



Imprisoned Bodies, Muted Voices: Female Characters and Patriarchal Control in Claire Keegan's Small Things Like These

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-01 Revised: 2026-06-18 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: Feminist Literary Criticism, Patriarchal Control, Institutional Silence, Confinement, Women's Oppression, Claire Keegan, Small Things Like These. DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.11218 Corresponding Author: Ulwiyya Farhana ulwiyyafarhana@students.unnes.ac.id English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Jawa Tengah	<i>This study examines the portrayal of the female characters in Claire Keegan's novel Small Things Like These (2021). In particular, the women held within the Magdalene Laundries are represented as marginalized and oppressed characters within patriarchal systems. This study examines how patriarchal control is implemented in the novel through the confinement and silencing of women, employing a qualitative descriptive approach and Feminist Literary Criticism, as proposed by Gilbert and Gubar (2000). Institutional oppression, collective silence, and historical trauma have been investigated in previous studies of Small Things Like These. However, little attention has been paid to how women are portrayed in light of Gilbert and Gubar's ideas of confinement and silencing. The study offers a distinctive feminist perspective by examining the intertwined processes by which patriarchal institutions control women's lives. The research indicates that the Magdalene Laundries do not offer women independence, self-determination, or the capacity to control their own lives as institutional power consistently overrides individual will. This oppression is reflected in the institutional and social silence that silences the voices of women, the limitation of women's freedom in the Magdalene Laundries, and the separation of mothers from their children. The research also points out two related mechanisms of patriarchal control. These are physical confinement, restricting women's autonomy and isolating them from the outside world, and institutional silence, which prevents their experiences from being acknowledged or challenged by the larger society. These mechanisms suggest that the novel's oppression is reinforced not only by religious and institutional power but also by social attitudes that normalize compliance and discourage resistance. However, the female characters still seek self-determination and dignity, indicating that</i>

oppression and resistance coexist within the same social context. These findings shed light on the mechanisms by which patriarchal institutions control the bodies, voices, and identities of women in contemporary literature, as discussed by Gilbert and Gubar's concepts of confinement and silencing. This is a contribution to feminist literary criticism.

1. Introduction

Inequality and injustice are perennial problems of the modern world, affecting people through various forms of marginalization, social control, and asymmetrical power relations. These situations are represented in everyday life, and they are also expressed and analyzed in literature. Literature serves as a potent lens through which to examine how social structures and prevailing ideologies shape individual life experiences and human existence, particularly in relation to inequality, marginalization, and oppression. Women continue to face many forms of marginalization, social control, and silencing in today's society, and the ongoing oppression of women remains a serious issue.

Many women continue to face victim blaming, unequal treatment in legal systems, and social pressure to remain silent about what has happened to them. Such factors point to the fact that women's subjugation is not only a product of physical violence but also institutional practices and patriarchal norms that constrain women's voice and autonomy. Literature is a crucial lens to understand how power systems affect women's lives and the reproduction of unequal gender relations.

In Feminist Literary Criticism, Gilbert and Gubar (2000) characterize women characters in literature as prisoners of patriarchal social restrictions that hinder their independence and agency. Their ideas fit with broader feminist discussions of gender inequality, the power of patriarchy, and the construction of women's identities, as demonstrated by the work of hooks (1984), Butler (1990), and Showalter (1977). Literary works are thus an important site for exploring how patriarchal systems control women's bodies, voices, and opportunities for self-determination.

According to Gilbert and Gubar (2000), the representation of women in literary texts tends to portray them as caught in a constraining patriarchal setting in which they are unable to be self-determined and autonomous. The idea of confinement they propose is not just physical confinement but also social, cultural, and ideological constraints that women's identities and opportunities. Similarly, silencing occurs when women's voices, experiences, and perspectives are pushed to the margins or excluded from dominant narratives.

These are concepts very much to the point in *Small Things Like These*, where female characters are physically confined within institutional spaces and symbolically silenced by religious and social authorities. Among the various

feminist approaches, Gilbert and Gubar's is especially relevant to *Small Things Like These*, as the novel consistently depicts women in terms of confinement and silencing. The female characters are physically confined to institutional settings, isolated from their families and unable to publicly express their experiences. At the same time, the surrounding community participates in maintaining silence regarding the injustices occurring within the Magdalene Laundries.

Therefore, among various feminist approaches, Gilbert and Gubar's framework is especially suitable for analyzing the novel because its central conflicts are closely connected to the intertwined processes of confinement and silencing, which serve as key mechanisms of patriarchal control. Accordingly, Gilbert and Gubar's framework is particularly appropriate for this study because it specifically emphasizes the concepts of confinement and silencing, both of which are central to the experiences of women portrayed in *Small Things Like These*.

Feminist theories such as Beauvoir's (2011) concept of woman as the "Other" which primarily explains the social subordination of women, or Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity which focuses on the social construction of gender identity, are different from Gilbert and Gubar's feminist literary criticism, which provides a more accurate framework for examining how patriarchal institutions restrict and silence women in literary works.

This perspective is especially appropriate for *Small Things Like These*, as the novel is set in Ireland. In this country, the historical truth about the Magdalene Laundries is that they were a system of institutional confinement under the authority of the Catholic Church. Within this historical and cultural context, women were physically separated, denied autonomy, and discouraged from speaking out about their experiences.

