

IRISH MOTHER AND BABY HOMES' FOSTERED CHILDREN RECONSTRUCTING THEIR PAST IN PHYLLIS WHITSELL'S *MY SECRET MOTHER* (2015) AND *A SONG FOR BRIDGET* (2018)

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ABSTRACT: Considered “outcasts”, unmarried mothers were secluded in Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries during the twentieth century, where they were deprived of their children (Luddy 2011: 109-126). Phyllis Whitsell's My Secret Mother (2015) and A Song for Bridget (2018) explore the Mother and Baby Homes regime of power, which rendered thousands of women in Ireland in a vulnerable position, and the adoption business the nuns had, which deprived thousands of women of their right to be mothers (Garrett 2010: 330-343). In this article our intention is to explore the trauma caused in both unmarried mothers and illegitimate children by the Irish Catholic system of correction and what sources of healing are offered to them in restoring their identities in the aftermath of their release. To that aim, we will employ Trauma Studies.

KEYWORDS: Mother and Baby Homes, vulnerability, trauma, healing, identity.

LOS HIJOS ADOPTADOS DE LOS HOGARES IRLANDESES PARA MADRES Y BEBÉS RECONSTRUYENDO SU PASADO EN *MY SECRET MOTHER* (2015) Y *A SONG FOR BRIDGET* (2018) DE PHYLLIS WHITSELL

RESUMEN: Consideradas “marginadas”, las madres solteras fueron recluidas en hogares de madres y bebés y lavanderías de Magdalena durante el siglo XX,



donde fueron privadas de sus hijos (Luddy 2011: 109-126). My Secret Mother (2015) y A Song for Bridget (2018) de Phyllis Whitsell exploran el régimen de poder en los hogares para madres y bebés, que dejó a miles de mujeres en Irlanda en una posición vulnerable, y el negocio de adopción que tenían las monjas, lo que privó a miles de mujeres de su derecho a ser madres (Garrett 2010: 330-343). En este artículo, nuestra intención es explorar el trauma causado tanto en las madres solteras como en los niños ilegítimos por el sistema de corrección católico irlandés y qué fuentes de resistencia se les ofrecen para restaurar sus identidades después de su liberación. Para ese fin, emplearemos Estudios de Trauma.

PALABRAS CLAVE: hogares de madres y bebés, vulnerabilidad, trauma, resiliencia, identidad.

LES ENFANTS FOSTERÉS DE LA MAISON IRLANDAISE ET DE LA MAISON DE BÉBÉ RECONSTRUISENT LEUR PASSÉ DANS PHYLLIS WHITSELL, *MA MÈRE SECRETE* (2015) ET *UNE CHANSON POUR BRIDGET* (2018)

RÉSUMÉ : Considérées comme «marginalisées», les mères célibataires ont été confinées dans des foyers et des blanchisseries pour mères et bébés à Magdalena au cours du XXe siècle, où elles ont été privées de leurs enfants (Luddy 2011: 109-126). My Secret Mother (2015) et A Song for Bridget (2018) de Phyllis Whitsell explorent le régime du pouvoir dans les foyers pour mères et bébés, qui a laissé des milliers de femmes en Irlande dans une position vulnérable, et l'entreprise d'adoption qu'elles dirigeaient. religieuses, privant des milliers de femmes de leur droit de devenir mères (Garrett 2010: 330-343). Dans cet article, notre intention est d'explorer le traumatisme causé à la fois aux mères célibataires et aux enfants illégitimes par le système correctionnel catholique irlandais et quelles sont les sources de résistance qui leur sont offertes pour restaurer leur identité après leur libération. À cette fin, nous utiliserons des études de traumatologie.

MOTS-CLÉS : maisons pour mères et bébés, vulnérabilité, traumatisme, résistance, identité.

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1. Introduction

Maternity out of wedlock in Ireland was, during the twentieth century, considered a sinful act contravening the religious morality of the time and bringing shame to the family and the whole nation (Byrne 2007: 2; Luddy 2011: 109-126). The gender division which characterised the Victorian period was welcomed and supported by the Catholic Church which imposed heteronormative principles as the norm. Materialised in the 1937 Constitution, gender requirements for women allowed reproduction within the marriage bond as the only legitimate form of sexuality (Perkin 1989: 20). Hence, unmarried mothers were automatically considered “outcasts”.

