

**HANNAH KENT'S *THE GOOD PEOPLE*:
A PROBE INTO COMMUNAL BELIEF SYSTEM**

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Abstract

*The present research paper intends to probe into the communal belief systems as a backdrop in Hannah Kent's novel entitled *The Good People*. The novel is set in the year 1825 in Ireland's County Kerry, a remote valley. The people residing there are mostly uneducated and ignorant. The novel is the story of a widow's struggle to find a cure for her grandson who has been struck down by a mysterious malady. Nora Leahy, the protagonist, is convicted of murder of her four-year-old grandson Michael Kelliher. However, she acted under false belief that her grandson was a changeling or fairy. The other people also fall prey to many superstitious beliefs. Thus, in this novel, Hannah Kent probes into the strange and extraordinary belief system in a small community residing in remote Irish valley. The novel, thus, explores a world full of superstitions.*

Key Words: belief system, community, ignorance, superstition, wonder

HANNAH KENT'S *THE GOOD PEOPLE*: A PROBE INTO COMMUNAL BELIEF SYSTEM

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The present research paper intends to probe into the communal belief system as a backdrop in Hannah Kent's novel entitled *The Good People*. Hannah Kent, an Australian authoress, was born in 1985 in Adelaide. She published her first novel *Burial Rites* in 2013. She was well acclaimed by the readers as well as by critics. *Burial Rites* was translated into thirty languages soon after its publication. It was adapted for film in 2017. It was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, the Guardian First Book Award and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. It won the ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year, the Indie Awards Debut Fiction Book of the Year and the Victorian Premiers People's Choice Award.

Hannah Kent's second novel *The Good People* was published in 2016. It is set in the year 1825 in Ireland's County Kerry, a remote valley. It is the story of a widow's struggle to find a cure for her grandson who has been struck down by a mysterious malady. The child, though four years old, is unable to walk and is also unable to speak. He is believed to be a changeling by the people in the community. The novel *The Good People* is inspired by a true account of infanticide which occurred in 1826. Hannah Kent, while researching for her first novel *Burial Rites*, came across a story in newspaper about a woman named Anne Roche who was tried for the death of a young boy called Michael Leahy by drowning him in the river Flesk. Marry Clifford, a servant for the boy's grandmother, was a witness against Anne Roche. The murderer Anne Roche defended herself saying that she had been trying to banish the fairy out of the boy. She believed the child to be a changeling for her true grandson.

Hannah Kent depicts vividly a community with a strange and extraordinary belief system in her novel *The Good People*. The novel portrays realistically the complexities of Irish folklore in an excellent manner. It explores the intimacy and kindness present in small communities. It also explores the cruelty in such communities. The story takes place in a remote Irish valley. The people residing in this valley are deeply connected to and dependent on the land and on each other. The place seems to be teeming with many folklores and folk beliefs which influence the decisions of people in all aspects of their life. The novel takes the reader into the pre-famine days of early nineteenth century rural Ireland. It explores a world full of

superstitions. It is a powerful examination of the psychology of grief. The novel was short listed for the Walter Scott Award for Historical Fiction in 2017.

Theoretical Perspective:

Human being nurtures various beliefs to solace the mind. The term 'belief' is defined as 'a strong feeling that something or somebody exists or is true.' Belief can be seen as a kind of acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof. The people sometimes act under false beliefs without rationality. This leads to unethical practices and they become prey to superstitions. The term 'superstition' refers to the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by reason or science. It is a belief that particular events bring good or bad luck. Superstition is excessively credulous belief in and reverence for the supernatural. In the foregoing part of this research paper, Hannah Kent's novel *The Good People* will be probed for strange beliefs and superstitions among the people residing in the remote Irish valley.

Hannah Kent's novel *The Good People* depicts a small community residing in the remote Irish valley. It is the story of Nora Leahy, the protagonist. Nora Leahy is left alone after the death of her husband Martin Leahy. Her daughter Johanna too died early. Nora Leahy is also burdened with the responsibility of taking care of Michael Kelliher, her grandson. Michael, a four-year-old child, suffers from a serious malady. He is unable to speak and he only keeps screaming throughout the nights. He is also unable to walk. Nora Leahy hires a girl Mary Clifford to look after the child. Nora and Mary attempt to cure the child with the help of Nance Roche, a mysterious woman. Together, the three women try different remedies to cure Michael's illness. Finding it difficult to cure Michael with various herbs, Nance Roche thinks the child to be a changeling and she suggests unethical practices to cure Michael's maladies. The women, under the superstitious beliefs, practice various remedies on Michael. As a final remedy, Nance suggests bathing Michael for three mornings before sunrise in the river Flesk. The women perform the task under their superstitious belief that the changeling will be taken away and Nora's true grandson Michael will be returned. Michael is kept under the water longer than usual on the third morning and he dies due to asphyxiation. Thus, the child loses his life under a false belief of the women and becomes a prey of their ignorant ways.