The historical background of Keegan's novel and the experiences of its female characters, therefore, correspond closely to Gilbert and Gubar's ideas of confinement and silencing, and their framework is particularly useful for analyzing the representation of patriarchal power in Keegan's work. This perspective allows the study to take into account not only gender inequality but also the institutional mechanisms through which patriarchal power regulates women's bodies, voices, and identities.

Today, the question of women's subjugation remains relevant, especially considering that the issues of sexual violence, abuse of power, and silencing of victims are still widely discussed on social media and in international news. Many victims are afraid to speak about what happened to them because of social stigma, public judgment, or the influence of powerful institutions. Thus, silence is often a tool of self-protection rather than a sign of acceptance. This is how cultures of silence and passive complicity continue to influence contemporary society. People may not act directly to oppress, but they may support the perpetuation of oppression through inaction or uncritical acceptance of unequal social arrangements. Therefore, it is important to study literary works that address

women's oppression, as they not only depict women's experiences but also challenge social attitudes and institutional practices that perpetuate injustice.

This study concerns Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021), a novella set against the backdrop of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland. Historically these institutions were used to confine women who were considered socially unacceptable and were subjected to strict discipline, forced labor and social exclusion (Finnegan, 2004; McAleese, 2013; Smith, 2007). With this historical backdrop, Keegan tells the stories of women under the authority of religious and patriarchal authorities.

The novel does not depict oppression through overt acts of violence but emphasizes silence, fear, and society's readiness to accept institutional authority unquestioningly. This leads to the female characters being represented as persons whose liberty, agency, and ability to self-express have been grossly curtailed. Such issues make *Small Things Like These* especially relevant to feminist analysis, as the novel shows how institutional silence, and social complicity sustain women's oppression in a patriarchal society.

In the novel, patriarchal power is personified by the authority of the Magdalene Laundries, which are run under the influence of the Catholic Church and supported by the surrounding community's silence. These institutions control women's lives by restricting their freedom, alienating them from their families, and not allowing them to talk about their lives. Individual male characters do not represent patriarchy in *Small Things Like These*, but as an institutional system of power supported by religious authority, social conformity, and collective silence.

Small Things Like These has been approached from a variety of perspectives in many studies. The oppression of women, the collective silence, and the role of society in the perpetuation of institutional violence in the Magdalene Laundries have been brought to the attention of research by Pérez-Vides (2024), Tillotson (2025), and Hakkioğlu and Güneş (2024). They conclude that it is not only the religious institutions but also the wider social setting that is silent in the face of injustice that perpetuates women's suffering.

Kang (2025) and Han (2024) have likewise examined the novel's challenge to patriarchal values via its depiction of empathy, passive conformity, and the normalization of harmful practices. However, Finnegan (2004) and McAleese (2013) are specifically interested in the historical realities of the Magdalene Laundries and their role as regulatory and controlling mechanisms in the lives of women in Ireland.

These studies, while they demonstrate that the novel critiques institutional oppression, social complicity, and patriarchal authority, differ in their analytical focus. Pérez-Vides (2024), Tillotson (2025), and Hakkioğlu and Güneş (2024) focus on oppression, collective silence, and institutional violence, whereas Kang (2025) and Han (2024) focus on empathy, conformity, and the normalization of harmful practices. Despite these valuable contributions, limited attention has been given to

how female characters are represented as both confined bodies and silenced voices through Gilbert and Gubar's feminist framework. However, little attention has been paid to exploring further the relationship between patriarchy, institutional power, and the representation of women in Keegan's work. Based on the research gap identified above, this study examines how female characters are represented as silenced and oppressed individuals within patriarchal institutions in *Small Things Like These*. It also investigates how patriarchal control is portrayed through the interconnected mechanisms of confinement and institutional silence.

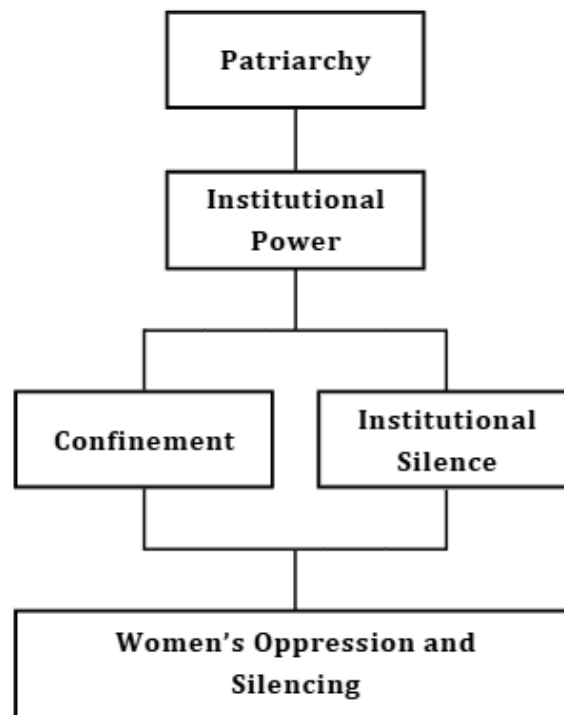


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Patriarchal Control, Confinement, Institutional Silence, and Women's Oppression

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study. Drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) feminist literary criticism, the framework positions patriarchy as the broader system of power by institutional authority. In the novel, this authority is articulated through two related mechanisms: confinement and institutional silence. Confinement restricts women's physical liberty, self-determination, and access to opportunities outside of institutional control, and institutional silence silences women's voices, experiences, and capacity to challenge existing power relations. These mechanisms are used to oppress and silence women. Hence, the framework helps to examine the depiction of female characters as oppressed and silenced beings and the maintenance of patriarchal control through confinement and silence in *Small Things Like These*.

