Elements of Violence in Anna Burns' Milkman

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT:
This paper explores the intricate layers of violence in Anna Burns' Milkman, set against the backdrop of Northern Ireland's Troubles. Through a meticulous analysis, the study delves into how Burns portrays the pervasive and multifaceted nature of violence, not only as a physical force but as a socio-political and psychological phenomenon deeply embedded in the lives of individuals and communities. Drawing on theories from Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and other critical thinkers, the paper examines the ways in which power, surveillance, and societal norms perpetuate structural, symbolic, and normative violence. The protagonist's struggle to navigate a society governed by fear, suspicion, and rigid social codes reflects the broader tensions of a divided nation. By situating Milkman within these theoretical frameworks, this study reveals how the novel transcends its historical setting to offer a universal commentary on the human condition under systemic oppression.

Introduction

Milkman has 'the Troubles' or the Northern Ireland conflict as its background. This essentially factional ethno-nationalist conflict began in the late 1960s and continued till the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Burns presents violence and political turmoil of the Troubles by saying, "So this was hatred. It was great hatred, the great Seventies hatred" (*Milkman* 96). Sharon Auld comments, "The conflict was primarily political and nationalistic. It also had an ethnic or sectarian dimension. A key issue was the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Unionists, who were mostly Ulster Protestants, wanted Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom. Irish nationalists, who were mostly Irish Catholics wanted Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and join a united Ireland." (22).

Morales-Ladrón comments on the setting of the novel: "Although *Milkman* is set in an unnamed town, reviewers have recognised in it the Catholic district of Ardoyne, where Burns grew up" (268). The novel presents human existence in the atmosphere of impending violence caused by the Troubles, seeping into everyday life invariably as riots and fear.

Universal Dimension of Violence

Burns tries to present the idea that the novel goes beyond the Troubles and implies the universal phenomenon of social and political violence experienced by people all over the world. Ron Charles remarks: "Despite taking place 40 years ago, *Milkman* vibrates with the anxieties of our own era, from terrorism to sexual harassment to the blinding divisions that make reconciliation feel impossible" (Charles).

Northern Ireland's history reveals that the area has been severely traumatised and devastated during the Troubles. The novel is a personal account of the Troubles. It shows how the Troubles affected an individual, a small community, and in turn the country. Burns' novel exposes the social constructs of the Northern Irish communities by addressing topics like sexual harassment, social, political, and moral defamation, communal oppression, and hypocrisy, in addition to depicting the effects of political violence and the ensuing chaos. The novel addresses these issues in the narrator's oscillation between the ongoing social and political conflicts and her coming of age amid communal oppression. As a result, *Milkman* not only depicts the tension during the Troubles through the perspective of a young woman, but also reveals the different ways in which violence functions within social structures (Danaci 294). It

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is with a sense of relief that the narrator says: "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" (*Milkman* 1). Fahriye Selvi Danaci says:

> Thus, by portraying a young woman's story in the midst of the Troubles from the first-person point of view and following her recovery from her trauma, Burns's narrative operates on a dual spectrum by focusing on a personal tale of coping with the communal oppression, accompanied by an account of political tension and distress and its repercussions on the society and the individuals in the background. (Danaci 294)

The Protagonist of the Novel and the Milkman

The novel *Milkman* focuses on an eighteen-year-old woman living in a Catholic and separatist stronghold, belonging to a family of eleven siblings, whom the narrative calls "middle sister" (56) or "middle daughter" (333). The author presents the Northern Ireland situation where people were categorized as "renouncers-of-the-state" (7) and "defenders-of-the-state" (22). Roghayeh Farsi and Abbas Ali Hallaji explain:

> The narrator of *Milkman* relates her reactions to the political forces she was exposed to in a militarized [Irish] society. Two points are to be noted to comprehend the sequence of events in the novel: first, the distinction between the narrator as the presenting self and the eighteen-year-old girl as her presented self; second, the gap of number of years between the time of narration, "twenty years later" (6), and that of the events and its interpretive influence upon her narration. (Farsi and Hallaji 43-44)

The narrator describes the character, milkman[3] thus: "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 even deliver milk. Also, he didn't drive a milk lorry" (*Milkman* 2). In the novel it is further stated that the milkman is "a befouler of young girls and a depraved, fraud milkman who gives bad names to people who are really milkmen" (246). Elsewhere in the novel he is an intruder into the privacy of people: "And now here he was, reaching with his unstoppable predations right inside my home" (247).

