

Religious Oppression and Injustices in the Irish Order of Nuns: A Critical Examination of the Film "Philomena"

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the themes and criticisms raised in the film "Philomena" regarding the Irish order of nuns and their treatment of women and children. The film sheds light on the injustices committed by the nuns, such as forced adoptions and the oppression of unmarried mothers. It highlights the role of religion in shaping societal attitudes towards sexuality and the consequences faced by those who violated these moral standards. The paper discusses the film's portrayal of both compassionate and cruel nuns, questioning the credibility and morality of the entire Catholic order. It emphasizes the need for specificity when addressing the injustices committed by the nuns and acknowledges that not all nuns share the same behaviours or beliefs. Furthermore, the paper explores the role of journalism in uncovering these past injustices and the tension between the media and the secretive nature of the convent. Overall, "Philomena" serves as a timely reminder of the historical mistreatment and oppression endured by women and children in Catholic Ireland, calling for a re-evaluation of religious moral standards and the treatment of the vulnerable.*

KEY WORDS – religious moral standards, Irish order of nuns, oppression, hypocrisy

INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, there have been a lot of questions with regard to religious moral standards, especially in the Catholic Ireland. Many have raised concerns especially from the media and catholic critics about the injustices being committed by the nuns and their inhuman cruelty. Criticism of the Church in Ireland is a new phenomenon that has begun since the 1990s. Up until the 1980s, the media tried to avoid reporting on “many religious stories and taboos because they were regarded by news executives as so extraordinary hazardous as to preclude detailed investigation” (Brereton, 2006, p. 322). Claims and counterclaims have surfaced regarding the mistreatment of women and children who are seen to have breached codes of sexual purity. These issues have ignited widespread discussions among the public. An apparent decline in interest

among women wishing to join Ireland's order of nuns has become evident, primarily due to fear of stigma given the order's tarnished historical reputation.

The film "Philomena" has piqued public curiosity, shedding light on the role of nuns in cases of baby adoption scandals and female oppression. It exposes the harrowing circumstances young women and their children are made to endure, driven by the belief that they have committed unpardonable sins requiring divine forgiveness. Their sufferings are seen as penance. The film centers on Philomena Lee who, in the 1950s, conceived a child out of wedlock, a situation regarded as a disgrace and handled with utmost secrecy within the Irish Catholic community. She is urged by the nuns to keep her secret under wraps. She is coerced into giving up her son, Antony, for adoption and to sign a confidentiality agreement that ultimately results in the child's involuntary adoption after three years. She is then secluded to a convent in Ireland.

Young and full of vitality, these 'fallen women' are exploited by the church and forced to carry out demanding tasks such as laundry and other labor-intensive chores. Their meager wages go directly to the church. They are led to believe that they are unfit for society, and their manual labor is portrayed as repayment for the shelter provided by the nuns. Their only escape from the convent is the hefty sum of a hundred pounds - an exorbitant amount back in the 1950s. For many years, this was Philomena Lee's life. Deep down, she clung onto the hope of reuniting with her son one day. However, as the longing for her child remained unquenched by her silence, she decides to share her story with her daughter Jane who introduces her to Martin Sixsmith, a journalist who has just lost his job with the BBC. Sixsmith then accepts to help Philomena to find Antony who was adopted by an American family and now goes by the name Michael Hess. Though she knows very well what she is going into, she wears a brave heart to face the consequences only to find her son.

It is not an easy road for them, but they decide to travel it anyway. Philomena goes to the Ireland convent to seek the records that will ease the reunion with her son. On the other hand, her son Antony is also desperately looking for her. It is later uncovered that Antony is a serious legal counsel at the White House. In the end, none of them see the other except for Philomena who sees him in the memoir of his video and camera shots. Antony who is homosexual dies of AIDS, and the love of his mother towards him still cannot be hidden especially when it emerges that she is asking if her son ever thought of her.

