines women to predefined roles of wife and mother. Her narrative reflects a broader historical context where women were treated as property, oppressed by social, political, and religious systems, and often silenced. Dowlatabadi's portrayal of these struggles gives voice to women whose experiences were historically ignored, shedding light on the deep cultural forces shaping their identities. Through the motherhood, agency, and resilience themes, Dowlatabadi's works encapsulate feminist literature intent that seeks to document and promote women's experiences in historical events. In one of the private moments of reflection about her and other women's condition, Irandokht confides in Simin, "We have these heavy chains of loneliness and misery weigh upon us, can we women ever see the brightness of life?" (Dowlatabadi 61). This would outline the complicated complexities of female agency under patriarchal pressure: even in the case where women are under oppressive circumstances, they find small but strong actions to claim their identity and step against the constraints of society. The emphasis on resilience and the pursuit of self-definition is closely related to Showalter's concept of the female phase, as evidenced by Dowlatabadi's

depiction of Irandokht, which demonstrates a transformation from mere passive endurance to a developing awareness of individual identity and psychological independence. Irandokht's journey is typical of a greater struggle for self-actualization in constrained contexts, showing that feminist writing means not only oppression but also the resilience that women manifest as they continue to pursue ways of expressing themselves and of being acknowledged.

Ultimately, *The Sense of Motherhood* serves as both a critique of the societal structures that confine women and as a celebration of the strength inherent in their resistance. Dowlatabadi's work contributes to the overarching goals of a feminist politics by documenting the nuanced experiences of Iranian women and challenging traditional narratives that have historically overlooked them. In portraying the harsh life of Irandokht, full of defiance, Dowlatabadi confirms the ability of a woman to rise above the limitations of her society and illustrates of the role feminist literature can play in personal and social transformation. At the same time, her work emphasizes the importance of observing and disseminating the voices of women within historical and literary discourses, another tenet of feminist writing.

Patricia Burke Brogan

Patricia Burke Brogan (1926–2022) left an indelible mark on Irish drama, using her empathy and passion to shine a light on the voices of women confined within the notorious Magdalene Laundries. Growing up in a devout Catholic family just after Ireland became an independent state, she was deeply influenced by her father's dedication to Irish nationalism—first as a member of the Irish Republican Army and later as a member of the national police force, An Garda Síochána [10]. This setting, steeped in faith and patriotism, planted the seeds for the internal struggles she would later explore in her work as she grappled with issues of faith, nationalism, and the suffering endured by women.

Her academic journey, which started with promise but was interrupted by an accident that dashed her dreams of becoming a pianist, eventually led her to a religious boarding school and a teacher training college, both operated by female Catholic religious orders. These environments gave her a profound understanding of the complexities of authority and religious devotion. Wanting to "serve Christ and the poor," she joined the Sisters of Mercy, finding initial peace in a life dedicated to spirituality (Burke Brogan 2014, 53). However, her transfer to the Magdalene Convent's laundry would change everything. Here, she was confronted with the bleak lives of women referred to as "penitents"—often young mothers or those deemed to have crossed "moral" lines. She was horrified by the oppressive conditions and later described her shock: "Gradually I see the room is full of women. Elderly women, middle-aged women, and young girls all seem to merge with the grey of womb-like washing machines" (Burke Brogan 73).

Her short time as a nun came to an abrupt end when she protested alongside the "penitents" against the inhumane conditions. This act cut her ties with the

Sisters of Mercy, leaving her with "bitter memories." But these memories became the backbone of her renowned play *Eclipsed*, a work that courageously highlighted the injustices faced by the women confined in the Magdalene Laundries. *Eclipsed* was staged at a time when Ireland was liberalizing somewhat, but before the nature of conditions in religious-run institutions was widely known. Starting as a short story in 1980 and later expanded into a full-length play, *Eclipsed* was celebrated for its raw portrayal of institutional oppression. The play, now seen as a cornerstone of Irish feminist drama, raised awareness about the cruelty within these religious institutions and emphasized the importance of women's solidarity in the face of patriarchal dominance.

Her painful recollections also found their way into poetry, giving *Eclipsed* an emotional weight that echoed her own experiences. When the laundry building where she had once worked was demolished in 1990, she wrote: "…Make visible the tree, / its branches ragged / with washed-out linens / of a bleached shroud…" (Burke Brogan 117–119). This poem would later be engraved on a memorial sculpture unveiled on International Women's Day in 2009, a tribute to the women who endured the Magdalene Laundries, ensuring their stories would not be forgotten. As Laura McAtackney (2022) notes, the physical remnants of Magdalene Laundries today serve as sites of "material memory," bearing the silent testimony of incarceration, stigma, and erasure. These transitional spaces resist forgetting by embodying the impermanence of institutional trauma while demanding new narratives of commemoration (226–227).