This study is important because it has paid less attention to the representation of women as silenced people in patriarchal institutions. At the same time, existing research has mainly focused on the historical background of the Magdalene Laundries and the social trauma associated with them. This study employs Gilbert and Gubar's Feminist Literary Criticism to analyze the oppression in *Small Things Like These*, which extends beyond institutional violence to silence women's voices, identities, and agency. From this angle, taking the novel into account, there is a better understanding of the way that literary texts depict the relationship between patriarchy and the institutional silence and subjugation of women in society.

In addition to depicting women's oppression, *Small Things Like These* also shows how patriarchal power is maintained through fear and social conformity. Not only are the women in the novel deprived of their physical freedom, but also of the opportunity to openly express their experiences and suffering. Therefore, they are not heard, and the institution continues to control their lives. The novel suggests that silence works as more than a personal response to difficult circumstances. It becomes part of a broader social pattern that discourages people from questioning injustice. When people do not oppose the status quo, whether out of fear or complacency, they are complicit in the ongoing oppression of women. Keegan uses this depiction to emphasize the combined effects of institutional silence and social compliance in maintaining patriarchal authority.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the representation of female characters as voiceless and suppressed within patriarchal institutions in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*. Drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's Feminist Literary Criticism, the present study further explores the construction of patriarchal control through the interconnected mechanisms of confinement and institutional silence and how these mechanisms contribute to the perpetuation of unequal power relations in the novel.

2. Method

The study used a qualitative descriptive design and Feminist Literary Criticism as the analytical framework. A qualitative method is deemed appropriate since it allows for the in-depth exploration of meanings, representations, and social realities embedded in literary texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis is conducted through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as suggested by Miles et al. (2020). The qualitative analysis provides a useful way to examine the representation of women, institutional silence, and power relations in *Small Things Like These*, which is the focus of the study. The feminist perspective is used to examine the representation of female characters and to explore how patriarchal power works through the control, silencing, and marginalization of women in the novel.

The primary data source for this study is Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021). The analysis is based on words, phrases, dialogues, and narrative passages that depict women's oppression, institutional silence, muted voices, and patriarchal control in the novel. Data collection started with a chronological close reading of the novel from the first chapter to the last chapter. This reading was meant to develop an overall understanding of the narrative, characters, setting, and institutional context before searching for relevant textual evidence for the study.

In this phase, notes were made on passages that could reflect patriarchal control, women's oppression, confinement, institutional silence, and other such social practices. The identified passages were then coded according to their relevance to the research questions and to Gilbert and Gubar's concepts of confinement and silencing. The excerpts were purposely selected because they represented forms of patriarchal domination, restrictions on women's autonomy, institutional control, suppressed voices, or other representations consistent with the analytical framework, rather than being randomly selected.

For example, the excerpt "*the top of the high wall separating the convent from next-door St Margaret's was topped with broken glass*" (Keegan, 2021, p. 25) was chosen because it directly represents Gilbert and Gubar's notion of confinement. The passage is not simply a description of the setting, but an example of the physical limitations imposed on women in the Magdalene Laundries. This example shows that the textual evidence analyzed in the present study was selected according to its relevance to the theoretical concepts and research questions, not arbitrarily. After the quotations were entered into a data inventory that included the quotation, page number, thematic category, relevant theoretical concept, and initial analytical notes.

This inventory allowed systematic organization of the textual evidence before the interpretation step and ensured that each excerpt was consistently associated with the theoretical framework. The inventoried excerpts were then coded according to recurring themes throughout the novel. Following the coding process, each excerpt was analyzed using Gilbert and Gubar's Feminist Literary Criticism to explore how patriarchal institutions control women's bodies, voices, identities and agency in the narrative.

To ensure systematic coding and interpretation, the study employed thematic categories and analytical indicators derived from the research questions and Gilbert and Gubar's concepts of confinement and silencing. The coding framework used in this study is presented in Table 1.

Theme	Analytical Indicators	Related Theoretical Concept
Women's Oppression	Restriction of agency, unequal treatment, loss of autonomy	Patriarchal subordination
Confinement	Physical restriction, isolation, separation from family	Confinement
Institutional Silence	Suppressed voices, inability to express experiences, social complicity	Silencing
Patriarchal Control	Institutional authority, religious domination, regulation of women's lives	Patriarchal domination

Table 1. Thematic Categories, Analytical Indicators, and Related Theoretical Concepts

As shown in Table 1, the thematic categories and analytical indicators guided the coding process throughout the study. Derived from the research questions and Gilbert and Gubar's concepts of confinement and silencing, these categories enabled the researcher to organize, interpret, and present the selected textual evidence systematically throughout the results and discussion sections.