Given the high rate of illegitimacy, the government dealt with this problem publishing the Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor of 1923 (Byrne 2007: 176-177). After its publication, the government turned to the Church to provide these women with special homes for their reformation. Voluntary associations such as the “Legion of Mary” (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012: 125), “The Sisters of Mercy”, or “The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge” (Smith 2007: 29), among others, set up County Homes where “first offenders” could hide their shame, be rehabilitated and recuperate their lost reputation (Titley 2006: 9; Luddy 2011: 109-126; O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012: 17-20).¹ County Homes, together with Mother and Baby Homes, were institutions founded to assist pregnant women in giving birth, after which they were sent to Magdalene Asylums where pregnant women were not admitted (Finnegan 2004: 27). These institutions, which spread throughout the North and the South, also helped unmarried mothers with the adoption of their children after the enactment of the Adoption Act (1952) (Smith 2007: 53; O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012: 130).

Once they gave birth, these women were moved to Magdalene Laundries where they remained until “reformed”. As far as their children are concerned, they were moved to Industrial Schools² or given up in adoption. It was not

1. There were two classes of unmarried mothers namely, “first offenders” and “hopeless cases”. Whereas the former were women who got pregnant for the first time, the latter were repeat offenders. First offenders were normally sent to Mother and Baby Homes first, where they gave birth to their babies, and later to Magdalene Asylums. But hopeless cases were preferably admitted in Magdalene Asylums. The illegitimate children of the former group were adopted whereas those of the latter were enclosed in Industrial Schools. (Byrne 2007: 187; Smith 2007: 48-52; Garrett 2010: 332-333; Luddy, 2011: 109-126; Garrett 2016: 714).

2. Industrial Schools were institutions created in Ireland which hosted thousands of illegitimate, orphans and destitute children and intended to reform and take care of them (Finnegan 161-168).

until 1987 with the Status of Children Act that the status of illegitimacy was abolished; concerning unmarried mothers, their condition was not improved until the publication of The Social Welfare Act of 1973 (Office of the Attorney General), which gave allowances to them (Byrne 2007: 210). 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 the formation of the Council for the Status of Women (CSW) in 1972 (Ferriter 2005: 539).

Many scholars have questioned the role of these reformatory institutions in the rehabilitation of women. This practice of sending “outcasts” to these institutions has been interpreted as a tool of oppression rather than of reform (Luddy 2007a: 237; McCormick 2009: 50). Eoin O’Sullivan and Ian O’Donnell consider prisons, reformatories, Borstals, Homes for unmarried mothers, Industrial Schools and Psychiatric Hospitals institutions of coercive confinement under the criminal justice system (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012: 2). Moreover, A.V. Simpson *et al.* analyse the role of the Laundries as instruments of compassion and power; they say that compassion is a form of dominance that establishes a social relation between the giver and the receiver (Simpson *et al.* 2014: 261). All these interpretations of Magdalene institutions reinforce Fassin’s idea that the discourse of vulnerability and ethical demands towards those in need—in our case of analysis prostitutes and unmarried mothers—adopted by humanitarian practices should be understood as a form of institutionalised violence (Fassin 2012: 1-8). He refers to the division between the powerful and the weak that is created by humanitarianism, a practice that essentialises and objectifies the victim (Fassin 2017: 501-519). In the case of Ireland, unmarried mothers and their children were named vulnerable and therefore deprived of their agency and identities. These humanitarian enterprises did contribute to the stigmatisation of these women claiming ethical demands on the witnesses of their suffering without accounting for their role in contributing to their vulnerability (Sabsay 2016: 180).

The psychological implications of the practices carried out throughout the twentieth century for unmarried mothers and their illegitimate children have been notorious. Being incarcerated against their will and deprived of their children left a profound wound on them difficult to heal. As far as illegitimate children are concerned, their identities were torn apart once they were separated from their birth mothers and their past was concealed. Both mothers and children share a

traumatic past they try to overcome throughout their whole lives. In repossessing one's life after trauma, telling it is of paramount importance as scholars claim: "[...] repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation" (Laub 1995: 70). In that process of bringing back a traumatic past and sharing it with others, the response of the community is necessary for restoring the victim's identity and healing their wounds (Herman 1998: 70). Hulbert defends transnational writing as a healing therapy which enables the silenced voices from all over the world to be heard (65). Whitsell's autobiographies *My Secret Mother* (2015) and *A Song for Bridget* (2018) are examples of this type of writing. They are recollections of a traumatic past which aim at giving voice and recognition to both unmarried mothers and illegitimate children. In Phyllis's memoirs, the role of society, the State, and the Church in granting recognition and restoration to the victims are questioned. Alternatively, mother (Bridget) and daughter (Phyllis) help each other in the arduous task of healing their wounds and reconstructing their identities.