Four Encounters with the Milkman

The story begins when the milkman, a "forty-one" year old "married" man, drives up in a car offering the narrator a lift as she was walking along reading *Ivanhoe*. He evidently knows about her: "You're one of the who's-it girls, aren't you? So-and-so was your father, wasn't he? Your brothers, thingy, thingy, thingy and thingy, used to play in the hurley team, didn't they? Hop in. I'll give you a lift" (*Milkman* 8). When she turns his offer down saying, "I'm walking" (3) and "I'm reading" (3) he says: "You can read in the car" (3). She expresses her predicament, "I did not want to get in the car with this man. I did not know how to say so" (3). He looks at her, smiling and friendly (3). And she says: "by age eighteen, 'smiling, friendly and obliging' always had me straight on the alert" (3). Although she "had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment" (6), she "had a feeling for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people" (6). Therefore, she reveals: "I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me" (1).

The second intimidating encounter takes place when she goes for jogging in the park. He comes and runs along with her (*Milkman* 5). The protagonist says: "I knew by this second meeting that the milkman was attracted to me, that he was making some move on me" (6). As in their first encounter she says, "I was startled" and "I could not speak" (5). She feels confused again: "I was still at the part of 'where did he come from?'" (5). She wishes that milkman would "hurry up" (6) and "go away" (6), "or else to go away myself . . . the very moment I could" (6).

[3] The name "milkman" is capitalized in the book only from page 197 when the novelist reveals that his real name in "Milkman." Therefore, all the references taken from pages 1 to 197 is "milkman."

The third encounter with the milkman too is an unnerving experience for the middle sister as the milkman implies impending violence:

> First thing that happened was again I got those spine shivers, those scrabblings, the scuttlings, all that shiddery-shudderiness inside me, from the bottom of my backbone right into my legs. Instinctively everything in me then stopped. Just stopped. All my mechanism. I did not move and he did not move. (102)

On this occasion the milkman threatens to kill her boyfriend if she does not break up with him. As the narrator retrospectively observes: "maybe-boyfriend was to be killed under the catch-all of the political problems even if, in reality, the milkman was going to kill him out of disguised jealousy over me" (*Milkman* 115). The over- all sense of encroachment and the specific targeting of the victim, even if there has not yet been any physical contact, make the middle sister feel violated and invaded, since the milkman knows all the personal and private details of her life. His sinister strategy also extends to the narrator's "maybe-boyfriend" as he threatens to kill him if she continues seeing him, which terrifies her. The milkman's predatory practice makes the victim feel mentally and physically wrecked, and her selfhood is shattered as she mentions: "All the same his predatory nature pushed me into frozenness every time" (*Milkman* 2) (Kondali and Vukotić 283).

The fourth encounter takes place after she found out that her boyfriend is involved homosexual relationships. Walking home feeling numb and confused, the milkman's van draws up, and this time she steps inside: "Ill-equipped I'd been to take in what everybody else from the outset had taken in: I was Milkman's *fait accompli* all along" (299). By the time of the fourth encounter, the narrator is utterly traumatised, "no longer a living person" (193), that she "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).

The town that forms the setting of the novel is under constant surveillance by the state through cameras and by the Republicans through paramilitary. Aware of this unremitting monitoring, the community is gradually drawn into paranoia, exercising the same methods of control upon its own members. While the community is supervised by the state, the middle sister is constantly under the scrutiny of the milkman and the community (Danaci 297). As Annalisa Quinn 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" ("Brutally Intelligent"). Burns indicates the pervading fear of being gazed upon, the threat of violence that is embodied like a prowling predator: "These were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody" (*Milkman* 27)

Claire Kilroy in her review of *Milkman* says that "Burns' targets are more insidious forces: the oppressiveness of tribalism, of conformism, of religion, of patriarchy, of living with widespread distrust and permanent fear" (Kilroy). Social coercion is "exercised unconsciously by the environment and by individuals and not by a central power or a centralised force" (Gramsci *Selections* 274). Such coercion contributes to the passivity of subaltern groups at all levels, including discourse (Jackson 51). According to Antonio Gramsci, it as an implicit violence involving the micro-dynamics of social transformation and in particular the molecular processes of transformation and conformism that become increasingly rapid and extensive under conditions of modernity (Jackson 52).

