



Gendered Trauma and Power Structures: A Feminist Post-Structuralism Analysis of Anna Burns' *Milkman*

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Citation: Dr. Manav Sharma, (2021), Gendered Trauma and Power Structures: A Feminist Post-Structuralism Analysis of Anna Burns' *Milkman*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 27(1) 1117-1120
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v27i1.9507

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper explores gendered trauma and power structures in Anna Burns' *Milkman* through a feminist post-structuralism lens. Set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the novel presents the experiences of the unnamed protagonist, "middle sister," as she navigates a patriarchal society steeped in political and social tension. Through the protagonist's encounters with the predatory *Milkman* and the suffocating community surveillance, Burns highlights how gendered trauma is reinforced by rigid social norms and male-dominated power structures. Feminist post-structuralism allows for an analysis of how societal oppression, particularly gendered violence, shapes the protagonist's fractured identity. Middle sister's traumatic experiences are exacerbated by a culture of silence, suspicion, and victim-blaming, where women's voices are marginalized. Burns' use of language, such as the protagonist's self-distancing terms like "maybe-boyfriend" and fragmented narrative style, reflects the protagonist's internal struggle to navigate this oppressive environment. Drawing on the works of theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Cathy Caruth, and Kai Erikson, this analysis demonstrates how *Milkman* critiques the gendered dynamics of power and trauma, exposing the societal mechanisms that sustain female subjugation. The novel underscores the complexities of living under patriarchal rule, where trauma is not only personal but deeply entrenched in the community's social fabric.

Keywords: Gendered Trauma, Power Structures, Feminist Post-Structuralism, Patriarchy, Gendered Violence and Social Oppression.

The title suggests an exploration of how trauma and power dynamics are shaped by gender in Burns' novel, through the lens of feminist post-structuralism, focusing on the social, cultural, and ideological structures that influence the protagonist's experiences.

Anna Burns is a Northern Irish writer best known for her novel *Milkman* (2018), which won the prestigious Man Booker Prize. Born in Belfast in 1962, she grew up in the Catholic working-class neighbourhood of Ardoyne during the Troubles, a period of violent political conflict in Northern Ireland. Burns' experiences in this turbulent environment greatly influenced her writing, particularly themes of oppression, trauma and social power structures. *Milkman*, her most acclaimed work, is set in an unnamed city resembling Belfast and is the story of a young woman who is harassed by a powerful, older paramilitary man known only as *Milkman*. The novel's distinctive voice, complex themes and experimental prose earned widespread critical acclaim.

Milkman centres on the recollections of an unnamed 38-year-old woman referred to as "Middle sister" as she recounts the traumatic experiences she faced at the age of eighteen at the hands of a stalker known as 'Milkman.' Set in what appears to be Belfast, Ireland, during The Troubles; Burns' narrative is deeply rooted in historical research, contributing significantly to the discourse on that era's political and religious tensions. The protagonist's narration seamlessly transitions between her younger and older selves, with both perspectives coexisting throughout the text. As the middle sister revisits the events from two decades earlier, her use of language, particularly in describing the physical sensations she felt when confronted by the predatory behaviour of *Milkman*, stands out as a noteworthy aspect of the novel. The novel begins by plunging us into the protagonist's traumatic memory from two decades earlier. This trauma stems from a rumour about her alleged involvement with an older, married paramilitary figure known as 'Milkman,' a man described as, "A befouler of young girls and a depraved, fraud *Milkman* who gives bad names to people who are really milkmen" (Burns 208)

His unwelcome pursuit of the eighteen-year-old protagonist, often called “middle sister,” marks her as his possession in the eyes of their community, leading to deep personal trauma and a fractured sense of self. From the outset, her recollections immerse us in a cultural climate rife with insecurity and anxiety, where political and social violence, harassment, and the constant threat of intimidation, both verbal and sexual, are woven into the fabric of everyday life.

