

## LISA MCINERNEY'S *THE GLORIOUS HERESIES* AS A CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY REALITY IN IRELAND

Maria Sony

[mariasony812@gmail.com](mailto:mariasony812@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Lisa McInerney's The Glorious Heresies, recipient of the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction in 2015, is a vivid depiction of the degenerative state of Irish society. Located in the rundown city of Cork, the narrative follows the lives of five social misfits, all connected to one another through a murder. This paper is an attempt to read the novel as a critical commentary on the oppressive nature of the governing and ideological forces in the country, namely the State and the Church, through the impact it has on the characters. It focuses on how these institutions are pinpointed as the repressive entities that inconspicuously nurture and propagate crime and violence in order to uphold the status quo of power. The portrayal of the coexistence of active and passive resistance to such oppressions is also studied as a critique on the country's descent into a possible present day dystopia.*

**Keywords:** State Apparatus, Catholic Church, State, resistance, passivity, degeneration

Lush green pastures flecked with grazing sheep, quaint pubs at every corner, a flourishing agricultural economy and a strong Catholic faithful – the Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland), even in the twenty first century, is rarely seen separately from these stereotypical images. Though they are significant aspects of the country's past and, to a certain extent, its present, it would be quite myopic to visualise the island solely within these parameters. Breaking away from such picturesque exposés, Lisa McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) draws attention to the dark reality of contemporary Ireland. Winner of the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction in 2015 and the Desmond Elliott Prize in 2016, McInerney's debut novel, set in the city of Cork, traces the lives of five misfits and the murder that connects them. The aim of this paper is to emphasize how *The Glorious Heresies*, by mirroring the reality of post-crash Ireland, comments on the corruptions within the Catholic Church. It also looks at the failure of the governing systems and the resulting depletion of the Irish society.

The novel's criticism of the dysfunctional and oppressive nature of dominant institutions like the Catholic Church and the State is also a denigration of their hegemonic roles as an Ideological State Apparatus and a Repressive State Apparatus, respectively. In his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser mentions that while institutions like, "the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc" constitute the Repressive State Apparatus, the

Ideological State Apparatuses are “a number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form distinct and specialized institutions” (151). The former functions primarily by violence and the latter operates by ideology. While their primary mode varies, both endeavour to coerce the individuals into submission and interpellation – the process by which certain ideologies are internalised by individuals and are accepted as a part of their identity.

In such situations, agency, whether social, institutional or individual, is suppressed. However, as Michael Foucault declares in *The History of Sexuality*, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (95). The novel, however, portrays the co-existence of resistance with inaction. On one hand, the Irish society is shown to engage in a particular form of resistance proposed by James C. Scott in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. In this influential ethnographic text, he opines that the oppressed people use their measured agency to engage in “everyday forms of resistance” through non-cooperation and cultural resistance (29). On the other hand, the novel suggests that the internalisation of the ideologies of the hegemonic power have led to a state of passiveness and comatose among the subordinated people. This passivity is not analogous to Antonio Gramsci’s ‘passive rebellion’ or to the ‘non – violent resistance’ popularised by Mahatma Gandhi, rather it is indicative of the increasingly deteriorating condition of the contemporary Irish society. *The Glorious Heresies* reflects these ideas of hegemonic control and resistance to structure its critique on the contemporary Irish reality.

The novel begins with an insight into Ryan Cusack’s broken family and the genesis of his relationship with his classmate, Karine D’Arcy. Simultaneously, in another part of the city of Cork, Maureen accidentally kills a man who intrudes into her house. Instead of the police, she calls her son Jimmy Phelan, who then assigns Ryan’s father, Tony, with the job of disposing the body. As Maureen struggles to come to terms with her guilt by approaching a priest, Georgie, a runaway and a prostitute, goes in search of her boyfriend, Robbie O’Donovan, who was the intruder murdered by Maureen. Both their efforts in vain, the former turns to her past only to realise that Catholicism wasn’t convincing enough for her, while the latter decides to join a Catholic retreat group to change her lifestyle. In the meantime, Ryan, who engages in a sexual activity with his neighbour Tara, gets into a massive fight with his father, walks out of his house and starts dealing drugs. Tony is threatened by Jimmy, when the latter finds out that the former had accidentally disclosed the name of the intruder to Maureen. When Ryan is caught for his drug dealing, Tony deliberately sends him to prison to keep him out of harm’s way. Karine, who had become pregnant by then, is forced to abort her child due to Ryan’s absence.

