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Politics of Benevolence: Analyzing Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*

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By

Shivaram Aryal

Roll No.: 34

Symbol No.: 2815039

T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-40-540-2017

Central Department of English

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Politics of Benevolence: Analyzing Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Shivaram Aryal has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee

_____

Maheshwor Paudel

Internal Examiner

_____

Dr. Shiva Raj Panta

External Examiner

_____

Dhruba Bahadur Karki, Ph.D.

Head of Central Department of English

Date:_____

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Abstract

This thesis critically analyses the ideological root of the Good Shepherd's convents depicted in Small Things Like these*, in order to explore the disguise of exploitation in the name of benevolence. The thesis deconstructs the perception of Good Shepherd's convent as benevolent institution, revealing it instead a site of systemic exploitation and confinement through the theoretical frameworks of Louis Althusser's ideology and Roland Barthes' myth. It examines how ideological frameworks and mythic constructs are utilized to uphold such institutions and influence individual subjectivity. It claims that the novel portrays façade of benevolence by depicting how unwed women and girls are reduced to mere worker of the convent's laundry, deprived of identity, and valued only for their utility to the convent. The analysis focuses on how these women and girls are brought to the convent through the restrictive laws that tamed the freedom of women. The thesis concludes that the Good Shepherd's convent as a space of confinement and oppression, veiled behind the guise of education and benevolence. As a newly formed nation-state, Ireland adopted Roman Catholic ideals of 'virtue, purity, and chastity,' perceiving unmarried pregnant women and girls as threats to its national ideology. By enforcing restrictive legislation, the state not only limited women's participation in public life but also institutionalized the confinement of women and girls who defied these societal norms.*

Keywords: benevolence, politics, ideology, myth, convent, women, suppression

The research critically analyzes the politics of benevolence adopted by Good Shepherd's convents in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These,* through the lens of

ideology and myth, applying the theoretical perspectives of Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes. It exposes the convent as a benevolent oppressor that conceals systemic exploitation and confinement under a guise of benevolence. By unveiling the oppressive practices of the convent, where unwed women and girls are forced into labor, and subjugated, the study deconstructs the perception of the convent as a benevolent institution and instead proposes it as a site of exploitation and confinement.

Keegan's *Small Things Like These* published in 2021, unfolds the story of a convent that is far larger than it seems. It is a historical fiction that closely revisits the history of Magdalene Laundries. Ireland's Magdalene Laundries were church run institutions that confined and exploited women and girls, often under the guise of rehabilitation and moral reform. These laundries, supported by the state, subjected the women to forced labor and harsh conditions, while sustaining a system of control and punishment under the disguise of providing care and guidance. In the fiction, the convent operates a laundry business where young women and girls are treated inhumanely; under the guise of providing training and basic education, it exploits them. Through a deeply personal and evocative narrative, Keegan critiques the Magdalene Laundries and the representation of women in 20th-century Ireland.

Keegan, born in County Wicklow, Ireland in 1968, is a celebrated Irish writer best known for her short stories and novellas. She has gained recognition for her work published in renowned publications like *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, and *The Paris Review*. Keegan's notable works include *Antarctica* (1999), *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), *Foster* (2010) and *Small Things Like These* (2021). Keegan's writing explores human relationships and moral complexities, often set in rural Irish contexts.

She completed an MA in creative writing and taught undergraduates at the University of Wales. She then received an M. Phil at Trinity College Dublin.

The research follows the qualitative research method. The research is primarily based on Keegan's *Small Things Like These.* However, the secondary sources like articles, and journals, are used to substantiate the claim. To interpret the text, the researcher has used Louis Althusser's ideas from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" and Roland Barthes' from "Myth Today" respectively. Althusser in his work argues that, ideological state apparatuses are the most silent mechanism of imposing belief system. That closely aligns with my research that claims, the ideological apparatus, the Good Shepherd's convent as a benevolent oppressor. As Barthes claims, myth gives natural justification to the historical intention. In Ireland confining these women and girls to the convent is the historical intention, and myth reframes it as the natural justification of teaching and reforming.

While reading the text, I felt that the Good Shepherd's convent, under the name of a teaching and training school, exploits young women and girls and operates as an oppressive institution that deprives them of their individuality and personal agency. What fuels or conserves this type of institution and how it controls the subjectivity of an individual, interest me in conducting academic research to address the research problem. Ideology and myth play crucial roles in shaping people's beliefs, and I believe the convent employs these same mechanisms to sustain exploitation. The research is essential to examine these issues, as it highlights the dangers of a convent that values conformity over individuality.

Many scholars and critics have analyzed *Small Things Like These* from various perspectives. Mümin Hakkioglu and Mustafa Güneş, in their study claim those confined women and girls to be the modern scapegoats and further affirm:

> The laundry in Keegan's novel, like many of its real-life counterparts, serves a wide network of customers ranging from restaurants to guesthouses, from nursing homes to hospitals, from clergymen to the wealthy, on the shoulders of the training schoolgirls, as they were known. In fact, they are the scapegoats of society and the child laborers of the capitalist order. (337)

These women and girls are scapegoats of society and victims of child labor. They were exploited by a capitalist system that masked their suffering under the guise of education and training.