Much literature has been written on unmarried motherhood by scholars like Maria Luddy, Paul Michael Garrett, Elizabeth Alice O'Rourke-Scott, and Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides, among others. Luddy's book *Unmarried Mothers in Ireland, 1880–1973*, together with other articles such as "Moral rescue and unmarried mothers in Ireland in the 1920s" or "Sex and the Single Girl in 1920s and 1930s Ireland", analyses the role and position of unmarried mothers in society and the government's measures to prevent illegitimacy; Garrett's article "Unmarried Mothers' in the Republic of Ireland" explores Mother and Baby Homes and the adoption business that was present in Ireland during the twentieth century; O'Rourke's thesis "Family Talk: Irish Women Across Generations Negotiate Single Motherhood" studies unmarried motherhood and identity formation of unmarried mothers within families and in society; Ramblado-Minero, and Pérez-Vides's book *Single Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Ireland. Cultural, Historical, and Social Essays* is a collection of essays where different aspects of single motherhood in the twentieth century and their representation in literature and films are analysed; finally, Pérez-Vides's article "Gender, Deviance and Institutional Violence in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries: An Analysis of Two Filmic Representations of Abuse" analyses the filmic representation of violence against the unmarried mother in reformatory institutions.

All these articles and books have been useful in our analysis of the socio-historical aspect of single motherhood in twentieth-century Ireland. Yet, this

article contributes to a wider understanding of unmarried motherhood and the adoption business that existed in Ireland in the twentieth century through the analysis of two autobiographies written by an illegitimate child which, due to their recent publication, have not been analysed yet—*My Secret Mother* (2015) and *A Song for Bridget* (2018). In this article, we intend to explore the trauma caused in both unmarried mothers and illegitimate children by the Irish Catholic system of correction and what sources of healing are offered to them to restore their identities in the aftermath of their release. For the first aim, we will employ Kaplan's idea of silence as a sign of fear and shame after trauma, together with Laub and Herman's stages of recovery from trauma to see how both unmarried mothers and illegitimate children went through it. For the second aim, we will use Herman and Laub's concept of witnessing as a healing tool and Hulbert's concept of transnational writing as a healing therapy.

2. The Adoption Business; the Traumatic Separation of Mothers and Daughters

Illegitimacy in Ireland during the twentieth century supposed the automatic exclusion of the unmarried mother and her illegitimate child given the shame they represented (Luddy 2011: 109-126). The unmarried mother was confined in a Mother and Baby Home during her pregnancy and once the child was born, their paths were separated; the mother was moved to a Magdalene Laundry and the child to an Industrial School until he/she could be adopted. During World War Two, a black market of adoption was set up in America and Ireland became a potential country to adopt babies (Milotte 1997: 22). De Valera opened the adoption flow supported by Archbishop McQuaid and although many doctors and members of parliament such as Dr Noel Browne, Joe Horan, Liam Cosgrave and Tom O'Higgins opposed to it, this practice continued until the last decades of the twentieth century (Milotte 1997: 25-104). Sean Ross Abbey in Tipperary, St Patrick's Home in Dublin, Castlepollard in Westmeath, St Patrick's Guild in Dublin, St Clare's in Stamullen, Co Meath, and The Sacred Heart in Cork were some of the adoption societies Mike Milotte highlights (Milotte 1997). These institutions were involved in the business of sending Irish illegitimate children to America until the single- mother's allowance in the 1990s put an end to this black market (Milotte 1997: 83, 186). To avoid that religious and legal persecution, and to be able to raise their offspring, many Irish women migrated to England, especially during the 1940s to the 1970s. Despite these women's attempt to avoid their confinement in Mother and Baby Homes, Workhouses or

Magdalene Asylums, the Child Protection and Rescue Society (1913) encouraged the repatriation of these women and their babies concerned with the moral dangers they were exposed to in England—proselytism (Garret 2010; 2016).

