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## **Violence and Religious Disguises in Kelly's *Sins of the Mother***

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### **Abstract**

'Sins of the Mother' is an autobiographical novel that unfolds the various periods of Irene Kelly's life; it reveals the torment, distress, and hardships faced by the author in her life. This research article aims to do a basic investigation of the novel and the cruel actions of the nuns by highlighting the atrocities, barbarities, and violent behavior of the nuns at St.Grace (the orphanage). This research is Qualitative Research where the textual and content analysis of the novel would be the main focus of the researchers. The research aims to highlight the psychological impacts of the deceitful, false, and barbaric conduct of the nuns on the life of Irene Kelly in the light of Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder, a theory suggested by Cathy Cruth, Neil Smelser, and Sigmund Freud. The novel brings to light the psychological effects caused later in a person's life due to the bad treatment in their childhood.

**Keywords:** *Trauma, hypocrisy, violence, atrocity, religious disguise, abuse, stress*

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## **Introduction**

'Sins of the Mother' is a self-portraying novel which consists of Twenty-Two sections. It is described by three individuals; Irene Kelley, Matt (Irene's significant other), and Jennifer Kelly (girl of Irene Kelly). This novel exposes the annoyance, depression, and adversities encountered by the writer and the effects of all the severe circumstances on her life. The author experienced childhood abuse as she was mishandled by her mom from an early age. But for Irene, the experience of staying at home was far better than the bitter and miserable practices of the orphanage. The novel gives an understanding of how she was beaten and explicitly ambushed in the orphanage of Dublin where she was sent by her mom. It also shares her experiences at the nursery where she worked while living in an orphanage. In that nursery, she saw nuns treating babies with terrifying brutality. Experiencing all these incidents had a very terrible effect on her later life. Her novel reveals the soreness and agony she has been through her entire life. The novel, 'Sins of the Mother' opens with the words of Jennifer (Irene's daughter) who writes about the peculiarity of her life and her confused relation with her parents.

In this paper, the researchers propose to analyze Irene Kelly's autobiographical novel, 'Sins of the Mother' with particular emphasis on the trauma faced by the author. The researcher intends to do a critical study of the novel which depicts the violent, barbaric, and religious facade of the Church's people who were running the orphanage in Ireland. The basic aim of the researcher is to assess the psychological impacts of these cruel treatments on a child later in life.

## **Research Methodology**

The qualitative research approach is selected by the researchers where the focus of the research was on the content and textual analysis of the autobiographical novel, "Sins of the Mother" by Irene Kelly. The researcher will find out the impacts of violence, abuse, and hypocrisy on the life of the author by giving examples of similar incidents from the real life and fiction. Many theorists like Cathy Cruth and Neil Smelser, put forward ideas that are used as reference in the following article. Their proposed works support the main theme of the following article, and are hence quoted by the researchers to support their argument. The mental state of the author of the novel is explained with the help of Sigmund Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis. His explanation of psychoanalysis is used to analyse the character of Irene Kelly, the author of the novel. The researchers will try to supply relevant references related to the context of the novel from different sources, to make research authentic.

## **Analysis**

Hypocritical acts, abuse, and violence in childhood cause trauma and suffering which affects the victims badly later in their lives. Many of the people who suffered this trauma did not go through the complete subordination or forced servitude to the wills of others but they became central to the trauma only through its remembrance.

In his work from 2004, Neil Smelser characterizes trauma as “a recollection acknowledged and acknowledged by a pertinent collective, triggering an occurrence or circumstance that is (a) steeped in negative emotions, (b) depicted as enduring, and (c) perceived as jeopardizing a society's survival or challenging one or more of its core cultural beliefs”(Smelser,2004,p.44).