The protagonist, Bill Furlong, confronts the dark reality of the convent, and helps Sarah Redmond to get out of it. Rayne Slimani argues, "[T]he protagonist's assistance to Sarah plays a pivotal role in empowering women to discover new paths of self-realization" (Slimani 47). Furlong's role symbolizes an act of resistance against the convent that supports women's quest for self-discovery. Similarly, according to Mireia Castells March, "Keegan uses the protagonist to expose the bigger picture of how the Catholic Church used the people's faith and fear of alienation to become immune to criticism in Ireland" (18-19). The Irish State and Church were closely aligned; they prevailed over the thoughts of the people. Consequently, they faced little consequence for their actions, even in the face of criticism.

The fiction revolves around Furlong who is occupied with delivering the last orders of Christmas. Barry Pierce considers, "The novel isn't just an eloquent attack on these laundries, however. It is also a touching Christmas tale, genuinely reminiscent of the festive stories of O. Henry and Charles Dickens" (*The Sunday Times*). Pierce's term 'eloquent attack' implies the fiction critiques the convent's laundry using elegant language and fascinating narrative techniques. Instead of only

providing a backdrop for warmth and rebirth, the Christmas scenario highlights the sharp contrast between societal ideals of charity or benevolence and the hidden realities of exploitation.

Apart from narrative style, Keegan has presented a multi-dimensional and lifelike character in the novel. British writer Lamorna Ash argues, "Despite this relative lack of turbulence in Furlong's past, Keegan provides him with a complex, nuanced inner life. It is this that prevents him, ultimately, from becoming a Dickensian stock figure" (*The Guardian*). The protagonist, Furlong, has a variety of traits, emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and conflicts. That is why, Bill is a multi-dimensional character, and is not just a Dickensian stock figure. At the same time, Keegan seems minimalist while using words and hits straightforwardly on what she wants to express. Shreevatsa Nevatia, in his review writes, "On several occasions . . . Keegan may have attempted to subvert *A Christmas Carol* with both her politics and sparse prose" (*India Today*). Keegan adopts a narrative style that is less descriptive, subverting the Dickensian works.

While going through the novel one can get familiar with the then Irish society where people were struggling to pay their electricity bills, and the dole queues were getting longer. Everyone walking through the streets of New Ross is aware of these events, but the general public is unaware of what happens inside the convent. Women and girls inside the convent are treated inhumanly Anna Mundow in her review states, "[T]he setting for this particular drama is rural Ireland in 1985 where the curse upon the land is not a plague but unemployment and the entities that rule—and casually ruin—people's lives are not the Greek gods but the far less playful clerics of the Catholic Church" (*The Wall Street Journal*). In Ireland, the pervasive issue is not a literal plague but the widespread unemployment and the institutions that rule. The

allusion to Greek gods highlights the immense power and influence of the Catholic Church's clerics, who, unlike the mythological deities, lack playfulness and benevolence. The nuns of the convent sell the infants of confined women to foreigners, demonstrating their double-dealing nature.

As the novel deals with the recent history of Ireland, Sarah Gilmartin mentions, "*Small Things Like These* brings a fresh and sensitive perspective to an awful period in our collective history" (*The Irish Times*). Keegan through her work, offers a nuanced and empathetic reinterpretation of the recent Irish history which is very unpleasant. On a related note, Dani Garavelli in her review, comments on Keegan's writings, "[S]he takes the national scandal of the Magdalene laundries and tells it so quietly you scarcely want to breathe" (*The Herald*). Undoubtedly, Keegan's work addresses the serious issue of the Magdalene Laundries in a very subtle way.

Since women and girls were considered as bearers of virtue and purity, and if they transgressed this national ideology, they were deemed as sinners and confined in those convent's laundries famously known as Magdalene Laundries. Similarly, Hope Lee in her review states these laundries, "[W]ere essentially workhouses for women (especially young and teen woman) who had fallen pregnant out of wedlock . . . families would drop off their female family members there so they could hide their pregnancies from society" (*Bound II Books*). Since the unmarried pregnant women were shamed for their families, society, and the nation, therefore they were confined in those convents.

While existing research on *Small Things Like These* explores themes such as challenging male-centered perspectives, eloquent attract on the convent's laundry, and addressing child labor within a capitalist system, no study has examined how conformity is imposed on the young women and girls who transgress the state's

dominant ideology, in the guise of benevolence.This research paper departs from previous studies and attempts to fill the research gap by interpreting the novel and its context through the lens of Althusser's perspective on ideology and Roland Barthes' concept of myth. It sheds light on the role of ideological state apparatuses, how myth conceals the politics of the convent, and the mechanisms through which the state exercises control over young women and girls.

The following research questions aim to address the problem: Why were only women and girls subjected to confinement in the convent? How were these women and girls victims of the convent and capitalist social formation? Furthermore, how can applying Althusser's framework on Ideology and Barthes's view of myth help us better understand how young women and girls are exploited in the convent in Keegan's *Small Things Like These*? These research questions investigate how the convent in *Small Things Like These* encapsulates Althusser's framework of ideological state apparatus. It also examines the role of myth in contributing to the state's control over those who transgress the national ideology and analyzes how the convent suppresses individuality while promoting conformity among young women and girls.

The research investigates the role of the convent in *Small Things Like These* as an apparatus of state control by analyzing how the state controls and subjugates young women and girls who transgress its moral code. As a historical novel, it depicts the harsh conditions faced by women and girls confined in the convent. Through morals and norms, the state curtails the freedom of women and girls, particularly those who transgress these laws and are thus confined in the convent.

The research follows the qualitative research method. It incorporates Louis Althusser's theoretical framework of "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" as

the primary theory to interpret the text. To further examine how myth helps to sustain the exploitation in the convent, the researcher also employs Roland Barthes' framework of "Myth Today" for the interpretation.