One of those illegitimate children is the protagonist of this autobiography we are analysing here. After giving birth to her first son and being forced to leave him in an Industrial School in Ireland, Bridget moved to England to start a new life. There, she fell pregnant, but her problems with alcohol forced her to leave Phyllis in an orphanage run by nuns—Father Hudson's Home—until she was adopted in 1960 by an Irish family (Whitsell 2015: 15). Unlike in Ireland, adoption was legal in England at that time under the Adoption of Children Act (1926). Phyllis's vulnerable condition was not only caused by the fact that she was separated from her mother at an early age, but also by the treatment she received from her adoptive family. Her childhood was a traumatic one since she never fitted in her adoptive family; she felt like an outsider at the beginning willing to be part of a family and to be loved, but she was treated differently for being adopted. They constantly reminded her of her condition and even claimed gratitude for having rescued her, especially her mother: "When no one was around, she went into great detail about how I should be grateful because they had taken me out of the orphanage" (Whitsell 2015: 21, 26). According to Fassin, the politics of compassion is a politics of inequality and solidarity towards those more vulnerable (Fassin 2012: 3). Hence, this humanitarian relation is one of control and power. In this case, the vulnerable child became the victim of a religious system which condemned unmarried mothers and their illegitimate children and a repressive family who supported those religious values.

This vulnerability was aggravated by the silencing attitude surrounding illegitimacy. Marriage and the family were recognised by the State and the Church as main institutions in Ireland leading women's lives, so maternity out of wedlock was considered a sinful act contravening the religious morality of the time and bringing shame to the family. (Luddy 2007b: 85). Consequently, the illegitimate child's existence and recognition in public were negated as a sign of that sin during the twentieth century as the following quotation shows: "I asked why I couldn't go to the same school as my brothers and sister but Mum just shouted at me, 'No, that will not happen. Do you want everybody to know you are adopted? You will be different from everyone else. It must be kept a secret [...]" (Whitsell 2015: 27). The fact that Phyllis was deprived of information about her past affected her identity, which was in turn denied:

[...] I would never be given such information about my birth or first days and months. When children are given this kind of knowledge by their birth parents they just absorb it, but as an adopted child it can be quite painful to be denied it. You desperately want to be told about every minute detail so you can form your own identity and feel more secure as a young child growing up. (Whitsell 2015: 57)

According to Herman, trauma affects people, their sense of safety, of themselves and the meaning of life. The victim is summed in an existential crisis which destroys the relationship with others (Herman 1998: 51). This feeling experimented by Phyllis, who was rejected by her family, is aggravated by the fact that her past is concealed to her.

It was during adulthood, in the 1980s, that Phyllis Whitsell started to reconstruct her past and to complete the jigsaw of her identity. After her marriage, Phyllis started to trace her mother helped by a social worker who warned her about the consequences and damage of doing so (Whitsell 2015: 115). However, she was determined to know the truth. She went back to the orphanage where she was told about her adoption, but she was not allowed to see her documents (Whitsell 2015: 124, 130). This secretive attitude the Church adopted and the elusiveness of its responsibility towards Phyllis leaves clear the secrecy surrounding unmarried mothers and illegitimate children in England too. As Kaplan (2005) explains, people forget as a way of protecting themselves from a traumatic past (74). However, “history seems to provide examples of national ‘forgetting’ or displacement that require explanation [...]” (Kaplan 2005: 66). As Kaplan claims, silencing is encouraged by political and social reasons since acknowledging the truth could damage whole nations (Kaplan 2005: 74). We can appreciate in this autobiography how the Church, as a powerful institution, adopted a silencing attitude about the confinement of women in reformatory institutions and the adoption of illegitimate children, and imposed silence on the victims as a mechanism to avoid reprisals. In the 1980s, Irish and some English reformatory institutions such as Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries were still functioning. Even though some Industrial Schools were closed at that time in England, the Father Hudson’s Home in Birmingham was still working. Hence, she was not allowed to see the records. It was not until 1996 that the last Magdalene Asylum was closed. During that time, the truth behind reformatory institutions was concealed in both England and Ireland. Indeed, it was in 2000 when the first investigations of these institutions started—The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. The silence surrounding institutional

abuse during the 1980s and 1990s implied the avoidance of responsibility from the part of the perpetrators and the silencing of the victims.