The people residing in the valley nurture many beliefs. They believe on the presence of 'The Good People' or 'the Fairies.' Peter O'Conner was a witness when Martin, Nora's husband, was clutching his heart at the time of sudden death. He saw

four magpies sitting together in the field at that time. He believed that it is a kind of bad omen to see four magpies together. He feared that there will be another death in Martin's family very soon. He points out to the people that Martin's daughter Johanna has died recently. He further points out that death likes three in company if the Good People have hand in it.

The people residing in the valley believe on certain irrational things too. They believed that Samhain Eve is a ghost night. They believed that dead were close and all the beings caught between Heaven and Hell would soon walk the cold loam. They also believed that people disappeared on Samhain Eve and small children went missing mysteriously. Nora Leahy, the protagonist, remembers an incident of Samhain Eve when she was a very small girl. A man was abducted and found naked and bleeding clutching ragwort in his hand. The next day people had burnt all the ragwort from the fields to deprive the Good People of their sacred plant. She, thinking of this incident, makes the sign of the cross with her hands to deprive the Good People.

The people also firmly believed that Michael, Nora's crippled grandchild, is a changeling. They feared that something terrifying is likely to happen due to the presence of this changeling in the valley. Kate Lynch believed that Michael is not an ordinary child. She also believed that Johanna, Nora's daughter, is not dead but she was swept away by the Good People. She tells Mary Clifford:

I'm going to tell you something now, girl, and you'd best be listening to me. Martin Leahy was a well man before the widow's daughter was taken, and before that child came to this valley. But no one drops down at a crossroads and dies in good health without some kind of interference. As soon as that changeling was delivered...As soon as that blasted cratur came into Nora's house, all manner of powerful trouble started, and now Martin is dead. (90)

Daniel, Nora's nephew, complains to Nance Roche that there is an uneasy feeling about the whole valley. He points out that cows are not giving enough milk and hens have stopped laying eggs. He suspects that all this may be due the changeling at Nora's house. He says, 'Perhaps if that boy has been touched by the Good People, then, they're after touching others. Or maybe he has the evil eye and he blinked Martin Leahy, and now he's after blinking my wife.' (119) Daniel fears that his wife Brigid will be taken away by the Good People. He says, 'I remember the stories. The old folk still tell them. The Good People have a need of women who are carrying, to take the human child for their own, and keep the woman to feed theirs.'(119)

Nora, following the superstitious beliefs of Nance Roche, practices irrational things to cure her grandson. She recalls that Nance once cured Martin's injured hand with the nettles plant. She hopes to cure Michael with the nettles plant and tickles his toes with the same. Michael wails with a piercing cry. Mary was frightened greatly to see Nora whipping the child with the nettles. She feels that the nettling was a kind of punishment to the child. She feels grieved by the pains of Michael and she tells Nora to stop. Peg O'Shea rebukes Nora for nettling Michael. She says:

You are as cold as a holy trout, Nora Leahy. Do you not know yourself that if the wee one is a changeling, your own good grandson suffers the ill you inflict on his stock? If the Good People have him, they will not take kindly to you treating one of their own like this. (143)

Nora also starts believing that Michael is a changeling or fairy child. She says to Mary:

The fear on you? Girl, you should be afraid to see the fairy strong. You should be afraid to have one of them amongst us. There's no knowing but that one, himself, there, blinked my man and my daughter. And there you are, playing with it. Dotting on it. Cutting its hair and biting its nails and feeding it as though 'twas your own. (238)

Nora, when she tried in the court for the murder of Michael, explains the reasons for believing Michael to be a fairy. She says, 'I had met my grandson before. There was no likeness between the one I had met and the one delivered to me. At first, I thought that he was only ill and I tried to cure him but the cures did not work and 'twas because the boy was a changeling.' (345). Nora points out that she accepted Nance's brutal ways of curing Michael because Nance had promised her to banish the fairy out of Michael.

The other women in the valley also believed on many superstitious things. They smear the fat on the walls as the butter came in meagre. They believed that Nance Roche, the mysterious woman, might have cursed their cows and that's why the cows are not giving enough milk. Many women believe that Mary Clifford might have the evil eye due to her red hair. They spit on the ground as they see Mary in order to undone the evil. Kate Lynch takes three steps backwards to see Mary on account of Mary's red hair.

Maggie, Nance's aunt, believed that there is a power in a black-handed knife. She taught Nance how to use the knife to cut the medicinal herbs. She believed that there are worlds beyond our own that we must share this earth with and there are times when they act on one another. Maggie tells her firm beliefs to Nance. She says:

People will not come to me if they don't respect me; if they don't fear me, just a little. Oh there are curses to lay, you can be sure of it. But 'tis not worth the breath you spend. *Piseogs* are fires that flare in the face of those who set them. In time, a curse will always return. (174)

Nance Roche, the most mysterious woman, nurtures many beliefs. She has lived at this place for nearly twenty years. She worked as a mid-mother and also worked as the keener who expressed grief on the behalf of others at funerals. She knows that people are always afraid of what they do not recognize. She believes that she has the ability to feel the things. She knows that there are things she could do to answer visions. She never fears to walk alone at night. She knows how to guard her body and soul with ash and salt. She suggests many cures to the people residing in the valley. Some of her ways are irrational and superstitious too. She convinces the people by appealing to their fear.