To strengthen the analysis, this study also draws on supporting theories and previous research concerning women's oppression, institutional violence, and patriarchy in literary works. While the novel is closely connected to the historical reality of the Magdalene Laundries, this research is not focused on verifying historical events. Instead, the study examines the novel's characters, setting, and narrative form as sites in which patriarchal control and the silencing of women are inscribed.

The analysis draws on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Feminist Literary Criticism* from *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000). This perspective is a useful tool for the study of the representation of women in patriarchal structures, particularly on the issues of control, marginalization and silencing. The selected excerpts were classified into themes such as women's oppression, institutional silence, and patriarchal domination, and then examined through the lens of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist perspective.

To improve the validity of the analysis, these interpretations were compared with the theoretical concepts of Gilbert and Gubar, as well as with other secondary sources on patriarchy, the oppression of women, institutional violence, and the historical context of the Magdalene Laundries. This way, the researcher can maintain consistency between textual evidence, theoretical interpretations, and the existing academic discourse. Secondary sources are used here not only as contextual references but also as analytical support in interpreting the representation of women in the novel. Interpretations were drawn from intensive

readings of the novel so that each analytical claim is grounded in textual evidence rather than theoretical assumptions alone.

3. Result

Representation of Silenced and Oppressed Women

Small Things Like These shows the oppression women face through the severe limitations on their autonomy over their own lives. One of the most revealing moments occurs when a young woman begs Bill Furlong, “*Take me home with you then. I’ll work till I drop for you, sir*” (Keegan, 2021, p. 24). Her plea exposes how desperate she is to escape from the Magdalene Laundry. She offers her labour in exchange for freedom, not for comfort, security or a better future. The willingness to suffer anything indicates that life within the institution is considered more intolerable than the unpredictability of life outside of it. “*I’ll work till I drop*” is a phrase that speaks volumes of desperation, which means freedom has become more important than physical comfort or personal safety.

The woman’s readiness to give unlimited labour for the opportunity to leave the institution shows that her options have been severely limited by the terms set for her. For her, freedom is not the possibility of a life of comfort or security, but only an opportunity to be outside the control of the institutions. This demonstrates the boundaries that patriarchal domination places on women’s expectations and the limited choices women have. Her request for help from Furlong, however, is a small act of resistance, even if she is in a powerless position. However, she is not content with her imprisonment and is looking for a chance to get out. This implies that the institution’s control over her does not reduce her desire for autonomy.

The quote also shows how women in the institution are denied the ability to make decisions about their own lives. They have little control over their circumstances, and one of the few options open to them is to seek help from outsiders. The representation can be explained by Gilbert and Gubar’s (2000) discussion on women’s confinement. The novel illustrates women whose movements, choices and future opportunities are confined by institutional authority. Viewed this way, the young woman’s plea is not just a plea to escape; it is an attempt to regain her liberty and agency.

This interpretation is in line with Pérez-Vides’ (2024) assertion that the women in *Small Things Like These* continue to try to maintain their dignity and humanity, despite the pressures put on them by oppressive institutions. The quote and these theoretical views show that the young woman’s plea is not just an expression of individual despair but also a testimony to the influence of patriarchal institutions on women’s notions of liberty and survival. If it means getting out of the institution she will work her ass off, which means she has no options. Her plea to Furlong is a silent defiance, an implication that the desire to reclaim autonomy and dignity remains in the face of institutional oppression. Keegan’s presentation

demonstrates how patriarchal confinement limits women's agency, but does not completely eliminate their ability to pursue freedom.

Another form of oppression in the novel is reflected in the loss of a woman's right to remain with her child and make decisions about her own life. This can be seen when a woman says, *"He's fourteen weeks old. They've taken him from me now"* (Keegan, 2021, p. 36). The statement might seem short, but it expresses a deep grief and a helplessness. The authorities have already taken their decision, there is no mention of any effort to resist the separation. *"they've taken him from me"* underscores her helplessness in a very intimate area of her life. What should be a private relationship between mother and child is subject to institutional interference, leaving the woman powerless to decide her own future.

This representation is consistent with Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) contention that women's identities and experiences are often dictated by patriarchal authority rather than their own choices. Power is concentrated within institutions heavily and the female characters in the novel are robbed of agency in their lives. Historical research on the Magdalene Laundries also shows that numerous women were deprived of control over important elements of their personal lives, such as their rights as mothers.

Keegan stresses that oppression is more than physical imprisonment through this portrayal. And it also means giving up agency, autonomy and the ability to sustain meaningful relationships, which are an important part of women's identities. Although the woman does not say much, her readiness to express the loss of her child indicates that the maternal identity is not entirely erased. In expressing her grief she keeps the emotional connection between herself and her child, though the institution tries to break it. This moment indicates that although patriarchal authority is successful in controlling her situation, it cannot eradicate her identity as a mother or her emotional attachment to her child.

This interpretation is supported by Rich (1976) who argues that motherhood can be institutionalized as a practice through which patriarchal regimes control women's bodies and reproductive functions. The enforced separation of mother and child in the novel exposes the institutional authority's claim to more power over motherhood than the woman herself. In sum, the citation and the theoretical perspectives discussed herein suggest that the loss of the child is not only a source of emotional suffering but also a denial of women's authority over their own maternal identity and family relationships.

