THE FAMINE ROAD BY EAVAN BOLAND - COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

CONTEXT:

Eavan Boland's The Famine Road is a powerful exploration of the suffering and dehumanisation experienced by the Irish during the Great Famine of the 1840s. The poem draws parallels between two forms of desolation: the physical hardship of the Irish forced to work on famine relief roads and the emotional desolation of a woman who is unable to conceive a child. Through her use of historical and personal imagery, Boland critiques both the cruelty of British colonial policies and the societal pressures on women, especially in terms of motherhood and fertility. The poem employs stark imagery, ironic tones, and vivid historical references to convey its themes of suffering, loss, and neglect.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS

STANZA 1 (LINES 1-7)

“Idle as trout in light Colonel Jones / these Irish, give them no coins at all; their bones / need toil, their characters no less.”

The opening lines introduce the perspective of the British authorities, who dehumanise the Irish by comparing them to “idle trout.” This comparison suggests that the Irish are perceived as lazy and undeserving of help, reducing their value to mere physical labour. The speaker, presumably a British official, argues that the Irish should receive no monetary compensation; instead, their suffering is framed as a moral lesson, implying that hard labour is the only way to build their “character.”

LINES 1-7 CONTINUED

"Trevelyan's seal blooded the deal table. The Relief / Committee deliberated: 'Might it be safe, / Colonel, to give them roads, roads to force / From nowhere, going nowhere of course?'"

This section refers to Charles Trevelyan, the British official responsible for famine relief, whose policies were notorious for their harshness and indifference. His "seal" metaphorically represents the official approval of policies that exacerbated the suffering of the Irish. The "roads to force / From nowhere, going nowhere" symbolise the futility of the public works projects initiated during the famine, where starving people were made to build roads that led nowhere, with no purpose beyond keeping them occupied.

STANZA 2 (LINES 8-10)

• "One out of every ten and then / another third of those again / women – in a case like yours."

These lines shift the focus to a more personal level, addressing a woman who is struggling with infertility. The calculation of odds here mirrors the impersonal and clinical manner in which women's bodies and fertility are treated. The phrase "in a case like yours" highlights the disconnect between the speaker and the woman's deeply personal grief, suggesting that her experience is just one more statistic, devoid of emotional significance.

STANZA 3 (LINES 11-17)

• "Sick, directionless they worked. Fork, stick / were iron years away; after all could / they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck / April hailstones for water and for food?"

This stanza returns to the famine workers, who are described as "sick" and "directionless," working without purpose or hope. The imagery of "fork" and "stick" being "iron years away" refers to tools and resources that are no longer accessible to the starving workers. The harshness of their conditions is conveyed through the violent image of their knuckles bleeding on the rocks and their desperation in "sucking April hailstones" for nourishment. This reinforces the theme of suffering and neglect, as the workers are forced to endure inhuman conditions.

LINES 11-17 CONTINUED

"Why for that, cunning as housewives, each eyed – / as if at a corner butcher – the other's buttock."

This line highlights the extreme desperation of the famine workers, who are depicted as so starved that they begin to look at one another as potential sources of food. The comparison to a "corner butcher" evokes a grotesque image of cannibalistic survival, illustrating the depths of their suffering.

STANZA 4 (LINES 18-23)

• "Anything may have caused it, spores / a childhood accident; one sees / day after day these mysteries."

Here, the poem shifts back to the woman's infertility. The reference to "spores" and "a childhood accident" suggests that her infertility is being discussed in cold, clinical terms, with no regard for her emotional pain. The dismissive tone of "one sees / day after day these mysteries" implies that her condition is seen as just another medical mystery, with no deeper consideration of the woman's suffering.

LINES 18-23 CONTINUED

"Dusk: they will work tomorrow without him. / They know it and walk clear. He has become / a typhoid pariah, his blood tainted, although / he shares it with some there."

The poem returns to the famine workers, describing one of them who has succumbed to typhoid fever. The other workers are aware that they must continue without him and avoid contact, treating him as a "pariah" due to the fear of contagion. The fact that he "shares it with some there" suggests that the disease is spreading among them, further highlighting the hopelessness of their situation.

STANZA 5 LINES 24-28

"No more than snow / attends its own flakes where they settle / and melt, will they pray by his death rattle."
These lines underscore the utter indifference of the other workers to the man's death. The comparison to snowflakes, which "settle and melt" unnoticed, reflects the dehumanisation and isolation experienced by the famine victims. The phrase "pray by his death rattle" suggests that even in death, the man receives no compassion or care from those around him

STANZA 6 (LINES 29-35)

'It has gone better than we expected, Lord / Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured / in one. From parish to parish, field to field; / the wretches work till they are quite worn, / then fester by their work. We march the corn / to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones / out of my carriage window. Your servant Jones.'