The characters in *Milkman* internalize and conform to societal norms out of fear and a desire for self-preservation, reflecting the subtle coercion inherent in totalitarian regimes. This conformity is evident in the character of the middle sister's mother, who adheres to traditional gender roles and expectations despite her own desires and ambitions. The pervasive surveillance, the policing behaviour and the constant threat of violence, all contribute to a system of symbolic violence that maintains the regime's hegemony. This aligns with Gramsci's broader concept of hegemony, where dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion but also through the subtle manipulation of culture and ideology. The struggle of the

characters to adapt to the oppressive norms of their society reflects Gramsci's concept of the crisis of adaptation.

The community's adherence to unwritten rules and the social ostracism faced by those who deviate from these norms illustrate how hegemony is maintained. In *Milkman* this is evident in the strict social codes of the unnamed city. Social codes are expressed after the scene of the second encounter with the milkman. The middle sister speaks of her personal workout routine and the patriarchal attitude of the milkman that it opposes the "male code of the district" (*Milkman* 10) and the "unshakable" rules of the society regarding women. This reflects Gramsci's idea of hegemony maintained through both force and consent. The community polices itself through social pressure, while the threat of physical violence is always evident.

Gramsci describes a type of violence that arises as a function of the dominant group's hegemonic project through the imposition of its own 'present.' In this process, as Peter Thomas explains, the subaltern groups experience an 'incoherent present,' or a 'non-presence of the present.' The non-contemporaneity of the subaltern groups involves the violence of having a social identity coercively constituted from a bizarrely composite and incoherent set of elements of different conceptions of the world. These groups are, in terms evoking the archaeological practices of later thinkers like Michel Foucault, living in the present like a fossil, a "walking anachronism" (Gramsci *Selection* 324). The insular nature of the community depicted in *Milkman*, with its outdated social norms and obsession with the past, reflects this concept. Characters like "real milkman" represent an older way of life out of step with modernity. It is only through the irruption of a positive revolutionary violence that the subalterns can emerge from the margins of history to achieve an autonomous position, and an awareness of their own historical personality (Gramsci *Selection* 324).

The pervasive surveillance within Middle Sister's community is reminiscent of the metaphor of the panopticon which Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish*. Although there is no literal watchtower, the constant observation by neighbours and the community at large serves a similar function. Middle Sister is acutely aware of being watched and judged, leading her to internalize the community's norms and expectations. This internalization of discipline, a key aspect of Foucault's analysis, illustrates how power operates through subtle means rather than overt coercion. The community's gaze compels conformity and suppresses dissent, maintaining social order through psychological rather than physical means. The protagonist laments: ". . . because of all these compounding violations, I was finding myself more and more circumscribed into an incoherent, debilitated place" (*Milkman* 170).

Foucault uses the panopticon as a form of political control wielded on large groups of people, for whom silence eventually turns into a discipline that regulates their behaviour. In *Milkman*, the protagonist says: "words didn't have to be disputed or undisputed, didn't have to be spoken" (34), a statement that resonates with the ambience of the oppressive years of the Troubles.

Foucault's theory of power helps to understand how in *Milkman* the gaze is repressively interiorised and normalised to the point of turning individuals into docile bodies, for whom silence is the only alternative form of resistance (Morales-Ladrón 268). Hence, the community in *Milkman* functions: "as a true panopticon, where people police each other, making everyone feel under constant surveillance" (Morales-Ladrón 269), in a clear parallel to how the authoritarian state in George Orwell's *1984* relies on the use of the telescreen. Not knowing when one is being observed, they always keep on guard. Being busily involved in their own vigilance, they regulate their behaviour to conform to the norms and avoid the consequences of transgression.

Foucault discusses the genealogy of sexuality in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* arguing that as a construction sexuality is articulated by discourses that have originated in the sciences and social institutions to adjust sexual behaviour, control the reproductive instincts, and repress deviant acts (145-46). In the novel, the protagonist tries to

resist conforming to the existing pattern of sexual behaviour by opposing her mother's expectations of marrying at the age of sixteen.

Foucault's concept of modern disciplinary power, which extends beyond institutions to permeate all aspects of life, is vividly depicted in *Milkman*. The community's surveillance extends to every facet of Middle Sister's existence, shaping her thoughts, behaviours, and desires. This aligns with Foucault's view that power shapes individuals from within, not just through external force. The pressure to follow the traditional gender roles and the fear of differing from community standards illustrate how power operates through the production of docile subjects.

