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Unraveling Gender Conflict in Anna Burns' "*Milkman*"

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Abstract: *Milkman* is a historical psychological fiction novel written by the Irish author Anna Burns. Set during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, the story follows an eighteen-year-old girl who is harassed by an older married man known as the 'milkman'. Her depiction of patriarchal oppression also functions as an implicit critique of post-conflict Northern Ireland where women continue to be treated as secondary citizens. The present study titled 'Unraveling Gender conflict in Anna Burns' *Milkman*' tries to portray the troublesome gender roles in Northern Ireland, and the difficulties women face within this male dominated world.

Keywords: Unravel, Gender, conflict, misogyny, psychological

Anna Burns, first novelist from Belfast, paints a scattering rigorously unsentimental portrait of an insular provincial-minded Northern Irish Community struggling to survive through the troubles beginning in 1960 and stretching through the mid-1960s. She was

the first novelist from Northern Ireland to win Man Booker Prize for her third Novel, *Milkman*. No Bones is her debut novel which won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and was listed for the 5 Orange Prizes for Fiction. Her novels dealt with the theme of violence which was spread in the Northern Ireland during the time of Troubles. As she witnessed her life during the time of Troubles, her novels had a touch of autobiographical element since she could relate her own life and atrocities which she had to face during the time in Northern Ireland.

Seventeen years after the publication of her first novel, Burns resume her investigation of the unspoken histories of the conflict and its gendered legacy. *Milkman* is a historical psychological fiction novel written by the Irish author Anna Burns. Set during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, the story follows an eighteen-year-old girl who is harassed by an older married man known as the 'milkman'. Her depiction of patriarchal oppression also functions as an implicit critique of post-conflict Northern Ireland where women continue to be treated as secondary citizens. Burns recognizes that the dominance of the political problems during the conflict occlude other problems

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within gender and sexual politics. And the issues which still lack visibility in contemporary Northern culture. The gender dynamics of community justice by way of the renounces in the book echoes those of the post agreement; state sanctioned community based restorative justice schemes within formerly paramilitary run districts. These programmes are led by ex-paramilitary men who tend to position themselves as leaders of peace building and community conflict resolution thereby sidelining women.

The present study titled ‘Unraveling Gender conflict in Anna Burns’ *Milkman*’ tries to portray the troublesome gender roles in Northern Ireland, and the difficulties women face within this male dominated world. The feminine and masculine roles play an important part in *Milkman* as it tries to depict the whole story within the perspective of a female narrator who is under the patriarchal dominance. In the novel we could see how the narrator, an eighteen year old school leaver called simply as middle sister asks: “Hold on a minute. Are you saying its okay for him to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read Jane Eyre in public” (88).

To this comment her longest friend too responds pithily as semtex is not unusual and it fits in and what is dangerous is narrator’s reading while walking. She informs middle sister that this confronting habit of burying her nose in a book marks her as beyond the pale because she appears obvious to their hazardous environment.

These young women inhabit a community under siege in an unnamed city within a state immersed long-term in conflict. Burns explains that her writing explores the impact in Northern Ireland of a level of violence that has become ordinary and has turned into the cultural norm. In particular she indicates that gendered violence is everywhere, but it remains unacknowledged in the context of the political problems where huge things, physical, noisy things happen on a daily basis, on an hourly basis, on a television news round basis.

In *Milkman* Burns analyses the conditioning of males and females by depicting the construction and experience of gender under conditions of armed struggle. She charts how young women navigate protracted conflict and entrenched violence within a coercive, tightly patrolled community. The eponymous *Milkman* becomes a central character in Burns’ novel stepping out of nowhere onto the scene. Middle sister encounters him :

I didn’t know whose milkman he was. He wasn’t our milkman. I don’t think he was anybody’s. He didn’t take milk orders. There was no milk about him. He didn’t deliver milk. Also he didn’t drive a milk lorry. Instead he drove flash cars, different cars often flash cars, though he himself was not flashy. For all this though I only noticed him and his cars when he started putting himself in them in front of me (2).

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As this description illustrates, Milkman represents a narratological shape shifting and repletion with a difference. Symbols from No Bones reappear in Burns' novel Milkman; however they are stripped of their signifiers and proper names disappear. For instance middle sister comments, "In this district where most streets were identical, the renouncers, slow and confuse the enemy with single street sign" (8). Correspondingly, Burns removes the narrative signposts from Milkman, challenging the reader to navigate the complex social cartography of the Troubles in this "no-go area."