It was working as a nurse that Phyllis finally met her mother, but she concealed her real identity at the beginning (Whitsell 2015: 150). This response may be explained through Herman's idea that trauma affects the victim and their sense of safety and themselves and the meaning of life; the links with others are broken and they feel alienated and displaced in their communities, overall, their identities are lost (1998: 56). As a result of the traumatic separation from her mother, Phyllis is unable to establish that link with her mother when they are reunited. Nevertheless, to understand Phyllis' story, we should first know Bridget's one that is told in *A Song for Bridget*. Her childhood was a traumatised one; the death of her stepfather and mother, and the abuse she suffered from the part of her brother after which she fell pregnant marked her life. Although she tried to hide her pregnancy for fear of being confined in a Mother and Baby Home, she finally told the priest the truth about her condition, but she was not believed. She was sent to Roscrea in the 1950s, one of the main houses which led the adoption business, where she was forced to sign the adoption once she gave birth to her child (Whitsell 2018: 124):

‘I relinquish dull claim forever to my child and surrender him to Sister Barbara, Superioress of Sean Ross Abbey. The purpose is to enable Sister Barbara to make my child available for adoption to any person she considers fit and proper, inside or outside the state. I further undertake never to attempt to see, interfere with, or make any claim to the said child at any future time. (Whitsell 2018: 142)

Although the nuns helped with the adoption, the cruel reality was that this adoption was imposed; women suffered the loss of their children once they were forced to enter a Magdalene Asylum: “Regardless of whether passion, seduction or abuse had been the cause of pregnancy; and irrespective of whether the infant had survived, grieving, post-natal mothers were compelled to suffer in silence, and to submit, without murmur to the anguish of their loss” (Finnegan 2004: 28). The loss of a child is a traumatic event which leaves the mother broken, but even more painful is the fact of being deprived of her child when given in adoption; in Young Marion's words, “the experience of going through a full-pregnancy, bearing a child and giving it up for adoption is punitive and traumatic for a woman because the relationship by then is real; it exists” (1998: 265).

After the time in the Laundry and the loss of her child, Bridget abandoned Ireland full of rancour: “I hadn’t looked back at Ireland’s shoreline as we left Rosslare Harbour. I didn’t want to see my homeland ever again, the land that had betrayed me had hurt me so deeply, though at least I would be free of Robert, free of the nuns but I knew my memories would always haunt me” (Whitsell 2018: 146). Kaplan claims that those who cannot reconcile with their traumatic past adopt a silencing and evasive attitude (2005: 74). Throughout the biography, we can appreciate that Bridget was stuck in this stage of victimhood. Instead of accepting the past and talking about it to overcome trauma, Bridget adopted a self-destructive attitude blaming the nuns for what had happened to her:

I was angry at the nuns in Roscrea for their lies, for taking my son. I felt like they’d punished me for my perceived crime of having a child out of wedlock. I felt furious that the priest in Templemore had ignored the truth that I was a victim of rape, which was a mortal sin against me. I hated the priest, I hated the nuns, I hated Robert above all [...] I hated the Moral Welfare Office for leaving me at the Sean Ross Abbey, for putting me into the hands of those nuns, for letting them take my Kieran away from me. I even hated Bill for running away when he should’ve come for me and taken me with him. But most of all, I hated myself. (Whitsell 2018: 159)

This attitude could be interpreted as a mechanism to deal with the trauma given the impossibility to externalise her feelings. However, it can also be interpreted as the only possible response these women had due to the impossibility to change the system. Laub affirms that speaking up about traumatic events is a way of survival and a form of action, but many women like Bridget did not find the courage to raise their voices and seek justice (Laub 1995:70). As many other women in Ireland, Bridget repressed and forgot those memories unable to come to terms with her past:

[...] I didn’t know any other way of coping with the memories that came back to haunt me. I knew why I drank. It was the only peace I could find. A way to block out the trauma of my past; the shock of seeing my stepfather swinging from his own belt, the upset of my mammy dying in my arms and the years I’d sacrificed staying home from school to care for her, losing Jimmie and then little Philomena whisked away to become a Conroy and cutting all contact with me – though I loved her dearly. Then on top of all that, the terrible ordeal at the hands of my own brother Robert, bearing his child and being punished for the wickedness wrought upon me, I drank to kill the pain of giving up Kieran, of being bullied by those

nuns at Roscrea, at the unfairness of being sectioned and placed in a mental hospital just for speaking the truth. Then Bill, my beloved Bill, left me when I was three months pregnant with our child, who I tried to be a good mammy to, but the odds were stacked against me. I tried—and failed, and I drank to block the pain of handing her over, too. (Whitsell 2018: 238-239)