Additionally, the secondary sources for the interpretation and analysis are books, articles, journals, and the internet resources as qualitative data or textual evidence. Since the primary text of this research is a historical novel, that is intricately connected to the Magdalene Laundries of Ireland. To analyze the text the research uses the report of "Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries" as evidence.

Keegan's *Small Things Like These* intricately captures the socio-economic landscape of Ireland during the 1980s, particularly that of December 1985. As the winter cold deepens, the shadow of poverty grows, highlighting the harsh realities endured by many. As some people focus on preparing for the Christmas holiday, the growing queues at unemployment offices serve as a harsh reminder of the ongoing economic hardship. A particularly striking image is that of "a schoolboy drinking the milk out of the cat's bowl" (Keegan 13), which serves as a powerful symbol of the difficult conditions that many families face. Amidst this harsh environment, individual's preoccupation with their own hardships becomes apparent; they appear mostly unconcerned with the struggles of others.

Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant in New Ross, is busy delivering orders before Christmas. The man, in his late forties, lives well with his wife, Eileen, and their five daughters in the town. He himself was raised by a single mother without a known father, at Mrs. Wilson's place, where his mother worked. His mother, Sarah, died while he was just twelve years old. He often contemplates his past, thinking about his mother and the haunting question of who his father was.

One day, while delivering of coal to the convent, he encounters its dark reality: “[T]he girls down on their hands and knees, polishing the floor, and the state they were in” (Keegan 43). The convent, meant to teach and provides skills to the women and girls, ironically thrusts them to poor working condition. This incident places Furlong in a moral dilemma as he faces the reality of the convent’s practices. On Christmas Eve, he rescues a girl named Sarah Redmond from the convent and brings her to his house.

In the article “On the Nature of Benevolence.” Yuval Livnat mentions that the act of benevolence consists of three elements: the emotive element, the performative element, and the cognitive element. *Small Things Like These* presents a nuanced depiction of benevolence through the protagonist Furlong, whose intention of doing good matches with all three elements. His act of benevolence is deeply rooted in emotional empathy, shaped by his past. A son of an unwed mother and no one to call as a father, he was often bullied in school because of this. His inner conflict, filled with pity, guilt, and a sense of justice, reflects the emotional motivation behind his decision ‘to do good.' In the emotive element Livnat mentions, “[T]he benevolent person’s care and concern for others, she/[he] experiences positive or negative feelings . . .she/[he] feels distress at the thought or sight of another’s misery or suffering and feels delight in reflection upon or witnessing another’s good fortune and flourishing” (Livnat 305). After seeing the condition of young women and girls in the convent, he was downhearted; while returning, “he realised he’d missed his turn and was heading in the wrong direction” (Keegan 43). Apart from this, Furlong talked with his wife about the girls and often contemplates about them. These incidents indicate the negative feelings and distress Furlong was facing. On Christmas Eve, he rescues Sarah from the convent’s coal house and brings her to his own house. On the

way to his house, Furlong “smoothed things over as best he could and carried on along with the excitement in his heart” (Keegan 107). This act of Furlong can be considered as an act of easing Sarah’s suffering and promoting her welfare that makes him feel delighted and good. This act of Furlong can be comprised as the emotive element of benevolence.

The performative element of benevolence appears through Furlong’s actions, like rescuing Sarah from the convent and offering a lift and some money to a boy. Mick Sinnott is a drunkard; he does not care about his family. One day, Furlong saw Sinnott’s son searching for sticks in the rain. Furlong “pulled over and offered him a lift and gave him what bit of change was loose in my pocket” (Keegan 10). Offering some change to the boy may not completely reduce his suffering. In this regard, Livnat asserts, “one can indeed be said to have acted benevolently irrespective of whether one’s (sincere and rational) attempt to do good succeeds or fails” (Livnat 310). Furlongs offering lift in the rain and giving him some money can reduce some sufferings of the boy. According to Livnat, “In order to be considered benevolent, therefore, one has to at least make a sincere and rational attempt to actualize her/[his] will to ease suffering of the beneficiary” (309). Furlong’s decision to help Sarah is a cautious act, as it is based on his logical assessment of the ongoing exploitation within the convent.

In the article, Livnat claims, “[I]n order for one’s attempt at doing good to be considered benevolent, it is not enough that the attempt be sincere; it must also be rational” (312). While rescuing Sarah from the convent, Furlong's mind was preoccupied with many conflicting emotions. At one point, he considers taking the girl to the priest’s house but concludes, “They’re all the one” (Keegan 106). He presumes the priest was already aware of what was happening inside the convent.

Furlong's effort to rescue Sarah is a genuine act of kindness, and his sincerity, combined with his assumption about the priest's awareness, demonstrates a thoughtful and sincere choice Furlong made, which is the cognitive element of benevolence. While talking about rational attempts, Furlong lacks this or is simply ready to face the consequences of his action bravely. Bringing Sarah to his home is an act of resisting against the current social order, which is dominated by church and convent. Furlong has to face the consequences of his action that lacks rationality, which will further create trouble for his family. This is how the novel presents the subtle depiction of benevolence through the protagonist Furlong.