Georgie, herself pregnant from a relationship with a man named David whom she met at the retreat centre finds out about Robbie’s death from Maureen. Her search for answers leads her to Tony who denies any involvement. When Tony finds out that Tara had tipped off Georgie, he strangles her in her sleep. Maureen, in her determination to find salvation without

the Church, participates in a cult meeting, only to leave it, unsatisfied with their ideas but contenting herself by burning down a nearby church. Georgie, when forced to give up her baby on account of being an ex-prostitute, leaves the centre and returns to a life of prostitution and drug dealing in order to make enough money to get her child back. Her encounter with Maureen and Jimmy finally results in her migration to England. While Tony sinks into a life of loneliness Ryan, whose failed relationship with Karine and sense of nihilism drives him to commit suicide. However, he regains his life and the novel comes to a close with him finally meeting Maureen, who convinces him that he can always turn his life around.

The advent of Christianity, Catholicism in particular, to Ireland in the fourth and fifth centuries, its gradual submersion of the Celtic paganism which was rampant until then, and its series of expansion and contraction over the following centuries finally culminated in the establishment of the Catholic Church as an institution, inseparable from Ireland's historic national identity. In fact, the fight in Northern Ireland, between the Loyalists and Republicans may be seen as friction between Protestantism and Catholicism. Its expansive influence on the social and cultural lives of the Irish is noted by Tony Fahey in "Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland", "In everything from sport to education to the mass media, Irish society accords a prominence to the church and to religion" (246).

While Ireland is still nominally considered a Catholic State, from the past few years, its impact on the Irish has been spiralling downward, gathering multitudes of criticisms. In the novel, Georgie's experience when she tries to spread the gospel summarises the people's antagonism, "She'd already been told to get off the doorstep before the dog was called, to get a life, to burn in hell, and to stick her propaganda up her shapely hole" (McInerney 134). However, McInerney's novel is not a mere observation of such criticisms hurled at the Church rather, it by itself is a critique. The title of the novel – 'The Glorious Heresies' – is an obvious suggestion of the text's attitude towards the institution of the Catholic Church. Heresy, any idea that opposes the doctrines of the Church, which is perpetually considered the negative pole to the positive of the Christian doctrines, is prefixed with the adjective 'glorious'. By glorifying heresies, the novel, itself quite heretical, makes its stand against the Catholic Church.

One of the most severe allegations made against the Church is its inability to provide a concrete sense of salvation, despite its promise of redemption to all those who seek it. This incompetence is portrayed through the experiences of the characters Maureen and Georgie, who despite approaching the Church, the former through confession and the latter through a Catholic retreat organisation, are unable to come to terms with their mistakes. Maureen's conversation with a Catholic priest clearly points out that this incapability stems from the countless sins committed by the Church, "I killed one man but you would have killed me in the name of god, wouldn't you? How many did you kill? How many lives did you destroy with your morality and your Seal of Confession and your lies?" (128).

While such direct accusations are scant in the novel, the author, through Maureen in particular, scathingly comments on the scandals of the Church, bringing to light the hypocrisy, tyranny and corruption at its base. Maureen's vehement declaration that the clergy are epitomes of brutality is an allusion to the recent reports of abuse by the Irish Church and clergy. As noted in *The Guardian*, several Catholic priests and nuns had been sexually molesting and terrorising thousands of children, most of whom come from dysfunctional and pathetic backgrounds, in the Church-run network of industrial schools, orphanages and reformatories (McDonald 11). Maureen's condemnation of the cruelty practiced in the Magdalene Laundries, popular asylums run by Roman Catholic orders to house 'fallen women', is suggestive particularly of the oppressive, patriarchal attitude of the Catholic Church. This patriarchal power of the Church is questioned and mocked through the pathetic light in which Una, Maureen's mother, is portrayed. In describing Una as "a frightened hag", who saw women as "treacherous vixens", for whom there "was no authority but the Holy Trinity" and who was in favour of the Magdalene Laundries, the author consciously constructs an analogy to the Church – an analogy strong enough to consider Una as a metaphor for the Catholic Church(186).

The Irish population's general fallout with Catholicism is also due to the latter's incompatibility with industrialisation as well as with certain feminist ideas of equality in the modern world. Karl Emil Maximilian Weber was of the view that, "the culture of the machine and the spirit of religion", did not go hand in hand because, "the triumph of the former has made the latter irrelevant to economic organisation in the modern industrial world" (Fahey 241). The Celtic Tiger, which was the Irish economic boom of the 1990's had an immense effect on the Irish, as money replaced religion. In the preface to *Contemporary Catholicism in Ireland: A Critical Appraisal*, it is said, "One of the ways [the Irish] used to acquire social capital was by being perceived to be 'good Catholics'; it is now more likely to be determined by the type of property (or properties) we own, or by the car we drive, or our holiday destinations" (Maher and Littleton 4). In the novel, several characters like Karine D'Arcy and Maria Cusack define their ideal lives in terms of material gains and goods. The Church's attempts to enter into the economic organisation and cater to the material desires of the contemporary population, by selling religious artefacts and souvenirs, are met with sarcastic amusement,