In the psychoanalytic theory of trauma, Cathy Caruth (1995) explains that it is the remembrance of the experiences that are traumatic in their effect, not the experience. There is always a period of latency or a time-lapse in her account. This period is the forgetting lapse between the experience and its trauma (Caruth, 1995, p.17). Thus, trauma works like a reflective process linking the present to the past through imagination. In the accounts of psychology, this forms a troubled identity as LaCapra (1999) suggests that “in certain situations, specific roles such as victim or perpetrator can dominate to the point of being overpowering. Individuals may find themselves fixated on the past, compelled to relive it as if it were happening in the present”(LaCapra 1999, p.12.). Sigmund Freud in his book; *The Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896) first introduced childhood sexual abuse and claimed that panic-stricken

symptoms could be traced to early childhood abuse. Any sort of abuse in childhood be it sexual, psychological, or physical, may lead to psychiatric issues that show up later in life. The victim's anger and gloominess can be directed to suicidal ideation post-traumatic stress, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity. It fuels constant psychiatric disorders (Freud, 1896, p. 186).

The story of Irene is the tale of an unfortunate girl whose mother's behavior is fierce and very unkind to her children. She asks Irene and her other kids to take things from the shops to kill their hunger. One day while doing so, police capture the kids and as a punishment, they are sent to the orphanage for this crime. What she writes in the initial six sections of the novel reinforces the research topic. It is generally believed that religious and spiritual people incline humankind. They are not strict and rigid with their actions but more kind, loving, and forgiving towards the imperfections of individuals. This novel seems to negate this notion completely as depicted through the horrendous actions of so-called religious people. The author has penned down such events and incidents that are very distressing for the readers. The narrator's early life experiences and her stay at the orphanage reveal the hypocrisies and the violent behavior of the people under the garb of religion. The novel also exposes the real faces of the religious hypocrites and how it traumatizes the author. All these atrocities and the violent behavior negatively affected the author's personality. She narrates her first encounter with the nuns at the shelter house as a horrid experience; the nuns were not welcoming at all and had unpleasant expressions. She jots down this experience in this way; "She had never seen such big and strict nuns like them before" (Kelly, p.36).

Individuals who address their particular religion yet hide the defects of their characters under the camouflage of the religion are called religious hypocrites. They don't admit their wrongdoings rather conceal their real personalities under the costume of religion and pretense to have what they do not have in reality. These religious atrocities are carried out in real life and they are not only the topic of fiction. The victims of such brutal incidents suffer their entire lives by going through trauma and depression; the result of these mishaps. Al Jazeera reported such an incident in May 2009; "Reports from certain schools indicate a disturbingly frequent practice of ritualized beatings, with girls subjected to strikes intended to inflict maximum pain across their bodies. These accounts serve to corroborate the disturbing conduct attributed to nuns".

### **Hypocrisies and the Religious Disguises**

"Hypocrisy is the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion" (Merriam-Webster). Literature of every era and time has been vast regarding similar themes and ideas. There are many kinds of hypocrites other than religious ones. But the most important and the most dangerous kind of hypocrisy is religious hypocrisy. Religious hypocrites preach to other people about the religion, about how other people should not commit sins and what bad consequences it will have on the sinner, but in their private lives, they may be the biggest sinners by being hypocrites.

The author of the novel also tells the readers about the fierce incidents of the church that affect her physically, emotionally, and psychologically. She exposes the hypocritical standards of the nuns and practices by revealing what they did to the

children at the orphanage. One such traumatic experience of Irene is with Sister Bernie (a junior nun) who one day calls her in the nursery and orders her to lie down. Sister Bernie sexually assaults Irene and makes her sob. The victim suffers not only physically but emotionally as well. The horrendous act of Sister Bernie makes readers wonder about the reality of the people associated with religious institutions. The nun inserts a pin into Irene's body making her moan with the hurt. The nun challenges her by saying that she will send her to Mother Superior if she refuses to follow her commands. For her, it is startling as she has heard before the serious beatings of Mother Superior; who is considered as the epitome of rage and violence. She feels ashamed and guilty for the actions of the nun. In this way the hypocrisy of the nun is revealed in that she could go to any extreme to fulfill sexual pleasure; "Bernie told me to take off my knickers and dress and lay back on the windowsill...Then she put the pin inside my privates" (Kelly, p.46). The religious figure conflicts with the standards of religion. What we find in the novel is the false reverence and misdirection by the supposed strict preachers. They are too stiff and rigid to even think about acting compassionate and with love. They are misdirecting individuals with the mask of religion and they do not have morality inside themselves. As a normal human being it is natural to have empathy for children but nuns of the Church delineated in the novel resemble the villains who dislike affection, pardoning, and possess more atrocious and brutal attributes.