In contrast, the act of the convent is a façade of benevolence. The convent of the novel is an example of the institution of Ireland that was also known as the Magdalen Laundries and Magdalen Asylum. According to James M. Smith, "The origins of Ireland's Magdalen asylums stretch back to 1767 when Lady Arbella Denny opened the first refuge for "fallen women" at 8 Leeson Street in Dublin" (Smith 52). At the time, Arbella Denny's purpose of establishing such an institution was philanthropic, to support so-called "fallen women." Over the course of time, the purpose of these institutions was changed. The convent conceals its true intentions; in the name of educating and reforming young women and girls, it exploits them. The convent also lacks the three components of benevolence mentioned by Yuval Livnat. The emotive element of benevolence revolves around a genuine care and concern for others, which the convent lacks, as it exploits women and girls under the guise of training and education. The performative aspect of benevolence demands sincere and rational efforts to ease suffering or promote well-being; here too, the convent fails, as it only escalates the suffering of these women and girls. The cognitive element of benevolence emphasizes that true benevolence requires not only a sincere intent to do

good but also a rational assessment. While the convent may believe its actions are justified by the notion of reforming and teaching morals, this rationalization does not align with true benevolence. The convent in the name of training and transforming these women and girls, forcing them to work under a very harsh condition.

The novel juxtaposes the different purposes of benevolence through the protagonist Furlong and the convent. The convent was established for philanthropic purposes, to teach and provide basic education to the young women and girls of the convent. As the years passed, its purpose of philanthropy and benevolence weakened since it was under the capitalist social formation. It started serving them, and the laundry business is one of the examples. At the same time, Furlong's attempts to help are an actual act of benevolence. This juxtaposition depicts the politics of benevolence in the novel.

After being partitioned from Britain in 1921, Ireland the newly formed state started to follow Roman Catholic beliefs. Hakkioglu and Gunes assert, "Especially after the independence, the Irish embraced the Catholic ideas of "purity, chastity, and virtue" to distance themselves from the British" (334-5). To distinguish itself from the British, and for the formation of national identity, Ireland adopted these beliefs. The state and Catholic Church was equally powerful institutions, and the Church went largely unquestioned during the time. James M. Smith, in his book, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* states, "For the vast majority of Irish politicians, civil servants, and members of the judiciary, publicly challenging the church's moral authority was inconceivable. To do so was to challenge the very relationship binding Irish national identity and Catholicism" (49). Among the majority of Irish officials and authorities, questioning the Church's influence was unthinkable, as it would have undermined the very foundation of the

state's identity. In order to preserve the nation's identity, the state and Church upheld mutual respect for not questioning one another.

In Keegan's *Small Things Like These,* there is a clear depiction of both Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State apparatuses (ISAs), as theorized by Althusser. RSA primarily functions through force and violence, and secondarily through ideology, while in contrast ISAs primarily function through ideology and secondarily through violence. Althusser asserts that public domains such as the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, and the Prisons are the RSA (142-3). He further mentions the ISAs in contemporary capitalist social formation namely the educational apparatus, the religious apparatus, the family apparatus, the political apparatus, the trade-union apparatus, the communications apparatus, and the 'cultural' apparatus (150). In the novel, the Police (Gardaí) are the RSA, while the convent is the ISA. These types of state apparatuses serve to reinforce the ruling ideology of the State, which is itself another RSA. In the text, the Mother Superior of the convent mentions, "We were about to call the Gardaí" (Keegan 62). Sarah Redmond was locked up in the coal house, and they were not finding her and about to call the Gardaí. This portrays that RSA is protecting ISA and vice versa, to keep in existence of both institutions.

Made in the backdrop of the influence of the church in Ireland, Steve Humphries-directed Irish documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* the narrator interprets:

> Until recently, the Catholic Church in Ireland went largely unquestioned as the republic's highest moral authority, and its teachings on sexual behavior were simple and strict: sex outside marriage was not only objectionable but like murder, a mortal sin. Women who fell under suspicion were condemned by both the community and the Church as fallen women. (0:06-0:31)

The documentary highlights the influence of the Church in Ireland and how women who failed to maintain chastity were labeled as 'fallen women'. This term closely aligns with the novel, where training school girls were labeled as "girls of low character." On a similar note, the narrator further elucidates, "Contraception was illegal and there was no sex education but religious dogma alone failed to prevent many thousands of single young women from becoming pregnant" (Humphries 5:18-5:27). These women, who became pregnant out of wedlock, became the threats to the foundation of national identity of Ireland. Therefore, they became the subjects of confinement in the institution like convent, in order to be reformed.

The convent supremacy is regarded as an unquestioned social norm. Martha Cooney one of the women who was confined in those reformatory institution contends, "[T]he nuns were gods to you, you didn't dare questioned them, what they done was right and you followed their instructions" (Humphries 21:03-21:10). The belief that the nuns are gods, one cannot question them, is a myth created by those who are in authority. In "Myth Today", Roland Barthes argues, "[M]yths has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification" (58). This means myth reverses the historical intention into natural justification. On the one hand, the nuns are human figures; they are not inherently gods. Although they are the people who hold power over others, their actions are constructed by socio-cultural and institutional norms. The very idea that nuns' authority is unquestionable or divine is the historical intention. On the other hand, the myth of the nuns portrayed as deities turns their authority into something that is natural, sacred and or inherent.