He remembered gift shop after gift shop, gift shops as far as an eight-year-old eye could see, stocked to the rafters with baubles. Rows of Virgin Mary barometers; her fuzzy cloak would change colour depending on the weather, which was very miraculous. Toy cameras with preloaded images of the shrine; you clicked through them, holding the flimsy yoke up to the light. (20)

In "Tradition and Status of Women in the Catholic Church", Ruth Henderson comments, "Whilst the Church preaches justice and equality for women in the social world, the Church itself practices injustice" (5). This injustice is mainly seen in its stance against

abortion and use of contraceptive pills. In the novel, Karine, who is forced to undergo an abortion voices against the pro-life signs, “How many girls walking past here might have had to terminate even though they don’t even want to? What about the ladies whose babies have no brains and stuff? What about girls who were raped?” (172). Her angry rants, slightly crude though they may be, criticise the Church’s disregard for the interests of individuals, especially females, in its mission to spread its doctrines and values over a large mass of people.

The text essentially portrays how the Church functions as what Louis Althusser calls an Ideological State Apparatus, which exerts control over people’s thoughts and actions through religious ideologies, forcing them to conform to the values it dictates (151). Una’s firm belief that women’s sexuality is a sin that has to be curbed and hidden is another significant instance of the Church enforcing its orthodox values while completely disregarding the individuals. Althusser’s claim that, “There is no such purely ideological apparatus” and that all Ideological State Apparatuses “function secondarily by violence” is realised through the various merciless brutalities of the Church (153). The criticism of these cruelties is hence a dismissal of the oppressive ideologies propagated by the Church.

In the novel, apart from the sarcastic comments and the fervent opinions raised against the Irish Catholic Church, the characters seek to overthrow the suffocating influence the Christian ideologies have on them. Such forms of resistance, brought to action through an attitude of non-cooperation with and intolerance towards the Church is similar to what Scott refers to as, “everyday forms of resistance”, which include weapons like, “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth” (29). For instance, Georgie displays a complete disregard for the sanctity of the Holy Bible, when she uses it as a board to intake drugs saying, “Mass produced and made of dead trees; there’s nothing special about them” (102). A far more radical move is undertaken by Maureen when she sets fire to a church, “No confessor, no penitent, no sin, no sacrament. Just actions to be burned away...Nothing as cleansing as a fire”(284). Such acts of resistance foreground the fluctuating tendency of power structures, and hence the text, within its function of critiquing, prophesies a possible demolition of the current power structures.

Though the novel depicts instances of resistance from the Irish society, it simultaneously suggests a situation of complete passivity, where the people, as a result of their internalisation of the ideologies imposed upon them, fail to show any signs of resistance. Such a state of comatose arising out of interpellation is evident when no actions, small or big, are taken against the governing systems of the Irish Republic, despite its corruptive and dysfunctional nature. The punishments meted out to the ‘deviants’ in the society and hence the role played by the governing body as a Repressive State Apparatus is merely hinted through Ryan’s time spent in prison. Furthermore, the corrupted officers and judges aren’t called out and mocked as in the case of the Church, though a mild scorn is reserved for the



Gardai, the Irish police, and their inefficiency. Even the disintegrated state of the Irish society can be seen as an outcome of this lukewarm response to the controlling institutions.

Interestingly, apart from their history of violence, the novel points to a feature shared by the Church and the government – both institutions are shown to thrive on the deviants. The narrative foregrounds how the deviants in the society are nurtured so that the status quo is maintained and their authority remains unquestioned. While the State juvenile prisons are noted by Ryan to give no proper education to the prisoners and help them lead a better life, Dan's comments, "I'm just saying to you, little man, the methods they use inside are designed to control you even after you get out" solidify the notion of the State's dependence on them to exert their power (214). Similarly, Maureen points out to Georgie, "The Church craves power above all things, power above all of the living. The Church has an ideal and it'll raze all in its way to achieve it. .. The Church creates its sinners so it has something to save" (252). Here again, the tyranny of the State Apparatuses, both Ideological and Repressive, is condemned.

