PROBLEMATICS OF PATRIARCHY, RELIGION AND
CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE IRISH CONTEXT: A STUDY OF
THE SELECTED WORKS OF MAEVE BINCHY

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SUMMARY OF THESIS

Maeve Binchy (1940- ) belongs to the legion of literary figures that have brought international attention and recognition to the little island country of Ireland. Hailed as the Grand Dame of English fiction, Binchy has been regaling her global readers with stories based in Ireland that have had them yearning for more. Her repertoire contains numerous works of fiction and non fiction. Over the years she has been honoured with numerous awards, the most recent being, Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award at Bord Gáis Energy Irish Book Awards 2010, presented to her by Mrs. Mary McAleese, the Irish President.

Despite Binchy being acknowledged as a writer of substance in the literary circles, there is precious little research available on her. It is said that currently the bevy of contemporary Irish female fiction writers such as Maeve Binchy, Marian Keyes, Patricia Scanlan, Sheila O’ Flanagan etc. are a very popular subject of researchers in US and parts of the western world. Maybe, the coming years will witness the filling up of this lacuna arising out of the unavailability of research on Maeve Binchy and her body of fiction. My research on the issues of patriarchy, female sexuality, religion and morality, and class consciousness in Binchy’s selected works is a modest effort in that direction.

This thesis makes a detailed study of the issues of patriarchy, sexuality, morality and class consciousness and how they are expressed in the selected novels of Maeve Binchy: Light a Penny Candle, Circle of Friends, The Glass Lake, Tara Road, and Scarlet Feather. The first chapter introduces the issues under scrutiny in the Irish context. Gender relations are crucial in understanding the conservative Irish society which is structured in a manner that women, for centuries have been relegated to the household chores and the all important task of bearing and rearing children. The extremely patriarchal Catholic Church has exerted tremendous influence over all aspects of Irish life. The Church has supported the social practices and government policies that have kept women in a subservient position. It has dictated the morals of society and even contributed to the rigidity of class structures in Ireland.

The writer’s biographical sketch presents in great detail the journey of the writer from her idyllic childhood spent, in her words, in a ‘house on the prairie’ to becoming a well loved teacher, and finally a writer. Her career graph has been on the upswing ever since her first novel Light a Penny Candle hit the stands in 1982 and created history of sorts by fetching Binchy a record amount as pre-publishing royalty. Her position as the reigning
queen of fiction has been reinforced by the commercial success of her successive books, right up to her most recent work *Minding Frankie*.

In the second chapter titled “Patriarchy and Sexuality” the discussion revolves around the high degree of patriarchal standards present in Irish society in the mid-twentieth century and their effect on female sexuality in the selected fiction of Binchy. The Catholic Church preached that women were inferior, and the state supported these contentions of the church by enforcing policies that compounded the already dismal position of Irish women. This nexus between the church and the state ensured that Irish society was imbued with the feeling that women had to confine themselves to a life of domesticity and motherhood. This position of woman as the centre of the family is enshrined in the Irish constitution, along with the position of Catholic Church as the centre-point of Irish society. The narratives in Binchy’s works make it crystal clear that Ireland’s extremely patriarchal society meted out a very discriminatory treatment towards the fairer sex. Premarital sex was discouraged and women were expected to uphold the ideal of ‘Virgin Mary’ by resisting their sexual impulses and desires.

In this patriarchal setup, a woman’s position was defined by her husband’s wealth and status in society. She clearly did not enjoy any autonomy in household decisions, as man was the master and sole decision maker even in sexual matters. Women were taught right from childhood to be tolerant towards their philandering husbands, because of the logic that men had their ‘needs’. This state-of-affairs is depicted in Binchy’s earlier works such as *Light a Penny Candle*, *Circle of Friends* and *The Glass Lake*.

Feminists talk of patriarchy and sexuality in the same breath for they are both concerned with power equations. The Irish had a very orthodox approach towards all sexual matters, so much so, that any writing perceived as overtly sexual in content was banned in Ireland until very recently, for the fear that people would become libidinous. The second half of the twentieth century began to witness a slow and gradual change in the social order. The new millennium has witnessed further changes in the socio-cultural configurations of the country. The later works like *Tara Road* and *Scarlet Feather* record the newer tendencies and attitudes that were creeping slowly and gradually into Irish society at the end of the twentieth century.