Religious geography demarcates the narrator's environment in a number of interface that surround her neighborhood. Her house is located on one side of an interface road and this sad and lonely road ran between the religions, the dark and bitter sectarian flashpoint, and the road of separation. And to walk along this road is a risk of exposure in the middle of nowhere and yet middle sister asks her maybe boyfriend to drop her off here regularly. Although she lives in a paramilitary enclave where street shootings are commonplace, she attempts to ignore the surrounding violence. This proves to be a difficult excuse that her family is connected to the PIRA and even one of her brothers died fighting the enemy. She did not want to get into all the political problems. Burns juxtaposes the narrator's perspective with the district consciousness which thrives on suspicion and gossip. Middle sister remarks, "As for the rumors of me and the

milkman, I dismissed it without considering it. Intense nosiness about everybody had always existed in this area. Gossip washed in, washed out, came, went, and moved on to the next target. So I didn't pay attention to this love affair with the milkman" (25.) Milkman repeatedly materializes out of nowhere because he is an embodiment of the persistent threat of sexual violence that is incorporated within the narrator's environment. He is also part of the ubiquitous surveillance culture within this conflict zone where the narrator's every move is tracked by her neighbors, the local renounces-of-the-state paramilitary, the paramilitary defenders-of-the-state over the road and the state forces. There are also some of the unnoticeable people who took a bit of watching and once they are spotted together the community automatically labels her a paramilitary groupie and even they decided to inform her mother.

Ach your new neighbor said the one in the background the one who does that stalking, that tracking all that shadowing and tailing and profiling, the one who gathers the information on the target and then hands it to the trigger men who- "Baby Jesus! Cried ma, and you are saying my girl's involved with this man!" she grasped the arms of her chair . . . he's not that milkman, is he - the one of the van, that wee white van that non-descript, shape shifting (128).

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The rumour confirms her mother's worst fears and she chooses to believe the neighbors' account rather than that of her own daughter. Middle sister says that she is called a liar. Her mother's viewpoint aligns with the district consciousness, which conflates gossip with gospel.

As a traditional woman, her mother still in principle approves the PIRA's initial objective and is in no way prepared to denounce them publicly to a state to which she was not even considered a cause of validity. Nevertheless she warns her daughter against associating with fast breath taking and being rebel, because paramilitaries is not conducive to family life. Her mother warns her saying that the role of women is only to serve their husband. Her mother implies that in their district, male destiny is to join the local boys and fight for the good of the cause and in defence of the area. And in contrast female destiny is to marry and be in the motherhood which her mother defines as a divine decree and a communal duty and also a responsibility. The traditional militarized gender regime and their renouncer-run area supports men as political actors and delineates women's roles as primarily familial. The narrator is hurt that her mother does not believe her and she longs to confide in someone about her predicament. She laments, "But I had not been having an affair with the milkman. I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me" (50). In an effort to lose Milkman's interest and

subsequently that of the community, she adopts a perpetually blank facial expression and begins a gradual process of self-effacement. The local paramilitary groupies were also now paying attention to middle sister and they accost her in the toilet of the district's most popular drinking-club. Middle sister also recalls: "They surrounded me and regarded my face in the glass", offering her chewing gum, lipstick and Estee Lauder, and she accepts this friendship or a kind of pretend friendship for no other reason than to buy time because she was afraid" (62). These paramilitary groups encourage her to relish her new role:

I'd always have a tough guy, said the oldest-looking, the one who'd handed over the perfume. She was at the sink beside me, talking to my reflection, before transferring her gaze over to herself... A dangerous ma, she said. "Masculine. Very. Has to be. Love that sort of thing. As she invited my reflection to agree another interrupted. "But that searching for the extreme ... I mean all that life and death and heroism," she said ... "The average man" said another, "cannot do that, not even the average renouncer." (66).

The narrator remains silent throughout this scene which figures her psychological detachment from her physical and emotional experiences via the metaphorical dissociation of her reflected image in the mirror. This passage explores

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a variation of what Elena Bergia calls “seductive capital,” a specific form of symbolic capital that paramilitary men wield owing to the social recognition of their actions during the conflict. Bergia argues that seductive capital is linked directly to masculinity. She applies her theory to IRA ex-prisoners in West Belfast who gained a heightened sexual status upon their release from Maze prison. Her theorization of seductive capital can also be expanded to address communal attribution of sexual power to paramilitary men during the conflict more generally. In Burns’ novel the renouncers exploit this power, making use of that patriotic, great-guy image, the good guy, the heroic guy, the invisible guy, sexy maverick male defender of all bad guys for the glory of his country. This gathering in the women’s toilet demonstrates how in turn, the men’s behaviour manipulates the paramilitary groupie. The women extol that it’s that they have taken control, they keep control, and they have everybody wrapped around their fingers. While listening to their exchange, the narrator learns that apparently the average woman was not to be like a renouncer. Only certain types of people can handle the paramilitary lifestyle because it is the place where people live and die in extremes.