Apart from the focus on the injustice and violence weaved into the functioning of the legislative and judiciary systems of contemporary Ireland, the novel also brings to the forefront the inefficiency of the government in coping with the economic crash of 2008 and in understanding the difficulties of people who belong to the margins of the society. As pointed out in "Ireland's Economic Crisis: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", despite the fact that several policies undertaken by the government, including the sudden rise and fall in the prices of houses, made the way to the economic crisis, the Irish government chose to lay the blame on the international financial crisis (Whelan 429). Nearly all the characters in the novel, all of whom belong to the invisible crevices of society, are shown to be engaged in all sorts of illegal activities in order to earn a living. The State's inability to deal with the fiscal crisis is depicted as the reason behind the migration of several characters to England and other European countries in search of better prospects. The State's irresponsibility and lack of concern is pointed out by Tony when his efforts to find work is met with an indifference by the officers of the government's Solidarity House, despite the lack of employment brought about by the economic turmoil (158). While the setting of the novel, in Cork in a post-recession scenario, highlights the concern with the government's management of the situation, the narrative suggests that the primary focus is on the populace's increasing antipathy with the Catholic Church.

Granted, *The Glorious Heresies* is, without doubt, a text that condemns powerful institutions like the Irish Catholic Church and the Irish government or Dáil Eireann. However, the author doesn't employ a narrator who is an all-seeing God, with a right to comment directly upon the activities of such organisations. Rather, the narrative point shifts between a third person limited narrator and first person perspective, such that the focus of the text is on the micro lives of individuals, their dilemmas and experiences, through which the macro affairs of the country is commented upon. Even though it said in the initial pages that, "Cork

City isn't going to notice the first brave steps of a resolute young man. The city runs on the macro...", a subversion is brought about by focusing on the rather small and easily ignorable lives of individuals from the side lines of the Irish society (10). The postmodernist focus on the individual, particularly each person's internal conflicts like Maureen's guilt, Ryan's lack of confidence and Tony's alienation from himself, is complemented with the non-linear and fragmented nature of the narrative. The frequent shifts between the past and present, the movement from a third person's point of view on an individual's life to the person's own account of it and the flow from one individual as the focal point to another character are indicative of the chaotic order that drives each of them.

The lives of characters who are marginalised, oppressed and ignored as the central focus of the novel heighten the dark and degenerative nature of the reality in Ireland. Their lives, inseparable from alcoholism, prostitution and drug misuse, as a result of broken families and physical abuse reveal the decaying morals and values in the society. For instance, Ryan troubled and abusive relationship with his father drives him towards drug lords and finally towards a nihilistic frame of mind, whereby he tries to kill himself. Even the landscape and weather are described to complement the mood of disintegration and dreariness, "A surf of cloud broke grey over the streets and Ryan walked through a city where debris stuck in damp clumps in every dirty corner" (75). The villainous encroachment of such a state of physical degeneration in the households of the marginalised refers to their waning existence. This is seen in the description of Tara's kitchen hours before she is killed, "Piles of clothes had been set on the table and left for so long they'd become musty. The wall behind the curtain was streaked brown and grey. The top of the cooker was thick with old grease. It was as if the resident had died months ago" (271). As stated previously, such images of deterioration are indicative of the interpellation of dominant ideologies.

Lisa McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies* observes and comments on the major areas of concern to the contemporary society of Ireland. While the critiques on the Catholic Church and the Irish government reveal their abuse of power and lack of concern for the distinct interests and problems of the individuals in the Irish society, the depiction of the characters and their surrounding suggest the deprivation that has been on the rise. However, the rather hopeful tone with which the novel ends is an indication of the possibility for a brighter future.

### Works Cited:

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Comp. John Storey, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, pp. 151-162.
- Fahey, Tony. "Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland." *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 79, no. 1, 1990, pp. 241-263.
- Foucault, Michael. *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Penguin, 1990.

Henderson, Ruth. "Tradition and Status of Women in the Catholic Church." *AEJT*, vol.2, no.1, 2004, pp. 1-9, *AEJT*, [aejt.com.au/2004/vol\\_2\\_no\\_1\\_2004?article=395682](http://aejt.com.au/2004/vol_2_no_1_2004?article=395682).

Maher, Eamon, Fr. John Littleton. *Contemporary Catholicism in Ireland: A Critical Appraisal*, Columbia Press, 1999.

McDonald, Henry. "'Endemic' rape and abuse of Irish children in Catholic care, inquiry finds." *The Guardian*, 20 May 2009, [www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/20/irish-catholic-schools-child-abuse-claims](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/20/irish-catholic-schools-child-abuse-claims).

McInerney, Lisa. *The Glorious Heresies*, John Murray, 2015.

Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University, 1985.

Whelan, Karl. "Ireland's Economic Crisis: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly." *Journal of Macroeconomics*, vol.39, no. PB, 2014, pp. 424-440.