

HORRORS OF THE TROUBLES IN ANNA BURNS' *MILKMAN*

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ABSTRACT

The novel analyses the story of a young women who lives in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The danger surrounds her and yet the most dangerous situation which she faces is the rumour of her connection with a married man. The novel portrays the violent atmosphere of the Troubles and its trauma experienced by the individuals. The novel also portrays the middle sister's struggle to get herself out of this predicament imposed by milkman and her community. Much like her failure in avoiding milkman, the violent atmosphere of the Troubles finds a way to penetrate into the narrative despite the protagonist's attempts to avoid the outer reality by burying her head into the literature of the past centuries. The protagonist struggles to survive the communal oppression and physical and psychological violence at the time of the Troubles in the Northern Ireland.

Keywords: The Troubles, Community, Oppression, Gossip, Northern Ireland.

Literature of Northern Ireland includes literature written in Northern Ireland, and in that part of Ireland prior to 1922, as well as literature written by writers born in Northern Ireland. It includes literature in English, Irish and Ulster Scots. Northern Ireland is a country that comprises six counties of Ireland, while still holding a place in the United Kingdom. Due to the country's unique political background, the history of Northern Irish literature is very different to its southern counterparts. This difference is reflected in the works of contemporary Northern Irish writers. Some of the famous Northern Irish writers are John Hewitt, Heaney, Brian Friel, and Louis MacNeice.

Anna Burns is a Belfast born Northern Irish writer, and the author of three novels, *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007) and *Milkman* (2018), and one novella, *Mostly Hero* (2014). *Milkman*, in addition to winning the Man Booker Prize in 2018, won the National Books Critics Circle Award for fiction in 2018, the Orwell

Prize for political fiction in 2020, and the International Dublin Literary Award in 2020.

Narratives around the Troubles are at the centre of Northern Irish Literature. The conflict, which lasted from 1968 to 1998, affected all aspects of Northern Irish culture. This was then reflected in the literature that the country produced at this time, is known as Trouble Narratives. These narratives focused on many different aspects of the conflict which includes the place of women and men masculinity, themes of violence and class distinctions. Not all of the literature produced in Northern Ireland during this period focused on the Troubles.

Milkman is a novel written by Burns and was published in 2018. Set in an unnamed city during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the book follows an unnamed protagonist, known as ‘Middle Sister,’ as she navigates the challenges and complexities of her community. The story takes place in the 1970s, against the backdrop of political unrest and violence. The protagonist, an eighteen year old girl, lives in a tightly knit and deeply divided society. She is referred to as ‘Middle Sister’ because she has an older sister, ‘First Sister,’ and a younger sister, ‘Wee Sisters.’ Middle Sister is an intelligent and bookish individual who deviates from the norms of her community. She loves reading which sets her apart and makes her a target for gossip and suspicion.

One day, while reading a book in the park, Middle Sister encounters a mysterious man, known as ‘Milkman’ who is significantly older than her. Milkman is a high ranking member of a paramilitary organisation, and rumors about his involvement with under age girls spread through the community. Although Middle Sister is not interested in him romantically, their interactions spark rumours and speculation. As the story progresses, Middle Sister becomes the subject of gossip and scrutiny. She becomes a target of unwelcome attention and advances from both Milkman and other members of the community. The societal pressure to conform to the expectations of her community and the constant threat of violence forces Middle Sister into a state of fear and paranoia.

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Burns' novel begins with a flashforward scene that brings the story to a conclusion: "The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died" (1). The rest of the novel is built in a manner that leads to this moment. After this scene, the narrator begins to tell how a man named Milkman walks into her life and disrupts its balance. Not an actual milkman, but a forty one year old Republican paramilitary who is also married, Milkman sets eyes on the protagonist, the middle sister, during her daily walks, and starts to stalk her, crossing her path unexpectedly, menacing and frightening her.