Gilbert and Gubar's idea of confinement and Rich's perspective on institutional motherhood shows that patriarchal oppression in the novel is not just about women's physical freedom. The institution separates the mother from her child and robs her of the chance to define herself as a mother and to have power over one of the most intimate parts of her life. Thus motherhood is no longer a personal relationship, but an institutional one, regulated by patriarchal power. Women have no autonomy over their identities or family relations.

The novel also depicts oppression through the gradual erasure of individual identity in addition to restricting women's freedom and agency. Keegan says of the women *"not one of them with shoes but going around in black socks and some horrid type of grey-coloured shifts"* (Keegan, 2021, p. 24). This description indicates the uniformity imposed upon the women, rendering them almost identical. The same clothes and unkempt look imply that the institution has stopped valuing personal identity. They are not persons with diverse backgrounds and personalities, but a controlled group, expected to follow the same rules and standards. Through these details, Keegan shows how institutional power goes beyond regulating behavior to include the regulation of women's bodies and outward appearance.

This representation can be read in the light of Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) discussion of women's position in the patriarchal structures. The control of appearance in the novel is the broader control of women's identities and their ability to express themselves. The institutional regulation of women's appearance reveals that patriarchal domination operates not only through the regulation of behavior, but also through the visual representation of women. Uniforms and unkempt appearance erase visible signs of individuality, reinforcing the perception of the women as subjects of institutional authority rather than autonomous individuals.

As a result, patriarchal power also regulates another aspect of women's lives: identity itself. The institution, by enforcing conformity, discourages individuality and reinforces women's subordinate status. This means that the women are treated less as autonomous individuals and more as passive subjects who have to conform to predetermined expectations. But even with these attempts at erasing individuality, the women still exist as individuals whose identity cannot be completely defined by institutional authority. Keegan's account implies that institutional control may repress overt expressions of identity, but it cannot entirely deny women's humanity. The novel suggests, therefore, that oppression works not only through physical constraints, but also through processes that reduce individuality and make women objects in a larger system of control.

Forms of Patriarchal Confinement and Institutional Silence

Patriarchal control in *Small Things Like These* is reflected in various forms of confinement that limit women's freedom both physically and socially. One of the clearest examples appears when Furlong notices that *"the top of the high wall separating the convent from St Margaret's next door was topped with broken glass"* (Keegan, 2021, p. 25). The image of a high wall lined with broken glass makes the convent seem more like a prison rather than a place of care or protection. The aim is not simply to build a fence but to stop women leaving the institution. Thus the convent becomes a space of control, where women are cut off from the outside world and are not free to go beyond the convent walls. The physical barriers around the convent are meant to show that the women are being held in, not kept out.

This representation reflects Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) observation that women are often subjected to different forms of confinement within patriarchal systems. In the novel, the walls symbolize more than physical restriction. They are also the social barriers that isolate women and make them dependent on the institution which rules their lives. This means that these women not only lose the freedom to move about, but also the ability to decide their own futures. This is backed by Hakkioğlu and Güneş (2024) who claim that the Magdalene Laundries were instruments of social control, strengthened by institutions and society. So, the physical structure of the convent is not just the setting of the narrative. They are institutional arrangements that remove women from society and preclude their autonomous action.

The convent, Keegan argues, is deliberately constructed as a prison-like space to maintain patriarchal authority rather than for protection or care. The system pushes women out of the public life and into the spaces that make them largely invisible to the wider society. This suggests that it is not only the institutional rules, but also the systematic arrangement of physical space that maintains the patriarchal confinement, always signaling to women the boundaries of their freedom.

In the novel, patriarchal control is exercised not only through physical confinement, but also through a culture of silence. Eileen's advice to Furlong "*If you want to get on in life, there are things you have to ignore, so you can keep on*" (Keegan, 2021, p. 27). Her words imply that a practical way to get through social life is to ignore injustice. Instead of encouraging people to ask questions about what goes on inside the convent, the community is told to keep quiet and not to meddle in things that are seen as sensitive or controversial. That is why silence is not an individual choice but a social practice, a space for resistance and the normalisation of indifference to others' suffering.

The passage also shows how institutions can sustain power without depending on direct coercion alone. If people decide to turn a blind eye to injustice, they are, in an indirect way, helping to maintain the system that causes it. This dynamic can be understood from the point of view of Gilbert and Gubar (2000) who suggest that patriarchal values are often inscribed in everyday social practices, and are reproduced without being explicitly challenged.

The response demonstrates that patriarchal domination is sustained not only by institutional authority but also by the everyday choices of ordinary people. Those who are silent in the community might not be engaging in the act of oppression. However, their silence when it comes to injustice allows the oppressive system to function without much pushback. This is why people slowly come to accept silence as a normal social behavior rather than as complicity in injustice. The novel, therefore, argues that patriarchal domination persists not only because institutions have authority but also because ordinary people normalize silence in their everyday interactions.

Hence silence is a major mechanism through which patriarchal institutions sustain their legitimacy and social acceptance. Under such circumstances, silence becomes a complicity that gives legitimacy to the existing power structure. This reading is aligned with studies of the Magdalene Laundries that highlight the significance of collective silence and social complicity in perpetuating institutional oppression for generations.