These traumatic memories, which come in the forms of hallucinations, dreams, and somatic reactions, are responses to trauma known in psychoanalysis as post-traumatic stress disorders (Herman 1998: 116). If the victim is not capable of talking about the trauma, he/she will develop a victimhood and vengeful attitude which will hinder forgetting and forgiveness. This is the case of Bridget, who was unable to talk about her past and adopted a self-destructive attitude to deal with her pain.

In our case of analysis, both mother and daughter are connected by this trauma of being separated. Yet, we can see how they handled the trauma differently; whereas Bridget adopted silence and forgetting as a survival mechanism (Kaplan 2005: 74), Phyllis acted and faced her traumatic past tracing her mother (Laub 1992: 70). In the process of reconstructing her identity, she claims her right to know the truth: “At times I felt that I was intruding on someone else’s life, when in fact it was my life and I had a right to know what actually did happen” (Whitsell 2015: 135). Although she concealed her identity at the beginning, Phyllis finally told her mother the truth, but her dementia did not allow her to recognise her daughter (Whitsell 2015: 199-200). She could finally enjoy some time with her birth mother before she died of pneumonia in 2003: “Bridget was a dysfunctional mother, a drunk and very damaged woman, but she was my mum. She was the last piece of my own jigsaw” (Whitsell 2018: 243);

I knew my story wouldn’t have a fairy-tale ending, but I never regretted finding her. We all have a right to know who we are and where we come from. I was able to look after her for eight years, without her knowing I was her daughter. When I did tell her it was too late, but I hoped she could now rest in peace. (Whitsell 2015: 242)

As we can see in these quotations, the fact of facing her trauma and tracing her mother helped her recuperate her identity. As Herman claims, the main stages of recovery from a trauma are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection with others (1998: 3). Contrary to Bridget who could not recover from trauma, Phyllis finally recuperated her identity and past.

Like Phyllis, thousands of illegitimate children have been denied their bonds with their mothers and are still trying to reconstruct their identities. Yet, it is not until we break with that wall of silence and shame that surrounds illegitimacy in Ireland that we will be able to help the victims.

3. Healing the Wounds of Traumatized Mothers and Children

The deprivation of these women's rights to be mothers by distancing them from their offspring contributed to the erosion of these women's identities; a violent act which demolished the natural and biological bond between mother and child, and which damaged these women psychologically. Moreover, illegitimate children also suffered the trauma of being deprived of their mothers. These autobiographies are examples of the consequences such a moral rigidity had on those displaced in society. The practice of punishing illegitimacy by confining women in reformatory institutions and giving their illegitimate children in adoption leaves clear their vulnerable position. In our case of analysis, both mother and daughter suffered different misfortunes, as we have seen, which caused a trauma difficult to heal.

Healing physical wounds may be easy although sometimes slow, but healing the psychological wounds left after a traumatic experience is an arduous task and with no guarantee of complete restoration: "Trauma can never be 'healed' in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe [...]" (Kaplan 2005: 19). In the process of overcoming trauma, Herman claims that talking about it with others is a precondition "both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual (Herman 1998: 1). The first step towards Bridget's healing is breaking her silence and telling the truth about what she had suffered. Offering her testimony to her daughter can be interpreted as a liberating act, but also as a cry for help. Bridget needs to be listened to, to be recognised, to share her burden with someone who could help her. Furthermore, "the response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma" (Herman 1998: 70). As Herman claims, the main "experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others", so the main step for the recovery of the victim is to empower them by giving them the necessary resources to do so (Herman 1998: 133). Recognition and restitution are what Bridget offers to her mother in the biography *A Song for Bridget*. In this biography, Phyllis acts as a therapist offering support to her mother and becoming a witness of her trauma. In telling her story,

Bridget asks her listeners for action—justice. As we contended above, unmarried mothers were discriminated in society and deprived of their rights towards their children. This heterosexual and phallogocentric economy that envisaged women as good mothers and wives rejected the unmarried mother from the domain of the intelligible suffering exclusion and violence (Finnegan 2004: 161-168; Luddy 2007a: 124-152). Bridget's quest for recognition is a claim to be counted in her community and to recuperate her identity which has been taken away from her. In this process, remembering and telling the truth are central aspects for the maintenance of a community's history and mutual recognition.