Foucault's assertion that "discourse functions as a framework of statements that shape our understanding of the world" (*The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 92) is evident in the way the community members in *Milkman* interpret and judge the middle sister's actions and relationships. The persistent rumours and suspicion surrounding her alleged association with the milkman create a narrative that she cannot escape which demonstrates how discourse operates as a tool of social control (Bartnik 64). The circulation of rumours about the protagonist's alleged affair with the milkman serves to control her behaviour and isolate her from the community. The community in the novel exerts control through gossip, rumour, and social norms, creating an environment where individual behaviour is closely monitored and regulated. The protagonist, navigates a society where what is spoken and unspoken carry significant weight (Deiana 29) as she mentions:

> Also, in a district that thrived on suspicion, supposition and imprecision, where everything was so back-to-front it was impossible to tell a story properly, or not to tell it but just remain quiet, nothing could get said here or not said but it was turned into gospel. (*Milkman* 229)

This mirrors Foucault's idea that discourse is a battleground where meanings are contested and social norms are established. The community's discourse shapes the identity and behaviour of individuals, reinforcing social conformity and marginalizing those who deviate from accepted norms. This explicit when the middle sister explains:

> I said this was because of the twisting of words, the fabrication of words and the exaggeration of words that went in this place. I'd have lost power, such was my power, I h'd tried to explain and to win over all those gossiping about me. So I'd kept silent, I said. I'd asked no questions, answered no questions, gave no confirmation, no refutation. That way, I said, I'd hoped to maintain a border to keep my mind separate. (*Milkman* 54)

Foucault's idea that knowledge is produced within fields of power relations and is not neutral or objective is pertinent in analysing *Milkman*. The community's collective knowledge about Middle Sister and her supposed relationship with the milkman is constructed through power-laden discourse. This knowledge is not based on factual truth but on the interpretations and biases of those in power. The construction of Middle Sister's identity by her community highlights Foucault's assertion that "power and knowledge are joined together" (*The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 100). Her identity is shaped by the prevailing societal norms and values, which are enforced through discourse and surveillance.

Slavoj Žižek's concept of symbolic violence is evident in the way language and social norms are used to control and marginalize individuals. The middle sister's community employs gossip, rumour, and social ostracism to enforce conformity and suppress dissent. This form of violence operates through the community's discourse, shaping the identity and behaviour of its members. Žižek's notion that symbolic violence is embedded in language and cultural norms is clearly reflected in the way Middle Sister's reputation and identity are constructed and constrained by her community's narratives.

In *Milkman*, Žižek's concepts of subjective and objective violence can be seen in the protagonist's experiences of both direct, personal threats (subjective violence) and the systemic oppression embedded in the society (objective violence). The political conflict in the

background of the novel represents systemic violence, where the very structure of society perpetuates fear, suspicion, and division.

Žižek's concept of symbolic violence refers to the often-unseen ways that social structures and language perpetuate inequality and oppression. The novel illustrates this through the use of rumours, gossip, and social ostracism to control and marginalize individuals. The constant whispers and speculation about the protagonist's relationships and behaviour serve to confine her within the patriarchal norms of the community. The text also notes how the protagonist's internalization of these oppressive ideologies, leading to self-doubt and a sense of helplessness, further exemplifies the insidious nature of symbolic violence. The protagonist's self-imposed silence and her inability to resist the milkman's advances reflect her docility in the face of societal pressure and the pervasive threat of violence.

Žižek's concept of the 'Real,' refers to the traumatic kernel that resists symbolization and disrupts the symbolic order. The novel's portrayal of the pervasive violence and trauma of the Troubles can be seen as an eruption of the Real into the symbolic order, shattering the illusion of normalcy and exposing the underlying violence of the social structure. The protagonist's experience of being stalked and harassed by the Milkman, as well as the community's collective trauma from the conflict, can be interpreted as manifestations of the Real. The milkman's act of violence against the protagonist, although not explicitly depicted, represents a traumatic intrusion of the Real that disrupts her sense of self and agency. The text suggests that the novel's focus on the protagonist's subjective experience of violence and trauma aligns with Žižek's emphasis on the Real as a disruptive force that challenges the symbolic order.

The middle sister's all the four encounters lead to what Judith Butler appeals to the category of vulnerability. Butler understands vulnerability or precariousness—terms that she uses interchangeably—to be a "general conception of the human . . . one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other" (*Precarious Life* 31). This is not the specific feature of certain lives as opposed to others, but "a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself" (Butler, *Frames of War* 22). Violence is "an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another" (Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27, *Undoing Gender* 22). The constant threat of violence in the novel creates a state of precarity for all the characters. The middle sister's vulnerability is particularly highlighted in her interactions with the milkman, who stalks and harasses her, exploiting the community's expectations and her precarious position.

