



EXPLORING FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF TRADITIONAL ROLES IN ANNA BURNS' *MILKMAN*

Dr. Mukund Dhule
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
S. P. M. Mahavidyalaya, Murum,
Tq. Omerga, Dist., Dharashiv, MS, India

Abstract:

Anna Burns' Milkman offers a significant analysis of gender dynamics, societal surveillance, and individual resistance in the context of patriarchal frameworks within a politically unstable community. Set in Northern Ireland during the historical period referred to as the Troubles, the novel critically examines the mechanisms through which societal expectations and gender roles operate as instruments of social control. The narrative, focusing on its unnamed protagonist referred to as Middle Sister, provides a critical analysis of patriarchal power dynamics and the systematic marginalization of women. This examination is articulated through the protagonist's experiences of coercion and harassment. This study examines the feminist dimensions evident in Milkman, focusing on the protagonist's nuanced acts of defiance, the subversion of traditional gender roles, and the wider implications of female resistance in oppressive environments. This study utilizes feminist theory and literary criticism to contextualize Milkman within the parameters of contemporary feminist discourse. This work elucidates the text's significance as a critical examination of the persistent issues related to gender inequality.

Keywords: *Feminism, Patriarchy, Subversion, Anna Burns, Milkman, Gender Roles, etc.*

Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) constitutes a noteworthy addition to literary scholarship, providing a nuanced analysis of the entrenched social structures that prevail within a community fundamentally shaped by political conflict and patriarchal dynamics. The unnamed protagonist, designated as Middle Sister, navigates a milieu defined by violence, rumour, and societal scrutiny, where her autonomy is consistently imperilled. Set against the historical context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the novel illustrates a societal framework in which individual liberties are subordinated to communal norms. This dynamic engenders the systematic marginalization of women, reflecting the broader implications of conflict on gender dynamics within the community. Middle Sister's understated act of resistance against prevailing societal norms represents a significant manifestation of defiance, thereby revealing the pervasive influence of patriarchal dominance.

Burns' narrative offers a critical exploration of feminist themes, with particular emphasis on the construction and enforcement of gender roles. This study utilizes feminist



theory, informed by the seminal contributions of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault, to critically analyze the novel's deconstruction of traditional gender roles and its challenge to patriarchal norms. The analysis delves into the narrative techniques utilized in the novel, specifically examining the implementation of stream-of-consciousness and the portrayal of unnamed characters as mechanisms that contribute to the amplification of feminist themes within the text.

In *Milkman*, the community functions as a surveillance apparatus that enforces conformity and imposes sanctions on individuals who diverge from established societal norms. Women's behaviours are subjected to critical examination through the mechanisms of gossip and rumour, which serve as instruments of social control. The practice of ambulating while engrossed in reading, as exhibited by the Middle Sister, may initially appear benign; however, it ultimately acts as a catalyst for suspicion, thereby marking her as an outsider within the prevailing social context. The community interprets her individuality as a form of subversion, leading to her ongoing exposure to scrutiny and judgment.

Michel Foucault's concept of the 'panopticon,' where individuals internalize mechanisms of control, is evident in the novel (Foucault, 201). The communal gaze serves as a pervasive mechanism that reinforces adherence to established gender norms. Women are particularly subject to rigorous societal expectations regarding their appearance, behaviour, and interpersonal relationships. This dynamic functions to reinforce the patriarchal frameworks that prevail within the community.

Gossip functions as a recurring motif in *Milkman*, highlighting the role of women in the reinforcement of patriarchal norms. The community's preoccupation with the alleged relationship between Middle Sister and Milkman—a figure embodying qualities of both power and predation—illustrates the role of gossip as a tool for enforcing social conformity. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, "patriarchal societies rely on women's complicity to sustain systems of oppression" (Beauvoir, 723). In the novel *Milkman*, the participation of women in gossip and evaluative discourse functions to reinforce their subordinate position within the social hierarchy.

The silence of the Middle Sister can be analysed as a crucial expression of resistance against patriarchal norms. Rather than conforming to societal expectations or resorting to self-defense in response to unfounded accusations, she adopts a strategy characterized by subtle resistance. This silence challenges the community's pursuit of regulatory measures and underscores the irrationality embedded in its preoccupation with her conduct. Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that identity is constructed through repeated actions, is relevant here (Butler, 185). The Middle Sister's repudiation of the expected behaviors linked to conventional feminine roles substantially challenges the societal norms that have been imposed upon her.

Sexual harassment represents a pervasive societal issue that transcends individual experiences, having significant socio-political ramifications. This phenomenon not only affects the victims' well-being but also reflects broader patterns of power dynamics, gender inequality, and institutional responses within society. The implications of sexual harassment extend to various spheres, including legislation, workplace policies, and societal attitudes



towards gender relations. Understanding these complex interrelations is critical for developing effective interventions and fostering a more equitable environment for all individuals.