Small Things Like These deconstructs the convent's façade as a benevolent institution, exposing its exploitative and oppressive practices hidden beneath a guise of charity and moral superiority. The nuns of the convent teach moral values to the

young women and girls whose chastity is questioned, but who will question these nuns about their heinous deeds? In the novel, the narrator interprets, others claimed that this institution was no better than a mother-and-child home where ordinary, single girls would go to be hiding away after giving birth. "[T]heir illegitimates had been adopted out to rich Americans, or sent off to Australia" (Keegan 39). The nuns profited from distributing these babies abroad, indicating that this was a profitable industry they were operating. This exposes the false appearance of morality and benevolence in the institution that claimed to provide shelter and care. It also reveals how unmarried mothers and their children were treated as commodities by the nuns, under the façade of charity and benevolence. On a similar note, Clara Fischer states, "Their children were usually "boarded out" to foster parents, sent to industrial schools, or adopted by Catholics families, particularly in the United States" (831). This fact elucidates what truly happened within such institution of Ireland. While Fisher clarifies the practice of boarding out of the children, Keegan meticulously emphasized the nun's business about sending off to these so-called illegitimate children. Thus, by exposing its exploitative and oppressive practices, the novel deconstructs the façade of the convent as a benevolent institution.

In Ireland at that time, pregnancy outside of marriage was seen as a sinful act, but Mrs. Wilson offered Furlong's mother both a place to live and continue her work, where Furlong was brought up. Furlong grew up under the care of his mother, who provided him with a good upbringing despite the absence of his father. However, his unfulfilled curiosity about his father's identity underscores the profound impact of absent parentage on personal identity formation. He was 12 years old when his mother passed away, he never knows who his father was. At times, he probes, "Where was his father now? Sometimes, he caught himself looking at older men, trying to find a

physical resemblance" (Keegan 21). Furlong's longing to connect with his absent father is evident as he looks for clues in older men. His actions highlight the emotional void created by his father's absence and his continuous struggle to establish a full sense of identity. After he married Eileen, he made up his mind to ask Mrs. Wilson about his father, but then he thought that it might seem rude. Later, "Mrs. Wilson took a stroke and was taken into hospital" (21). The answer to his question remains unanswered.

Ned is one of the men working at Wilson's, and Furlong is very close to him. After his mother's death, Ned looks after Furlong. On Furlong query about his father, Ned replies that his mother never shared it, but as many visitors had come to the house that summer before Furlong was born, so it could be anyone. They were big relations of the Wilsons and friends of theirs, over from England, fine-looking people who "used to hire a boat and go fishing for salmon on the Barrow. So who knew whose arms his mother had fallen into?" (83). This response leaves Furlong's question about his father unresolved, deepening his sense of confusion and isolation. The mention of his mother's interactions with multiple visitors escalates Furlong's torment, as it points out the uncertainty surrounding his paternity and deepens his struggle with identity.

In the name of conserving purity, virtue, and chastity as the marker of national identity, the Irish state suppressed the individual identities of women and girls. If they are identified by the state as threats to its identity, they are subjected to confine. Fischer mentions that the strong desire to uphold the myth of Irish purity, especially the claim by Arthur Griffith, "Irish women are the most virtuous in the world," required hiding any visible signs of impurity (827). The state establishes various

institutional settings across Ireland to hide individuals it recognizes as threats to the ideal of Irish purity.

After their confinement, the state, through these established institutions, intervenes in the individual's self. For instance, by changing their names and roughly cutting their hair, the state employed the rituals of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) of the convent. In the novel, Furlong during a conversation with the girl he found in the coal house who was surrounded by Mother superior and nun, he asked:

> 'Won't you tell me your name?'
>
> She glanced back at the nun. 'I go by Enda in here,'
>
> 'Enda?' Furlong said. 'Is that not a boy's name?' She wasn't fit to reply.
>
> 'But what's your own name?' Furlong gentled.
>
> 'Sarah,' She said. 'Sarah Redmond.' (71)

This is evidence of how the convent suppresses Sarah's sense of self and interferes with her subjectivity. During a visit to the convent, Furlong comes across a group of young women and girls, a moment that exposes him to the concealed realities of the institution. "One girl had an ugly stye in her eye, and another's hair had been roughly cut, as though someone blind had taken to it with shears" (Keegan 41). These are the examples of the convent's ISAs rituals that solely suppress the individuality of the subjects living there. In this way, the state in the name of conserving state's identity, suppresses the individuality of the confined women and girls.

Neither the RSA nor the ISAs operate independently; they are interconnected and rely on each other. According to Althusser, ISAs mainly influence through ideology, but also rely on subtle forms of repression to maintain control. Althusser opines, "There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus." Churches and schools implement a variety of disciplinary measures, including selection, expulsion,

and punishment. “to ‘discipline’ not only their shepherds, but also their flocks” (145). Institutions like schools and churches do not solely rely on teaching values, but also use disciplinary actions. The phrase “discipline not only their shepherds, but also their flocks” means these institutions maintain discipline not only among the superiors within these institutions but also among the members or students. As depicted in the novel, the nuns conform to the norms and beliefs of the convent and instruct young women and girls to do the same. In addition to instilling these beliefs, the nuns compel them to work in the laundry. By doing so, they uphold the religious ideology of the state, which centers on purity, chastity, and virtue, and impose these ideals on those deemed as girls of low character.

The Irish national identity largely depended on women’s purity, virtue, and chastity; any possible obscenity was seen as a threat to this identity, as it was the dominant ideology of the state. To defend against these potential threats, the state initiated the regulation and enforcement of sexual norms through the implementation of restrictive legislation that curtails women’s role in the public sphere. Clara Fischer in her research article mentions, Ireland enforced sexual morality through regressive legislation, restricting women to domestic spheres, "corrupting influences through censorship" (Fischer 823), and punishing transgressors to maintain moral and sexual purity. In this context, women and girls who engaged in unethical sexual affairs and violate rules and norms are viewed as threats to Ireland’s national identity. As a result, they are subjected to confinement. The foundation of the national identity is the ruling ideology of the state.