“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” (Burns 07)

The narrator recounts the event that ends her abuser’s life in a detached, almost casual tone, even though it coincides with a period of intense personal happiness for her. This jarring contrast highlights her confusion and distress as she struggles to distance herself from the trauma of the past. By revisiting this experience from a different perspective, she begins to grasp the profound ways in which her sense of self has been stifled and fragmented by the oppressive forces surrounding her. This includes *Milkman* himself and her mother, neighbours, paramilitary groups, state forces, and the broader societal context in which they all exist. Despite her attempts to remain detached from politics and her community’s rigid, gendered social norms, she finds herself labelled as “interesting” and “beyond-the-pale,” highlighting the inescapable nature of these power dynamics. As *Milkman*’s relentless harassment begins, marked by stalking and intimidation, the narrator reveals the profound sense of disruption and displacement his actions inflict upon her. This highlights the deeply intertwined physical and psychological effects of the trauma she endures.

“There was confusion, too much of being startled. It seemed a shock, yes, but shock over something that must be too small, unimportant, and even too normal to be really truly shocked over. Because of it though, it was only hours later when back home that I was able to take in he knew about my work. I didn’t remember how I got home either because I was lapsing in attention, because I was confused, because I wasn’t being truthful, I slipped, I skidded and lost balance, I fell down on the path” (Burns 14)

While *Milkman*’s threatening dominance and sexual harassment are not the sole source of trauma for the narrator, he embodies the larger system of male authority and abusive practices prevalent in her society. This system consistently subjugates women, leaving them vulnerable to relentless repression and fear. The novel explicitly points to this gendered power imbalance:

“This was the ‘I’m male and you’re female’ territory. This was certain girls not being tolerated if it was deemed they did not defer to males, did not acknowledge the superiority of males” (Burns 12)

This culture of masculinity, coupled with the pervasive tribalism of Northern Ireland, contributes to the pervasive sense of being pursued and trapped, as the narrator highlights: “the predations upon me by the community and by Milkman.” (Burns 289) Although violence permeates the novel in various forms, the strong gender bias within this violence is impossible to ignore. The narrator is subjected to constant surveillance and intimidation, which impacts her not only psychologically but also physically and sexually,

“There were plenty of quiet, unnoticeable people who took a bit of watching. It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman.” (Burns 07)

The burden of being falsely accused and held responsible for a situation she neither sought nor encouraged leaves the protagonist feeling deeply vulnerable. She grapples with a profound sense of violation, guilt, and betrayal, compounded by the lack of support from her friends and family. This experience profoundly shapes her memories, characterizing that period of her life as fragmented and unstable. “This was living otherwise. This was underneath the trauma and the darkness a normality trying to happen.” (Burns 97) *Milkman*’s predatory behaviour unfolds within a broader context of relentless surveillance and social control, impacting both individuals and the community as a whole. This atmosphere is mirrored in the narrative itself, which relies on deliberate ambiguity and the avoidance of proper names when referring to other characters. The protagonist must navigate this oppressive environment to survive in a fractured society defined by suspicion and control, “The whole community’s a suspect community. Everybody’s house, everybody’s movements, everybody’s connections constantly are checked and kept an eye on” (Burns 175)

The pervasive sense of intrusion and the protagonist’s feeling of being directly targeted, even in the absence of physical contact, create a profound sense of violation. *Milkman*’s awareness of her personal life amplifies this violation, making her feel exposed and unsafe. His menacing tactics, which include threats against her “maybe-boyfriend,” further escalate the sense of terror and danger. As is characteristic of trauma narratives, the protagonist experiences uncontrollable physical reactions to her trauma. *Milkman*’s predatory behaviour leaves her feeling emotionally and physically devastated, resulting in a shattered sense of self, a fragmentation evident in her recollections,

“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” (Burns 253)

The protagonist’s words highlight how societal pressures and the need to conform restrict her agency, limiting her ability to make independent choices. This underscores the idea that “extreme experience cultivates multiple responses and values,” suggesting that individuals develop complex and multifaceted coping mechanisms in response to oppressive environments. The protagonist experiences recurring trauma, leading her to adopt defensive behaviours as a means of navigating and escaping the dynamics of oppression and control she faces. Silence becomes both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance, allowing her to express her traumatic

experiences as a woman within this oppressive environment, “Rarely did I mention anything to anybody. Not mentioning was my way to keep safe” (Burns 42)