The novel's portrayal of the culture of silence is strengthened by social pressures that discourage individuals from speaking openly about what happens inside the convent. This can be seen in the warning: *'you'd want to watch over what you'd say about what's there?'* (Keegan, 2021, p. 56). There are some things that should not be laid out in the open, and these are the things that touch on the convent and how it treats women. Instead of challenging the institution, people are counseled to be wary, to stay clear of confrontation and to protect themselves from possible repercussions. The warning is a reflection of a social climate in which the will to speak out against injustice is overcome by fear of retaliation and self-interest.

According to the passage, religious authority and the opinions of the community surrounding them are both factors that keep institutional silence in place. People often know when something is wrong, but are afraid of the social consequences of doing anything about it. Keegan's depiction indicates that confinement and silencing are interdependent mechanisms of patriarchal control.

Women are physically restricted within institutional spaces, while the larger community is discouraged from questioning the system that confines them. In this interaction, the novel demonstrates the mutual reinforcement of fear, silence, and social conformity in maintaining oppression.

The warning shows that institutional silence is enforced by fear, not by explicit coercion. Society controls its members' behavior because they may face social repercussions when challenging institutional authority. As a result, patriarchal domination pervades not only the walls of the convent but also the community at large, where silence is normalized as a means of maintaining social order.

4. Discussion

Female Characters as Silenced and Oppressed Individuals within Patriarchal Institutions

The results show that the women in *Small Things Like These* are women whose lives are shaped and limited by patriarchal structures. Oppression is not only in restrictions on physical freedom, but also in the limited ability to make decisions about their own life. The novel shows how many of the important areas of women's lives – their prospects, identity and their relationships – are dictated mainly by institutional power, rather than by personal choice. Consequently, the female characters are portrayed as dependent and powerless, preventing them from exercising agency or gaining control over their circumstances. Keegan's portrayal shows the working of patriarchal systems in that the women are not

allowed to decide their own destinies and the social hierarchies continue to keep them subordinate.

This representation aligns with Beauvoir's (2011) argument that women have historically been positioned as the 'Other', meaning that their identities are defined in relation to dominant social groups rather than through their own autonomy. In the novel, the female characters are frequently divested of the power to determine their own future, thus reinforcing a social order in which women are dependent on institutional power. Similarly, Walby (1990) claims that patriarchy is exposed through the interrelated social structures that limit women's opportunities and sustain gender inequality systematically.

The findings resonate with Pérez-Vides (2024) who posits that the suffering of women in *Small Things Like These* is intricately tied to the institutional arrangements that impede women's autonomy and social visibility. Similarly, Hakkioğlu and Güneş (2024) note that the novel's oppression is maintained not only by religious authorities but also by the broader social system that normalizes the subjugation of women. These results support the argument of Gilbert and Gubar (2000) that patriarchal structures operate through limiting women's autonomy but suppressing their voices simultaneously.

This study, unlike the previous studies that focus mainly on institutional oppression and collective silence, specifically shows that the forms of oppression are represented through the interconnected mechanisms of confinement and silencing. Therefore, this study extends Gilbert and Gubar's feminist framework by showing how these two mechanisms work together to sustain women's subordination in *Small Things Like These*.

This portrayal is in line with the argument by Hooks (1984) that patriarchy is a social system that ensures the subjugation of women by limiting their independence and controlling their places in society. The female characters' experiences illustrate how the normalization of unequal power relations occurs as institutions are empowered over basic aspects of women's lives. Beauvoir, Walby and hooks show that women's oppression in the novel is maintained not only by unequal gender relations but also by institutional structures institutionalizing women's dependence and subordinate social status. These views, taken together, suggest that patriarchal oppression in the novel is sustained both by structural inequalities and by institutional practices that systematically restrict women's autonomy.

Besides the loss of agency, the novel also presents the silencing of women as a significant form of oppression. Some women do attempt to speak of their pain, but their voices are feeble within the institutional structure that rules them. Their experiences are often ignored in favour of the interests of the institution. Keegan's depiction suggests that silencing doesn't always come in the form of outright restrictions on speech. It can also work through neglect, dismissal and lack of opportunity for women to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Thus, women are doubly marginalized, denied both the freedom to determine their own futures and the ability to describe their own experiences on their own terms. This interpretation is consistent with Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) argument that women are often located in patriarchal structures that mould their identities and restrict their ability to self-define. The view is similar to that of Showalter (1977), who states that women have been represented by paradigms created by dominant cultural values rather than by their own experiences. Here, the silence of women in the novel means more than an inability to speak. It also includes the lack of possibility to have their experiences recognized as a legitimate source of knowledge. Thus, female characters are marginalised not only socially but also discursively as their views are subordinated to the authority of institutional narratives.

This finding further develops Pérez-Vides's (2024) arguments, which primarily conceptualize silence as a result of institutional oppression. The present study further demonstrates that silence is not only a consequence of oppression but also a proactive mechanism by which patriarchal institutions govern women's identities and sustain unequal power relations. This wider view allows us to see institutional silence not just as the lack of speech but as a strategic tool which strengthens patriarchal power by preventing the woman from becoming authentic subjects of knowledge and social recognition.

