

## THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN AS NATION IN THE SCOTTISH LITERARY RENAISSANCE\*

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Although representations of woman as nation have been traditionally related to nationalist movements which emphasise women's symbolic role, they are sometimes contradictory, and thus, difficult to categorise. This essay introduces the main concerns of the Scottish Literary Renaissance and focuses on the representation of woman as nation during this period, in Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*. It will be contended that MacDiarmid's female characters seem to adapt to the traditional characterisation of woman as nation figures while Grassie Gibbon infuses his female characters with a psychological depth that prevents them from fully conforming to a national allegorical reading. Therefore, this essay will argue that this ambivalence, which partly results from the cultural and linguistic hybridity of Scotland, problematizes the existence of a coherent tradition of woman as nation in the Scottish context.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Nation, Scottish Literary Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon*

Aunque las representaciones de la mujer como nación han estado tradicionalmente ligadas a movimientos nacionalistas que enfatizan el rol simbólico de las mujeres, éstas son a menudo contradictorias, y por lo tanto, difíciles de categorizar. Este ensayo introduce las principales preocupaciones del Renacimiento Literario Escocés y se centra en la representación de la mujer como nación durante este periodo, en *A Drunk Man Looks at the*

*Thistle* de Hugh MacDiarmid y *Sunset Song* de Lewis Grassie Gibbon. Se argumentará que los personajes femeninos de Hugh MacDiarmid parecen adaptarse a la caracterización tradicional de la mujer como nación mientras que aquellos de Grassie Gibbon poseen una mayor complejidad psicológica que impide su lectura como meras alegorías de la nación. Por lo tanto, este ensayo demostrará que ésta ambivalencia, parcialmente derivada de la hibridación cultural y lingüística de Escocia, problematiza la existencia de una tradición coherente de la mujer como nación en el contexto escocés.

**Palabras clave:** *Género, Nación, Renacimiento Literario Escocés, Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon*

In 1919, T.S Eliot dismissed the existence of a Scottish literary tradition, since ‘Scottish literature lacks, in the first place, the continuity of the language’ (qtd. in Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism* 8). Nevertheless, the Scottish Literary Renaissance would prove otherwise. This movement, taking place during the interwar years, promoted the revitalization of the Scottish literary tradition, which was considered to be in decline since the political union of England and Scotland in 1707. Although the Scottish Literary Renaissance belonged to the wider European Modernist movement and was thus characterised by aesthetic innovations and a concern with subjectivity, it also had a national dimension, showing a deep interest in the revival of the native languages of Scotland, Scots and Gaelic, as well as nationalism. In this essay, I will provide a brief introduction to the main concerns of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, followed by an assessment of the nationalist tradition of portraying women as nations. The focus of the analysis will be the allegorical representation of women in Hugh MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*, which will be finally contrasted so as to elucidate whether the analysed female characters conform to the woman as nation tradition.

Hugh MacDiarmid is arguably the most central figure of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. He played a crucial role in the

recuperation of the Scots language, which had been reduced to dialectal use and was deemed unfit as a literary medium. By collecting words and idioms from different dialects and historical periods (Glen 33), MacDiarmid created a 'synthetic Scots', which he employed as the language of his poetry. However, his 'synthetic Scots' encountered much criticism, from, among others, the poet and critic Edwin Muir, who similarly to T.S. Eliot, considered Scots to be a fragmentary poetic language, unsuitable for communication in every aspect of human life: 'Scots has survived to our time as a language for simpler poetry and the simpler kind of short story ... and it expresses therefore only a fragment of the Scottish mind. ...this linguistic division means that Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another' (Muir 8).

Grassic Gibbon can be said to reconcile the views of MacDiarmid and Muir in the controversy over language. Although he regarded English as a 'foreign' language, and thus, not a natural vehicle for Scottish literature, he was aware that the fragmentation of the Scots language would deem it inadequate for narrative writing. Therefore, his solution was 'to mould the English language into the rhythms and cadences of Scots spoken speech, and to inject into the English vocabulary such minimum number of words from Braid Scots as that remodelling require[d]' (qtd. in Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism* 37). This approach, exemplified in *A Scots Quair*, proved successful for portraying the speech of a Scottish community while remaining accessible for English readers.