Although the state established laws, women and girls who violated these regulations were out of the control of the state’s authority. The state began categorizing offenses like house-breaking, theft, and socially condemned pregnancies

by age group and subsequently assigned confinement to different institutions based on these classifications. Clara Fischer interprets this national grand design as, "Institutionalization: The Irish solution to an Irish problem" (825). In this regard, if a woman or girl violates rules and regulations, she has to face the remand and thereafter forced to be confined. In McAleese report, it is mentioned in this way:

> If a girl on remand is deemed undesirable for the 'Remand Home', she may be sent to the Magdalen Asylum without official sanction, even if she is still a juvenile and awaiting trial for offenses like house-breaking or larceny. These girls are often sent to the Reformatory School, St. Joseph's, Limerick. If the Manager learns they spent a week in High Park, they are no longer considered suitable subjects for St. Joseph's and are transferred to the Good Shepherd Convent. This is a poor start for young girls under 16 years who may not have had immoral tendencies. (215)

While on remand, if the manager deems them guilty, they could even be sent to the Magdalen Asylum without official approval. If they are considered unsuitable for St. Joseph's, they are transferred to the 'Good Shepherd Convent'. The convent of the Keegan's novel, closely aligns with the McAleese report. The convent retains unmarried pregnant young women for the purpose of basic education, a tactic that conceals their exploitation.

For an ideology to survive, it requires the obedience and active participation of individuals who accept and follow its principles. Althusser argues, "[T]here is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects." It means, "there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject" (170). It means that ideology cannot sustain without people, and they are part of the ideology itself. The ideology is created by the people and for the

people. In the text, the convent is interpellating these young women and girls as subjects through the state's dominant ideology. For instance, the daily work these young women and girls were forced to perform shaped their mentality, convincing them that they must have committed a grave wrongdoing, without realizing it. This fostered a sense of obligation to obey the nuns to cleanse the shame they were told they had brought on themselves and their families.

As the national identity of Ireland was assured on purity, chastity, and virtue; if any women and girls transgress this identity, are considered to be punished. "[W]omen and girls who constituted threats to this identity were constructed as bringing shame onto themselves, their families, and their nation and were therefore deemed to be deserving of punishment and confinement" (Fischer 827). In this way, the entire state apparatuses intentionally targeted women and girls. Regardless of whether they have committed any crimes, they are portrayed as the sole bearers of shame for their families and their nation, and thus, the only ones who must be subjugated.

These women and girls, labeled as transgressors, are often unable to remain in their parental homes due to the stigma and shame their presence is believed to bring upon themselves and their families. With no possible alternatives for shelter, they face the dual threats of homelessness and state intervention. Those found living on the streets are frequently arrested by the authorities. McAleese's report committee identified instances where:

> Informally placed girls and women in institutions by Gardaí or probation officers without court proceedings, often involving temporary homelessness or, "in one case, a young girl being protected from prostitution", were often

> short-term and not limited to Magdalen Laundries, City or County Homes, and other religious-run institutions. (206)

Authorities, including the Gardaí (Police) and probation officers, can detain these women and girls without any court procedures. While cases such as "a young girl being protected from prostitution" are cited, it is questionable whether these interventions truly ensured their safety. Although the girl may have been placed in a reformatory institution, her vulnerability to exploitation likely persisted. Whether on the streets or within the institution, she remained at risk of abuse and mistreatment.

The convent was directly managed by Mother Superior and nuns, it was deeply influenced by the broader patriarchal system and ideology. "[P]riests made regular visits to the Magdalen asylums to conduct mass and take confession" (Humphries 32:07- 32:13). The Church had direct influence over the convent. In the novel, there is a congregational ceremony where priest visits to conduct Mass, "he genuflected with his back to the congregation before taking his place at the altar" (Keegan 77). These examples portray that the convent is not an entirely independent institution, because its structure, functions and beliefs are shaped by patriarchal ideology. The convent operated under the Church, which served as another form of ideological state apparatus. Both these forms of ideological apparatuses preserved the dominant ideology of the state, eventually patriarchal ideology. The moral beliefs as such are misogynistic, as they typically view women as threats. The things that have been mentioned so far suggest that the patriarchal, male-centric perspective was the driving force behind the subjugation of women. Ultimately, because of this male-centric perspective, only the women and girls were subjected to confinement in the convent as punishment.

The narrator reflects, "[T]he convent, ran a training school there for girls, providing them with a basic education. They also ran a laundry business" (Keegan 38). The convent is an educational site that trains and provides basic education to girls. It also managed the laundry business simultaneously which is the site of confinement and exploitation of women and girls. According to Althusser, educational apparatus is the dominant ISA in capitalist social formation, "One ideological State apparatus certainly, has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School" (154-5). In the laundry, the labor of women and girls was entirely unpaid, making it a site and stake of exploitation. Their work generated profits that helped to sustain the institution, which highlights why the educational domain functions as a dominant ISA within capitalist social formations.

The convent is an agent of producing labor power for the laundry with the support of the dominant state ideology and serves the established capitalist orders. The convent manages an educational training school for girls, "providing them with a basic education" (Keegan 38). In the name of a training school, the convent produces labor power to serve the ruling class and actually runs a laundry business. The convent's training for the girls is limited to teaching them laundry skills, such as washing clothes and the basic education to follow the nun's order, thereby ensuring their conformity to the prevailing ideology. Althusser in his article mentions, "The reproduction of labor power thus reveals as its *sine qua non* not only the reproduction of its 'skills' but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology" (133). The convent not only reproduces labor power but also forces them to continue, accept and follow the beliefs and values of the ruling system. Simultaneously, the convent is using those girls to serve established orders in the support of the national ideology.

