Renaming and Carceral Silence in Irish Fictional Representations of the Magdalene Laundries

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https://doi.org/10.29081/CP.2025.30.05

Abstract

This paper explores the practice of renaming as a mechanism of identity erasure within the framework of the Magdalene laundries, in contemporary Irish literature. The laundries were institutions where women labelled as 'sinners' were confined and exploited. In the context of the construction of the Irish Catholic State, the systematic erasure of identity through the practice of renaming functioned as a means of enforcing silence on the incarcerated women. The paper employs a literary analysis methodology, with a focus on the selected works of V.S. Alexander and Claire Keegan with the aim of elucidating the ways in which the Magdalene laundries reflect broader cultural anxieties. The findings highlight the role of tools such as renaming and isolation to dehumanize the penitents and exert social control. The paper has practical implications for understanding how literature contributes to the critique of institutional power while preserving historical memory. The novelty resides in the analysis of the symbolic and performative role of renaming in literary representations of the Magdalene laundries, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary discussions on gender, memory and narrative justice.

Keywords: *carcerality, gendered victimhood, Magdalene laundries, Otherness, renaming*

1. Introduction

The Irish nation is characterised by a unique cultural and political landscape that evolved as a result of the binomial relations of power established between the State and the Catholic Church. The

new state developed along the following main paths: intersection of Church/State relations of power; patriarchal practices that promoted gender bias; the advancement of the idea of women's purity and the exploitation of women as a result of this.

1922 was the year that marked the establishment of the Irish Free State and, together with the creation of the new state, the government also tried to instil in its citizens a strong sense of nationhood. Cooper (2022: 132) points out that the result was that religious organisations, especially those under the control of the Catholic Church, were granted a substantial social control. These focused on the ideas of moral purity and respectability and, as such, began to institutionalise those who did not fit the moral profile. Black (2024: 4) suggests that there were two threats that the state perceived as important, namely "the ongoing risk of subversive violence, and the moral risk inherent in the bodies of women." Fischer (2016: 829) explains that the Irish found "an Irish solution to the Irish problem of sexual immorality" which was threatening to taint the image of a pure national identity; thus, the enforcement of a system that not only punished, but mainly hid those who were seen as transgressors was "to be found in an increasingly powerful network of institutions".

This paper argues that the replacement of women's birth names with religious aliases, combined with the imposed silence within and outside the laundries, contributed to a broader societal mechanism of moral regulation and gendered oppression. The literary works chosen to exemplify this serve as both depictions and ways of challenging the complicity of the Catholic Church, Irish State, and society in perpetuating systemic violence against women. The paper uses the literary representations in *The Magdalen Girls* (2017), by V.S. Alexander and *Small Things Like These* (2021), by Clare Keegan, to argue that institutional renaming (through the use of impersonal identifiers or the imposition of saintly appellatives) and carceral control worked as instruments of epistemic violence aimed at systemic

dehumanization of women and erasing female subjectivity to enforce conformity to patriarchal and theological norms.

Although the aim of this paper is to reveal a portrait of the systematic repression of women through religious institutions in Ireland, the themes of the works discussed resonate profoundly with the broader framework of British culture, particularly those referring to patriarchal power structures and moral regulation. The intertwining of Church and State in Ireland, as illustrated in this paper, echoes the legacy of British colonial rule, which has long influenced the Irish socio-political framework, ultimately leaving a residue of hierarchical, gendered moral control. In some way, the Magdalene laundries could also be read as some kind of outgrowths of a British-imposed structure of discipline, in which moral deviance (especially the one related to female sexual agency) was not only hidden from the public eye but also criminalised. The systemic stripping away of women's identities, names, and autonomy in the Magdalene laundries aligns with a broader cultural pattern visible not only in colonial British history, but also in the domestic history where institutions like workhouses, borstals, and asylums functioned in a similar manner in order to regulate, confine, and ultimately to 'normalize' the bodies of those individuals who were considered socially deviant. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the Magdalene system in Ireland is a continuation of punitive ideologies which were institutionalized during centuries of British rule and re-appropriated by an independent Irish state seeking to project a purified national identity. Both British and Irish social narratives were constructed around the idea of respectability, morality, and purity and they were often based on the duality of the image of women, as either moral examples or social threats. The Magdalene laundries are not uniquely an Irish phenomenon, as they could be found all across the U.K. – in England and Scotland as well – but they are most commonly linked to Ireland due to the magnitude of the phenomenon and to the fact that it persisted until well into the

20th century. They became rooted in cultural mechanisms that surpassed national borders, and which were set in motion by patriarchal and institutional violence. They also advanced a culture of "otherness" which promoted discipline and an erasure of those individuals who did not correspond to the shared script of moral regulation. Thus, institutional silencing and gendered oppression became regulatory forces that continue to haunt the collective cultural memory on both sides of the Irish Sea.