In this final stanza, the poem returns to the famine relief efforts. Lord Trevelyan is congratulated for his policies, which are praised for eliminating “sedition” and “idleness,” implying that the suffering and death of the Irish were acceptable collateral damage for maintaining order. The description of the workers as “wretches” who “fester by their work” underscores the callousness of the British authorities, who are indifferent to the suffering they have caused. The final image of “bones out of my carriage window” symbolises the complete dehumanisation of the famine victims, reduced to mere skeletons in the eyes of those in power.

LINES 29-35 CONTINUED

'Barren, never to know the load / of his child in you, what is your body / now if not a famine road?'

The poem concludes with a devastating comparison between the woman's infertility and the famine road. Just as the famine road leads nowhere, so too does the woman's body, which is described as "barren." This final image connects the physical suffering of the famine victims with the emotional desolation of the woman, suggesting that both are victims of neglect and cruelty.

KEY THEMES

COLONIAL OPPRESSION AND INDIFFERENCE

The poem critiques the indifference of British colonial authorities, represented by figures like Trevelyan, towards the suffering of the Irish during the Great Famine. The famine relief efforts, such as building roads to nowhere, are depicted as dehumanising and futile. The British officials view the Irish as expendable, their suffering dismissed as a necessary means to maintain order.

Quotes:

• 'It has gone better than we expected, Lord Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured in one.'

This quote reveals the British view that the famine was an opportunity to suppress rebellion and laziness, showing a complete disregard for the human cost.

• 'We march the corn to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones out of my carriage window.'

This line emphasises the callousness of the British authorities, who are more concerned with exporting corn than alleviating the suffering of the Irish, reducing the famine victims to “bones.”

SUFFERING AND DEHUMANISATION

The poem highlights the physical and emotional suffering of both the famine victims and the infertile woman. The famine workers are dehumanised, seen as nothing more than labouring bodies, while the woman's infertility is treated with cold detachment, her personal grief dismissed as a mere medical issue.

Quotes:

• 'Sick, directionless they worked. Fork, stick were iron years away; after all could they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck April hailstones for water and for food?'

This image captures the extreme physical suffering of the famine workers, forced to labour in inhumane conditions without proper tools or nourishment.

• 'Barren, never to know the load of his child in you, what is your body now if not a famine road?'

This metaphor draws a parallel between the emotional barrenness of the woman and the physical desolation of the famine road, emphasising the shared experience of loss and hopelessness.

FERTILITY AND WOMANHOOD

The poem explores the societal expectations placed on women regarding fertility. The infertile woman is treated with pity and condescension, her worth seemingly tied to her ability to bear children. The dismissal of her grief reflects the broader theme of women's suffering being overlooked or trivialised.

Quotes:

• 'You never will, never you know but take it well woman, grow your garden, keep house, good-bye.'

This line highlights the societal expectation for women to accept their roles as caretakers, even when they are unable to fulfil the traditional role of motherhood.

• 'Barren, never to know the load of his child in you, what is your body now if not a famine road?'

The comparison of the woman's body to a "famine road" suggests that her inability to conceive is seen as a personal tragedy, echoing the larger theme of desolation and neglect.

MOOD OF THE POEM

The mood of The Famine Road is bleak and accusatory. Boland evokes a profound sense of despair, highlighting the physical and emotional suffering of the famine victims and the infertile woman. The tone is also deeply critical of the British authorities, whose indifference and cruelty are exposed through the stark imagery of death and desolation. The poem invites readers to reflect on the consequences of colonial oppression and societal neglect.

LITERARY DEVICES

JUXTAPOSITION

“Idle as trout in light / these Irish, give them no coins at all”

The comparison of the Irish to idle trout highlights the dehumanising view of the British, who see the Irish as lazy and undeserving of aid. The juxtaposition of living beings with lifelessness evokes a sense of injustice and cruelty.

METAPHOR

'What is your body now if not a famine road?'

The metaphor of the woman's body as a "famine road" links her personal grief with the collective suffering of the Irish during the famine, suggesting that both are victims of neglect and desolation.

IRONY

'It has gone better than we expected, Lord Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured in one.'

The ironic tone here underscores the callousness of the British authorities, who view the famine as a success because it has subdued rebellion and forced the Irish into submission, ignoring the immense human cost.

IMAGERY

'We march the corn to the ships in peace. This Tuesday I saw bones out of my carriage window.'

The vivid image of “bones” seen from a carriage window captures the complete disregard for the lives lost during the famine, reducing the victims to nothing more than skeletal remains in the eyes of the powerful.

CONCLUSION

Eavan Boland's The Famine Road is a searing critique of colonial oppression and societal neglect, drawing parallels between the suffering of the Irish during the Great Famine and the personal grief of a woman unable to conceive. Through its vivid imagery and powerful metaphors, the poem exposes the dehumanisation and indifference that fuelled both personal and collective suffering, challenging readers to confront the consequences of historical and societal injustices.