The laundry has a good reputation for its standard of service to, “restaurants and guesthouses, the nursing home and the hospital and all the priests and well-off households sent their washing there” (38). The laundry serves the charitable institutions like hospitals and nursing homes, as well as to the upper class and established capitalist orders.

These girls who are working in the convent are the forced and exploited laborers; they are confined at first and later they have to serve the convent. The state plays a dominant role in confining these women and girls and then the convent exploits and forces them to labor. The convent does not have to care for the reproduction of labor power, since it does not pay the laborers. To sustain the reproduction of labor power, Althusser writes, “giving labor power the material means with which to reproduce itself: by wages” (130). While the ordinary workers are paid for their work, these girls receive nothing, only food to sustain them. That is why the convent does not have to care about the laborers since they can exploit those women and girls. Once, Furlong encounters these young women and girls in the convent, he finds them, “down on their hands and knees with tins of old-fashioned lavender polish and rags, polishing their hearts out in circle on the floor” (Keegan 40). This phrase shows the vulnerability and how these young women and girls are exploited in the convent. The convent is the agent of producing labor power, while on the other hand, the state is the agent of reproducing labor power through its dominant ideology. These women and girls are the victims of the convent and capitalist order.

The ongoing laundry business was known to the people of New Ross, but they were unaware of what was really happening inside the convent. Although there were rumors about the convent in the town, “Some said that the training school girls, as they were known, weren’t students of anything, but the girls of low character who

spent their days being reformed, doing penance by washing stains out of the dirty linen, that they worked from dawn till night" (Keegan 38-9). These are the only rumors of the town; the exact reality of the convent was unknown to outsiders, that their so-called penance is a cover for exploitation disguised as reform.

During the month of December everything seems freezing, but the young women and girls of the convent has no excuse from it. Since they just have to work; like cleaning the floor with a lot of care and effort, often in a very difficult way. For instance, Sarah was locked in the cold, "the girl within had been there for longer than the night" (Keegan 59). The girl was not even aware of the time as it was morning or night. She said, "I'm out now" (60). Sarah feels a surge of happiness simply because she believes she is free from the convent this incident depicts how the young women and girls were exploited in the convent.

The convent, presented as a charitable reformatory home, is in reality an exploitative workhouse that masks its true intentions in the name of charity. In *Small Things Like These* the convent frames its exploitation of unmarried mother as a moral duty to reform "girls of low character", concealing the historical and systemic oppression of women labeled as such. Barthes further contends, "myth in bourgeois society is depoliticized speech" (58). It takes out of the realm of politics and historical context, presents itself as natural. In this process, "myth does not deny things" but simplifies and purifies them, "it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification", and further, "it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of statement of fact" (59). In 1926 Archbishop of Tuam, Dr. Gilmartin stated, "The future of the country is bound up with the dignity and purity of the women of Ireland" (Fischer 821). This is the statement of fact Gilmartin declared; it gives clarity to the people of Ireland that women's dignity and purity are regarded

as the future of the country. At the same time, those women who cannot maintain the dignity are deemed as transgressors and are therefore, confined in convents or other reformatory institutions of the state. This ongoing situation provides a natural justification to the people, like in the novel the people of town believe these girls are not the students of anything but are "girls of low character" who will be reformed by doing penance through washing clothes. Similarly, during the formation of Ireland's national identity, it was considered essential for the country to differentiate itself from Britain by embracing Roman Catholic values, reflecting the prevailing intentions of that era. As previously noted, the ideals of Catholic beliefs center on 'purity, chastity, and virtue'. Those who deviate from these principles are expected to reform themselves by residing in reformatory institutions, such as the convent depicted in the novel. This gives natural justification to the historical intention. It appears clear and meaningful on the surface but hides the human intention and power that shaped it.

As an ideological state apparatus, the convent plays a crucial role in upholding the dominant ideology of the state. By teaching Christian morals to young women and girls who fail to adhere to them and exploits them by forced labor, it also serves the interests of the ruling and upper class. Nonetheless, the same dominant ideology or Christian morals also play a role in resisting the ongoing exploitation of the convent. As stated by Althusser, "The Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle" (147). ISA function as both instruments of domination and spaces where class conflict escalates as marginalized groups challenge the existing power structures. The convent through the support of repressive apparatus and dominant ideology of the state exploits these young women. While at the same time, the working classes can challenge or resist the dominant ideology.

Furlong contemplates whether life is meaningful without supporting each other and further questioned, “Was it possible to carry on along all the years, the decades, through an entire life without once being brave enough to go against what was there and yet call yourself a Christian, and face yourself in the mirror?” (Keegan 108). Furlong is questioning how someone can truly live according their faith if they do not confront uncomfortable truth, take risks for justice, or make sacrifices when needed. Furlong asks himself these questions after rescuing Sarah Redmond from the convent. While the same ideology or the Christian morals, can serve as a means of exploitation for the convent, it is also the same ideology which drives Furlong to defy the convent and the society. Thus, the ISA function both as mechanism of domination and as potential sites of resistance.