The film "Philomena" has portrayed the nuns as very cold and inhuman people especially to the girls who engage themselves in sex out of wedlock, and it is worse for the ones who become pregnant in the process. Here we see young Philomena being exposed to a very painful experience while giving birth. Sister Hildegard asserts that they are paying for their grave sins, and they do not deserve to be helped. In all fairness and as the custodian of the convent, she can do more to help, a just act of being human for a delivering young woman from that kind of experience, but she is only saying the benediction prayers. Probably she wishes them all dead in the process. This

issue portrays nuns as very cruel and unforgiving. In fact, while entering the convent, Philomena narrates to Martin that she was just lucky because she had a friendly young nun, Annunciata, who assisted her in the delivery process. Sister Hildegard portrays a form of pseudo spiritual behavior that most nuns have been accused of in most criticisms recorded in both films and books. In addition, the film helps us to uncover the kind of hypocrites these nuns were in reality.

The act of adopting young children against their mother's will surface in this film a lot. Sister Hildegard and the company play smart by convincing the women confined in the convent that by surrendering the ownership of their children to the custody of the church can help them atone for their sins which are considered unforgivable. The nuns here turn out to be great swindlers because they misuse legal documents with selfish ambitions of selling these children. The documents are signed by the mothers whom at that moment only need at least forgiveness and accommodation. Philomena confesses to have been given a valid document which she signs on oath not to disclose to anyone that she surrenders her child for adoption. She does that willingly without force or duress of any kind. But she later realizes that she is manipulated into accepting her state. This was a good platform for them to make money; the bar attendants tell Martin that there are several cases of claims by mothers who surrendered their children for adoption and now they are seeking to reunite with them. The bar attendants state gallantly that children were sold to rich Americans who were the only people who could afford the adoption fee which was approximated as a thousand pounds. They even accuse the Sisterhood of burning the documents to erase the evidence that these children were once accommodated in the convent and their mothers.

In her return to the convent to seek for the whereabouts of her son, she finds a whole new generation of nuns downed in different outfits. Philomena is in high spirits as she meets the now very polite group of nuns. The young African convent receptionist, who is also a nun, is very polite and innocent. Sister Clara is now the custodian of the convent, and the atmosphere looks very fresh and conducive. There is a complete contrast with the former convent's environment which looked dull and somber. In fact, they are offered a cup of tea as they wait to be served by Sister Clara.

There is an impression that things have changed, and Philomena is going to get help. But things take a different twist when Sister Clara comes in. She is adamant to keep the secrets of the Sisterhood and very hesitant to divulge any information that would compromise the reputation of the convent. This is obvious when we see the manner in which she handles the questions that Martin asks her in surprise. This becomes a bit of an issue especially when she realizes that Martin is a journalist. She openly asks him to give room for them and Philomena. The secretive way of handling issues in the order of nuns in this Irish convent has not changed at all. They still hold it that they know nothing, and the records were burnt in fire.

Later on, Philomena joins Martin in the car with a restraining document, the document she signed while surrendering her baby. Martin wonders why this document has not been burned out. The

oath of secrecy signed by Philomena herself has been very much safe and well-kept and now it is 50 years old. These nuns are the same; the only difference is that they now have a polite and empathic approach in addressing the convent's historical injustices as they have emotional implications to people like Philomena. The fact that the contract signed by Philomena to keep her mouth shut, is a sure way that the order of the nuns will keep themselves away from the blame. Actually, there is a demand for evidence from a section of critics of this film. Bill Donohue rubbishes the claims by Philomena that her child has been snatched away from her by the nuns, and considers her claims as a hate speech, because she states clearly that she has signed that document willingly. The inconsequential lack of evidence to prove the nuns' guilt vindicates them, thereby preserving their secrets a little bit longer (Donohue, 2014, p. 6).