Already a subject of gossip in her neighbourhood for her reading while walking activity, the middle sister is immediately stigmatised by the community as Milkman's paramour and accused and plied by her family members without being able to defend herself. Cornered by the psychological harassment of both Milkman and her community, the middle sister finds herself in a predicament which she strives to ignore and avoid by taking up with her maybe boyfriend, reading and jogging. However, Milkman manages to penetrate into every part of her life, including these activities.

The novel portrays the middle sister's struggle to get herself out of this predicament imposed by Milkman and her community. Much like her failure in avoiding Milkman, the violent atmosphere of the Troubles finds a way to infiltrate into the narrative despite the protagonist's attempts to avoid the outer reality by burying her head into the literature of the past centuries. As Costello-Sullivan argues, the Irish novels written in the twenty first century

emphasize not only the representation of personal or cultural trauma but also the act of representation itself and the *curative* power of such representation. This narrative engagement with the process of narrativizing mimics the healing function of testimony as awareness of the process of telling empowers the trauma victim to author his or her own life story. (22-23)

The protagonist's attempts to avoid the world surrounding her by reading anything that is not of the twentieth century content do not spare her from the touch of the outer world. Violence is a reality of her society that is impossible to turn a

blind eye to. Having an opinion about the conflicts despite her intentional indifference, the middle sister is quite aware of her position as a resident of a Republican dominated district.

The fear instilled by both political forces into the lives of the people causes a sense of paranoia, leading the people to operate self-censorship in their behaviours and monitor and police each other in order to assure the so-called safety of the community. As Quinn also suggests, “The enemy itself is basically absent from the story: It only manifests as the click of surveillance cameras. Instead, we watch a community mutilate itself from the inside” (9). Indeed, the camera located in the park where the middle sister goes jogging monitors the passers and takes their picture, imposing the sense of continuous surveillance on the people even in the physical absence of the state. Therefore, the state controls the community, or evokes the sense of its control, in order to establish and sustain its power over them.

Accordingly, the presence of the state forces and that of the paramilitary is replaced by the community’s adoption of self censure and policing as a result of this paranoia. The violent acts practised by the British state and the Irish paramilitary forces are recounted by the protagonist, such as the state soldiers’ killing the neighbourhood dogs, the state’s accidental shootings of innocent civilians mistaking them for Milkman, or the paramilitaries’ plundering the neighbourhood houses in the name of the cause, yet, the act of violence, physical or psychological, is mostly portrayed through the very individuals of the community.

This practice of violence is most evidently observed in the conflict between the middle sister and her community, displaying how oppression, in the form of psychological violence, dictates normality, punishes, and gradually isolates the individual. As Miller also pinpoints, “the conflict that most preoccupies this novel flares not between republicans and royalists or between Catholics and Protestants ...but between the girl and her community” (2).

It seems that only the middle sister is aware of this unusual attitude of the community towards what is normal and what is not. Considering the general atmosphere of the novel, nonetheless, it can be argued that the world presented in *Milkman* is quite topsy-turvy in a way that it portrays a community where normal is abnormal, and abnormal normal. In accordance with its understanding of normality, the community tries to ‘fix’ the middle sister, since her abnormal reading while walking is unacceptable.

Milkman's function in the novel is to represent the general sense of menace in the society. He is, in fact, the very embodiment of the horror of the Troubles, power abuse, and patriarchy in the Northern Irish society. The menace he invokes operates the same way as the state forces do. Although it is stated that he is a killer, his true impact on the protagonist is not constructed through physical violence, but a psychological one. Without displaying any physical act of violence, the presence, or even the absence of Milkman meddles with the middle sister's state of mind, leading her to isolation and paranoia, thus threatening her existence in the society.

The protagonist is well aware of the society's mindset on sexual harassment. It simply prefers to ignore it, or merely gossip about it. The community itself through gossip, like Milkman's stalking and the state's photographing, disrupts her mental balance, tries to control her, and eventually exiles her into isolation. Therefore, in a community where violence is normalised, humanity forgotten, and morality corrupted, the victims of the oppression are 'naturally' ignored or punished.