The Magdalene laundries were institutions of confinement where 'fallen' women were incarcerated as a means of spiritual rehabilitation for alleged transgressions, including illegitimate pregnancies and promiscuous behaviour. Women were forced to perform unpaid backbreaking labour to redeem their sins. The laundries were run by religious orders belonging to the Catholic Church, with the consent of the Irish State. As Smith (2007) suggests, the Magdalene laundries were elements of a broader 'containment culture' that was promoted by the newly formed Irish state as part of the concept of purity of women as mothers of the nation. Brangan (2024: 394) points out that the laundries "operated with an undiluted formula that all Irish citizens were expected to subscribe to: a culture of conformity that prided obedience, self-denial and moral purity."

The truth about the Magdalene laundries was uncovered in 1993 when a mass grave was discovered at High Park convent in Dublin, that housed Ireland's largest Magdalene laundry. The bodies found were attributed to women who had been confined in the laundry – the so-called penitents – for alleged moral impurity or perversion. According to Brangan (2024: 394), from the 155 bodies discovered at the convent managed by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, only 75 death certificates were found. The others remained unidentified.

The press started inquiring into the subject that soon turned into an issue of national importance, especially since both the Church and the State were interested in concealing the truth about these

institutions as part of their attempt to keep the silence about this punitive system of female containment. The religious orders of the Irish Catholic Church were the main administrative agents of the laundries and, as such, were harshly criticised for operating a punitive system that not only disciplined women who did not conform to standards but also promoted among the broader Catholic public a degrading image of what was seen as sinful individuals. The state was a silent accomplice since it had knowledge about the existence of the laundries and the punishments inflicted on the penitents, but in no way did it intend to interfere in the process. As a result, as Pérez Vides explains, perhaps the most important effect on the Church and the governmental institutions was "the inevitable pressure […] to deal with their own complicity in what was a network of female incarceration when sexual transgression and other socially 'unacceptable' circumstances took place" (Pérez Vides 2016: 11-12).

After the exposure of the grim details related to the activities in the laundries and the punishments administered by the nuns in charge, a series of literary works by Irish writers emerged. Among them Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1994) and novels such as Marita Conlon McKenna's *The Magdalen* (1999), V.S. Alexander's *The Magdalen Girls* (2017), and Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021). All of these works mention the stripping away of women's names upon their entrance in the laundries and replacing them with religious names as a means of manipulation and control, and as a representation of a broader suppression of women's voices in Irish society.

2. Religious renaming and the silence of the unnamed

The discourse the Church advanced in the public sphere promoted the idea that the laundries were facilities meant to provide women in need with religious guidance and an opportunity for spiritual redemption. In reality, these were sites of punishment, a part

of a 'punitive carceral system' (O'Donnell, 2018) that had a pure theological and doctrinal aim, and not an instructional one.

Black (2024: 10) suggests that, even if women were trialled in a court of law, judges often considered that the laundries represented more lenient institutions, therefore they would rather sentence them to confinement in a religious home than send them to prison. But the two systems could not suffer comparison, since religious homes were based on gender control and the stigmatization of the women who entered them. Brangan (2024: 406) explains that unlike prisons whose aim is to "reform people so they may return to society, better citizens", the Magdalene laundries "alienated women from their lives and this world, to secure their citizenship in heaven." She further argues that, according to an explanation provided by the probation office in 1941, "a Magdalene laundry differed from a prison because a laundry was a regime of 'religious training' that was 'directed with the purpose of leading the subjects to a permanent renunciation of the world and to a life of penance' (1941: 5)."