Butler's (2006) journal points out that there is a great difference between the Irish government and the Catholic community in Ireland. At the same time, despite the proven sadistic oppression that the nun community in Catholic Ireland expose the children born out of wedlock and their mothers to, there are millions of nuns across the world that are still faithful to their duties to the church, and they perform them diligently. Hence, it is very necessary to be more specific and direct while crusading to get justice for infringed rights. *Philomena* is not this specific; the generalization tendency of the film encompasses many innocent Catholic faithful nuns and members of the clergy.

Amongst these cold-hearted nuns in the film, there are also sympathetic, friendly, and human nuns. They do not exhibit any hypocritical behavior. They are ready to reason with the humanity irrespective of their wrongs. They are here to encourage the 'fallen' individuals and give them hope. This statement refers to Sister Annunciata. This is the sister who goes against all odds to help Philomena deliver her baby safely. This nun is more than a friend to Philomena. She breaks into Sister Hildegard's quarters, sneaks out a picture of young Antony and brings it to his mother. This is a friendly gesture more so, from a nun in that convent. The director uses a medium shot in order to have the audience focus on the dialogue and the interaction between Philomena and Sister Annunciata as well as their reactions. This shot demonstrates how the nun is totally different from the other nuns because she tells Philomena that she expects that Antony's father should be handsome, thereby breaking the nuns' cycle of hatred to women who engage in sex out wedlock.

In this community, nuns are considered unnatural and inhuman. Yet, we can manage to find a genuinely polite and caring one. But the bone of contention here is that she is still very young. She is still in the process of knowing how things work in that convent. Going by the trend that has been exhibited in this film, Sister Hildegard is very old but still cold hearted, defiant, and still very unapologetic of her past action despite her being very old. Sister Clara, who is now the convent-in-charge, is polite but very cautious. Her consistent denial of the knowledge of Antony's whereabouts is a bit bugging. She does not exhibit even a little sympathy to old Philomena who only seeks to know how her son is doing wherever he has been sold. She even denies ever meeting

him at one point when Antony was there to seek for his mother too. Though the secret is already out, she still clings to it.

Although the young Annunciata at this time is nowhere in the picture, her innocent act of kindness still lives. Is it possible that with time she will get sucked into the Sisterhood culture of cruelty and inhuman tendencies? This bit is missing in the film. Presently, just like the friendly young Annunciata, we meet the polite young African nun whose name has been treated with some bits of insignificance since it is not mentioned in the film. Her smile and hospitality have the ability to blow one's mind away, but hey, she is still a nun who has sworn the oath of chastity and purity. There is a revelation though, that these nuns' act of inhumanity is developing as they get used to the norm of the convent.

One's guess could be that Sister Hildegard was very accommodative, friendly and understanding just like sisters Annunciata and the receptionist. But as they get assimilated into the system and learn how things work, they get conformed to the pattern of operation in the convent. This film pattern shares the features as in the Magdalene Sisters film which brings out the aspects of politics in which the nuns are swayed to act in a certain pattern. It is coming out clearly that each order of nuns has their own secrets and culture of implementing their clerical duties (Free, 2010, p. 216-219).

Irish cinema industry is majorly focused on Catholic criticism in the recent past. The detective and narrative nature of these films compel their audience to uncover major injustices committed in the past by the Irish order of nuns. The soothing sound effects denote a melancholic mood, especially the sound effects at the convent when Philomena is exploring the corridors of the convent where they are locked in. At the grave of Michael, there is a sudden bright light that glows on Philomena's face to signify that her troubled heart is now at rest. The longing to know the whereabouts of her son has been quenched. Magdalene sisters, generational conflict, Northern Ireland, Eastenders and most recently Philomena (ibid) all tend to blame nuns of the past atrocities that were committed by the nuns, and critics use films to satirically address these past injustices.