Besides the linguistic debate, the Scottish Literary Renaissance was also characterised by nationalism, which became particularly prominent after World War I. Indeed, for the Scottish Modernists, 'Make It New' did not just refer to the transformation of the arts, but to the regeneration of a depressed Scotland and the creation of cultural, social and political welfare. For this reason, beside their primary literary efforts, the members of the Scottish Literary Renaissance also became involved in politics; for instance, MacDiarmid was one of the founders of the National Party of Scotland, Neil M. Gunn contributed to the unification of the National Party and the Scottish Party in 1934 and even Edwin Muir, who was not an advocate of nationalism, showed his enthusiasm with the

achievements of the Scottish Labour Party (Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism* 93-94).

However, the nationalist emphasis of the Scottish Literary Renaissance and its primarily male membership entailed a problematic relationship with gender, since nationalism is considered to be 'a profoundly gendered discourse that interpellates men as 'insiders' while at the same time excluding and quite literally alienating women' (Schoene 83-84). Indeed, Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an 'imagined community' based on 'horizontal comradeship' (7) is essentially masculine, disregarding relations of power and thus failing to account for the role of women in the creation of nationhood. Besides, women's general lack of involvement in nationalism has contributed to their identification 'as signifiers of ethnic / national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic / national categories' (Yuval and Davies 7), leading to the revival of representations of woman as nation. Although allegories of the nation are not restricted to embodiments of womanhood, female representations of the nation are normally highly abstract, adding to the disenfranchisement of real women: 'The female form tends to be perceived as generic and universal, with symbolic overtones; the male as individual, even when it is being used to express a generalised idea' (Warner 12).

The allegorical representation of woman as nation has certainly been fruitful in nationalist movements. Since both woman and land fulfil a reproductive function, the metaphor of the nation as a mother that bears its citizens becomes particularly compelling. However, their parallel role is not limited to physical reproduction, since women are also regarded as the cultural transmitters of tradition (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 9) and symbols of the nation itself:

Women do not only teach and transfer the cultural and ideological traditions of ethnic and national groups. Very often they constitute their actual symbolic figuration. The nation as a loved woman in danger or as a mother who lost her sons in battle is a frequent part of the particular nationalist discourse in national liberation

struggles or other forms of national conflicts when men are called to fight “for the sake of our women and children” or “to defend their honour” (Yuval–Davis and Anthias 9-10).

Two important consequences derive from the quotation above. Firstly, the nation as a woman predates its inhabitants; it is whole and eternal and thus portrayed outside the realm of history. As Anderson remarks, ‘If nation-states are widely conceded to be “new” and “historical”, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future’ (11-12). Secondly, men are considered to be the citizens of the nation, and women are consequently relegated to the fulfilment of a passive symbolic role. This is exemplified in MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, where the statement ‘And nae Scot wi’ a wumman lies / But I am he...’ (961-962) entails that Scots and women are opposing categories, since Scots are those who sleep with women (Whyte 30).

The tradition of representing woman as nation is widespread throughout Europe. As Kirsten Stirling points out, Caledonia can be positioned along other representations of woman as nation, such as Britannia, Marianne in France, or Helvetia in Switzerland (11). However, as opposed to these nations, Scotland is stateless, and as such, the representation of woman as nation never became institutionalised but remained in the realm of literature. In ‘The Representation of Women in Scottish Literature’, Douglas Dunn attempts to trace the literary tradition of representing women as the Scottish nation:

Scotland, like the Muse, is a feminine term and Idea. Among the more obvious examples are Dame Scotia in *The Complaynt of Scotland*, Scota in Ross’s *Helenore*, Burns’s more local Muse, Coila, in *The Vision*, and perhaps also Kilmeny in James Hogg’s magnificent poem of magical nationalism and lyrical affront in which Kilmeny spectates on the past and present predicaments of Scotland. It is an imaginative embodiment which leads to Chris Caledonia in Grassie Gibbon’s novel (16).