Life outside the convent was challenging as Burke Brogan struggled to adapt to newfound freedom and find stable work. Eventually, as a teacher, she gave encouragement to her students to express themselves creatively. Gaining recognition as both a writer and visual artist, she remained steadfast in her mission to advocate for those who had been silenced and forgotten. Through *Eclipsed*, she preserved the stories of women whom society had abandoned, establishing herself as a vital voice in both feminist writing and Irish theater. By staging *Eclipsed* in a grungy car garage in Galway, Brogan disrupted the sanitized national mythologies surrounding these institutions, confronting the audience with the gritty realism of spiritual and physical captivity. As Ronan Noone (2007) observed, the play didn't "glide over the ghosts" but "dived right into the horror" of abuse, loss, and shame (618).

Burke Brogan represents the "Female Phase," in Showalter's model of feminist literary evolution, which signifies an independent, authentic female voice free from patriarchal norms. This phase, as Showalter describes, is the culmination of a journey where women's literature moves from imitation to resistance, ultimately reaching a place of individual identity and inner expression. Writers in this phase explore the psychological and social complexities of women's lives, presenting their experiences in a genuine and unfiltered way. Such a feminist re-visioning was urgently needed, as Magdalene Laundries in Ireland were not only gendered but deeply entangled in the carceral logic of a postcolonial, patriarchal state (O'Mahoney et al. 2021, 31). Institutions like these operated as memory

regimes, maintaining cultural amnesia by systematically excluding survivor voices (Winter 2010, 33). In this context, Brogan's dramatization becomes a vital act of feminist historiography. As Fischer (2021) argues, that Ireland's nation-building relied on a gendered politics of shame, where women who transgressed moral codes—by becoming pregnant out of wedlock, for example were rendered invisible through confinement. This dual process of shame and stigma marked them as "not-home," ostracized both socially and spatially (149–150). Brogan's work can thus be seen as reclaiming that lost "home," restoring grievability to the lives erased from national memory.

Eclipsed (1994)

The play *Eclipsed* delves into the lives of women confined within the Magdalene Laundries, portraying their quiet resilience and struggle against institutionalized degradation. Patricia Burke Brogan, the playwright, uses a realistic language and dialogues infused with layers of suffering and emotion to bring the stifling, oppressive environment of the laundries to life for the audience. From the fifth scene in the first act, this dark, confined atmosphere becomes vividly apparent. The voices of several incarcerated women, alongside Mother Victoria's, the supervisor of the laundry, create a suffocating and desperate ambiance:

> Brigit's voice: "Keys, Sister! My John-joe is getting married next week! He doesn't know about our baby!... Keys! My baby, Rosa! I have to find my baby!"
>
> Mandy's voice: "It's Cathy! She's chokin', Sister!"
>
> Nellie Nora's voice: "A kettle! Steam! Hurry, Sister! Hurry!"
>
> Mother Victoria's voice: "Mandy thought she could leave if she wasn't pregnant, so she performed an abortion on herself! … We give them food, shelter, and clothing. We look after their spiritual needs. No one else wants them! No one else wants them!" (Burke Brogan 2008, 49-50)[11]

These dialogues portray the immense and crushing pressure imposed upon these women. Confined and isolated from the outside world, they endure the pain of losing their children and giving birth under deplorable conditions, while the merciless system marginalizes them as unworthy sinners, reducing them to mere vessels fulfilling basic needs.