During his first encounters with the young women and girls at the convent. One of them asks Furlong, “‘Just take me as far as the river. That’s all you need do’. . . ‘Or you could just let me out at the gate’”, he replied, “‘It’s not up to me, girl. I can’t take you anywhere’” (Keegan 41). That girl even asked Furlong, “‘Take me home with you, then. I’ll work til I drop for ya, sir’” (41). The request of the girl depicts the vulnerability of the those who are confined in the convent. The phrase “I’ll work til I drop” reflects a willingness to endure extreme hardship in exchange for being rescued from the convent. Later that night, Furlong tells Eileen about the condition of girls he encountered at the convent. She reacted, “Those who put in there because they hadn’t a soul in this world to care for them” (46), and it had nothing to do with them, “‘Tis not one of ours’” (46). Furlong was not pleased with Eileen's response, but to him these things mattered. He counters Eileen, “Isn’t it a good job Mrs. Wilson didn’t share your idea? . . . Where would my mother have gone? Where would I be now?” (47). Furlong understands that Mrs. Wilson offered a shoulder to lean on for his

mother. If she had not been there to help, his mother would have likely ended up in the convent and he might have been sent to an orphanage or elsewhere.

Furlong's quest to know who his father was remains unsolved throughout the novel. Perhaps the author intends to show the unwed mother's condition in a particular context, where illegitimate infants were adopted out and sold by the nuns of the convent. The unmarried mother remains there just because the man who impregnated her did not accept her and she has to stay in an institution like the convent. To portray the suffering of an unwed mother's story of the convent, the author attempts to bring a character like Furlong who was born from an unmarried mother and has struggled with identity formation because of the absence of his father. She gives justice to the overall plot of the novel but to some extent, she did injustice to Furlong, by not letting know him about his father who was always eager to know who his father was.

Furlong who grew up without a father and the son of an unwed mother, now raises five daughters. His personal experiences with absence and hardship make him deeply aware of the exploitation of unwed mothers (young women and girls) at the convent. He believes that, if Mrs. Wilson was not there to help his mother, she must have been confined in the other institution like the convent. These things escalate, Furlong to rescue Sarah Redmond from the convent, "You'll come home with me, Sarah" (105). Furlong sees a resemblance between Sarah and his own mother, who shared the same name. To some extent, his personal sentiments create a sense of understanding and care for the girl in the convent. It demonstrates how his painful past directly influences his decision to confront the institutionalized exploitation, which is deeply connected to his own history.

Furlong, a working-class coal merchant, encounters the dark side of the convent while delivering some supplies. Although he had heard rumors about the convent before, what he saw that day really intrigued him and motivated him to do something. On another visit, Furlong finds a girl named Sarah inside the coal house of the convent, and he hands her over to the Mother Superior. The incident of Furlong's visits to the Mother Superior spreads across the town and Mrs. Kehoe (restaurant owner) asks him "I hear you had a run-in with herself above at the convent?", he confirms his visit to the convent. (Keegan 94). During the conversation, Mrs. Kehoe mentions, "Keep the enemy close, the bad dog with you and the good dog will not bite you" (94). With this statement, Mrs. Kehoe warns him about the potential risks of his actions. Despite the challenges, Furlong rescues Sarah from the convent. What motivates him to rescue her is the same ideological apparatus, the religious apparatus or the Christian morals, that guide his action.

The women and girls are deprived of their agency, confined within the convent, and forced to tolerate suffering in oppressive conditions. Such actions cannot be considered benevolent, as they exploit rather than help or uplift them. As the convent was built to reform and teach to those women and girls, whom the State assumed as threats to maintain the national identity, in the context of novel, the Good Shepherd's convent and similar institutions across Ireland, the State was involved directly or indirectly. According to James M. Smith till the date of 12 February 2002, "The state, to this day, considers the Magdalen laundries 'voluntary,' 'charitable,' and 'private institutions' (48). Under the mask of charity, education, and care, these institutions hide exploitative and oppressive practices. Only after the, "Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries", confirmed the state's involvement in the Magdalene Laundries.

In February 2013, Enda Kenny, the Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach), formally apologized on behalf of the state for its role in the Magdalene Laundries. Although Ireland's last Magdalene Laundry closed in 1996, the Irish government apologized to the victims seventeen years later. Thus, it verifies the act of convent as façade of benevolence.

In conclusion, this research has examined the politics of benevolence in *Small Things Like These,* and claimed that the convent is a site of confinement and subjugation concealed under the façade of education and benevolence. Ireland, as the new nation-state, follows Roman Catholic beliefs of 'virtue, purity and chastity', and treats unmarried pregnant women and girls are the threats to maintain this national ideology. In the name of conserving national ideology of the state, the institution like convent played a crucial role in sustaining the ideology. The other institution such as Magdalene Asylum, Magdalen Laundries, Good Shepherd Convent, Reformatory School are some of the names that serves the state and the church. The state, through the implementation of restrictive legislation that curtailed women's role in public spaces and confined women and girls who transgress the laws to these established institutions.

The repressive state apparatuses, such as the state and the police (Gardaí), promoted the exploitations occurring within the convent, a site of Ideological state apparatus. Through the help of ISA rituals, the convent expected conformity from young women and girls. By imposing the convent's rituals, the convent deprived them of their individuality and personal agency. These women and girls became the forced free laborers for the convent and capitalist order. The imposition of the narrative of chastity and nuns as God are the 'myths' that played a significant role in perpetuating their confinement within the convent. The research, through unveiling the oppressive

practices of the convent, deconstructs the perception of the convent as a charitable, benevolent institution and instead proposes it as a site of exploitation and confinement.

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