Gott (2021: 174) argues that the work women had to perform in the laundries had both a gender and religious aspect since women "could also make amends for their sins by physically cleaning dirt, doing good for their communities." This also meant that they were doing "women's work - productive and reproductive labour" which would have a double benefit: on the one hand, it would develop their skills as future wives and mothers; on the other, it would be in the advantage of the society as a whole.

Women never knew when their degrading confinement would come to an end as they were never told the reasons they were brought in or the length of their sentence. The only thing they could do while working in the laundry was to wait and hope that one day they would regain their freedom. However, this freedom was nothing more than mere fantasy since, upon their release, they would be hired as housemaids by respectable Catholic local families, at the recommendation of the nuns. Once they left, the Magdalens were often

confronted with a bitter reality: society would pretend that it did not know about the existence of the laundries, so the women themselves had to dive into silence and pretend that they had never been at the laundry.

Brangan (2024: 394) explains that "the pains of this form of detention were drawn not from the loss of liberty, but the loss of self." As such, one of the most common methods employed by the nuns to strip the penitents of their own past and identity was that of changing their birth names. The renaming of the women by using names associated with saints mirrors an institutional oppression tactic of the Catholic Church as a tool of control. Brangan continues her commentary pointing out that upon arriving at the laundry, women and girls had their hair cut, but

> it was not just their hair that was gotten rid of […] When they arrived in the laundry *their names were also taken*. This was non-negotiable. Pipa became Theresa, Evelyn became Margaret, Maureen became Frances, Catherine became Columba. Sometimes they weren't even afforded the dignity of a pseudonym and were instead designated by only a number. That is how Sarah, as a girl at the age of 15, spent two years known only as 60 (Brangan 2024: 401-402).

In addition to being stripped of their own name, the women were not allowed to make any references to their previous lives and were prohibited from developing friendships with the other women at the laundry. Brangan further points to the fact that these women were almost completely cut off from the outside world, as they were not allowed to receive visitors or to go outside of the convent.

Shame–both as a personal emotion and a social state derived from moral deviancy–implies a natural desire of becoming invisible to

the others in order to hide the faultiness of the person. The renaming of the Magdalene penitents is closely related to this feeling of inadequacy and the aspiration to conceal all those who engaged in shameful acts and therefore represented a threat to the purity of the Irish nation through sexual immorality. Giving women new names related to saints was closely connected to the idea of the salvation of the soul while preserving the Catholic faith.

The fact that the Church wanted to erase women's identities is reflected not only by the replacement of their birth names, but also by the list of possible punishments for those who refused to work or to conform to the rules imposed by the nuns. O'Rourke and Smith (2016: 5) explain that the survivors most often complained about the fact that they felt "constantly being under surveillance, being verbally insulted, feeling cold, having a poor diet and enduring humiliating and inadequate hygiene conditions." All of these actions resemble torture methods meant to break the women's spirit and reduce them to a slave-like condition. Additionally, the researchers point out that the survivors they spoke to also denounced that they did not "receive an education", and many of them "dwell on this fact as determining their 'loss of opportunity' in later life."

Similarly, Urban (2012: 51) points out that many of the girls confined in these institutions were underage and they "were sent to the laundries after having been raped, some by their own family members." Instead of attending school, their identities were being erased precisely during their adolescence when personality is mainly formed. Furthermore, other categories of women were incarcerated "because they suffered from disabilities", "from perceived psychological problems", or "to protect the male community from their 'tempting' beauty" as well as for "any other intolerable signs of 'otherness'.

The psychological trauma and identity erasure through renaming, experienced by the women in the Magdalene laundries,

cannot be fully understood without addressing the broader mechanism of *othering,* which lies at the heart of patriarchal control. *Otherness*, in this context, stems mainly from the fact that those who possess the political power also hold the power to configure what is considered to be normal and what transgresses this normality. According to the patriarchal discourse, women are assigned to the private sphere, where they need to become the embodiment of purity. *Otherness* is therefore not the result of an authentic difference of the *Other,* but that of an artificial or manufactured point of view of those who perceive the *Other* as such. Othering becomes, in fact, a process through which the humanity has somehow managed to devise a scale that divides it into two groups: those who fit the norm, and those who are defined by their faults, whatever those might be. As a result, *otherness* implies stereotypy, marginalization, discrimination, misogyny, and racism. *Otherness* means that those stigmatized have not been able to construct a standardized individuality and this inevitably leads to a loss of identity. Women's confinement to the domestic sphere is the result of the constant perpetuation of gender inequality by patriarchal societies; the construction of female *otherness* is founded both on the male public discourse and the spatial practices of confinement. The Magdalene system, thus, becomes an apparatus through which female otherness is institutionalized.