The film *Philomena* has cut very deep in the emotional veins of Catholic followers because it is almost impossible to comprehend the fact that a nun who has sacrificed her sexual desires to set them apart for the service to the church and to God could engage in such incredible scandals of selling babies. The notable dull photography in the film could signify that it not a happy moment for everyone in that environment especially for the nuns. The old Sister Hildegard is dying of guilt, her past has caught up with her and when Martin stretches, she tells it all. But who is fooling who?! Though the film *Philomena* exhibits a level of oppression by the nuns, but it does ultimately represent the entire Catholic order of nuns. That is a debatable premise.

Philomena is very nostalgic about her past sexual experience with the guy who got her pregnant in the 1950s. The memory is still very fresh in her mind. It has been a life changing experience for her, and she confesses to have enjoyed every moment of it. This is because she did not have a chance to interact with men in her teenage life and evidently she was not having the conviction to pledge allegiance to the oath of chastity, purity, and self-denial of worldly pleasures. Philomena realizes that she is attractive especially when she looks at herself into the mirror. This is when she finds her new love but her aunt, who is a devoted nun, warns her not to talk to strangers especially men. Her emotions get over her and she finds herself in a very romantic state of affairs. She gives in and there she has a sexual experience which would change her life forever. This scene is shot by a wide medium shot in order to display the beautiful countryside which incurs a feeling of nostalgia for sex because sex, according to Philomena, is “wonderful” and beautiful.

Sexual intercourse outside marriage was a normal scenario going by the number of babies and their mothers represented in the film. But having sex and in the process begetting a child was a terrible sin; it was a self-mortification act and was punishable by confinement to a convent. According to Sister Hildegard, death would serve a good remedy for such type of sin. She brags to have managed to maintain her oath of chastity and remain pure, and the only person who is in a position to judge her is Jesus Christ himself. Not a mere sinful mortal man. Close-up shots are used in this scene in order to take the audience into the mind of Sister Hildegard. In addition, these close-up shots are used in the film in order to make the audience feel extra uncomfortable about Sister Hildegard. The nuns surface to us the truth on how they are treating romantic issues, and something becomes clear that some of them are not really happy while denying themselves bodily pleasure like sex.

One would argue that maybe they were frustrated or had an experience with romance which was not a really good one. Philomena faces rejection by her parents and father telling the villagers that she was dead because she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. This film may also tend to bug the mind of the audience on the reasons why sex is such a big sin amongst the Irish community. There is a clear misrepresentation of how the nuns treat the community with regard to sexual offenses.

Moreover, the cinematic representation of the manner in which nuns are recruited and used is quite absurd because the whole meaning is lost due to such practices that are seen in this film. This has been a notorious practice by most film authors whose films are based on religious criticism, most specifically on the Irish order of nuns. For instance, in the film, Magdalene sisters, nuns have been depicted as political tools to push political agenda rather than the original initial divine calling of the nuns.

On the other hand, the film *Philomena* exposes the manner in which the Irish nuns oppress women and children. Philomena is clearly denied the right to talk about her son not even to her family members by being manipulated into signing an oath of secrecy and she is supposed to die with that

while we are all aware that someone somewhere pocketed one thousand adoption fees for Antony. This is the most sadistic way of punishing women and children in the name of protecting the public from ‘morally loose women.’

It is not clear how someone who professes the Christian faith like a nun engages in such religious malpractices that only stand to undermine the Christian faith. There are increased scandals in almost all convents in every part of the world especially those whose origins are traced back from Irish order of nuns (Butler, 2006, p. 10). Secularism and love for money has turned the convents into a human trafficking organ. The nuns of the Catholic Ireland are depicted in this film as people who are there in the convent to snatch babies who have been born out of wedlock and sell them to the highest bidders. Though critics of this film are not very much amused with this film as they decry lack of evidence of that proves the accusations that are portrayed in the film (Donohue, 2014, p. 6).