The women are put into the same categorisation as the tablets girl. However, unlike the tablets girl, they are considered as a serious threat to the community not only by men, but by women as well. This fear of being different or having a different individual in the society is ingrained in everyone in the novel, including the protagonist, who is terrified of being labelled as beyond the pale, avoids the issue women, or ignores the fact that her father was raped as a child. Not only women, in this regard, but all individuals who do not conform with the society's understanding of normality and commonness are ignored and exiled.

The chef, who loves cooking and is secretly gay, is othered and considered as beyond the pale by the neighbours. The maybe boyfriend, who is also homosexual, struggles to be an accepted member of the community and not to be alienated like the chef by dating the middle sister. The protagonist's father, damaged by the childhood trauma of repeated abuse, and possibly silenced and ignored by the community, is drawn into depression and eventually dies.

The protagonist discovers this phenomenon when she finds out that her mother has always loved the real milkman, another beyond the pale character who is actually a milkman, and whose normality is deemed abnormal and who isolates himself from the community. The novel portrays the middle sister as the most conscious character in the novel about her surrounding and the abnormality of the mindset and functioning of the community, hence, the changes in her life carries

significance both for her and the gist of the novel. She finds out that her maybe boyfriend is gay, which provides her with an epiphanic moment: “The truth was dawning on me of how terrifying it was not to be numb, but to be aware, to have facts, retain facts, be present, be adult” (294). This sudden realisation of the outer reality eliminates the indifference and numbness that prevailed her disposition almost throughout the novel.

Although she surrenders to Milkman on the way home by getting in his van, this sense of despair is soon replaced by relief with the news of Milkman’s death, which causes the protagonist to realise her predicament now that the threat is expelled from her life: “while standing in our kitchen digesting this bit of consequence, that I came to understand how much I’d been closed down, how much I’d been thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness by that man. Also by the community, by the very mental atmosphere, that minutiae of invasion” (303).

Now fully aware of the condition she has been put through by Milkman, the middle sister evolves into a more mature and self-confident individual, having survived the abuses of Milkman, the community’s gossip, the tablets girl’s poisoning, and McSomebody’s assault. Recovering the countless adversities and attacks, the middle sister comes out alive and strong, preserving her individuality. Parallel with this maturation, the end of the novel is brought with a female solidarity formed among the middle sister, her mother, and her sisters.

By encouraging her mother to let go of the burden of ‘wrong spouse’ phenomenon, reject her preordained despair, and go after the real milkman, and by reconciling with her eldest sister without causing tension, the middle sister also releases herself from her conflict with the community, since the community oppression is mostly operated by her mother and eldest sister throughout the novel. Therefore, the dark tone that prevails the whole novel begins to shatter at the end with the dancing of the wee sisters, the shared moments and feelings among women, and the resumption of the jogging.

In the novel, the trauma that the middle sister suffers due to the oppression and psychological violence on the part of the community she lives in is the same trauma that the country itself endures due to both physical and psychological repercussions of the Troubles. However, Burns does not settle for merely demonstrating the trauma in question; she also embellishes her narrative with the potential of a recovery by making reconciliation and hope for the future possible for

her characters. Once the threat becomes too real to ignore as she gets poisoned by the tablets girl, menaced by Somebody McSomebody with a knife, and terrorised by Milkman one last time, the middle sister understands how extremely she was subdued and forced to give up on her individuality. With Milkman's death, she confronts her true oppressor, the community, by refusing to succumb to its constraint.

Burns' *Milkman* portrays the trauma caused by oppression in an individual context, it displays a similar struggle with trauma and oppression in a wider scope, implicitly dealing with the condition of Northern Ireland in the time of the Troubles, and thereby the novel also puts forward a process of confrontation and healing for the country through the middle sister's story.

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