In the second act, in the first scene, Sister Virginia, who serves as Mother Victoria's assistant within this institutional system, gradually perceives the injustice and oppression inflicted upon the women. A conversation between her and Mother Victoria in the latter's office illuminates the cruel reality of the laundry and reveals the deep divide between Sister Virginia's empathy and Mother Victoria's authoritarian outlook:

> Mother Victoria: How do you like the laundry?... Are you happy? Tell me.
> Sister Virginia: The work – the women – I find it difficult, Mother!
> Mother Victoria: Difficult, Sister!
> Sister Virginia: Yes, Mother! It's very sad!
> Mother Victoria: Sad, Sister? You find them sad?
> Sister Virginia: Yes, Mother! The women need their children! Is it really necessary to keep them locked away?
> Mother Victoria: Those women can't be trusted! They're weak, Sister! No control! They've broken the sixth and ninth commandments!
> Sister Virginia: But isn't our God a loving father, a forgiving father? The men who made them pregnant broke the same commandments! (Burke Brogan 57-59)

These exchanges form a pivotal point in the play, confronting the audience with the oppressive beliefs and attitudes of the Church towards women. Mother Victoria, as a symbol of religious authority, justifies the oppression of women, keeping them under societal and religious constraints. By degrading and blaming these women, she labels them as "sinners" and "weak," all the while cruelly denying them any sense of humanity or dignity, even as she emphasizes the Church's provision of food, shelter, and clothing.

In that same scene, the second act- first scene, the reason behind the play's title *Eclipsed* becomes vividly apparent when Mother Victoria explains the women's situation, using the metaphor of "eclipse":

> Mother Victoria: [...] try to remember that we are eclipsed! But that deep inside there is a shining that is immortal – a part of us, which is outside time. Hold on to that thought! Do not question the system! You want to change the rule, the Church, the world!... we are eclipsed. But blind obedience will carry you through! (Burke Brogan 59)

This metaphor not only reflects the plight of the women trapped in the laundries but also alludes to the nature of the socio-religious system that has kept them eclipsed and confined. Mother Victoria, as the Church's representative, promotes blind obedience and submission to the system, while in reality, the system itself, by obscuring the truth and reducing these women to the status of the "eclipsed" or "sinners," deprives them of light and hope.

The character of Sister Virginia, acting as a compassionate and humane figure, exemplifies the emergence of a nascent feminist consciousness. In contrast to Mother Victoria, who embodies the Church's authoritarian dominance over women, Sister Virginia's doubt and criticism of the prevailing conditions represent a symbolic resistance to religious oppression. This role aligns with Showalter's "Female Phase" model, where women seek to assert their individual identities and break away from dominant male narratives, embracing a form of resistance against authoritarian structures. Evidently Sister Virginia's attitudes reflects that of Burke Brogan when she was in that junior supervisory position in the laundry.

Ultimately, Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* reminds the audience through the depiction of these lives, resilience, and female solidarity that even under extreme oppression, women possess the ability to resist and confront societal and religious pressures. Through this work, Burke Brogan upholds a feminist objective in reclaiming and amplifying the silenced voices of women, encouraging the audience to reflect on past injustices and urging accountability.

Comparative Analysis

In *The Sense of Motherhood* and *Eclipsed*, Dowlatabadi and Burke Brogan respectively delve deeply into what it means to be a woman facing societal pressures that restrict freedom and self-expression. These plays show us what it is like for women navigating cultural and structural barriers that limit their identities, reflecting the evolution of feminist literature as analyzed by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*. Dowlatabadi's work brings Iranian social and religious expectations into focus, highlighting the restrictive roles given to women in the early 20th century. In contrast, Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* examines the harsh reality of Ireland's Magdalene laundries, where women labeled as "fallen" were severely punished. By looking at both plays through Showalter's model, which maps the "Feminine," "Feminist," and "Female" phases, we see how feminist resistance can emerge in different ways depending on cultural context.

In *The Sense of Motherhood*, Dowlatabadi centers on the traditional role of motherhood as a defining part of a woman's worth in Iranian society. Her female characters are caught in a structure that equates motherhood with virtue, often at the cost of personal identity. This portrayal aligns with what Showalter calls the "Feminine Phase," where women writers began by mirroring the cultural values of a male-dominated society. Dowlatabadi's characters outwardly accept their roles but convey an underlying dissatisfaction, hinting at the restrictions they feel but are unable to directly oppose. Iranian literature during this phase frequently embeds subtle critiques within traditional narratives, laying the groundwork for later, more direct feminist expression.

Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed*, on the other hand, immerses us in the strict and punishing environment of the Magdalene laundries, where institutionalized religion exerts control over women, aiming to erase their autonomy. Here, women are reduced to tools in a system that claims authority over their bodies and futures. This critique fits Showalter's "Feminist Phase," where writers begin to overtly confront and question oppressive structures, in this case, the Catholic Church. Burke Brogan does not shy away from exposing the harsh reality faced by these women, portraying the religious and moral expectations of post-colonial Ireland as mechanisms of oppression.

