

# Repressed Voices: Female Struggle and Survival in Anna Burns' Milkman

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## Abstract

*Anna Burns' Milkman explores the pervasive oppression and objectification of women within a patriarchal Irish society. The novel reflects how societal norms and cultural expectations, reinforced by male dominance, reduce women to mere commodities and undermine their autonomy and dignity. Burns portrays the psychological and emotional toll of living in a male-centric, politically unstable society. Middle Sister's, the protagonist, her struggle for independence is marred by social scrutiny, patriarchal coercion, and systemic inequality. Her interactions with Milkman, an ex-army officer who manipulates her vulnerability, reflect the broader societal exploitation of women. The narrative highlights the internalized oppression experienced by women and the complex intersection of gender, power, and social conformity. Burns critiques the limitations imposed on women, exposing how objectification and systemic control reinforce gender inequality. Ultimately, Milkman underscores the resilience of women who seek empowerment and self-determination despite societal and political adversity.*

**Keywords:** Gender Objectification, Repression, Patriarchy, Societal Norms, Female Autonomy, Psychological Toll, Systemic Inequality, Internalized Oppression, Gender Dynamics, Empowerment.

Women are often oppressed and suppressed by societal norms that were created and dominated by the other gender, which were robust in nature. This has been reflected in both cultural representations and social norms. When people are reduced to nothing more than sexual objects or commodities, their values are frequently determined as insubstantial and easily damaged, which reinforces power disparities. This gender objectification takes many different forms, from the everyday interactions where women are valued more for their desirability than their humanity to media portrayals that prioritize physical appearance above intelligence. Such objectification impedes the advancement of gender equality and perpetuates systemic disparities in addition to undermining the autonomy and dignity of women.

The role ought to be performed or possessed by women are preconceived by the dominant gender, which was clearly implanted in people's minds over the years. Throughout the history, there has been much debate over how women should be viewed and treated in the society. Though there have been several civilizations and societies which proved that women as equal as the other gender where women have played a more equal or even dominant role, generally speaking, women's roles have been mostly subordinate to men's.

A multitude of elements, including social, political, and economic ones, influence how women are regarded in society. In many countries, women have been granted equal rights to men, and they have been able to participate in all aspects of society, including the workforce. However, there are still many societies in which women are not treated humanely, and their roles are more limited and dictated by another dominant gender.

The novel *Milkman* mainly depicts the status of women in Ireland and how they are treated like commodities in the context of post-war Irish society. The society portrayed in the book is one that is ruled by men, primarily stereotyped, patriarchal, and contradictory. The problems that women face in Ireland, such as rape, female feticide, discrimination, and physical or verbal abuse are exposed by Anna Burns.

The book is set in Ireland in the 1970s during the Troubles, an erratic armed struggle between Ireland and Northern Ireland's separatists, who are supported by England. The town's residents' psychological health has suffered as a result of military aggression. Because of the uproar and conflict, the atmosphere is chaotic. The selfishness of human nature has nearly brought social concord to an end. Women are weak and obedient. A retired army soldier named Milkman makes contact with an eighteen-year-old girl who lives in the town with her younger sisters and mother who is a widow. As Milkman starts speaking with her repeatedly, the critical locals misinterpret the scenario and assume that they are having an illicit connection. She is harshly judged by society and becomes a social scandal but no one questions.

The tale of Anna Burn's mouth speaker, Young Woman, is told in *Milkman*. Young Woman shares her life's experiences in narrative form. In a hostile and alienating Irish society where women are treated like commodities, she seeks her individuality and self-respect. Her search for independence and to forge her own identity as a woman is accelerated by her awareness of her Irish background, the genetic tension she feels, and the male chauvinism she witnesses.

Milkman's middle sister has been forcibly confined by her ambition to establish for herself. She is aware of the risks involved with romantic relationships, thus she refuses to let "his sights on me and had started in on destroying me." (MM, 171) is a pressing rejection of her commodification because Irish society is dominated by male-centric ideology and male members view women as commodities rather than as fellow human beings. "This new man got her pregnant and they got married right away. He made lewd remarks about me to me from the first moment he met me" (MM, 1). In these lines Young Woman and her sister are commodified. Irish social setting is also a barrier of women which binds female within four walls of a house and the things to be played in the hands of male member.

The novel shows the marginalized status of women in Irish culture. Young Woman, the main female character in the book, is a victim of patriarchy. The eighteen-year-old girl's life is not only dominated by male characters but it also becomes a nightmare as Irish society holds her responsible for Milkman's death and subjects her to unbearable torment and misery throughout her entire existence. An ex-Army member endures a great deal of hardship and anguish throughout her life. She is not free to relocate as she pleases. Her tragedy begins with the fact that people view her as a commodity in the first place. She is quiet, submissive, and repressed. She wants to love with car mechanics and settle her life, but retired army personnel threatened her that he would kill him. Finally, her maybe boyfriend meets his death.