The women became more conscious about having careers and started opting for late marriages and postponing motherhood. The availability of contraceptives compartmentalized female sexuality and fertility, bringing about a sexual revolution. Rosemary Ryan, a career woman in *Tara Road*, flaunted a hedonistic lifestyle. She drove a BMW, took pills and had a
succession of lovers. To top it all, she was smart and attractive, and very sure of her sexuality. Cathy in Scarlett Feather who hailed from a working class background flaunts her independence by retaining her surname after marriage. She also owns her own business despite there being no economic compulsion for her to work, as she was married into the wealthy Mitchell family. In Heart and Soul young Linda smokes and drinks, and has one night stands on regular basis, much to the chagrin of her mother Dr Clara Casey, a cardiologist. Though she disapproves, Dr Clara is resigned to the new sexual standards of the youth. The emergence of the new, confident and self assured Irish woman is a far cry from the passive, meek and docile creature of yore. Binchy was never a groveling, whining female herself. She uses her own surname even after her marriage to Gordon Snell, and abhors doing domestic chores that she associates with female subjugation, proving herself to be a liberal at heart. She claims that she is delighted at the Irish, embracing new attitudes.

When it comes to portraying the sexuality of her characters, Binchy is extremely conservative. The absence of explicit sex scenes is a definitive and a constant feature of Binchy’s fiction. This absence of explicit sex shows the prudery of the Irish as well as the personality of the writer that veers towards the old-fashioned. This stance of the writer has remained unchanged from her first novel to the present. However, in her recent works Binchy does show her female characters initiating sex, which is a huge step forward for Irish women because in the olden days it would have invited aspersions on their character.

In chapter three titled “Religion and Morality”, the effect of religion on all matters pertaining to the life of the Irish has been discussed. The writer is a non-practicing Catholic whose marriage to an Englishman also tilted the scales in favour of a more secular approach. Binchy claims that she lost faith in Catholic values propounded by the church, way back in the 1960s during a visit to a cave in Jerusalem, said to be the site of ‘The Last Supper’ by Christ. The characters in Binchy’s works have reflected this disillusionment of the writer. They violated the code of conduct prescribed by the Catholic Church. They indulged in premarital sex, had extra-marital affairs and even underwent abortions. Geraldine in Scarlett Feather undergoes an abortion to save her love affair. Despite Binchy’s projection of sinful behaviour, she has never faced any conservative backlash from the clergy in her country. This is probably due to her restrained approach to sex.

Despite Binchy proclaiming herself to be ‘a collapsed Catholic’, there is nothing to suggest in her works that her approach to the morality of her characters is any different from the one a Catholic might subscribe to. Furthermore, if not Catholic morality, the actions of her characters fall under the ambit of universal morality. Critics like Mary Kenny vouch for
the fact that Maeve Binchy is nothing short of ‘a living saint’, because of the ideology she upholds in her real life. Binchy’s works are devoid of truly villainous or purely evil characters. Her characters are different shades of grey.

Chapter four of the thesis titled “Class Consciousness”, centres on the issue of the role of class in the ‘class-obsessed’ society of Ireland. Ireland had rigid class structures and the church played an important role in reinforcing these class structures. The characters in all her works are acutely conscious of their standing in society and there is a constant endeavour for upward mobility. Getting married to a man of superior status, because of the principle of ‘male superiority’, was the most desirable option for all women of marriageable age. In Jane Austen’s works based in England of the eighteenth century, there is ample proof of how a woman’s social position was enhanced in direct proportion to her husband’s wealth and status, and it was no different in Ireland of the twentieth century. Women had to be particular about maintaining chastity, in order to land a good match for themselves.

Marxist feminists like Zillah Eisenstein, Christine Delphy and Heidi Hartmann have defined women as a sexual class, because of the similarity of their condition in which they are exploited by the patriarchal system for their labour and reproductive abilities. In Binchy’s works, women show solidarity as a class by coming to each others aid in times of trouble.

Subscribing to a particular faith also affected a person’s standing in Irish society. The Catholics were the privileged sections whereas the Protestants were the downtrodden social outcasts in a predominantly Catholic country. The recent years have witnessed a diminishing of class barriers, with the new generation adopting a more cosmopolitan approach. Though even in present times, there are sections of conservative Irish who express resentment towards people they count as inferior. Animosity towards the immigrants from Eastern Europe and the African continent, which have flocked to the now prosperous Ireland in hoards, is an echo of old attitudes. Binchy addresses this issue in her later works like Tara Road, Heart and Soul etc. where the conservative Irish treat the immigrants as rank outsiders.

Binchy, has been, in many ways, ahead of her times. Her earlier works were harbingers of the time to come. She has always been an ardent supporter of female sexuality. Her earlier female characters flouted social norms. The same behaviour would be taken as a matter of course in present day Ireland. Her new novels Heart and Soul and Minding Frankie talk about contemporary issues and record the transition of Holy Ireland to a modern one. The conclusion of the thesis reaffirms the status of Binchy as a reputed writer. She has been hailed by Mary Kenny, a well known Irish critic as a ‘National Treasure’, an epithet that speaks volumes of Binchy’s stature in contemporary Ireland and in the literary world.