After such a terrible encounter with the nun, Irene chooses to flee from the orphanage however sadly she is caught and sent to Mother Superior who is famous for her savage

beating. She whips the children viciously with a belt on little, negligible issues. She treats Irene and Agatha (Irene's sister) in the same manner. Irene feels extremely frightened to face her mother as she does not want to experience the atrocity but she unwillingly appears in front of her. She becomes the victim of the brutal beatings of Mother Superior. She is so terrified of the nun that she practically wets her pants. The head nun embarrasses and beats them by saying; "There is evil in a child that runs away from goodness. Now you will have the evil beaten out of you. Bend over" (Kelly, p.49). This malicious and mean behavior of religious people becomes very upsetting and unbelievable, when, those who are thought to be the epitome of love and forgiveness turn out to be the epitome of viciousness and barbarity. For each normal and reasonable individual, it turns out to be extremely troublesome and difficult to know about the excruciating and anguished experiences of the sufferers. The novel is the genuine delineation of the hypocrisy of nuns and how they fool the individuals around them by having a façade of piety. The events in the novel further inform us about the delusional character of the nuns. Irene goes on to write; "She (Mrs. Lawley), got my hand and put it under her skirt and between her legs" (Kelly, p.49). This disturbing approach of the nun who preaches about piousness and purity shocks the narrator. The threats she (victim) receives from the molester, in case she refuses to fulfill her sick desires, shackles her and leaves her traumatized. On her refusal, Irene gets beaten up by the perpetrator but is still satisfied with carrying out the heinous act. In this manner, all these incidents show how ironically nuns bug children for their sexual delights. In Christianity, nuns do not marry and they stay virgins for their whole



lives. But we see that the nuns in the novel have passed the degree of mankind and only for sexual joy attack the minors and command them to do appalling acts. The researcher aims to highlight that this primitive disposition of the nuns in the story makes the sufferer a robot, void of every human sentiment and emotion. This reveals the horrible impacts of the conduct of hypocrites on the naïve people, who are fooled in the name of religion. The sufferers of such unfortunate incidents become emotionally vulnerable and suffer from anxiety and trauma at a later stage of life. The same happens with the writer of this novel; she has perplexed relations with her kids and her spouse. She does not open up about the pinching incidents, she doubts that nobody would believe her and fears that nobody is different from the other; "There was nobody in here who was kind to us children" (Kelly, p.50). Hence, this shows how these incidents affect children psychologically in a way that they stop trusting anyone. Trust issues started in Kelly's life after being harassed. The children are generally dependent on someone for an extensive time and this dependency may increase opportunities for recurrent abuse. If a person attempts to disown the existence of a traumatic past, one fails to do so, as traces of the trauma remain, even though in faint forms (Mack, 2009, p.5). Kelly's suicide attempt narrated in the novel shows the psychological effect of these abuses. She wants to end her life to escape this torture which is why she puts her fingers in the electric holes. This asserts Freud's claim that sexual assault brings pain, shame, and the feeling of self-loathing in victims.

The events discussed in this section show the hypocritical behavior of the religious persons and their effects on the life of the victim. The life of Irene Kelly gets affected

badly because of the hypocritical behavior of the members of the church. They concealed their flaws by wearing the disguises of the religion. This hypocritical behavior of the nuns, in the name of the religion traumatized Irene. This shows how a person gets affected by the ill-treatment of other human beings. The suffering and pain due to the violence can turn a person's life into hell. The conduct of the nuns at the orphanage towards the children is difficult to evaluate. One cannot comprehend the barbarism of those who claim to be the representatives of God, the symbol of love and mercy.