Thus, Milkman explores how different complicated categories of the masculine and the feminine develop within a site of armed conflict involving both state and non-state forces. Through the renouncer-of-the-state and defender-of-the-

state characters, Burns examines what has been termed as paramilitary masculinities and gendered expressions of attributes, behaviours and agency associated with men, defined within the context of paramilitary struggle. Anna Burns depicts through the character of middle sister the femininities of traditional women and paramilitary groupies in the novel. These femininities are defined in accordance with the roles prescribed to them by paramilitary men. The traditional women in the novel run the household while the men are fighting or imprisoned. Young boys act as district spotters to war against incoming police or soldiery, while young girls are expected to help out at home. The traditional women also support the cause by banging bin lids, breaking curfew and operating safe house surgery theatre, back-parlour causality wards, homemade apothecaries and the garden-shed pharmacies dotted about the place. The paramilitary groupies and renouncer-wives support the men by looking good, keeping secrets, staying faithful and making prison visits and tombstone visits. The narrator does not want to belong to either subset. However, communal rules dictate that she must subscribe to one or the other group. She observes: “I was coming up against the ambivalences in life” (68). She becomes more uncomfortable as the women in the toilet speak on “of their behaviours, their carnality of pain is being arousing so that they trained themselves not to resist, so that always they were going around in pleasure... Unable to act voluntarily” (145)

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This section suggests that paramilitary groupie identity is linked to hyper sexuality. That is the women instruct middle sister on how to convey sensuousness through a hyper feminine physical appearance: “Let him know how much he means to you, they said. Look good. Look classy. Always dresses. No trousers, High heels, mind and jewellery. Never let him down” (228).

Middle sister remarks that they were like those wee girls who dress up like movie stars, and as femme fatales. She recognizes the performativity of their group identity as the women enact it in the mirror. However, while watching their reflection and even her own, she experiences intense depersonalization and becomes a detached observer of her. She even states that “it was as if I’d fallen into the very person, according to everybody; I was now supposed to be” (26). The attitude of people made her to obey the normal rule of the society.

Nonetheless, middle sister is unable to embody this identity fully and she grows increasingly disturbed by Milkman’s stalk-talk. On their third meeting, he hints that if she does not break up with her car mechanic maybe-boyfriend someone might plant a bomb under a vehicle at the garage where he works. Her paranoia becomes overwhelming and ultimately debilitating as its psychosomatic effects make it hard for her to act to move properly. She ruminates that she had been thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness by that man. Also

by the community, by the very mental atmosphere of the minute of invasion. Her condition reflects the pervasiveness of gendered violence, which invades every aspect of the narrator’s life— that is her family, her community, her psychology and her body. Burns uses self-censored narration for fear of trespassing the district mores. The narrator explains that she needed her silence, to shield her from pawing and molestation by questions.

When a group of women suggest to the local paramilitary that they should do something about the middle aged leech in their movement who goes around preying upon and grooming young women, they respond by saying that they would not be drawn into equivocation nor would they be dictated to. The irony of their reply shows that women’s attempts at speaking out seem pointless in a place where men get off on standard charges of one-quarter rape in the renouncer’s Kangaroo courts. Middle sister recounts:

Streaks ahead therefore we are they maintained and they meant in terms of modernity, of conflict resolution and of gender progressiveness. Look at us they said. We rake things seriously rape and all that jazz was practically what it was called. I’m not making this up. They made it up. Excellent, they said. That’ll do for them, meaning women, meaning justice for the women (29).

Burns demonstrates how the imposed system of community justice fails

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the women repeatedly in the novel. Although it is abusive, sexually invasive, a violating creepy thing, milkman's sexual harassment of the narrator goes unpunished by the renouncers because it is always a verbal thing. Moreover his comrades view him as above reproach since he outranks them and is no bit player but one ruthless character. Therefore Milkman's reputation is untarnished, whereas the community regards middle sister as a hussy and a loose woman. Not only had that she discerned that it's her fault that she got into affair with milkman. The narrator remains circumscribed within the fixed social structures that self-replicate at all levels of society.

Burns' book is set at different time, she captures the dynamics of gendered power and performances of masculinity that are prevalent in many communities in conflict. We see gender inequality and the allure of dangerous, powerful manhood in many expressions of violent extremism. Importantly in the novel though there are other expressions of what it is to be a man in such contexts — maybe-boyfriend with an interest in sunset and political avoidance, his wayward father a glamorous ballroom dancer and real milkman the man who rejected the violence of many of his contemporaries. Despite the predominance of the link between masculinity and violence, multiple masculinities do exist, even in the situation of violent conflict 43 finding ways to disentangle idealised manhood from violence and enable other ways of doing

gender to emerge are central to violent extremism. In Milkman Burns surveys that official male and female territory and what they could never say. Her approach is dazzlingly inventive with a disarmingly loquacious and often darkly funny stream of consciousness narrative and a distinctive surrealist style. In an unstoppable torrent words, she gives voice to the women who endured unspeakable violence during the troubles making a powerful and necessary feminist intervention into the literary legacy of the conflict.

Thus, the novel illuminates how in the uproar of a national schism, the basic dignity of woman continues to be casually undermined. It also explores how silence perpetuates misogyny and how toxic institutions and norms such as marriage and celibacy subjugate and simplify women and their complex stories. Milkman establishes Anna Burns as one of the most consequential voices of our day. Milkman is an unsparingly critical portrait of modern Ireland and its epidemics of ignorance and intolerance. Burns uses her experience growing up in Belfast to present an unsentimental, realistic and troubled perspective that is bound to make readers shift from the actual realities of life.

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