The findings also suggest the considerable role of institutions in the sustenance of subordinate positions of women in the novel. They are not only to control the routine life but also to influence the image of women in the society. By means of rules, restrictions, and disciplinary practices, institutions create an image of women as dependent beings who require unceasing guidance and supervision. Such representations reinforce patriarchal assumptions that women are not capable of managing their own lives without external authority. This reading echoes previous work on *Small Things Like These* that emphasises the connection between institutional power and women's marginalisation.

Likewise, research into the Magdalene Laundries has demonstrated that these institutions were not merely places of forced labour, but were also instruments of social control, targeting women who were deemed to have transgressed social norms. The representations of women's experiences in the novel are therefore embedded in a wider social and historical context in which institutions reinforce gender inequality.

These findings continue earlier research, illustrating that institutional authority affects women's lives not only through physical incarceration but also through symbolic forms of control that shape women's identities and social status. This wider reading shows how institutional practices and patriarchal ideology serve to consolidate the subordination of women. Thus the novel demonstrates how institutional authority works as a disciplinary system and as a way of legitimating patriarchal values by naturalising and socialising women's

dependence.

The women of the novel, however, are not simply passive victims of these oppressive conditions. Keegan provides glimpses of their yearning for freedom, dignity and self-determination. The women's attempts to escape, calls for help and efforts to stay in touch with their children show they are aware of the injustice around them. Even if their possibilities of resistance are limited, such practices show that they have not completely fallen under the sway of the system that aims at controlling them. The novel thus depicts oppression and resistance as coexisting realities, suggesting that even in the most oppressive conditions, people continue to find ways to assert their humanity and agency.

Resistance, Keegan contends, is not open defiance of patriarchal power but everyday acts of courage, like asking for help, mourning, or keeping emotional connections with loved ones. These acts do not at once destroy the power of institutions, but they demonstrate that women can still assert their dignity even in the most savage oppression. This implies that agency is possible even in very restrictive patriarchal contexts.

Taken together, the findings illustrate the complexity of women's experiences within patriarchal institutions in *Small Things Like These*. The women are continually placed in situations with limited options and their voices don't count very much in effecting their own futures. Even with these limitations, they still try to find ways to maintain their dignity, identity and self. The novel suggests that patriarchal power is maintained not only by control over women's bodies, but also by regulation of their voices, choices and personal identities.

Thus, oppression is a social and institutional process that constantly reiterates the subordinate position of women within society. By foregrounding the interdependence of confinement and silencing, this study contributes to feminist literary criticism by extending Gilbert and Gubar's model to account for how institutional spaces and social silence work together to maintain patriarchal domination. Therefore, the study contributes to the understanding of patriarchal control in contemporary literary narratives by demonstrating that women are oppressed through both physical constraint and the silencing of women's voices.

Patriarchal Control through the Confinement and Silencing of Women

Keegan describes patriarchal control as a system that restricts women's freedom and silences their voices. In *Small Things Like These*, women are not only confined within institutional spaces, but also denied the opportunity to have their experiences acknowledged or taken seriously. So, patriarchy doesn't only work through direct control. It is sustained by practices that promote submission, dependence and acceptance of the present order of power.

The Magdalene Laundry is a perfect example of how space can be used to control. The institution isolates women from the wider community, limiting their access to support networks, freedom and opportunities to live independently. This

isolation slowly makes them more dependent on the system that controls them. Thus, the importance of confinement in the novel goes beyond physical restriction. The convent walls become a metaphor for the broader social constraints that determine women's choices, identities and futures. The freer one is the less life is institutionalised.

According to Keegan, patriarchal control reinforces women's subordinate position in society by operating on their bodies, voices and social lives at one and the same time. This control pattern can also be understood in terms of Foucault's (1977) discussion of disciplinary power. Foucault argued that institutions exercise power through the control of bodies, the regulation of movement and the creation of environments in which individuals internalise surveillance and obedience. This structure of discipline can be seen in the Magdalene Laundry, where women's movement is restricted and they are isolated from society as a whole. Thus, control is exercised not only through physical restriction but also by normalising submission and dependence. This indicates that patriarchal domination in the novel is sustained not only through overt restrictions but also through disciplinary practices that make women internalise obedience as a condition of their daily lives.

The findings also highlight the importance of silence in sustaining the existing system. Although many members of society appear aware of the conditions within the convent, this awareness rarely develops into meaningful resistance. Fear of social consequences, respect for institutional authority, and a desire to avoid conflict encourage people to remain silent rather than challenge injustice. Women's experiences are therefore largely invisible to public attention. Without criticism, institutional practices can continue largely without challenge and therefore silence is an important part of the maintenance of unequal power relations. According to Freire (1970), oppressive systems are likely to endure when people accept the current structures without posing critical questions.

In the novel, silence is a mechanism of suppressing dissent and of allowing institutional power to pass unchallenged. While many in the community appear aware of the injustice women face, their unwillingness to speak out helps perpetuate oppression. This demonstrates how social conformity may be an important element in the maintenance of unequal power relations. Institutional silence does not exist in a vacuum; it goes hand in hand with physical containment to keep women's suffering from public view and thus difficult to contest.

Seen together, confinement and silence are interrelated tools of patriarchal control. Confinement restricts women's physical and social freedom, while silence prevents their experiences from being acknowledged or questioned. When these mechanisms work in conjunction, women are left not only without the power to control their own lives, but also with the opportunity to make their suffering visible to others. In this relationship, Keegan shows how patriarchal power can be maintained without constant direct force, through isolation, compliance and the normalization of silence in society.

