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The Unkept Promise of the 1916 Proclamation in Claire Keegan's novella *Small Things Like These*

Ravi Suryavanshi, Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Language, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Koni, Bilaspur, (C.G.)

Khushboo Gavel, Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Language, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Koni, Bilaspur, (C.G.)

Abstract: Fakir Mohan Senapati's excellent short story entitled "Rebati", published in 1898, holds up a mirror to the abject and dismal condition of female education in the late nineteenth century Odisha. Set in a little village in the district of Cuttack, this story depicts how the dreams and aspirations of a ten-year-old girl named Rebati were simply shattered to the dust because of an orthodox society, steeped in superstition. Being prompted by western humanistic values, Rebati's father, Shyambandhu and the young village teacher, Basu dev thought of giving Rebati an education, breaking her free from the age-old superstitious belief that educating a girl might prove disastrous for the family. The little girl Rebati was extremely happy to know that she would be educated. Her mother also supported her but her grandmother was opposed to this idea. This paper is a detailed study of how Fakir Mohan Senapati seeks to throw a flood of light on the much-needed empowerment of women through education against the backdrop of the nineteenth century conservative society.

Keywords: Claire Keegan, Ireland's Magdalene laundries, social justice



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Introduction

Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021) commences not with its protagonist but with a promise. The epigraph quotes the Proclamation of the Irish Republic of 1916, where the would-be state declares that it “guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” and resolves “to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally” (qtd. in Keegan). The novel’s initial reception treated it as a fictional exposure of the Magdalene laundries, the church-run institutions that abused and enslaved unmarried mothers in Ireland from the eighteenth century until 1996 (Cornwell 52). Recent scholarship has examined the novella through several complementary perspectives, including feminist empathy and cruel optimism (Pérez Vides), scapegoating and the complicity of church, state, and capitalism (Hakkioğlu and Güneş), silence and national trauma (Holmqvist), and the novella as a formal intervention in collective memory (Tillotson). Gareth Cornwell’s essay reads the text as “a realist text with distinct Existentialist overtones” (53). What remains insufficiently developed, however, is the epigraph’s constitutional and political force. Cornwell explicitly brackets this dimension when he argues that “Christianity need have nothing to do with” Furlong’s moral action (Cornwell 58). He also mentions the state’s social contract only by quoting a review that suggests the novella underplays “the obligations of the State regarding its Social Contract, as suggested by the novel’s epigraph” (Cornwell 60). That passing observation identifies the central gap this essay addresses. This paper examines that the 1916 Proclamation is the standard in opposition to which the entire novella is measured and found wanting. The novella *Small Things Like These* is a counter-history of the Irish state: an indictment of the church-state nexus that made the Magdalene laundries possible, a portrait of the civic moral failure faith that sustained them, and a dramatisation of the private act of care that the state itself refused to perform. Furlong’s rescue of Sarah Redmond is not only an existential assertion of freedom; it is the restoration, by one man, of a public promise the state never kept. The Proclamation of the Irish Republic is the founding political document invoked by the novella’s epigraph. Its promise of equal citizenship, “cherishing all of the children of the nation equally” (qtd. in Keegan), was betrayed by the institutions that the state permitted the Catholic Church to run in its place. Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762) is the classic statement of this idea: political society is founded on a pact when individuals exchange natural freedom for civil liberty, and the general will become the source of legitimate authority.

He says, “Since no man has natural authority over his fellow man and since force creates no right, therefore conventions remain as the basis of all legitimate authority among human beings” (Rousseau 9-11). The Proclamation’s language of guarantees, rights, opportunities, and national care is contractual language. The Magdalene laundries care is outsourced to an institution that disciplines vulnerable women, appropriates their labour, makes them lose their children, and conceals the consequences in the inaccessible or destroyed record (Keegan 114). All these languages, rights and their resolve to cherish all the children of the nation equally belong to this republican tradition. John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* (1971) renews the social contract as a device for judging institutions: principles of justice are those that free and equal persons would accept from an original position of equality, and each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override (qtd. in Hoffe 6). Rawls calls this initial position of equality the original position. In it, “no one knows his place in society, his class position, or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like... their conceptions of the good or their special psychological properties” (qtd. in O’Neill 23). Individual cruelty does not merely break the promise of equal citizenship. This promise is structurally violated by a system in which the church and state cooperate. The church-state nexus that the novella exposes is illuminated by political theology. Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922) argues that “the sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 5); he further says, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secular theological concepts not only because of their historical development, but also because of their systematic structure... the exceptions in jurisprudence are analogous to the miracle in theology” (Schmitt 36). Keegan locates this institutional betrayal in the historical atmosphere of 1985. The novel mentions young people emigrating “to London and Boston, New York”, the opening of a new airport at Knock, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and the crowds who still gathered at shrines “in the hope that one of the statues might move again” (Keegan 13). The town is also marked by economic contraction. The shipyard has closed, Albatros has made redundancies, Bennett’s has dismissed eleven employees, and Graves & Co., where Eileen once worked, has closed its doors (Keegan 13). This community is a society undergoing economic and ideological transition while continuing to protect the authority of the Church. The novel’s historical specificity prevents its moral argument from becoming a generalised allegory. Its question is not simply whether human beings should help one another. It is why a state founded on equal citizenship allowed a parallel system of exclusion to endure.