Both plays explore the concept of motherhood but from different cultural angles. In Dowlatabadi's work, motherhood is portrayed as an intrinsic part of a woman's worth, as expected by society. Her protagonist embodies the challenge of balancing her own identity with societal expectations, a theme that resonates

deeply within Iranian culture, where the family reflects broader cultural values. Showalter notes that "motherhood has often been central to women's literature, symbolizing both fulfillment and a source of restriction" (Showalter 240). Dowlatabadi's depiction of motherhood as both a foundation and a boundary captures the complex reality of women's lives in patriarchal societies.

In *Eclipsed*, however, Burke Brogan shows us a very different view of motherhood—one that is weaponized against women. The Magdalene laundries condemn women, particularly single mothers, who are punished under a moral code that views their motherhood as sinful. Motherhood becomes the justification for their confinement. This contrast highlights how institutions, when coupled with strict moral beliefs, can amplify the oppression of women. The theme of identity and its suppression runs through both plays, though they approach it differently based on the varying phases of feminism in their respective contexts. While the cultural settings play a role, the distinct historical and social phases of feminist movements in each period largely influence how the theme is portrayed. Dowlatabadi's characters wrestle with self-expression within private spaces, using fragmented internal dialogues to reveal their hidden dissatisfaction. Showalter describes this early feminist literature as limiting women's identity to the family sphere, subtly challenging but not entirely escaping patriarchy (Karmarkar 2014, 36). Dowlatabadi's protagonist experiences both comfort and confinement in her home, showing the dual nature of traditional female roles that provide security yet limit freedom.

In *Eclipsed*, Burke Brogan's women face identity suppression from an external force—the religious institution of the laundries. These women are not only silenced but systematically erased, their identities consumed by the institution's moral expectations. This erasure exemplifies Showalter's "Female Phase," where women's voices move beyond family confines to challenge larger social structures. Burke Brogan's play critiques a moral authority that values societal norms over individual well-being, demonstrating how women's autonomy is sacrificed to maintain public values. The laundries symbolize the rigid social and moral control of the Church, which exerts its power over women's lives with little regard for their individuality.

Both playwrights use storytelling techniques that emphasize the confinement, both mental and physical, their characters endure. Dowlatabadi's nonlinear narrative, shifting between memory and present, reflects the fragmented identities of Iranian women caught between personal ambitions and cultural demands. Showalter notes how women's writing often mirrors internal struggles, especially when exploring traditional roles that hinder self-expression. This narrative style captures the protagonist's inner conflict, blending longing and frustration as she faces societal limits.

Meanwhile, *Eclipsed* uses a stark, minimalist approach that mirrors the bleak, monotonous life of the Magdalene laundries. The repetitive and claustrophobic dialogue captures the relentless control over the women's lives, reflecting Showalter's idea of cultural expression through form. Burke Brogan's

sparse setting symbolizes the spiritual and psychological confinement imposed by the laundries.

Ultimately, *The Sense of Motherhood* and *Eclipsed* provide two distinct but thematically united explorations of female resistance against oppressive norms. Dowlatabadi's play subtly examines domestic constraints within an Iranian setting, while Burke Brogan's work directly challenges institutional oppression in Irish society. Both plays embody the evolution of feminist literature as described by Showalter, illustrating a journey from conformity to critique and, ultimately, self-assertion. By documenting the silenced stories of women, Dowlatabadi and Burke Brogan make vital contributions to feminist writing, capturing how women's literature can bridge cultural divides and continue the legacy of resistance against gendered oppression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sedigheh Dowlatabadi's *The Sense of Motherhood* and Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* vividly demonstrate the power of feminist writing in reclaiming voices that history has often marginalized or silenced. These playwrights expose how women's lives are shaped and constrained by patriarchal structures—whether through domestic expectations in Iran or institutional oppression in Ireland. Each play charts a movement from passive acceptance to active resistance and autonomy, reflecting feminist literature's evolution from imitation toward a bold celebration of independent female expression.

To fully understand these works, it is essential to consider the concepts of space and place as frameworks for analyzing how environments shape and reflect women's experiences. Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (2017), in her influential study *Space and Place*[12], clarifies that while "space" refers to abstract, physical geography, "place" is space charged with cultural meaning, memory, and identity. This distinction helps us see how Dowlatabadi and Burke Brogan do not simply depict physical settings, but transform these spaces into places rich with emotional and social significance. Building on this, theorists like Lefebvre, Foucault, and Deleuze[13] have expanded spatial studies since the 1990s by highlighting how power relations, mobility, and identity intertwine within these spaces and places—key themes in feminist writings challenging patriarchal norms.