However, these examples cannot be said to create a coherent tradition, since their depictions of woman as nation are ambivalent and cannot be always categorised as fully allegorical. For this reason, the writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance had to create their own iconography, and following the influence of Irish nationalist writers such as W.B. Yeats, drew inspiration from the Irish tradition of representing woman as nation that stemmed from the myth of sovereignty goddess in Irish Medieval Literature and continued in the *aisling* poetic genre (Stirling 36-37).

Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* can be categorised as one of the attempts to create a Scottish woman as nation figure. The poem is written in Scots and contains the distorted mental wanderings of a drunk man who is lying on a hillside and looking at a thistle, the symbol of Scotland. His meditations include the situation of the nation but also philosophical concerns with mankind and the self, mixed with an intertextual array of literary references. Although the poem is narrated through the interior monologue of the drunk man, two women feature importantly in his thoughts: 'the silken leddy', the ungraspable spiritual woman, and Jean, the drunk man's wife, an earthly woman connected with the stability of home.

'The silken leddy' is depicted as a mysterious woman who retains a sense of foreignness, since she appears in translated texts, and is associated with alcohol and the supernatural: 'A silken leddy darkly moves. / Slow gangs she by the drunken anes,' (MacDiarmid 196). She is described as 'fey and fremt' (MacDiarmid 193) and has 'an unkennt face' (MacDiarmid 246), which reinforce her uncanniness and relate her to the Scottish tradition of representing the 'troublesome' side of women (Elphinstone 47). Despite being portrayed as a symbol of 'the ideal' (Kerrigan 118), she is perpetually transforming into other symbols, and as such, her existence is challenged by the drunk man, who suggests that 'the silken leddy' could be no more than a reflection of himself: 'Were you a vision o' mysel', / Trasmuted by the mellow liquor?' (MacDiarmid 225-226).

In opposition, Jean, the drunk man's wife, is portrayed as a flesh and blood woman, allegorically connected to the land through her identification with the map of Scotland: 'Sae in the cod I see't in you

/ Wi' Maidenkirke to John o' Groats / The bosom that you draw me to.' (MacDiarmid 958-960). Therefore, Jean is presented as a symbol of home, a protective figure to which the drunk man returns whenever he attempts to escape his anxieties:

Syne liberate me frae this tree,  
As wha had there imprisoned me,  
The end achieved – or show me at the least  
Mair meanin' in't, and hope o' bein' released.  
(MacDiarmid 2052-2055).

Nevertheless, Jean is not solely relegated to materiality, since she draws the drunk man closer to spirituality: 'When Jean has been in bed wi' me, / A kind o' Christianity!' (MacDiarmid 573-574), and thus represents the unity of body and mind which parallels the bodily and cultural reproduction of the nation as woman figure. Despite being threatened by 'the silken leddy', the end of the poem asserts the supremacy of Jean, who is elevated as the true national symbol, epitomising the triumph of the protective and nurturing woman over her eerie counterpart:

Be thou the licht in which I stand  
Entire, in thistle-shape, as planned,  
And no' hauf-hidden and hauf-seen as here  
In munelicht, whisky, and in fleshy fear,  
(MacDiarmid 2036-2039).

Throughout his later poetry, MacDiarmid continues in search of a 'Scottish Muse' and for this purpose, he often assimilates foreign muses into his work. Similarly to Jean, whose dominance is endangered by 'the silken leddy', MacDiarmid's assimilation of external muses imperils the necessary wholeness of the allegorical representation of woman as nation (Stirling 48). Nevertheless, their introduction would be best understood in the context of MacDiarmid's effort to internationalise Scottish poetry and inscribe the Scottish woman as nation figure into the European tradition.

Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, the first novel of his trilogy *A Scots Quair*, follows the development of the heroine, Chris Guthrie,

in the rural community of Kinraddie. Although Chris Guthrie is never explicitly equated with Scotland in *Sunset Song*, she is portrayed as the nation twice throughout the trilogy, both times in *Cloud Howe*: Stephen Mowat points out that on meeting Chris 'he felt he was stared at by Scotland herself' (105) and Robert remarks '*Oh Chris Caledonia, I've married a nation!*' (139). Besides these characters' comments, the connection between Chris and Scotland is further emphasised by the fact that Chris symbolically undergoes the same historical changes as Scotland. As Cairns Craig puts it, she passes from 'the peasant farming community of *Sunset Song*, symbolic of an early Scotland, through the world of the Reformation, as instantiated in her second husband ...to the world of modern industrial society in *Grey Granite*' (165).

However, although implicit, the reading of Chris as the nation is most fruitful in *Sunset Song*, where she is represented as a divided character, exemplifying what G. Gregory Smith termed 'Caledonian Antisyzygy': 'the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability' (qtd. in Palmer McCulloch *Modernism and Nationalism* 6). Chris's split self embodies the main concerns of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, and as such, she can be said to mirror the social and political situation of Scotland. As Douglas F. Young argues, her dilemma represents 'the Scotsman's search for identity' (87), since Chris, similarly to Grassie Gibbon himself, must decide whether to embrace the rural Scotland and its Scots speech or move on to the modern world and the English language:

So that was Chris and her reading and schooling,  
two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and  
tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak  
of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day;  
and the next you'd waken with the peewits crying across  
the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you  
and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you'd  
cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness  
of the Scottish land and skies. ...And the next  
minute that passed from you, you were English,  
back to the English words so sharp and clean  
and true ...till they slid so smooth from your throat

you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all (*Sunset Song* 32).

However, Chris's identification with Scotland goes beyond national borders and is particularly compelling in her connection with the land. To begin with, the titles of the four parts of the book named 'Ploughing', 'Drilling', 'Seed-Time' and 'Harvest', describe the agricultural cycle, which is linked to the physical development of Chris from childhood into sexual maturity and motherhood. As such, the reproductive link between Chris's body and the land emphasises her reading as the nation. Moreover, her connection to the timeless Standing Stones conveys her longing to stand outside history, away from civilisation, exemplifying the eternity of woman as nation figures: 'this old stone circle ... was the only place where ever she could come and stand back a little from the clamour of the days' (*Sunset Song* 108). The land is certainly presented as mythical, characterised by its immutability, as opposed to the folk that farm it, and it is this revelation which prevents Chris from leaving Kinraddie:

And then a queer thought came to her there in the drooked fields, that nothing endured at all, nothing but the land she passed across, tossed and turned and perpetually changed below the hands of the crofter folk since the oldest of them had set the Standing Stones ... She could no more teach a school than fly, night and day she'd want to be back, for all the fine clothes and gear she might get and hold, the books and the light and learning (*Sunset Song* 119-120).

Chris then marries the Highlander Ewan Tavendale, who 'had fair the land in his bones' (*Sunset Song* 22), and dedicates herself to the land, from which she comes and to which she returns in the end of *Grey Granite*, becoming part of the enduring landscape: 'But she still sat on as one by one the lights went out and the rain came, beating the stones about her, and falling all that night while she still sat there, presently feeling no longer the touch of the rain or hearing the sound of the lapwings going by' (204).