3. Name erasure as a mechanism of dehumanisation in Irish fictional depictions of the Magdalene laundries

The analysis we have used thus far has established that the systematic erasure of identity through the practice of renaming in the Magdalene laundries has served as a mechanism of control and othering. Degradation and humiliation were part of the penological regime enforced by the nuns. In addition to being stripped from their names, the penitents were constantly reminded that they had no value since they were 'nobody' and that if they tried to escape there would

be no one to help them, so they would most probably be caught by the police and returned to the laundry.

Many literary works about the Magdalene women feature unnamed characters as a symbol of the thousands who were institutionalised and forgotten. The stories of Teagan, Nora, and Lea in *The Magdalen Girls*, by V.S. Alexander, exemplify the deep psychological trauma of the women confined in these institutions. At the same time, *Small Things Like These*, by Claire Keegan, illustrates the ritualized degradation and humiliation used to force women and girls intro submission.

The Magdalen Girls is a historical fiction novel set in 1960s Dublin. It explores the dark and harrowing world of the Magdalene laundries, where girls and women were subjected to harsh labour and strict punishment under the guise of moral correction. The story centres around a 16-year-old girl, Teagan Tiernan, who lives a relatively sheltered life. Her parents do not share the happiest marriage, as her father, a government employee, struggles with alcoholism. Her life takes a devastating turn when she is wrongfully accused of being morally corrupt after being caught in an innocent conversation with a local young priest. As her conservative and religious family is more concerned with their reputation than with the well-being of their daughter, her parents decide to send her to a Magdalene laundry as a punishment for her behaviour.

Upon arrival, Teagan is stripped of her name and identity, forced to wear a plain and coarse uniform, and have her hair cut:

> Sister Anne started toward the door, but turned before she reached it. "Say your name," she ordered.
> "Teagan Tiernan."
> Sister Anne pursed her lips and studied her from head to toe. "Now you will be called – 'Teresa,' a good Christian name. I doubt you will ever emulate the saint of Avila. (Alexander 2017: 50)

Upon her arrival at the convent, she is subjected to a brutal routine of silencing and spiritual and physical abuse. Within this oppressive environment, she befriends Nora Craven, a rebellious and spirited girl who has a strong desire to escape. Nora's confinement results from a perceived moral transgression – being discovered alone at home with her boyfriend – that, in the eyes of her family, warranted incarceration. Like all the other women confined in the convent, Nora has to obey the same strict codes of behaviour, including the symbolic erasure of identity through the replacement of her birth name with a religious one:

> "It's all right, Sister," the Mother Superior said. "We know how to deal with such crude behavior. Monica will learn."
> "Monica?" Nora's voice curdled into a snarl. "Who the hell is Monica?"
> Sister Anne smiled. "Why, you, child. You're Monica, named after a beloved saint. Your hair will be cut, you'll wear a uniform, and you'll say your prayers like a good penitent. I dare say 'Monica' will be an improvement on 'Nora.' Take her to *the* room, so she can see the error of her ways." (Alexander 2017: 64)

Lea, the third character in the story, is a shy and troubled outcast with a mysterious past who has endured trauma and, unlike the other girls, has found a home at the laundry. Similarly, she had to undergo a process of name changing, but because she has spent so much time in the institution, she appears to have internalized the convent's punitive structure to such an extent that she perceives it not as a prison, but as a form of refuge. Having spent a long period of time within the convent, she has grown so used to her assigned name that

she seems to have forgotten her real one: "Lea's not your real name, is it?" She shook her head. "Sister Anne named me Lea. I hardly remember my real name it's been so long since I've used it" (Alexander 2017: 89).