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1964)[14] complements this understanding by emphasizing how intimate places—particularly the home—are experienced phenomenologically, carrying maternal and emotional meanings that shape identity and belonging. Yet, as these plays show, such spaces can also reveal violence, oppression, and mental health struggles, a duality starkly reflected in the surge of domestic violence during the COVID-19 "shadow pandemic" (Mineo and Yang, 2022).[15]

Further, Verena Conley's *Spatial Ecologies* (2012)[16] pushes the "spatial turn" towards an ethical reflection on how we collectively inhabit and transform spaces amid social and environmental crises. This perspective encourages us to consider

how affective ties to domestic, public, natural, and gentrified places are deeply gendered and politically charged. Similarly, Doreen Massey's work on space, place, and gender (1994)[17] foregrounds geography's central role in constructing gender identities and relations, emphasizing how spatial arrangements reinforce or challenge systems of power.

Applying these frameworks, Dowlatabadi's depiction of motherhood and domestic space becomes a site of both nurturing and constraint, reflecting cultural pressures that simultaneously shelter and limit women. Burke Brogan's portrayal of the Magdalene laundries transforms institutional spaces into places of trauma, control, and collective resistance. Through these spatial re-imaginings, both playwrights subvert traditional narratives of space and place, illuminating women's memories, struggles, and solidarity in ways that enrich feminist literary discourse and inspire future feminist storytelling.

Dowlatabadi's depiction of motherhood in *The Sense of Motherhood* reflects this path. Here, motherhood becomes both a foundation and a restriction, symbolizing the limiting roles imposed on women in Iranian society. Through her character Irandokht's inner conflict between society's demands and her own aspirations, Dowlatabadi brings forth a quiet but powerful resistance, subtly challenging oppressive norms even as her character lives within them. The fractured storytelling in her work mirrors the fractured identities many women experience under patriarchy, as they navigate personal dreams under the weight of cultural duties.

Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* takes a different approach, facing head-on the grim reality of women institutionalized in Ireland's Magdalene laundries. In this setting, solidarity among the "penitents" shines as an act of defiance, echoing Showalter's "female phase," where women characters openly resist and reclaim their identities. The headless mannequin in *Eclipsed*, symbolizing facelessness imposed by patriarchal and religious authority, emphasizes how these women are reduced to objects of control. Sister Virginia's empathy and quiet rebellion show us that, even within rigid institutions, women can find subtle yet powerful ways to claim their humanity.

These works, when considered together, provide fresh inspiration for feminist studies for contemporary women playwrights. By showcasing the resilience of women under social and institutional pressures, the themes of motherhood and constraint remind modern writers that theatre can play a crucial role in challenging patriarchal systems and shedding light on the silenced stories of women. The works of Dowlatabadi and Burke Brogan encourage today's writers to explore the real and painful stories of women, with the understanding that such inquiries have the potential to change social attitudes and expand cultural awareness. Their works transform literary traditions into a foundation for creating new and authentic narratives. Furthermore, these plays demonstrate how art can reconstruct history, particularly by amplifying voices that have long been silenced. For the next generation of female writers, themes of motherhood and oppression show how feminist literature can serve as a powerful catalyst for

change. Through promoting solidarity, identity recognition, and reflecting on the lived experiences of women, these writers help us imagine a better world through their storytelling. Their works affirm the ongoing mission in feminist studies—a mission that remains vital to recording, strengthening, and valuing marginalized voices, deepening our understanding of human resilience across diverse cultural and historical contexts.

In this regard, it must be noted that while patriarchy has not been definitively eradicated in the modern world, it is essential to remember the journeys women have undertaken to be heard, to express themselves, and to break their silence. There are many renowned female playwrights around the world who have showcased a long-standing tradition of patriarchal thought through their works. However, focusing solely on these individuals raises questions about the long, collective journey of women's struggle, and we may risk forgetting the other women who have traveled this path. The further danger is that this system of dominance among women playwrights may go so far as to create a display of blindness among critics and scholars, resulting in their ignorance of a broader spectrum of feminist theory and literature. Many female playwrights from regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa—among other places—are less frequently read, which itself reflects the uncertain status of women's literature, as these positions are always susceptible to being occupied by "another superiority." Therefore, these comparative studies not only highlight the women who have sought to break their silence but also emphasize the importance of expanding perspectives and embracing diversity within feminist literature, which can contribute to broader social and cultural changes.