“Small Things” As the texture of civic care

The novel's title names both its method and its political scale. Furlong lies awake at night “going over small things like these” (Keegan 11). Near the conclusion, he thinks of Mrs Wilson's as “small things she had said and done and had refused to do and say and what she must have known, the things which, when added up, amounted to a life” (Keegan 109). Small things are significant. They are the material texture through which care, obligation, exclusion, and complicity become visible. The town's economy is an economy of small things. Furlong sells “coal, turf, anthracite, slack and logs”, and the coal is described as “the dirtiest work” (Keegan 2). His work connects households through heat and debt. During his deliveries, he is repeatedly asked whether money owing can be put “on the slate”, and he sometimes leaves a bag of logs for customers who cannot afford to pay (Keegan 44). These gestures do not abolish poverty, but they create a local ethic of practical reciprocity. Mrs Kehoe's maxim, “The empty sack cannot stand,” reduces social care to a bodily and material truth: hunger and cold must be answered with food and heat (Keegan 3). The convent is this economy inverted. From the outside, it resembles a Christmas card, with “the yews and evergreens dusted in frost” (Keegan 28). Its laundry has “a good reputation”, serving restaurants, guesthouses, the nursing home, the hospital, priests, and wealthy households (Keegan 28). The institution's respectability rests on clean linen, punctual payments, religious ceremony, and the appearance of order. Its violence is hidden behind the same material signs that ordinarily signify care.

The fifty-pound Christmas gift reveals how the institution converts complicity into generosity. After Furlong encounters the imprisoned girl, the Mother Superior gives him an envelope. When Eileen opens it, “a fifty-pound note fell into her lap,” and she immediately explains that it will pay for what is owing at the butcher's (Keegan 73). The gift is not simply a bribe in a legal sense. It is more disturbing because it enters the household's ordinary economy of provision. It promises meat, Christmas, and domestic comfort in exchange for silence. The convent's charitable appearance depends on transforming institutional power into small, familiar acts of exchange. The girls and children are kept away from this economy of care. The novel's rumours describe girls who work from dawn until night, washing stains from dirty linen, while other rumours claim that the babies are sent abroad after the nuns receive money for placing them (Keegan 38-39). The uncertainty of the rumours is itself part of the town's social structure. The narrator observes, “People said many things, and a good half of what was said could not be believed” (Keegan 39). Gossip permits knowledge to circulate without becoming responsibility. The town knows enough to suspect, but not enough, it claims, to act.

The State's Absence and The Church's Power

The church-state nexus appears in the ordinary organisation of the town. Furlong's daughters attend St Margaret's, the school beside the convent, and take accordion lessons at the convent on Tuesdays (Keegan 9). Mrs Kehoe reminds him that "there's nothing but a wall separating that place from St Margaret's", the institution on which his daughters' futures depend (Keegan 95). The wall is therefore not a boundary between Church and society. It is an architectural image of their proximity. The girls who are in the laundry and in the school occupy adjacent spaces within a shared system of gendered discipline and opportunity. Furlong's first response to the suffering he witnesses reproduces the state's refusal of responsibility. A girl asks him to take her to the river so that she can drown herself. He responds, "It's not up to me, girl. I can't take you anywhere," while showing her "his open, empty hands" (Keegan 41). The phrase "It's not up to me" is both a personal refusal and an institutional formula. Responsibility is always elsewhere, assigned to the nuns, the priest, the family, or the state. Furlong's empty hands symbolise a society that has the ability to intervene but perceives intervention as the responsibility of others. Eileen articulates the town's civic bad faith. When Furlong tells her about the encounter, she says that "such things had nothing to do with them" and that there was "nothing we could do" (Keegan 44). She later states that in order to live a fulfilling life and get ahead, we must ignore certain things to continue our journey (Cornwell 45). Cornwell reads this response through Sartre's false consciousness faith, and the reading is persuasive. Yet Eileen's words also reveal a wider political logic. The community's continued access to schools, credit, business, and social respectability depends on avoiding questions about who pays for its order.

The Mother Superior represents institutional power as a performance of calm. When she questions the girl about the coal shed, she begins with idle conversation and "more unimportant things" before asking, "Won't you tell us now why you were in the coal shed?" (Keegan 68). Her language pretends that the girl is a participant in a reasonable exchange, although the girl is visibly terrified. The question reverses responsibility. Instead of asking who captured the girl, the Mother Superior questions her to explain why she is there. The walk-through town with Sarah exposes the final stage of civic denial. People who know Furlong stop to speak until they see the girl's "bare, black feet" and realise that she is "not one of his own." Some avoid them, some speak awkwardly, and others wish him a polite Happy Christmas. It seems that no one they met addressed Sarah or asked where he was taking her (Keegan 107). The sentence is devastating because it describes not ignorance but social recognition without moral recognition. The town sees the girl, identifies her as belonging to the laundry, and then refuses to treat her as a citizen whose destination matters.