Chris's decision to stay in the rural community of Kinraddie

has led Douglas Gifford *et al.* to characterise her as ‘a disappointment, falling short of her possibilities’, concluding that ‘Chris’s role is to remain passive’ (595). Although it has been shown that Chris does indeed fulfil some of the woman as nation characteristics, her reduction to a passive symbolic role would not do justice to her individual characterisation and psychological depth. As Deirdre Burton argues, the representation of Chris as a split self, a common technique in women’s writing, emphasises Chris’s conflictive subjectivities of female experience (38-39), which would be neglected in a purely allegorical reading. Actually, Chris can arguably be regarded as a feminist character (Dixon 289-301), since she is a dynamic young woman who holds her own opinions and actively takes decisions, sometimes against the beliefs of the community. For example, she rejects the oppressive patriarchal values of Calvinism, which led her mother to suicide, and is fully aware of her body and her sexuality: ‘So next time mother was indoors she took off her skirt and then her petticoat and mother coming out with another blanket cried *God, you’ve stripped!* and gave Chris a slap in the knickers, friendly-like, and said *You’d make a fine lad, Chris quean*, and smiled the blithe way she had and went on with the washing’ (*Sunset Song* 60). However, the appearance of John Guthrie turns Chris’s celebration of her body into a shameful act and leads her to remark that she would ‘wear what she liked and have never a man vexed with sight of her, she’d take care of that’ (*Sunset Song* 61). Furthermore, Chris also shows her nonconformity with traditional gender roles, for ‘If only she’d been born a boy ...she’d have ploughed up parks and seen to their draining, lived and lived, gone up to the hills a shepherd and never had to scunner herself with the making of beds or the scouring of pots’ (*Sunset Song* 141).

Chris’s complexity and psychological realism resist her equation with Scotland, and therefore, a purely allegorical reading of Chris would be simplistic. Instead, as Crawford argues, Chris could be best read as a representative of the national personality: ‘If an observer says that a person is “Scotland herself”, and if the remark applies to character, he can only mean that her personality reflects and embodies what the observer conceives to be the national character’ (122). Through her identification with ‘the national character’, Chris escapes Marina Warner’s conceptualisation of the abstract woman as nation,

remaining both a psychologically credible character and a prototype with which we can easily identify.

MacDiarmid and Grassic Gibbon differ in their employment of the woman as nation figure. MacDiarmid adhered to the traditional representation of woman as nation in the figure of Jean, the drunk man's wife, who solely appears in the poem as a projection of the drunk man's desires and is intrinsically connected to home and the Scottish land. Jean embodies the ideals of protection and certainty, and remains unchanged throughout the poem, providing an anchoring point for the drunk man, and thus fulfilling the role of woman as nation. In opposition, Grassic Gibbon's Chris is a much more ambivalent character. Similarly to Jean, Chris is also connected to the land, both physically, in the parallel between her sexual awakening and the agricultural cycle, and emotionally, since she regards the land as a symbol of endurance. Nevertheless, Chris is the protagonist of the trilogy, and through free indirect style, readers gain direct access to her individual thoughts and actions. Chris cannot be said to embody the values of the community, and in fact, she sometimes actively opposes them, for example, in her denial of Calvinism. Consequently, her psychological depth prevents her from fully conforming to the woman as nation figure. While MacDiarmid neglects Jean's subjectivity in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, Grassic Gibbon emphasises Chris's female perspective in *A Scots Quair*, providing 'an understanding of history beyond the limitations of patriarchy' (Burton 46). In conclusion, as these examples have proved, the representation of woman as nation in the Scottish Literary Renaissance can be said to remain ambivalent and never ultimately secured. While MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* succeeds in portraying Jean as the true woman as nation figure, Grassic Gibbon's Chris does not fully accommodate to the traditional portrayal of woman as nation due to her individuality and agency, which problematize her reduction to a symbol of the nation.

Moreover, the failure of the Scottish Literary Renaissance to secure a tradition of woman as nation could be partly related to the hybridity, which according to Alastair Niven, is 'the very nature of Scottish Literature' (331). As such, female symbolic representations of the nation are bound to embody the cultural and linguistic diversity which characterise the Scottish Literary Renaissance, preventing the

constitution of an allegorical female form which must be by definition unitary and whole.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Simon Cooke (University of Edinburgh) and Dr. Carla Rodríguez González (University of Oviedo) for their useful suggestions and constructive criticism which have helped me to improve this paper.

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