The novel vividly portrays the normative violence inherent in the strict gender roles and expectations imposed on women in the community. The pressure to conform to these norms is a form of violence that restricts individual expression and autonomy. The protagonist, known only as "middle sister," is expected to adhere to traditional gender roles, including getting married and conforming to patriarchal expectations of how a woman should behave. The constant gossip and scrutiny she faces for her perceived relationship with the milkman illustrate the enforcement of these norms. She narrates communally accepted mental aberrations:

> . . . all the various drinkers, fighters and rioters who existed in this place. Drinking, fighting and rioting were run-of-the-mill, customary, necessary even, as hardly to be discerned as mental aberrations. Also hardly to be discerned as an aberration was all that repertoire of gossip, secrecy and communal policing . . . (*Milkman* 59)

The novel also challenges the notion of gender as a fixed identity, aligning with Butler's concept of gender performativity. The characters' performances of gender are not natural but are constructed and reinforced through repeated actions and societal expectations. The theory of performativity which argues that norms are not an ideal standard preexisting their implementation but are rather created and sustained by their repeated enactment. For Butler, a norm becomes violent and, in turn, legitimizes violence when it is naturalized by imposing a pattern of normality. Regarding the norms of marriage middle sister says: "Marriage wasn't meant to be a bed of roses. It was a divine decree, a communal duty, a responsibility, it was

acting your age, having right-religion babies and obligations and limitations and restrictions and hindrances" (*Milkman* 50).

Butler specifies how onto-epistemological violence operates: the violence of the frame materializes in such a way as to cast certain beings as unrepresentable and unrecognizable and, consequently, to submit them to a process of 'derealization' (Butler, *Precarious* 33) in which they are considered to be inhumans living lives that do not count as such. Violence is here linked to the potential to confer or withdraw recognition (Ingala 198). When humans are not recognized as humans, they are exposed to a double violence: the violence inherent in non-recognition and the processes of derealization and the violence that they might endure as a result of the derealization but which will not be recognized as such. It is interesting to note what the middle sister mentions: "Intense nosiness about everybody existed in the area. Gossip washed in, washed out, came, went, moved on to the next target" (*Milkman* 5).

The community's shared understanding of reality is shaped by patriarchal norms and the ongoing conflict, leading to onto-epistemological violence. The protagonist's experiences and interpretations are often dismissed or invalidated because they do not align with the dominant narrative. For instance, her attempts to explain her lack of interest in marriage are met with disbelief and ridicule. This dismissal of her perspective is a form of epistemic violence that reinforces the power dynamics within the community. The protagonist's feelings of derealization, where she questions her sanity and perception of reality, are a consequence of this onto-epistemological violence. The constant gaslighting and manipulation she experiences contribute to her sense of isolation and confusion. Burns tries to present the pressing need to change perspectives: "Here teacher bade us look at the sky from this brand new perspective, where the sun – enormous and of the most gigantic organge-red colour – in a sky too, with no blue in it" (*Milkman* 73).

The novel highlights the precarity of life, particularly for women, in a society marked by conflict and rigid social norms. The protagonist's vulnerability is evident in her constant fear of violence, both from paramilitary forces and from the social consequences of defying societal expectations. The threat of violence is a constant presence in the novel, shaping the characters' actions and interactions. Middle Sister and others experience precarity due to the oppressive norms and political tensions caused by the Troubles. Middle Sister's constant fear and instability reflect the precarity imposed by her environment, highlighting how socio-political structures perpetuate conditions of vulnerability and instability. The community s collective anxiety and paranoia further emphasize the precarious nature of existence in this setting.

The state-sanctioned violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in *Milkman* is a pervasive force. Both, the paramilitary groups and the state's security forces engage in violence, creating an atmosphere of fear and paranoia. This aligns with Walter Benjamin's critique of state violence, which as he argues, often serves to maintain existing power structures and perpetuate injustice. In the novel, the state's violence is not only physical but also psychological, as it normalizes surveillance, suspicion and the erosion of individual liberty. The protagonist narrates her mental turmoil: "I was now checking to see if the community was concealing itself in those tucked-away places too" (*Milkman* 178). The checkpoint searches and the constant presence of armed soldiers exemplify law-preserving violence, maintaining the state's authority through force.

