

Religion in *Baptizing* by Alice Munro

K.S. PARTHASARATHI

Ph.D Research Scholar

School of English and Foreign Languages

The Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed to be University, Gandhigram

Abstract

The article aims at close reading of the story “Baptizing” in the framework of religion. This article analyses the male character of Garnet French in the “Baptizing” from Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* and focuses on the Munro’s engagement with character vis-à-vis religion. The analysis traces the religious journey of the male character Garnet French after he was baptized. Through the character Garnet French, Munro reflects the inhumanity of individuals who were imprisoned within their religion doctrines by their narrow understanding.

Key Words: religion, psychological journey.

From the outlook of literary studies, it is noteworthy that Alice Munro, a writer has been illustrious who has worked almost exclusively within the form of short story. Her writings are a symbolic obligation of the short story however has long stood as a novel. The significant statements and narrative form are intricately knit by Munro resulting in a refined and indeed comprehensive descriptive art which can be relished on multiple levels. By experimenting with the genre, the author extends the boundaries of the short stories in her exclusive style. Munro emphasizes the fragmented and incomplete human experience and defines the approach of an individual life.

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, a substantial portion is about religion which is illustrated by the title of the stories namely, “Heirs of the Living Body”, “Age of Faith”, “Baptizing”. “Heirs of the Living Body” is a symbolic representation of St. Paul’s first letter which describes the relationship among the members of the church and “Baptizing” shows the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. The close reading of the story “Baptizing” in the light of religion frame the aims of this article. This article aims to analyse the male character of Garnet French in the “Baptizing” from Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* and focuses on the Munro’s engagement with character vis-à-vis religion. The analysis is focused on the male character Garnet French and his journey after he was baptized.

Garnet French, a twenty-three year old lived on a farm out past Jericho Valley. He worked in Jubilee, in the

lumberyard. He had spent four months in jail for his part in a terrible fight outside the Porterfield beer parlour in which a man had lost an eye in the fight. Things changed however when he was in jail. He got baptized by a Baptist minister who had converted him. After that, he planned to enrol in a Bible College and become a Baptist minister himself. His goal was revealed when he spoke without any urgency. He was mellowed down after being baptised.

At the beginning, Garnet was portrayed by the narrator as a person who cannot control his anger. His anger was such that in a brawl, Garnet punched his rival so fierce that his adversary lost an eye. However; a drastic change was obvious after his conversion in jail. The conversion has changed his entire psyche which made him to see his goal in life to become a Baptist minister. The result of his conversion was drastic within a short span of time which made others to wonder on seeing him. When he met Del for the first time, the first thing he asked her to go for ‘a meeting of Baptist Young People’s Society.’ (272) from this statement it was clear that even though he had a bitter past he started to live a new life after releasing from jail.

The statement, “I would probably have landed back in jail if it hadn’t been for the Baptist Church” (272) revealed that the change in course for Garnet was exclusively due to his being baptized. The revelation showed his dedication towards his self as well as his concern for others. His change had not happened over night but he had started to realise his true self and the love of God after

his conversion when he was put alone in jail. He saw this change in him would be forever which made him to lead his life further in Christ.

Garnet visited Del's house and her mother treated him with courtesy, asked him questions about the lumber business. He called her Ma'am and said, 'Well I don't really know so much about that end of it, Ma'am,' he would say, polite and self-possessed. The narrator commented on his reply as,

"Any attempt of a general conversation, any attempt to make him think in this way, to theorize, make systems, brought a blank, very slightly offended, and superior look into his face. He hated people using big words, talking about things outside of their own lives. He hated people trying to tie things together." (278)

Garnet's reply to her mother showed that he did not bother even to reply but then due to the question posted to him he answered her. This showed his reservation towards people around him. However, from the narrator's description of his state show that even though he seemed to be polite, he was not able to accept people around him and comment on his business. He was contented to live alone and never bothered to involve in other lives.

Although Garnet seemed to be self-possessed, he also expected Del to be like him and 'took just what he needed, to suit himself' (278) He was so possessed that he started to love himself as a Baptist by which he was proud with a mask. Del observed that he

"... loved the dark side, the strange side, of him, which I did not know, not the regenerate Baptist; or rather, I saw the Baptist, of which he was proud, as a mask he was playing with that he could easily discard. (278)

From Del's statement it was understood that the world in which Garnet was and the world he saw was entirely different. Del stated, 'The world I saw with Garnet was something not far from what I thought animals must see, the world without names.' (279) This showed that he did not have worldly emotions apart from physical.

Garnet was determined to marry Del nevertheless had 'Strict ideas' (281) of baptizing Del. For instance, when Del asked, 'Would you like to have a baby?' (298) he was specific that she should attend the church and get baptized first. This was revealed from the statement, 'You have to

join the church first,' he said shyly. 'You have to be Baptized.' (298) He thought that Del had 'to get saved sometime' (299) from the world. Unless she got baptized he was not sure of anything. The idea of Garnet might be symbolic to convert Del into being a woman who lead a life knowing her place in the men's world and being in the church.

For Del, being in the river with Garnet appeared to be playful, but suddenly she found out that she had to struggle with Garnet. Garnet was so obsessed that he pushed her in the river to baptize her on the spot. He felt that it was significant task to get finish which was clear from the statement,

"He caught up to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, pushed me gently up and down in the water. 'I ought to baptize you now and get the job over with. I ought to baptize you now.'" (299)

Garnet's action was so vehement and decided that he did not leave her unless she said that she would get baptized anyway. This act of Garnet made her to feel that he had 'real power over' (300) her. Del sensed his thoughts and commented her helplessness and viewed it as an insult. The act made her have a second opinion on their relations.

"If we had been older we would certainly have hung on, haggled over the price of reconciliation, explained and justified and perhaps forgiven, and carried this into the future with us, but as it was we were close enough to childhood to believe in the absolute seriousness and finality of some fights, unforgivability of some blows." (302)

In reflection of Garnet's violent attempt to baptize Del into his religion in the river reflected the whole affair of Del with Garnet was like a "possibly fatal game". At that moment, Del also thought that she could not handle the situation at her age. The act of Garnet forced Del to end their relationship in the Wawanash River.

The story "Baptizing" presents Garnet's journey after his baptism and the instances reflected his behaviour towards Del in the form of religion. Though he has a major transformation of self, he was not able to handle his transformations in the way as it was taught to him through his religion. Through the character Garnet French, Munro reflects the inhumanity of individuals who were imprisoned

within their religion doctrines by their narrow understanding.

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