Hurlbert defends the idea that writing and teaching are both techniques of healing and of sharing knowledge. Writing is about putting forward our thoughts, our histories to be shared with others, and to challenge those normative powers which want to steal our voices (2013: 24-25); when we write we incorporate ideological, social, political and cultural ideas which tell things about ourselves, and we provide the reader with meaning through our words and silences. We transform the world and ourselves when writing (2013: 72-73). Phyllis's biography telling her mother's life aims at giving her recognition and at defending vulnerable people to change society's view of them: "[...] while writing I have tried to give you the voice you never had as a child or as a vulnerable young woman [...] I hope that in telling your story I am giving you back some of the dignity stolen from you, and in doing so, creating a legacy in your memory" (Whitsell 2018: 10-11). As this quotation shows she commemorates her mother by restoring her voice and healing her wounds. Moreover, this biography is a praise of all those women victims of trauma who are still trying to reconstruct their identities; a defence of all those vulnerable people who struggle to overcome their problems, and a claim for society to understand those considered "deviant":

I listened to her stories for hours on end [...] I managed to piece together the whole story of her life, the story that makes up this book, the prequel to my own memoir *Finding Tipperary Mary*. I hope that in writing this story (adding in everything I have learned), charting my mother's harrowing life, I will understand the forces that shaped her, that made her the tragic figure she became. I want this book, her book, to prove her life was not in vain and in telling her story, she will never be forgotten. I also hope that my mother's struggles will help others to understand that behind any addiction to alcohol or drugs, there is emotional and psychological pain or trauma. They are damaged people who deserve our support and understanding, not our condemnation. (Whitsell 2018: 241)

Her attitude in this quotation confirms Laub and Herman's idea that no observer can remain untouched when bearing witness of traumatic events (Herman 1998: 7; Laub 1992: 66). Kaplan affirms that the witness's response may be more powerful if he/she had experienced something similar (2005: 90). In the case of Phyllis, she empathises more with her mother not only due to her biological link but also because she had also suffered trauma.

Phyllis's biography is not only a defence of her mother but of all unmarried mothers who suffered the misfortune of not following the morality imposed in twentieth-century Ireland. In these autobiographies, Phyllis understands her mother and defends her: "You were battling terrible odds. Your life had been unbelievably hard; you had terrible experiences growing up in Tipperary, and were left alone and defenceless. You sank into despair, a despair made worse by the comfort you sought from drink and with no chance of a 'normal' life" (Whitsell 2018: 7). In her words, she also accuses society of stigmatising those women by rejecting them:

When you were sitting in the staff room you would sometimes overhear the doctors and nurses complaining about the problems the drunks were causing within the department—you'd hear, 'I wish they would get their lives sorted out as they are costing the NHS so much time and money' [...] Although understanding their point of view, I always had a degree of sympathy and felt empathy towards vulnerable people, especially when they had some type of addiction. (Whitsell 2015: 101)

Moreover, her defence in her autobiography is also of all those illegitimate children, like her, who were dragged from their mothers' arms. Writing this autobiography does not only help to restore her mother's identity but also hers. These books, especially *Finding Tipperary Mother* reflects the damage caused to thousands of children who suffered the consequences of their mothers' "sins". Even though she could not share the burden of her trauma with her mother due to her illness, Phyllis could alleviate her pain putting it down to words. Writing these memoirs can be considered a healing therapy for her but the reader becomes the witness this time. Laub defines three levels of witnessing: "being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself." (Laub 1995: 61). In these books, Phyllis experiences these three levels trying to reconstruct her identity. It is by going through her traumatic past and meeting her mother that Phyllis was able to recuperate her identity. The connection with

her mother and in turn with her past were recovered so the first step towards Phyllis' recovery from trauma was fulfilled, according to Herman. Yet, complete restoration and restitution were not possible for her since the perpetrators did not completely acknowledge their fault.