It is essential to underscore that the gendered differences in depicting trauma are established both through the novel’s themes and language. The novel immediately disrupts literary norms with its unconventional style, revealing the ending within the very first sentence. Throughout *Milkman*, the narrator adopts a distinct voice that blends self-soothing, humour, and resistance. This is evident in the unusual language and expressiveness, which is at turns absurd and logical, realistic and surreal, darkly disturbing and comical. This unique style creates a tapestry of “affective and unconscious associations” throughout the narrative. The novel’s unconventional style mirrors the protagonist’s inner turmoil and fragmentation, particularly as she becomes increasingly aware of *Milkman*’s disturbing and invasive behaviour. Her use of language, such as the recurring “maybe” (as in ‘near-maybe-boyfriend’), reflects a hesitant and uncertain relationship with reality, suggesting that humour may serve as a coping mechanism in the face of trauma. This is further exemplified through the narrator’s use of lists, catalogues, and almost instructional language when describing her community’s intricate web of political affiliations and allegiances, often with unintentional comedic effects. While seemingly baffling, these stylistic choices offer a glimpse into the protagonist’s struggle to navigate a world defined by fear, suspicion, and the ever-present threat of violence.

“The spirit of the community going back in time deemed which names were allowed and which were not. The names not allowed were not allowed for the reason they were too much of the country ‘over the water’. The banned names were understood to have become infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict” (Burns 25)

The novel’s preoccupation with documenting the past and its seemingly arbitrary rules about acceptable names resonate with Cathy Caruth’s assertion that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 24). This interconnectedness of individual and collective trauma is further underscored by the narrator’s struggle to fully comprehend the events she recounts; a phenomenon also explored in Caruth’s work. The protagonist’s experience becomes a microcosm of the broader societal trauma, highlighting how individual and collective memory are intertwined in the aftermath of violence and conflict in the following lines,

“As regards this psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed, matters didn’t stop at ‘their names’ and at ‘our names’, at ‘us’ and ‘them’, at ‘our community’ and ‘their community’, at ‘over the road’, ‘over the water’ and ‘over the border’” (Burns 26)

The above-stated quotation highlights the protagonist’s heightened awareness of boundaries, both physical and psychological, which permeate every aspect of her daily life, even down to the details of what she eats. This heightened awareness is conveyed through a stream-of-consciousness style that catalogues the various elements of her world, revealing a volatile environment steeped in political tension. The narrator’s frequent repetition and rephrasing of certain concepts underscore the anxiety and distress she experiences, as exemplified by the line: “These were paranoid times. These were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody.” Living under the constant threat of insinuation, manipulation, and various forms of violence – be it general, physical, sectarian, political, or gender-based – she is forced to adapt and develop “an extreme response” to cope with the unrelenting unease of her reality.

In the initial sections of the novel, the middle sister provides a brief introduction to the character *Milkman* before delving into her unsettling encounters with her first brother-in-law, who subjected her to inappropriate sexual questions when she was younger. Recalling an incident from when she was twelve years old, she reflects on the discomfort caused by the man’s use of sexual language that she did not fully comprehend yet recognized as being of a sexual nature,

“He used words, words sexual, I did not understand. He knew I did not understand them but that I knew enough to grasp that they were sexual. That was what gave him pleasure. He was thirty-five. Twelve and thirty-five” (Burns 1-2)

This interaction, despite her young age, left her with a sense of unease. Drawing from Sara Ahmed’s work *Living a Feminist Life*, it is highlighted that individuals, particularly women, often develop a keen awareness of being wronged or experiencing injustice as a result of unwanted male attention, a sentiment that resonates with middle sister’s encounters, “Over time, with experience, you sense that something is wrong or you have a feeling of being wronged. You sense an injustice...Many of my early experiences of feeling wronged, as a girl, involved unwanted male attention” (Ahmed 22)

A compelling indication of this intrusion is evident when *Milkman* is absent from the scene. During an evening adult French class attended by Middle Sister, participants are directed to step outside and observe the sky. It is during this moment that Middle Sister notices a white van bearing a resemblance to *Milkman*’s vehicle. Her recorded visceral response resembles Van der Kolk’s explanation of how the feeling of helplessness manifests in the affected body areas: “head, back and limbs for accident victims, vagina and rectum in victims of sexual abuse” (Kolk 267).