This result also lends support to Millett's (1970) claim that patriarchy is a political system where power relations are embedded in everyday social practices. Patriarchal power is frequently exercised through cultural norms and institutional arrangements that seem normal and unquestionable, rather than solely through visible forms of domination. The novel depicts how confinement and silence are effective ways of preserving these unequal power relations, concealing the mechanisms through which oppression is reproduced.

Through the way it portrays this, Keegan shows that patriarchy continues because of powerful institutions, but also because of social norms that prop up the system. This interpretation also supports Hooks' (1984) argument that patriarchy is maintained through everyday social practices that normalize the subordination of women, rather than through coercion alone. Therefore, the critique of this novel is aimed not only at the Magdalene Laundry as an institution, but also at society that allows such practices to continue. The novel also demonstrates how the oppression of women can be prolonged if their freedom is curtailed and their voices are not heard, presenting confinement and silencing as the two main mechanisms of patriarchal control.

These findings are echoed in Seijas-Pérez (2025), who notes that institutional spaces in Irish literature are frequently used as mechanisms of containment that regulate women's lives and constrain their agency. The resemblance implies that the representation of confinement in Keegan's novel is symptomatic of a larger trend of institutional control over women in Irish literary narratives. These findings support Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) view that women are dominated by patriarchal notions of physical limitation and silencing. This study reveals how confinement and institutional silence are interrelated mechanisms that reinforce patriarchal domination, whereas past studies have examined institutional control and historical oppression in the Magdalene Laundries.

Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) discussion of women's confinement provides a useful framework for understanding the experiences of the female characters in *Small Things Like These*. The novel depicts women as individuals whose lives are confined not only by physical limits but also by social expectations that restrict their capacity for independent action. A similar idea is found in Butler's (1990) argument that gender identities are constructed and maintained via social norms and disciplinary practices. Women in the novel are expected to conform to standards set by religious and social institutions and those who do not face punishment and exclusion.

Control is thus exerted not only through physical confinement but also through the regulation of women's identities and conduct. Thus, this study contributes to feminist literary criticism by extending the work of Gilbert and Gubar to show that the notions of confinement and silencing are still useful in analyzing contemporary literary representations of institutional oppression. These theoretical perspectives collectively show that patriarchal control in the novel is

maintained by the interplay of institutional authority, social conformity, and the silencing of women's voices, not just physical coercion.

This study demonstrates that the interaction of physical confinement, institutional silence, and social complicity sustains patriarchal control through an analysis of *Small Things Like These*, thus broadening the scope of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist literary criticism to include contemporary depictions of institutional oppression within the field of literary studies. More broadly, these findings show that literary texts can provide important insights into how patriarchal institutions continue to regulate women's lives through both visible and invisible forms of power.

Thus, the study emphasizes the continued significance of feminist literary criticism in comprehending institutionalized oppression and gender inequality within present-day society.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this research show that women in *Small Things Like These* are represented as being oppressed and silenced within patriarchal institutions. Their oppression is not only in the restrictions of their physical freedom, but also in the loss of their agency, their autonomy, their ability to make decisions about their lives. In the novel women are often denied control over significant elements of their identities, relationships and futures, placing them in a subordinate position where institutional authority supersedes personal choice. So, women's experiences are shaped by systems that limit both their freedom and their ability to define themselves.

This study also shows that patriarchal control in the novel relies on two intertwined mechanisms: confinement and silencing. Confinement removes women from the outside world and denies them opportunities to be independent, while silencing denies recognition of, and challenges to, their experiences. By these means, the novel demonstrates that oppression is sustained not just through institutional power, but also through social attitudes which promote compliance and penalize resistance.

In this paper, I argue that the oppression depicted in the novel should be understood through Gilbert and Gubar's notion of women's containment as part of a larger patriarchal system, rather than a series of individual experiences. At the same time, Keegan depicts women as people who carry on the quest for dignity, freedom and self-determination despite the limitations imposed on them. Future research could build on this analysis of *Small Things Like These* by studying other works by Claire Keegan to see if the themes of patriarchal control, women's silencing and institutional oppression are prevalent across her fiction.

Such studies may provide a wider understanding of Keegan's feminist vision and demonstrate whether her literary works intertextually function as a critique of patriarchal structures in Irish society. Further research could also apply alternative

feminist methodologies (such as radical feminism, postcolonial feminism, or trauma studies) to read gender, power, and institutional control in her works in complementary ways.

This study makes a contribution to feminist literary scholarship by providing a better understanding of the ways that patriarchy, institutional power, and social silence influence the representation of women in contemporary literature. It also suggests the significance of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist approach to the analysis of women's experience in restrictive social systems. Future research could expand this analysis beyond *Small Things Like These*, looking at other works of Claire Keegan and whether the themes of patriarchal control, women's silencing and institutional oppression run throughout her fiction.

Such studies may provide a wider understanding of Keegan's feminist vision and demonstrate whether her literary works intertextually function as a critique of patriarchal structures in Irish society. Further research could also apply alternative feminist methodologies (such as radical feminism, postcolonial feminism, or trauma studies) to read gender, power, and institutional control in her works in complementary ways.

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