Benjamin's distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence can be applied to *Milkman* in the context of the political and sectarian violence that governs the community. The state and paramilitary groups in the novel exercise law-preserving violence to maintain control and suppress any challenges to their authority. The protagonist's resistance to the Milkman's advances can be seen as a form of individual rebellion against these oppressive structures, questioning the legitimacy of the violence used to uphold them.

The text explains that Benjamin distinguishes between two types of violence:

- Law-making violence which establishes a new legal and political order.
- Law-preserving violence which is used by an established state to uphold or strengthen the existing legal system.

The novel illustrates this distinction through the actions of the paramilitary groups and the state's security forces in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The paramilitary groups' violent acts can be seen as a form of law-making violence, as they aim to challenge the existing political order and establish a new one. On the other hand, the state's use of force to suppress dissent and maintain control exemplifies law-preserving violence. The checkpoint searches, the constant presence of armed soldiers, and the arbitrary arrests and detentions highlight how violence is used to enforce the existing laws and maintain the status quo.

The novel also touches upon Benjamin's concept of mythic violence, which perpetuates the power of those in authority through symbolic means and often reinforces existing power structures and injustice. The text suggests that the violence depicted in the novel, particularly the brutal killings and the climate of fear and paranoia, can be interpreted as mythic violence, as it is often senseless and driven by primal fears and hatreds. The use of propaganda and sectarian rhetoric by both the paramilitary groups and the state also serves to legitimize their actions and perpetuate the cycle of violence. The text notes how the community's policing of its own members and the enforcement of rigid social norms can also be seen as a form of mythic violence, as it reinforces the existing power structures and suppresses individual autonomy.

Hannah Arendt emphasizes the importance of the public realm as a space for action and political discourse. In *Milkman*, the public realm is distorted and claustrophobic, dominated by rumours and gossip as well as under the community's constant surveillance and judgment.

Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" can be applied to the characters in *Milkman* who perpetuate violence and conformity. They are not necessarily inherently evil but rather caught up in a system that normalizes violence and discourages critical thinking. The milkman himself, a figure of authority who misuses his power, exemplifies this banality of evil.

The pervasive atmosphere of intimidation and coercion in the novel reflects Arendt's idea that violence is a tool used when genuine power is lacking. The community's reliance on threats, surveillance, and the enforcement of rigid social norms illustrates the breakdown of legitimate authority and the absence of true power. The characters in *Milkman* experience violence not as a means of achieving collective goals but as a method of maintaining control and suppressing dissent.

Arendt argues that violence dehumanizes individuals by stripping them of their agency and reducing them to objects. This is evident in *Milkman*, where the protagonist and others are subjected to continuous scrutiny and control, leading to the loss of personal freedom and the ability to act autonomously. The longest friend admonishes the middle sister: "This mental misfiring – it's not normal. It's abnormal – the recognising, the remembering, the not remembering, the refusing to admit to the obvious" (*Milkman* 207). The community's use of violence to enforce conformity and silence opposition further dehumanizes its members, aligning with Arendt's view on the destructive nature of violence.

Arendt's distinction between power and violence is reflected in *Milkman* through the contrast between the communal solidarity (a form of power) and the violence that underpins the political conflict. The community's power lies in its collective identity, but this is constantly undermined by the violence that seeks to enforce conformity and suppress dissent. The novel also explores how violence can erode genuine power, as seen in the protagonist's gradual alienation from the community.

Johan Galtung defines structural violence as the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or life chances due to social structures and institutions. This means that some groups have significantly less access to resources, education, healthcare, and political representation, affecting their ability to realize their full potential (Galtung, "Violence" 167-68). The political turmoil of the Troubles in Northern Ireland creates an environment where

structural violence is pervasive, manifesting through restricted political participation, and social marginalization. For instance, the presence of the paramilitary and the constant threat of violence further limit the freedom of community members, reflecting Galtung's idea of unequal power and life chances. The consequences of structural violence in *Milkman* are severe, which manifest as social exclusion and psychological trauma. Middle Sister and others in the community face continuous stress and fear due to the oppressive social environment.

The novel vividly portrays the consequences of structural violence on individuals and communities. The protagonist's experiences of isolation, fear and anxiety are the direct results of the social injustice and inequality she faces as a young woman in a patriarchal and sectarian society. The pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and the constant threat of violence create a climate of psychological trauma and prevent the characters from living fulfilling lives.

Galtung's concept of structural violence is evident in *Milkman* through the systemic inequalities and social hierarchies that oppress the characters. The protagonist's lack of agency and the pervasive fear within the community are products of the structural violence that pervades the society. The political and religious divisions in the novel reflect Galtung's idea that violence is not always direct or physical but can be embedded in the very structures that organize society.