### **Violence**

Violence means to approach someone with cruelty. This novel does not only tell us about an ugly childhood, the pain, and misery of a tender child but also unmask the reality of the so-called religious institutions. The terrible effects of the violence and stress, the victim faced at the orphanage left deep scars on her personality. Irene Kelly portrays how the kids in the shelter (St Grace) were dealt. She reviews that she and her kin were presented with something she was unable to try and envision to eat; "That perhaps the pig man was not picking up the leftover food for the pigs but for the orphanages" (Kelly 38). She writes down that the dark, sludgy malodorous water was for the children to take in place of tea with pieces of something of green color in it. This sort of food is not intended to be for humans; on the other hand, the diet that the nuns take is very nutritious and healthy. The kids of St. Grace are deprived of healthy food. Authorities and the nuns enjoy their food in the similar eating corridor however

their diet is extremely scrumptious and heavenly for the kids. While the students had to drink that foul, dark water; the fragrance from the table of nuns made all the children crave the delicious food. "For their selves, the nuns had brilliant dish potatoes, steaming orange carrots and bread moves with bits of chicken" (Kelly, p.38).

Numerous articles have been written and a lot of incidents have been reported about the horrible treatment of the congregation authority, particularly, the instances of Ireland church authorities have come into the limelight. The scandals of the Irish church are highlighted in the Ryan report, which features and reveals the wrongdoings of the church authorities. The report completely unveiled the real faces of church people and gave us facts about orphanages and many such religious places. Ryan reports uncovered those individuals who do religious brutalities and monstrosities and commit all these crimes in the name of God. The novel is by all accounts a genuine image of what has happened to the children and humanity of the world by all such religious mongers. Steve James writes in the article *"The Ryan Report Cover up"* about all the perturbing corruptions of the church authorities that were related to the childcare scheme. The reports about all these crimes were published mainly between the years 1930 and 1970. The reporters organized an interview program to interview almost all of those affected children, the victims counted, were almost 1,090. All the victims were the students of those schools that were run by the church authorities and some reformatories; "Out of all these interviewees, almost 90% of them have confessed that they have been somehow treated or physically abused by authority and over 500 of them were sexually abused"(Irish child abuse: The Ryan Report cover-up, 2009).

Such articles and genuine stories from the past uncover their merciless activities and abominable mentalities. Most of these activities have been done under the mask of religion; they cover up their atrocious behavior by saying that this is for their salvation and it will cause them to enter paradise. As indicated by such reports and articles, the casualties become so startled that they don't admit openly what they have been through and they attempt to cover their agony from others in terror of being called liars. Another experience of the barbarity of a sister is shared by the writer that one morning in the orphanage, they were provided with cereal to eat. The cereal was simply loaded up with chunks of crude oats; Irene in the wake of completing her breakfast vomits it out. The watching adherent (Sister Beatrice) after seeing this, orders her to eat that puke. Aside from being terrible, the conduct of the nuns isn't even rational. The shocking savageries at the St. Grace church had awful impacts on Irene Kelly and later it isn't just she, who bears yet her family likewise faces the result as Jennifer (Irene's little girl) was not permitted to go out and play with different children. For Jennifer, this attitude was very odd. When someone sees violence at an early age, the person becomes very conscious because of that experience. Irene was facing the same issue; she did not allow her daughter to go out because of the fear of the people. She lost trust and thought that anyone could do anything wrong with her daughter. Thus, the violent experiences of her childhood affect her family too in later life.