Notes

1. Feminist historiography emerged in the 1970s as a response to traditional historiography, which often marginalized or ignored women's experiences. Pioneered by scholars like Joan Scott and Gerda Lerner, it challenges patriarchal narratives by focusing on gender, power dynamics, and the role of women in history. Key figures in this field include Lillian Robinson, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis, who have all significantly contributed to rethinking historical narratives through a feminist lens.
2. The women's suffrage movement was a global campaign aimed at securing voting rights for women, achieving significant victories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Key milestones include the 19th Amendment in the U.S. (1920) and the Representation of the People Act in the UK (1918).
3. Second-wave feminism refers to the feminist movement of the 1960s-1980s, focusing on gender equality in areas like sexuality, reproductive rights, and workplace discrimination. It expanded the goals of first-wave feminism, addressing broader social and cultural inequalities. Key figures include Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem.
4. *Marginalized women* are those who face systemic oppression and exclusion due to factors like gender, race, class, or sexuality, resulting in limited access to power and resources.

5. This title (in Persian: "؟مم‌ان وت دای زا و حم دش ارچ") is derived from the book *Why Has My Name Been Erased from Your Memory?* (2024) by Afshaneh Najmabadi, a scholar in the field of women's studies in Iran. She, indeed, drew the title from the poem "*Daughters of Quchan*" by Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda, which refers to the tragic story of the sale of girls from Quchan, Iran. Dehkhoda first published this song in the column *Chorand Parand* in the *Soor-e Esrafil* newspaper, on the day the *Commission to Investigate the Sale of Quchan Girls and the Capture of Women from Bashqanlu* began its work in 1946 (1325 in the Iranian calendar). In the final lines of the poem, Dehkhoda writes from the perspective of the women, expressing their despair:]

   God, no one thinks of us
   Why has my name been erased from your memory?
   God, no one thinks of us.
   Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and twenty
   Oh God, no one thinks of us.

6. *Eclipsed* was based on an award-winning short story published in 1980. It was first staged in Galway in February 1992 by the innovative Punchbag Theatre Company ('Punchbag's new play', *Connacht Sentinel*, 11 February 1992). In August of the same year, the production was brought to the Edinburgh Festival, where it won the Scotsman First Fringe Award ('Edinburgh award for Punchbag', *City Tribune* (Galway), 21 August 1992).

7. For example, several years before the writing of this work, in 1905, during a period of famine, some impoverished peasants sold their young women and daughters to the government in exchange for tax payments. Others from Turkmen tribes were sold as war spoils with the agreement of village men. Such events were not considered extraordinary in their time or place, and numerous such reports exist in the historical writings of Iran. However, this event became intertwined with the political turmoil leading to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, where the stories of women and girls, treated as commodities by men, became a national issue. After that, these events were largely forgotten in future historical narratives.

8. For further information on this please see *The Irish Times* report on the discovery of the remains: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/magdalen-plot-had-remains-of-155-women-1.370279.

9. "Iranodokht" in Persian means "Daughter of Iran," which in this play can be a symbol of a woman who has a close connection with the cultural and national identity of Iran.

10. For more on this please see Burke Brogan (2014).

11. his article refers to the 2008 edition of *Eclipsed* by Patricia Burke Brogan, published by Wordsonthestreet (2nd Revised ed., 30 August 2008). The play *Eclipsed* was a precursor to reports regarding the mistreatment of women in the Magdalene institutions.

12. This work distinguishes "space" as abstract physical geography and "place" as space invested with cultural meaning, memory, and identity, providing a foundational framework for analyzing feminist spatial narratives.

13. These theorists expanded spatial theory by integrating concepts of power, mobility, identity, and social relations into the understanding of space and place, influencing contemporary feminist spatial studies.

14. Bachelard offers a phenomenological perspective on intimate spaces, especially the home, emphasizing their emotional and maternal significance in shaping identity and experience.

15. Studies during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight a "shadow pandemic" of increased domestic violence worldwide, revealing the darker dimensions of domestic spaces under crisis.

16. Conley develops the "spatial turn" toward an ethics of collective living, encouraging consideration of emotional and political relationships to diverse environments amid social and ecological challenges.

17. Massey emphasizes the role of geography in constructing gender identities and relations, arguing that spatial arrangements are deeply intertwined with systems of power and social dynamics.

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