Arjun Appadurai discusses the phenomenon of "fear of small numbers," where majority groups feel threatened by minority populations, even when those minorities are relatively small. This fear often leads to violence and exclusionary practices.

The text, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* explains that this theory explores how anxieties and uncertainties associated with globalization can fuel ethnic violence (31-32). The novel, *Milkman* illustrates this by highlighting the ethnic tensions and violence between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The fear of the "other" and the perceived threat that the Catholics pose to the Protestant dominance, even though they are a minority, leads to conflict and violence. This fear is not based on the actual size of the Catholic population but on a perceived threat to their dominance and way of life.

Appadurai emphasizes the role of rumour and gossip in fuelling ethnic violence (14). In *Milkman* rumours and gossip play a crucial role in the protagonist's life. The unfounded rumours about her relationship with the milkman lead to her ostracization and harassment, highlighting how such informal communication can be used as a weapon to control and marginalize individuals.

In *Milkman* the rumourmongering by the townspeople becomes the accepted reality and they live within that. The maybe-boyfriend works as a mechanic, and one day, he brings home a spare part from a rare and valuable car. People become suspicious of his political leanings, as the body of the car had a British flag decal on it. The maybe-boyfriend manages to mostly dispel these ungrounded suspicions, as the decal is not his (*Milkman* 27). The mentally unstable "tablets girl" accuses the middles sister: "there was no point in denying . . . done black magic for him (the milkman), cut up dead animals for him, been a female accessory to his murders of those twenty-three women, plus her . . ." (*Milkman* 215). When the "tablets girl" is murdered the townspeople suspect the middle sister of perpetrating the murder without the milkman's help: "It had been Milkman. He had killed her. Ordinarily, not politically, he had killed her, and all because – so it seemed to this community – he hadn't liked that she'd attempted to kill me" (*Milkman* 240).

In the context of Burns' novel *Milkman*, the community is convinced that the middle sister has an affair with the milkman: "I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them . . . that I had been having an affair with this milkman" (*Milkman* 1, 53, 116). Rumours, manufactured truths, and sectarianism are the ingredients that endanger the life of a young and largely defenceless protagonist, whose inner voice is silently raised to challenge the divided community (Morales-Ladrón 267).

But it is the "pious women" (*Milkman* 47) who pull the strings in the community and manage everyday life. They act as guardians of the status quo by circulating a cacophony of rumours that censor deviant behaviour. For example, the rumour about the protagonist's affair with the milkman started by the first brother-in-law, who instructs his wife to act as a conduit and tell her mother. However, the rumour is worthless without the collective endorsement by the "pious women of the neighbourhood" (*Milkman* 47), who especially drop by to see her mother in her house. Rumours are kept alive by a chain of hearsay which involves the community. As pieces of news or stories that might be true or invented, rumours feed on contradictory claims. Rumours operate in the realm of imaginary storytelling and are subject to collective editing. According to the "pious" women's rumourmongering, the middle sister's lover is variously mentioned as "the milkman," "a motor mechanic," a man in "his early forties," a person "round about his twenties" and as "an intelligence officer . . . who gathers the information on the target" and "hands it to the trigger men" (*Milkman* 48). But at least he is, as the women sum up, a "renouncer-of-the-state and not a defender-of-the-state" (*Milkman* 48). Their collective gossiping authenticates the rumour. The fact that their various pronouncements are incompatible does not matter at all because they demonstrate the pious women's central role as authorities in the community. While the men enact power through a regime of threats, coercion and violence within and outside the community, the "pious women" police the community discursively and performatively through everyday interactions.

Frantz Fanon's work as a psychiatrist deeply informs his understanding of the psychological effects of colonialism and conflict. In *Milkman,* the pervasive atmosphere of fear, paranoia and surveillance during the Troubles takes a toll on the protagonist's mental well-being. The novel vividly portrays the psychological trauma inflicted by living under constant threat and scrutiny, echoing Fanon's insights into the internalized oppression and psychological damage caused by systemic violence. The middle sister says about her condition: "I was no longer a living person" (*Milkman* 193).

Fanon explores the complex role of violence in anti-colonial struggles, arguing that it can be a necessary tool for liberation. While *Milkman* does not depict overt physical violence by the protagonist, her refusal to conform to societal expectations and her subtle acts of defiance can be seen as a form of resistance against the oppressive forces in her life. This aligns with Fanon's idea that resistance can take various forms, not always violent, but always aimed at reclaiming agency and challenging the status quo.