The torture given to kids in orphanages makes them physically and mentally ill. Irene does not only write about her experience but the behavior of the nuns in general at the school. She narrates one incident when her school teacher, Mrs. Lawley stroked her for

not writing alphabets the same way as her teacher wrote. Mrs. Lawley wrote the alphabet that curled at the end, but Irene's handwriting was unlike her teacher, and whenever she wrote in her style, Mrs. Lawley stroked her. The teachers beat the students with a foot ruler on the palms of their hands. The children at the orphanage got scolded for everything, whether they were at fault or not. One day Sister Beatrice scolds the girls for not properly cleaning the floor, not only this, she also throws the bucket of dirty water and orders them to make it clear again. These poor undernourished children are ill-treated; they are given rough tasks to complete, and this violent attitude makes them weak. The cruelties and horrendous acts of the nuns are extremely difficult to read and believe. Irene goes on to tell her readers about the inhumane treatment of the nuns. At one point the cruelty of a Sister surpasses every limit. Irene, one day takes the blame on herself after her sister wets her knickers. The reaction of the nun upsets and baffles Irene. Nun gathers everyone to look at her, Irene shakes with shame as everyone looks up at her; "I wanted to disappear at that moment. Please make it stop, please make it stop. Oh God, please make it stop" (Kelly, p. 42). Hence, it shows how the kids were tortured mentally, Irene because of the shame wanted to disappear. This shame later leads her to attempt suicide.

All of the mental distress of Irene seems to be the result of the horrible and violent conduct of the nuns at the orphanage. All the issues related to psychology faced by the kids later in their lives are simply because they experience and bear those cruel whipping and molestation at the orphanage. The children face psychological issues more because they are unable to share their sufferings with anyone. They are unable to

share anything because they know that nobody would believe them, no one would accept it as true. What the writer has printed is the actual faces of the disguised humans who have just the exterior of virtuous human beings; they have no longer mercy and warmth which is the very essence of nearly all religions. What the writer describes is barbaric and fierce and it is heart-wrenching to imagine that human beings can stoop to a point where they can act like wild animals. It is a horrible sight for anyone to even see let alone to go through the experience. Such behavior is not a humane thing to do. Little children who should be given love and care are fed upon rotten bread. This heartless behavior is not just cruel but also insane. Kelly is horrified when she sees these children at the orphanage and the vicious treatment of nuns with them. Orphanages are meant to be built for those who have no parents or do not have anyone to look after but in the novel, the writer tells something else. The orphanage that the author has described is not for taking care of children instead they are meant to torture those kids. The management of these bodies is devoid of compassion. The author completely uncovers the deception of righteous people by showing the dealings of members of the church. Irene further shares her experience of the nursery where she used to care after the babies. Irene explains that even small kids were not treated well there. For many weeks, the nappies of the babies were not removed; "There was something very wrong about the way the nuns and staff dealt with the babies as if they weren't people at all" (Kelly, p. 44). These incidents are very disturbing even for an elder person, thus these incidents truly disturb Irene and even in later life, she has flashbacks of these incidents. Irene is unable to seek out the grounds and logic behind

these merciless acts of the nuns. Though Irene at that time could not speak against this brutality she felt from the start that nothing was right. They were doing what they ought not to be doing which was ruthless and barbaric. Treating babies like this is considered cruel and cold which the author has placed in this way; "The place was run by nuns but what they were doing to the babies was ungodly. It was bad and sinful" (Kelly, p.45). The above events depict that such appalling treatment at the orphanage with Irene and hundreds of other children is the reason that made Irene suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Child sexual abuse causes a risk of severe mental disorder including low self-esteem, suicide, and depression (McLean, Carmen P., et al, 2014). These all stress disorders can be examined in Irene; she attempts suicide by putting her fingers in electric sockets, she suffers from depression and her low self-esteem does not let her speak and trust anyone.