Nance Roche performs some rites on the death of Martin Leahy. She comes out in the yard and sweeps a fistful of ash saying, 'Ashes to banish Those that would restrain a soul's flight into the other world. Ashes to sanctify the grieving of kith and kin and mark it as holy.' (21) Nance Roche tells the pregnant Brigid to leave Nora's house as Martin's dead body is put there before funeral. She spits on the fire and points out that a pregnant woman should not be present in churchyard, corpse house and graveyard. She advises Brigid to put some salt in her pocket and leave the place at earliest for the good of the unborn child.

Nance Roche, while delivering Brigid's child, forbids Aine to come inside the cabin. She feels that Aine, being barren, might cast the evil eye over the child. Brigid gives birth to a dead child after long hours of labour pains. Nance fears that some evil spirit is responsible for the death of Brigid's child. She tells Daniel, Brigid's husband, to perform some rites to protect the soul of the child. She gives him a hen and tells him to kill it so as to drive away his troubles. Daniel cuts off the head of the hen and turns it upside down and moves around dripping its blood on the floor of the cabin by the entrance. Nance also tells Daniel to circle the cabin with the dripping blood in order to protect his wife.

Nance Roche convinces that Aine could be blessed with child. She suggests many practices under her strong beliefs. She takes Aine to the woods to collect some herbs to bless her with a child. She tells Aine to pluck a plant carefully. She tells Aine, 'When the air grows warmer, the leaves will have a dew on them, and the best way to fix a child in you would be to mix that dew with water and bathe in it.' (245) Nance also tells Aine to boil the leaves and drink the water for twenty days. As a remedy to

be blessed with the child, she also suggests Aine to bathe in the urine of cow who has eaten flowers.

Nance Roche, under her firm beliefs, performs some remedies to cure Michael's illness. She attempts to cure Michael with the juice of mint. She puts the mint juice in each ear of Michael in order to know if Michael is fairy or if the fairies have only made him deaf. She also suggests that they must try more powerful herb called 'Lus mor' to drive away the fairy. She also suggests Nora and Mary to bathe Michael with foxglove water. She also tells Mary to give the juice of foxglove to Michael. After that, Michael starts gasping as if there is not enough air. Nance, then, swings Michael back and forth in the air saying, 'if you are a fairy, away with you.' (221)

Nance Roche, after her early failures to cure Michael, studies Michael closely measuring his legs and limbs the other time. She says, 'Nora, The Good People may have struck your grandson and left him cripple, or it might be that they have taken him altogether and left this changeling in his place. This cratur here might be fairy-born.' (155) Nance advises Nora to visit her at the turn of the year. She promises her to put the fairy out of Michael. She believes that there are some other ways of restoring Nora's grandson. She tells Nora:

You, me and the girl. Three women at the place where three running rivers meet, for three mornings in a row. We will all of us fast. We take the changeling before sunrise for three mornings, and when you return home on the last morning, the changeling will be gone. And perhaps you will find Michael restored to you. Maybe it is that the Good People will have returned him to you. The Fairy will be gone. (276)

Nance expresses her belief in the court that she has the knowledge to heal all manner of ills and sickness, both those of an ordinary kind and those wrought by the Good People. She explains the difference, 'There are those which are of a common kind, but there are some ills which are the mark of the Good People, and they call for a different cure.' (353)

Mr. Walshe, the defence lawyer, makes it clear in the court that the women tried to cure Michael under their superstitious beliefs. He points out their ignorance and appeals the court that the women cannot be rightly convicted of willful murder. He makes it clear that Michael Kelliher lost his life through superstition. He says:

It is true that the circumstances surrounding his treatment at the hands of the accused are extraordinary. It is true that the gross delusion these women operated under is horrifying. The scale of their ignorance is appalling. But it cannot be discounted as incidental. The accused acted

on the belief that the deceased child Michael Kelliher, was a fairy spirit.

A changeling, in the words of the Crown's witness. (357)

Mr. Walshe points out to the court that the women are uneducated and ignorant of the modern world and they did everything to put the fairy out of the child.

In conclusion, it can be said that Hannah Kent's novel *The Good People* weaves the story around the many folk beliefs and folklores among the people residing in the remote Irish valley. The people conjure up many superstitious beliefs. All the decisions of their life seem to be affected by their belief system. The people are uneducated and ignorant of the modern world and its ways. They are not exposed to the modern knowledge and follow the traditional ways of thinking and behave accordingly. Their ignorance seems to be responsible for their miseries. It can be concluded that the communal belief system is a backdrop in Hannah Kent's *The Good People*.

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