Fanon's concept of the "zone of non-being" refers to the psychological state of dehumanization and alienation experienced by the colonized. By extension the protagonist in *Milkman*, as a young woman in oppressive patriarchal society during the Troubles, experiences a similar sense of invisibility and objectification. She is not seen as an individual but rather as a body to be controlled and defined by the male gaze and societal expectations. This aligns with Fanon's concept of the colonized as a "non-being," stripped of their humanity and agency. This concept helps understand how certain characters are dehumanized or made less "real" within the community. For example, the way people are often referred to by descriptions rather than names ("maybe-boyfriend," "real milkman") could be seen as a form of derealization.

Fanon explains how language is used as a tool of oppression in colonial contexts. In *Milkman,* rumours and gossip become weapons used to control and isolate the protagonist. The constant whispers and speculation about her relationships and behaviour serve to confine her within the patriarchal norms of the community.

The protagonist in *Milkman* is a subaltern figure, marginalized and silenced by the patriarchal and sectarian power structures of her society. Her voice is often drowned out by the rumours and gossip that circulate about her, denying her the agency to define her own identity and experiences. She mentions the way a rumour is presented: "We heard our uncle's cousin's brother's daughter's friend who doesn't live in the area anymore said" (*Milkman* 173). She mentions about the first brother-in-law: "In his compulsions he made things up about other people's sexlives. About my sexlife (*Milkman* 1). This reflects Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's

argument that the subaltern is not only oppressed but also epistemically silenced, unable to articulate their own truths.

Spivak's concept of epistemic violence can be seen in the way the protagonist's voice is marginalized and her experiences are devalued in *Milkman*. The community's dominant narratives, shaped by political and sectarian ideologies, silence alternative perspectives and perpetuate the marginalization of those who do not conform. The protagonist's struggle to assert her identity and make her voice heard reflects Spivak's theory of how marginalized groups are often rendered voiceless within dominant discourses.

Spivak's concept of epistemic violence refers to the silencing and marginalization of subaltern groups—those who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure—through the suppression, devaluation, or erasure of their knowledge systems and ways of knowing. The novel illustrates this concept by highlighting how the protagonist's experiences and perspectives are silenced and marginalized by the dominant discourse of the community. The constant rumours and gossip about her alleged relationship with Milkman, despite her denial, create a narrative that she cannot escape, demonstrating how discourse operates as a tool of social control. The community's refusal to acknowledge her agency and her attempts to define her own identity reflect the epistemic violence that perpetuates the oppression of marginalized individuals.

The text further elaborates on the concept of epistemic violence by highlighting the following points:

- The protagonist's self-imposed silence and her inability to openly express her experiences and feelings can be seen as a manifestation of epistemic violence. The community's norms and expectations, enforced through surveillance and gossip, create an environment where her voice is stifled and her perspective is devalued.
- The labelling and categorization of individuals based on their perceived affiliations or behaviours, such as the "beyond-the-pale" label, further contribute to epistemic violence. These labels serve to marginalize and exclude those who do not conform to the dominant norms, denying them recognition and agency.
- The novel's narrative style, which focuses on the protagonist's inner thoughts and feelings, can be seen as a form of resistance against epistemic violence. By giving voice to the protagonist's subjective experiences, the novel challenges the dominant narrative and creates a space for the marginalized to speak.

Anna Burns' also produces an opposing idea with regard to knowledge: "Knowledge didn't guarantee power, safety or relief and often it meant the opposite of power, safety and relief" (*Milkman* 63).

Conclusion

Even though *Milkman* is set in the 1970s, the novel speaks about the present with the author cleverly problematising the third millennial world, governed by sophisticated panopticon scenarios that include social media and digital surveillance (Morales-Ladrón 275). As demonstrated in the novel, even for the apolitical middle sister, the impact of violence becomes inevitable to ignore (Danaci 293).

However, the characters that go above and "beyond-the-pale" — like the middle sister, the real milkman, the "issue women," and the third brother-in-law —offer a glimmer of hope for the society's future. Since the middle sister is portrayed in the book as aware of her surroundings and the abnormalities in the community's mindset and functioning, the changes in her life have significance for both her and the main plot of the book. Kilroy comments: "The narrator of *Milkman* disrupts the status quo not through being political, heroic or violently opposed, but because she is original, funny, disarmingly oblique and unique: different. The same can be said of this book" (Kilroy).

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