The character of Milkman epitomizes the pervasive threat of male violence and harassment within society. His unwelcome advances and insinuations exemplify the pervasive coercive structures that women face within patriarchal societies. Bell hooks, in *Feminism Is for Everybody*, argues, “patriarchy thrives on fear and submission” (Hooks, 22). The experiences of the Middle Sister illuminate the normalization of harassment and demonstrate the strategies that women utilize to negotiate and manage hostile environments.

The influence exerted by Milkman is attributable not only to his tangible presence but also to the apprehension he instills in those around him. His ability to influence public perception and marginalize Middle Sister exemplifies the tactics utilized by patriarchal systems to suppress and exert dominance over women. The community’s willingness to accept Milkman’s narrative underscores the complicity of societal structures in sustaining gender-based oppression.

The absence of character names in *Milkman* functions to universalize the themes presented in the novel, thereby allowing the characters to be interpreted as archetypal figures rather than as unique individuals. The characters of Middle Sister, Milkman, and Maybe-Boyfriend serve as embodiments of broader societal roles, thereby augmenting the narrative’s significance beyond its specific context. Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that “the subaltern must be allowed to speak resonates here, as Burns amplifies the experiences of marginalized individuals within oppressive systems” (Spivak, 28).

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between stream of consciousness as a literary technique and the phenomenological aspect of subjectivity. By examining various theoretical frameworks and literary exemplars, this study aims to elucidate how the stream of consciousness manifests the complexities of individual perception and cognition within narrative structures.

The stream-of-consciousness narrative technique utilized in the novel effectively conveys Middle Sister’s fragmented psyche, thereby illuminating her difficulties in establishing a sense of agency within a tumultuous environment. This methodology aligns with feminist literary traditions that prioritize the investigation of women’s inner experiences and subjective realities. Helene Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, advocates “for writing that reclaims women’s voices and challenges patriarchal narratives” (Cixous, 253). Burns’ utilization of the stream-of-consciousness technique offers an authentic depiction of Middle Sister’s internal thoughts and emotions, thereby effectively interrogating traditional narrative structures.

Feminism, positioned as a pivotal social movement and theoretical framework, endeavours to examine and dismantle the systemic inequalities and injustices encountered by women and marginalized genders. This analytical perspective emphasizes the necessity of understanding these issues within a broader socio-political context, acknowledging the interplay of various social identities and structures of power that contribute to the multifaceted nature of oppression. The text emphasizes the interrelated nature of social categorizations, including race, class, sexuality, and ability, which collectively influence both individual and collective experiences of oppression and privilege. Through the analysis of the ways in which



intersecting identities shape the lived experiences of individuals, intersectionality serves to enrich the feminist critique of societal structures. Furthermore, it promotes a more inclusive framework for advocating for social justice. In the integration of feminism and intersectionality, both scholars and activists underscore the imperative of acknowledging and addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of discrimination. This approach facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the distinct challenges encountered by diverse groups within the feminist movement. This integrative perspective aspires to establish a more equitable society that recognizes and appreciates the multiplicity of identities and experiences.

Although *Milkman* is intricately situated within the specific socio-political landscape of Northern Ireland, the feminist themes it addresses have broader implications that transcend this context. The novel examines the intricate relationship between gender, class, and political dynamics, elucidating how women's experiences are shaped by a multifaceted interplay of diverse forms of oppression. "This aligns with Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes the interconnected nature of social categorizations" (Crenshaw, 1241). The challenges faced by Middle Sister involve not only a critique of traditional gender norms but also a confrontation with the dominant power structures that regulate her community.

The themes of harassment, surveillance, and resistance articulated in *Milkman* hold considerable relevance to contemporary sociocultural movements, most notably the #MeToo movement. The novel provides a critical examination of the systemic attributes of gender-based violence, emphasizing the importance of scrutinizing the societal norms that perpetuate inequality. Burns' body of work highlights the ongoing challenges faced by women and underscores the imperative for collective action in the dismantling of patriarchal structures.

Anna Burns' *Milkman* constitutes a critical exploration of feminist themes and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles within a patriarchal context. The novel utilizes various narrative techniques to delve into feminist themes while concurrently highlighting the concept of resistance as a means to critically examine the mechanisms of control that sustain the oppression of women. The transition of Middle Sister from silence to subtle defiance offers a significant analysis of the strategies employed by women to navigate and resist patriarchal structures. As a noteworthy contribution to feminist literature, *Milkman* compels readers to critically engage with the enduring issues of gender inequality and to conceptualize innovative pathways toward liberation.

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