The psychological abuse that the women underwent at the laundries transformed many of them; they are described as emotionally vacant, reduced to hollow figures whose eyes no longer evoke vitality or will to live. As illustrated through Lea's character, prolonged exposure to the institution's practices led many of them to became so accustomed to their new names and identities that they no longer recall their birth names. A similar instance occurs with Nora who, after managing to escape the laundry, finds temporary refuge in a shelter. When asked to give her name, she instinctively responds with the religious alias assigned to her within the convent, thus demonstrating the depth of psychological conditioning and identity displacement inflicted on her: "The woman opened a card file on her desk. 'What's your name?' Almost without thinking, Nora said, "Monica" (Alexander 2017: 113).

The girls form a fragile bond as they try to survive the oppressive treatment of the nuns and the harsh conditions in which they have to work. The vicious Mother Superior, Sister Anne, consistently seeks out severe forms of punishment for the penitents, subjecting them to a range of abuses including solitary confinement, starvation, and physical abuse. What renders her behaviour particularly disturbing is her unwavering conviction that these punitive measures stem from a deep, albeit distorted, sense of love that she has for the Magdalens. She firmly believes that the suffering she imposes is a necessary path towards the girls' spiritual salvation:

> She lifted her head and stared at the door, knowing that above her three Magdalens were doing penance. Should she let them get up? *No!* They needed to *pay*. They needed to learn what obedience meant. Placing

> them in the form of the Crucifixion had given her a small amount of pleasure. Even Sister Rose had told her how beautifully the punishment was presented. She smiled, lifted by the thought.
> She knew instinctively that Monica would be the last to come around. Stricter measures might be called for, more trips to the Penitent's Room, longer hours in the laundry, more vigils in the chapel for prayer. She would bend Monica to her will–for the greater good. (Alexander 2017: 96)

The three protagonists seek to escape this oppressive environment and therefore devise various plans that would allow them to acquire freedom. Although both Teagan and Nora manage to escape temporarily, they are almost immediately apprehended by the police and returned to the laundry. During her brief time outside, Nora becomes pregnant and later gives birth to a baby boy, who is subsequently taken away to the orphanage adjacent to the convent. In a desperate attempt to reunite with her child, Nora escapes once again but accidentally sets on fire both the orphanage and the convent. Lea dies heroically while trying to save Nora's infant, and Nora, overwhelmed with grief, falls into a catatonic state from which she appears to be irreparable. Meanwhile, Teagan discovers that she was adopted and that Sister Anne is, in fact, her biological aunt. Following the tragic death of her adoptive parents in a car accident, Teagan is taken by another aunt–her mother's sister–residing in New York, who offers her the chance at a new life. The priest who had falsely accused Teagan of seduction ultimately confesses his wrongdoing, which leads to her release from the convent. Before departing for New York with her aunt, Teagan vows to return for her friend Nora, thus affirming her commitment to those left behind.

The Magdalen Girls illustrates how the nuns employed instruments of humiliation and othering women as a means to control them, particularly evident in an episode where the main character tries to understand the reasons behind her confinement in the laundry:

> The nun shook a finger when she started to speak. "You are here because you have sinned. Many arrive because they are about to succumb, but you have committed a mortal sin, a deliberate and deceitful act, which requires your expiation."
> She heard the nun's words, but they didn't make sense. *What mortal sin have I committed? Whom have I sinned against?* She sunk in her chair, crushed by those disturbing questions. (Alexander 2017: 48)

O'Rourke and Smith (2016: 5) point out that "a rule of silence was imposed at almost all times in Magdalene Laundries and, in many women's experiences, friendships were forbidden. […] Visits by friends or family were not encouraged and were often monitored when they did occur." The rule of silence extended on multiple levels: first, upon arriving at the laundry, women were instructed not to speak to each other; second, the nuns tried to erase the women's past by not allowing them to refer to personal experiences or anything related to their background; third, the broader society and the state institutions kept silent about the confinement of these women in the laundries and the abuses that often took place.