The fact that the episodes of the film are depicted in both 1950s and the present day, it can be argued that Philomena only represents the cry of thousands who have gone through the same ordeal she experienced. In his book, Sixsmith brings to light that nuns operated the monastery that was used as the assembly line for adoption and over 40,000 babies born out of wedlock were put up for adoption and raised by their adoptive parents between 1948 and 1962 (Donohue, 2014, p. 3). There is an element of inflation of these figures though, but all the same it is a sure proof that children were being taken from their parents and being sold to adoptive parents. This is a traumatic and very cruel way of treating children, let alone their mothers. In this film, we see Philomena struggles to reach her baby when he is taken away by his adoptive parents. Her cries and wails land into the deaf ears of Sister Hildegard who cannot even offer her information on the events that have led to the selling (adopting at that time) of her baby boy Antony.

Philomena exhibits elements of structural narratology. The film relays on a very crucial message to the members of the society about the nuns and what is hidden behind their outfit which covers everything except their faces. Its contents have a characteristic consistence that is empirically and conceptually acceptable (Bordwell et al., 1988, p. 6). That is why we get to relate the events of 1950s and those of 2002, when Philomena Lee sets foot to confront her history. Given that the film is based on a true story, there is compelling evidence that proves the validity of the information given, and this makes the public to be informed accordingly.

In the United States, Philomena and Martin learns that Antony identified himself as an Irish though he did not talk about it, but the Celtic harp that was pinned on his tuxedo convince them that he was proud of being an Irish. This is where we find out from his partner that he even travelled to Ireland to seek for his mother and even poised for a photo with the nuns. Sister Clara at the convent is very clear that she has not seen Antony, now known as Michael. But in real sense, she talked to him and even on his death she offered him a portion in the graveyard to be buried. Even

at the time of his death she could not inform his mother. Another issue is that his partner explains very well that he took him there. The question is: did he open up or did Sister Clara know that he was homosexual, and he died of AIDS and that is why she kept it all away from her even the news of his death? This brings out an aspect of 'I don't care attitude' in the nuns behaviour.

Now it is clear that the children being given away for adoption by the nuns are forgotten the moment they are taken. To them out of sight is always out of mind and this does not sound well. Antony's fellow adopted sister confesses that life was not very easy with them. They had a difficult life at childhood. This is also evidenced by the faded smile young Antony gives even on the camera. The nuns do not have a follow up policy on the well-being of the adopted children with their adopting families. This is unfair treatment of children, and this can be the reason why even Antony/Michael finds solace in homosexuality. This aspect of greed and selfishness manifests itself in the character traits of Sister Hildegard and company.

If this is a film which is based on a true story as it is being stated, then the Irish order of the nuns must have a moral obligation to ensure that the children they give of sell have the life that the mother could not really give. They must make sure that they are loved and cared for. This phenomenon has been discussed in different forums all over the world. Some adoptive families are very oppressive and unloving. Hence, the nuns are supposed to fulfill their due diligence in ensuring that the children that have been adopted from their convent get the best happiness they deserve. This could also be the cause of the suspected resentment in Sister Hildegard's eyes and voice. There is guilt that is eating her from inside if the words of those bar attendants are anything to go by. Most of the mothers come back for their babies and they cannot be traced because their documents were burnt down. If this has been happening since 1950s and beyond and one of the nuns who oversaw that is still alive and still living on the mercies of self-justification, then she is still paying with her guilt.

Most people have had problem with such past injustices, and they end up rebelling like Martin Sixsmith who is a former altar boy or rebelling like the Protestants. If a trusted personality in the docket of a nun can commit such atrocities, then some would argue that they (the nuns) can be having a role to play in the strife that has affected the Irish order of nuns and Catholic Ireland as a whole. According to Bartlett (2010), there is a historic strife that has existed for over 500 years between the Catholics and their critics, especially the Protestants. One could have an urge to believe that the convents and monasteries are the exact epicenter of the conspiracy that threatens to soil nuns' credibility worldwide.