Karl Marx highlighted the inclination of capitalism to generate extra profits by exploiting the labour of the working class people. In *The Capital*, Marx writes: “The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and laborers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-laborers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman’s family, without distinction of age or sex. Compulsory work for the

capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family" (Marx 394-395).

Caruth states, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 09)

Furthermore, the community's reaction to 'Milkman's' demise underscores the deeply ingrained suspicion and judgment that permeate their world. The rumors surrounding his death, whispered but never confirmed, demonstrate a collective unwillingness to confront the truth and dismantle the systems of power that allowed him to thrive. The narrator observes, "Nobody was going to say he was dead, not definitely, not yet" highlighting the pervasive fear of reprisal and the insidious grip of silence that continues to bind the community.

The novel's final lines encapsulate the narrator's precarious position, caught between a yearning for normalcy and the lingering trauma of her past. She reflects, "Things were not talking about. Things were moving on," suggesting a tentative step towards healing yet acknowledging the unspoken wounds that continue to shape her reality. This abrupt ending, devoid of clear resolution or catharsis, mirrors the often messy and protracted nature of trauma recovery. It serves as a stark reminder that even as individuals strive to move forward, the scars of the past, both personal and societal, can linger, shaping their present and future. In its refusal to offer easy answers or comforting closure, the ending of *Milkman* challenges readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of a society grappling with violence and its aftermath. It is a testament to the enduring strength of the human spirit, particularly the spirit of women who navigate a world all too often defined by male dominance and suspicion. The novel's open-ended conclusion serves as a powerful reminder that the journey toward healing, both individual and collective, is an ongoing process, demanding constant vigilance and a refusal to succumb to the forces of silence and fear.

Anna Burns' *Milkman* is a testament to the enduring power of the human spirit, even in the face of profound trauma. Through its fragmented narrative and unconventional language, the novel delves into the darkest corners of a society grappling with political unrest and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. We witness the insidious nature of violence, not only in its physical manifestations but also in the subtle ways fear and suspicion poison relationships and erode individual autonomy. The unnamed narrator, subjected to 'Milkman's' unwanted advances and the suffocating judgment of her community, embodies the vulnerability of women navigating a world where their bodies are often seen as sites of control and contention. Her experience lays bare the insidious ways in which societal pressures, amplified by the ever-present threat of violence, can silence women, forcing them to internalize their trauma and navigate a world steeped in suspicion and fear.

However, *Milkman* is not a tale of utter despair. Despite the psychological toll of her ordeal, the narrator emerges as a beacon of quiet resilience. Her refusal to conform to societal expectations, her embrace of her unique voice and perspective, and her unwavering commitment to her truth all point towards a hard-won triumph. The novel's ambiguous ending, while offering no easy resolutions, suggests that healing, while complex and on-going, is possible. The narrator's journey reminds us that even in the darkest of times, the human spirit, particularly the spirit of women who dare to challenge the status quo, possesses an indomitable will to survive and, ultimately, thrive.

In conclusion, a feminist poststructuralist analysis of Anna Burns's *Milkman* reveals how gendered trauma is intricately woven into the fabric of power structures within a divided, oppressive society. Through the protagonist's experiences of surveillance, control, and sexual harassment, the novel critiques how social norms and power dynamics silence and marginalize women. Burns' innovative narrative style underscores the complexities of individual identity amid collective political pressures, highlighting the pervasive and often invisible ways in which patriarchal systems perpetuate trauma. Ultimately, *Milkman* serves as a powerful exploration of the interrelationships between gender, trauma, and power.

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