### **Psychological Impacts on the Survivor**

This research gives an insight into the life of Irene Kelly and her daughter Jennifer whose lives were affected mainly by the harsh experiences at the orphanage. The psychological implications of Irene's trauma are that those children who go through a life where they face lies and cruelty are unable to lead a normal life even long after they come out of these institutions. The life of Irene Kelly is representative of the harm that is coming to society at the hands of hypocritical, atrocious, and fake keepers of the faith. Due to the ill-treatment and awful attitude of the church members, Irene Kelly and her entire family experienced the consequences. But for Irene, it became an

incident of never-ending pain that did not enable her to lead life normally. The condition of being sexually abused is discussed by Elizabeth Horst in her book, *'Recovering the Lost Self: Shame-Healing for Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse'* as "Some victims will experience more emotional trauma than others. One will feel offended and dirty" (Horst, 1998, p.13).

The novel starts with Jennifer (Irene's daughter) narrating the story of her childhood and the troubled relations Jennifer had with her parents. According to Jennifer, her parents were not like other parents. They did not let her play with other kids or go outside. They never talked about their relatives, they did not go to anyone's house, and they lived quite a recluse and anti-social life. The traumatic past they had lived was so horrid that they did not want to relive it by either mentioning it again or by remembering anyone from their past. They had cut all ties with their past and never wanted to come face to face with it ever again. For a young Jennifer, it was not easy to understand their behavior. Jennifer explains in the novel that this behavior of her mother left her frustrated because she was ignorant of her past (Kelly, p. 7). Horst further explains in her book; "Sexual abuse causes shame which prevents victims from seeking help; keep them locked in behaviors that make them vulnerable to further victimization" (Horst, 1998, p.14). Of her mother's behavior, she says that at times she (Irene) would close herself in the room and would not come out for many days. She wouldn't change her dress for many days and remain untidy. This attitude of Jennifer's mother makes her confused. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Irene's such odd attitude was due to the impact of the fearful attitude of the nuns with her when was in



the orphanage. This shows that because of post-traumatic stress disorder, one feels that they desire nothing except being disappear.

Not only this Irene also suffers from mood swings and goes into depression. According to Jennifer; "She had always suffered from her 'moods'. We all knew there were times that Mum would 'go under' – then she'd take herself off to her room and lock herself away" (Kelly, p. 9). Thus, the past experiences let the episodes of bad moods in Irene's life. The treatment she had faced from the nuns at the orphanage left such a traumatic effect on her life that it became difficult to deal with day-to-day affairs. The home environment was such that the children were always reluctant to even go home from school; Jennifer rather preferred to loiter around than eagerly get back home after school, because she was unsure of what she would encounter once she got home (Kelly, p.7). Thus, due to those experiences, she was unable to communicate with her family, especially with her daughter, and that made her daughter suffer too. The scars and marks left on her personality made it very difficult for her to communicate properly later in her life. She was unable to speak of herself to anyone in her family.

Fletcher in his book "Childhood Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" while commenting on post-traumatic stress disorder said that childhood violent memories continue to have an unconscious impact, no matter how much one tries to dissociate that memory (Fletcher, 1996, p.347). Irene could not cope emotionally at any level with the outer world. The fear that the church people will come and take her back to that place remains throughout her life. She does not allow her daughter to go out just because of the same

fear, the continuous flashbacks haunt her. The whole novel is the best example of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; the traumatic experiences of the past connect to the present of the writer where she faces stress disorder. The bitter flashbacks of Irene's childhood later affect her married life.

## **Conclusion**

The novel of Irene Kelly is reflective of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder of a girl who faces sexual and physical abuse in her childhood. The novel is the best illustration of the hypocrisies, disguises, and violent attitudes of religious people. By searching the effects and impacts of the treatment of the nuns towards children, the researcher found out that there are serious psychological implications for the sufferers. The sufferers also undergo different psychological and emotional phases. The atrocious conduct of orphanage authorities has brought a very brutal and severe outcome on Irene's personality. The trauma that she faces has made her life difficult and bitter not only for her but for her family also. Her experiences brought grave consequences; she has mood swings, she cannot socialize, she cannot fulfill the emotional needs of her children, she for the longest time is unable to tell her story to anyone, thus is ill with depression and anxiety.

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