The purpose of this coercive system was not necessarily that of lowering women from their social status, but to erase them through the systematic administration of degradation mechanisms. The degradation ritual included not only replacing women's birth names and cutting off their hair, but also public humiliation and alienation from their senses through seclusion as a means of punishing disobedience. In order to achieve purity and the expunction of their

transgressions, women had to go through spiritual cleansing through prayer and hard work. This type of hard labour is described in detail in *The Magdalen Girls*:

> Several young girls were stationed at sinks. Their scrawny hands worked like pumps, pushing and kneading the fabrics they worked on. A few worked with steam irons. The older women were placed next to the whirring washers and dryers. They stared at the machines, apparently looking for any imperfection in the process." (Alexander 2017: 70-71)

Women are assigned an inferior status upon their birth; as Simone de Beauvoir rightfully pointed out, women are not born, they are made. This means that women have been represented as *the other* by a patriarchal system that has dehumanized them by frequently reducing them to their bodies; immorality could thus be easily shown in case of transgression which had to be concealed from the rest of the society. In a deeply conservative and Catholic Ireland, this resulted in a process of silencing and isolating women so that they would not contaminate the moral integrity of their community. The confinement of wrongdoers in the Magdalene laundries led not only to the silencing of the penitents, but also to a loss of identity. Hence, one of the most potent mechanisms of dehumanization was the linguistic violence of renaming: changing the penitents' names or simply referring to them as *sinners* became an efficient means of not only stigmatizing them but also of erasing their sinful identities and objectifying them, reducing their whole personality to a singular condemnable trait.

This process is vividly described in *The Magdalen Girls*, when the protagonist is addressed by Sister Anne for the first time.

> "Come along now." Sister Anne coaxed her forward. "I have more important tasks to attend than listening to the morning birds with a sinner."
> *Sinner!* The word shocked her, like a splash of cold water. Perhaps that was the way back to her family. A *misunderstanding* had gotten her to this place, not a sin. She could clear up this mistake if the Mother Superior would listen. She'd done nothing wrong and proving it would be easy. She would only have to tell Sister Anne the truth. (Alexander 2017: 46)

The protagonists of V.S. Alexander's *The Magdalen Girls* cling to their birth names as a form of defiance and an act of resistance against the institutional erasure imposed on them. Upon their entrance in the laundry, the nuns assign the girls religious names, which they are compelled to use, even when referring to themselves. This imposes a fragmented identity, and the girls are thus forced to navigate multiple versions of themselves as their names and identities are rewritten by the Church.

The process of de-identification through renaming the penitents represents a means through which the Catholic Church dehumanized these women in order to both control and reframe them as moral cautionary tales for the broader Irish society. Alexander criticises this punitive system which led to an erasure of the individual identity; the process seemed offensive for other religious denominations, as Reverend Conry, an Anglican clergyman, expresses clear disapproval of the renaming policy when he first meets Teagan. However, his dissent is rendered ineffective, as the Anglican Church held no jurisdiction over Catholic institutions such as the laundries:

> Teagan wanted to rush to his side and hug him, but Sister Anne's stern expression tempered her desire. She spoke harshly to her: "I've only agreed to this

> meeting because the Reverend Conry is in this room as an emissary of the Anglican Church."
> The man standing near Lea turned and smiled at Teagan. "Happy to meet you, Miss Tiernan."
> Sister Anne frowned. "She should be addressed by the name given to her by the good Sisters of the Holy Redemption–Teresa."
> The Reverend Conry smiled at the Mother Superior. "Of course. My mistake." Teagan surmised there was no love lost between the two. […]
> The Reverend Conry walked toward them. He extended his hand and said, "It was nice to meet you"–he lowered his voice – "Teagan." (Alexander 2017: 104, 107)

Another work that offers a contemporary literary exploration of the abuses endured by women in Magdalene laundries is Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021), a novella whose action is set in the provincial Irish town of New Ross in the weeks preceding Christmas. The novella critically engages with the themes of moral responsibility, societal silence, and resistance to institutional oppression, while also offering a stark reflection on the legacy of the Magdalene laundries in late 20th century Ireland. The main character is Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant, whose routine deliveries across town inadvertently expose the concealed realities of the Magdalene laundries. Confronted with the revelation that these institutions were not helping women but subjecting them to forced labour and systematic abuse, Bill experiences a profound moral crisis, which is shaped in part by his own upbringing as the son of an unmarried mother who was shown uncommon compassion by her employer. His personal history compels him to intervene, ultimately choosing to rescue a girl from the laundry and offer her refuge in his

own home. In doing so, Furlong places himself at odds with a community that tacitly accepts the injustices perpetuated by the Church-run establishment.