Due to this lack of accountability, Phyllis's books are calls for action; she asks the Church to recognise and restore the victims by accounting for their crimes:

Her life was a tangled web, and I don't know if I've uncovered all the strands of it, but I do know that this book, my tribute to Tipperary Mary, is a heartfelt attempt to understand her as a victim of circumstances out of her control. History was cruel to unmarried mothers, and her life bears witness to this. The Catholic Church had so much to answer for. How many young women's lives were destroyed by forced adoption, by their young lovers disappearing, leaving them to fend alone, their babies taken, their lives changed and altered without kindness or understanding? (Whitsell 2018: 243)

Herman claims that by making a public complaint or accusation, the survivor defies the perpetrator's attempt to silence and isolate him/her, and he/she opens the possibility of finding new allies. When others bear witness to the testimony of a crime, others share the responsibility to restore justice (Herman 1998: 210). In our case of analysis, Phyllis defies the silencing attitude adopted by the Church and the State concerning illegitimacy and claims justice and restoration for the victims.

Phyllis' autobiographies are quests for the perpetrators to recognise their fault and restore the victims. Also, they aim at remembering the victims and encouraging all those who have suffered to speak up. At the time when these autobiographies were published (2015, 2018), the scandal surrounding Mother and Baby Homes came to light thanks to the press. The government of Edna Kenny had offered a public apology to the victims of reformatory institutions (2013), but not much compensation was offered to the victims. In January 2019, *The Irish Mirror* covered the social campaign initiated by survivors of Mother and Baby Homes. These women started to put pressure on the government to inquire into these institutions and the illegal adoptions carried out by religious orders. *The Irish Mirror* also put on the spotlight the scandal surrounding the Tuam Mother and Baby Home where thousands of infants died and were buried in unmarked graves (Flanagan 2019). This article outlines the mistreatment and malnourishment thousands of women and their illegitimate children suffered

inside these institutions. Thousands of children and women have died without being acknowledged, but there are many vulnerable women trying to reconstruct their lives and find their children. Several social campaigns have been initiated by survivors of Mother and Baby Homes to put pressure on the government to inquire into these institutions and the illegal adoptions carried out by religious orders. The publication of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009), which analysed sexual abuse in Industrial Schools, did not alleviate the uneasiness among victims due to its biased nature. Despite the evidence of sexual abuse religious orders involved were not taken to prison. The lack of accountability from the part of the perpetrators and the concealment of the victims' identities reduced the possibilities of overcoming a traumatic past. Moreover, The Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and Certain related Matters) Records Bill 2020 is announced to be sealed for 30 years. As a response, several organisations such as Justice for Magdalenes are fighting to amend this Bill and to grant the victims of Mother and Baby Homes access to their records. What this situation reveals is that there are still thousands of women and their children who have not been offered restitution and healing, appending subject Ireland must solve.

4. Conclusions

Unmarried motherhood and illegitimacy during the twentieth century were matters of concern for both politicians and religious people in Ireland. In an attempt to control and regulate women's sexual practises to preserve the image of the country, the Church and the State sent thousands of unmarried pregnant women to Mother and Baby Homes. Once there, they could have their babies in secret, after which they were deprived of them and given up in adoption or enclosed in an Industrial School. It was not until the 1970s that attitudes towards unmarried mothers and illegitimate children changed with the Status of Children Act and The Social Welfare Act (Byrne 2007: 210). Before these changes, humanitarian practices oversaw those women granting a silencing attitude concerning illegitimacy. Hence, this humanitarianism should be understood as a form of institutionalised violence (Fassin 2012: 1-8).

As we have seen, both unmarried mothers and illegitimate children suffered psychological damage after being separated and enclosed in reformatory institutions. Their identities were erased, and their past denied. The perpetrators' denial of their accountability endangered the survival of those victims who were concealed and

silenced. Yet, some victims like Phyllis found the courage to raise their voices and recuperate their identities. These autobiographies explore the traumas of both mothers and children and the rejection these vulnerable groups suffered in society at the same time they uncover a system of corruption and abuse. It is by offering her testimony and that of her mother that Phyllis defies the silencing attitude adopted by the Church and the State at the same time she goes through her trauma. For her part, Bridget is recognised and compensated thanks to her daughter's biography which is a commemoration of all those women victims of reformatory institutions who are still trying to reconstruct their identities.

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