The oppression of women and children in the church setting has been hidden from the public for centuries; the Catholic Church in Ireland has been benefiting a lot as a result of such oppression. It is true that having children out of wedlock is unacceptable act. But when the church is benefiting in the name of secluding the loose moral women from the society, then it is terribly unacceptable

in the present day. For many years, Irish women have suffered pain, trauma, and segregation. In his literary work, poet, and historian McCarthy (2008) emphasizes on the type of oppression women faced:

‘Kinship’ of legions on ramparts, casualties and victims, and slaughter for the common good have obvious contemporary resonances in 1975 and the shaven heads of the notorious remind us of the ‘little adulteress’ of ‘Punishment’ with her ‘shaved head / like a stubble of black corn,’ and the comparison that that poem draws between her punishment and that of women ‘cauled in tar’ in 1970s Northern Ireland (p. 100).

The above statement echoes some similarities with the representation of nuns in the film *Philomena* though the film captures modern Ireland. It is the time for catholic Ireland to stop hiding behind the religious shadow while committing undeserved atrocities to the women and children.

Another important aspect of the film is the role played by journalism. Martin Sixsmith agrees to help Philomena unconditionally to find Antony who is her lost son. One cannot overlook the media’s role in the film. At the same time, it is a good representation in the noble role of voicing out the voices of the oppressed. Sister Clara on realizing that Sixsmith is a journalist, she shies off from speaking to Philomena until he gets out. Philomena informs Martin that Sister Clara has cautioned her against speaking to him. The reason being there is a culture of privacy in the Sisterhood, and this could be the reason why the convent is situated in a very remote secluded area. Sixsmith, who is now an atheist, goes ahead to confront the Sister Hildegard and there she bursts into confession. This could be the reason why the press is not very much welcome. They could have found out very early that Antony was actually buried in the convent grounds. This reveals that there are a lot of injustices and other undercover activities that the nuns are involved in apart from the service to God.

In a nutshell, *Philomena* is a timely film that tends to address past injustices of the nuns in the postmodern world of today. Nuns have been given the cruelest role in this film. Philomena tries to hold on to her loyalty to the church despite the fact that her love has been lost in this convent; she has lost her child and suffered a trauma in the same place. Many cultures of the world have always respected the convents and branded it a very peaceful place. A place where one can find refuge when they are faced with hard times. But *Philomena* tries to draw us to the contrary. Philomena had her worst experience in the convent and taking her foot back to that compound only brings sorrow to her heart.

The nuns have come out as friendly people when they are new or junior to the system such as Sister Annunciate and the polite young African nun, but as they get submerged into the system they become very ferocious people to live with. Philomena Lee has had her bite of the pain. After watching this film, opinions would be divergent with regard to the placement of one’s religious

loyalty. The nuns have also been represented as very spiritual human beings, in fact supernatural humans who have never tasted sin.

Nuns tend to subscribe to the premise that there is only one person who can question their morality and holiness, that is, Jesus Christ only. This could explain the act of separation from the mainstream society. But how is it that they are mingling with the 'fallen women' who have children out of wedlock? Which moral authority do they have to punish those who have committed sin against God? This comes out as an act of double standards and misrepresentation of the truth. Furthermore, the act of snatching babies from their mothers and giving them to total strangers in the name of adoption is an immoral act. There is compelling evidence that justifies that children have been bought at one thousand pounds and with this act these nuns are misrepresenting Mother Theresa with utmost impunity.

All in all, not all nuns have been represented here, only a few who refuse to be modernized and strives to maintain status quo and refuse the revolution that is brought about by modernity are represented in this film. There are good nuns like Annunciata in this film. The film *Philomena* uncovers the fact that there is no difference between modern Ireland and traditional Ireland. The scandals that were exhibited in 1920s are the ones that were exhibited in 1950s, 1970 and in the present days (White, 2007, p. 47).

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