Furlong And the Private Restoration of The Public Promise

Furlong is not an outsider to the system he confronts. He is its product and its near-victim. “Furlong had come from nothing. Less than nothing, some might say,” the narrator explains. His mother became pregnant at sixteen while working as a domestic servant, and Mrs Wilson, rather than dismissing her, allowed her to remain in employment and brought mother and child home from the hospital (Keegan 5). Furlong’s life therefore depends on an act of private care that contradicts the social order around him. Mrs Wilson performs, on a small scale, the duty that the state and Church fail to perform collectively. The connection between Furlong’s history and Sarah’s situation is established through naming. When the girl identifies herself as Sarah Redmond, Furlong says, “That was my mother’s name” (Keegan 72). At the end of the story, he is contemplating Mrs. Wilson and feeling that, “In an earlier time, it could have been his mother he was saving” (Keegan 109). Sarah is not merely an emblem of suffering. She is placed within Furlong’s own network of memory, kinship, and historical possibility. The question “What if it was one of ours?” is answered by the recognition that Sarah is already one of his, not through biological relation but through the shared vulnerability that the national promise should have protected.

The novel tracks Furlong’s struggle against what it calls “the ordinary part of him”. “When he finds the girl in the coal shed, a girl just about fit to stand, with her hair roughly cut, the small part of him seeks that he had never been near the place” (Keegan 59). Waiting on the convent step, he again wants to be rid of the situation and return home (Keegan 9). The ordinary part is the internalised voice of the town, the family, and the state. It is the voice that turns institutional violence into an unfortunate matter that has no business with Furlong’s decision to act; it is therefore a political withdrawal of consent. After the Mother Superior’s performance and the town’s warnings, he becomes certain that “the priests already knew” and concludes, “They’re all the one” (Keegan 95). Mrs Kehoe’s warning about the danger to his daughters cannot finally persuade him. He asks, “Surely they’ve only as much power as we give them, Mrs Kehoe?” (Keegan 94). The question restates the social contract from the position of the ordinary citizen. Institutional power is not supernatural. It depends on the consent, fear, and silence of the society. Furlong then releases Sarah after returning to the convent. His words, “You’ll come home with me now, Sarah” (Keegan 105), are ordinary, but they have some significance. He does not offer a theory, a legal argument, or a religious justification.

He offers a home. The state's abstract promise of equal citizenship is translated into a concrete act of shelter, clothing, movement, and recognition. He gives Sarah his coat and takes her hand while carrying a box of shoes for his wife (Cornwell 57). The contrast between the wrapped shoes and Sarah's bare feet exposes the unequal distribution of comfort that the town has normalized. The moral climax is voiced as a question addressed to the whole society: Was there any point in being alive without helping one another? Furlong asks whether a person can pass 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). The question expands the private rescue into a judgement on national identity. To call oneself Christian, Irish, respectable, or law-abiding while refusing to oppose institutional abuse is to accept the separation between public ideals and private conduct. The ending remains deliberately unresolved. As Furlong walks toward his home with Sarah, "his fear more than outweighed every other feeling," yet "in his foolish heart he not only hoped but legitimately believed that they would manage" (Keegan 110). The state, the Church, and the community remain in place. Furlong has not solved the institutional problem; he has refused to cooperate with it. His act is ethically significant precisely because it does not produce a convenient public resolution. It restores the promise for one person while revealing how much remains unredeemed.

Conclusion

The novella *Small Things Like These* (2021) is generally approached as a universal fable of conscience, and it is certainly a story about moral choice. Yet the epigraph insists on a more specific reading. The novella is a critique of the Irish social contract, an indictment of the state that promised to treat all kids equally and delegated that promise to an institution that abused them. Furlong's act is the private restoration of a public promise. His mother's history, Sarah's name, the fifty-pound gift, the coal shed, and the silent town all demonstrate that the political is carried through small material details. The "small things" are the ways in which citizenship is either enacted or denied. They include the bag of coal left at a poor household, the child whose bare feet are ignored, the record that is destroyed, and the hand that is finally extended. This argument does not displace the existentialist interpretation. Furlong does regain agency, and his action involves a decision to assume responsibility in circumstances that encourage passivity (Cornwell 54-58). But the agency he regains is exercised against an institution that the Irish state empowered and financed (Keegan 113). To read the novella only as an existentialist fable is to risk repeating the town's gesture of abstraction: to see Sarah as a universal moral object rather than as a particular child of the country. The Proclamation's promise and Keegan's novella refuse that abstraction.

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