> The worst was yet to come, he knew. Already he could feel a world of trouble waiting for him behind the next door, but the worst that could have happened was also already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been – which he would have had to live with for the rest of his life. Whatever suffering he was now to meet was a long way from what the girl at his side had already endured, and might yet surpass. Climbing the street towards his own front door with the barefooted girl and the box of shoes, his fear more than outweighed every other feeling but in his foolish heart he not only hoped but legitimately believed that they would manage. (Keegan 2021: 58)

This passage encapsulates the moral and emotional climax of the novella, capturing Bill Furlong's internal dilemma related to ethical action and the burden of conscience, and it suggests that the main character embraces moral courage in order to avoid passive complicity. Bill understands that while social ostracism and communal scorn might await him after taking in the girl from the laundry, the *true* moral catastrophe would have been represented by the actual inaction, "the thing not done." Bill saves the girl just as her aunt saves Teagan. The narrative thus elevates ethical responsibility over self-preservation, suggesting that the psychological toll of moral failure far outweighs the costs of resistance. The image of him walking down the street with the girl and the box of shoes serves as both a literal and symbolic act of uplift: a quiet defiance against a society that has sanctioned institutional abuse through silence and compliance.

The same as V.S. Alexander in *The Magdalen Girls,* Keegan also illustrates the practice of renaming used by the nuns in charge of the laundries:

> '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.'
> 'Sarah,' he said. 'That was my own mother's name. And where do you come from?'
> 'My people are from out beyond Clonegal.'
> 'Isn't that well out past Kildavin,' he said. 'How did you come to be here?'
> The nun at the cooker coughed and gave the frying pan a rough shake and Furlong understood that the girl could say no more. (Keegan 2021: 40-41)

The exchange between Furlong and the girl who is identified by the imposed name "Enda" illustrates the erasure of identity within the institution. The girl's hesitation and the incongruity of "Enda" as a traditionally male name, speak to the systematic stripping away of personal history and gendered identity in the laundries. Renaming the women does not by any means represent a benign act but one of power since what one is called and who gets to assign the name becomes emblematic of one's autonomy or lack thereof.

Just as in the case of Reverend Conry and Teagan, in Alexander's novel, Furlong's insistence on asking her *real* name functions as a small but meaningful act of reclamation. The abrupt interruption of their dialogue by the nun acts as a metaphor for the omnipresent control by the institution and the silencing of truth. It reinforces the atmosphere of surveillance and intimidation that prevents open speech and keeps women like Sarah trapped, not just

physically, but narratively as they are denied the ability to tell their stories.

Despite Furlong's apprehension in the final scene of the book, he allows himself to express a fragile yet profound hope in the possibility of individual action against entrenched cruelty. The process of renaming the women reveals the extent of the dehumanizing practices specific to the laundries. Renaming functions as a tool of erasure, stripping women of both personal identity and agency. Thus, both Alexander's novel and Keegan's novella are intended to articulate a vision of ethical responsibility that is grounded not in heroism, but in empathy and the refusal to remain complicit.

Conclusions

The fact that the laundries existed for decades demonstrates the "messy reality of an imperfect, mortal society" as opposed to the creation of a "faultless Catholic nation" (Brangan 2024: 408). The confinement of the women did not happen from the desire to reform them, but because both the State and the Church wanted to purge society of undesirable elements. Brangan concludes that "more women were incarcerated in laundries than men were imprisoned" which leads her to assert that "[t]his stark disparity between the sexes in levels of confinement shows that Ireland was astonishingly sexist and patriarchal, and that the Catholic Church held tremendous power" in enforcing "Catholic gender order" (Brangan 2024: 407).

The literary representations of the Magdalene laundries reveal the complexity of Church and State intervention in enforcing gendered norms. The narratives discussed not only expose the layers of trauma inflicted on the penitents through forced physical labour and confinement, but they also stand witness to the symbolic annihilation–through renaming and silencing–of women who did not conform to imposed norms. However, the practice of renaming can be explained as more than a symbolic gesture; it was a mechanism of domination, designed to rewrite personal identity and supress autonomy. By

foregrounding these acts in their literary works, authors such as V.S. Alexander and Claire Keegan offer a counter-discourse that re-humanizes the women who were made invisible. These stories invite the readers to acknowledge the failures of the system and to keep alive both memory and collective accountability. In doing so, literature becomes a space where the unnamed are finally called by their rightful names.

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