The Middle sister moves in a traumatized way as she becomes triggered by his threat of a flashback. Because she is entangled in the patriarchal ideology, she is forced to embrace the prejudices, patriarchal standards, and ideals. The retired army man possesses both political and economic influence, so no one is willing to challenge his will. She is therefore prepared to carry out every action in accordance with the wishes of the man in charge of the social system. Even if an

eighteen-year-old girl can make moral judgments, in the patriarchal Irish society following a war, women are often used as scapegoats when it comes to material belongings.

The societies create freedom, like find moments within the privacy of their own home; seek spiritual and emotional resources for comfort and significance. In times of self-examination, contemplation, and communion with something bigger than themselves, they find liberation. People create places of spiritual and emotional freedom where they can find serenity and perseverance in the midst of hardship, whether through prayer, meditation or introspection. Then People can participate in acts of intellectual resistance through art, music, and literature, challenging prevailing narratives and looking for different viewpoints. Despite the limitations placed upon her by her surroundings, the middle sister finds intellectual solace in her love of literature, which gives her a sense of empowerment and independence.

Certain members of the community perceive reading while walking as a sign of disconnection or disassociation from the environment. The fact that Middle sister spends time in her book rather than connecting with people. That was taken as a sign of unsociable behaviour or lack of empathy. In addition she was falsely rumoured up with Milkman who gave threats to her and mentally disturbs her thus Middle sister feels as though she is always being observed and judged by her neighbours, leading to a constant sense of unease and paranoia. This lack of privacy makes it difficult for her to relax and live her life without fear of judgment or punishment. Though the society create freedom but Middle sister was cannot able to feel it

The Middle sister losing her independence from her own Mother, Elder sister, and Brother in law, who are her closest and dearest family members, because their voices are ignored in a household where her spouses, boyfriends, fathers, and other male family members are tyrants. Her family members, who are supposedly the closest to her, attempt to force their will on her. She consequently feels cut off from the environment and wildlife. Both the social environments and the individuals within that society are deceitful. All of them the Milkman, the Brother in law, the Car mechanic Maybe boyfriend perhaps are manipulating the feelings of women. Ma and Elder sister are equally supportive of the patriarchal society, even as patriarchal chaos befalls them. They appear to support patriarchy as well.

The author of the book has emphasized conventional ideas of men, which have weakened the duties and obligations of women. On one evening, after the sunset Middle sister leaves a French class and walks home. Milkman approaches her to stop seeing her Maybe boyfriend otherwise he threatens her to kill him This make the Middle sister to feel fear and paranoid that has led her to paralyzed state. In order to stop this and save her Maybe boyfriend. Middle sister submit herself to Milkman and create her new identity just to survive in this society. The Milkman and her Maybe boyfriend are at odds. They are both exemplars of patriarchy society that one is making every effort to win her over with love, the other is using his force.

. . . private oppression could be simply legislated away, but it seemed clear that the lot of a woman trapped in a violent marriage would be better if she had the legal right to leave her husband and to achieve economic independence; rights of education and employment were clearly also of practical importance to single women who would otherwise have no role in society or reasonable source of income. (MM, 34, 35)

The milkman first repressed her by saying that he drove a variety of autos “I only noticed him and his cars when he started putting himself in them in front of me” (MM 2, 3). To get her emption, Milkman shows up in various vehicles, “van- small, white, nondescript, shape shifting. From time to time he was seen at the wheel of the van too” (MM, 3). This indicates that he has all the necessary resources to use the local ladies as a target because he is a paramilitary officer. The young woman’s family is impoverished; they have an elderly mother and live in squalor due

to the deaths of their father and brother, who provided for them financially. It was a riot period when gunshot and bombardment were frequent occurrences. Young Woman travels around in this disorganized state to finish her studies. She frequently uses her bare feet to navigate. In this scenario, Milkman pulls up in front of her in his gorgeous car and asks her to stay in it.

“I will give you a lift.” This was said casually, the passenger door already opening. I was startled out of my reading. I had not heard this car drive up. Had not seen before either. This man at the wheel of it. He was leaning over, looking out at me, smiling and friendly by way of being obliging. . . . People who had cars her often would stop and offer lifts to others going into and out of the area. “(MM, 3)

The most effective way to entice a young woman victim is through financial manipulation. The impoverished and women are seen as playthings in capitalist culture. Their bodies and souls are toys to them. Because he owns a variety of cars, Milkman wants to exert control over Young Woman on that same property. Although on the surface it appears that he is helping her, his true motivation is very different. “. . . indeed helpful, but I understood he had to make use of me because he was excited by the car . . .” (MM, 17).

With his manipulation of property, he tries to play with Young Woman, something she understands and rejects because she knows that she is being oppressed. Young Woman manages to get away from the conspiracy of Milkman’s car game, but she is unable to escape the false rumours that circulate in her community. The false rumours about Milkman and Young Woman’s relationship make her unhappy because they put her under false suspicion and stigmatize her. In patriarchal society, women are not allowed to live their lives as they please. Elder Sister is a victim of male gaze; numerous men enter her life and play with her body; nobody loves her, even herself. Milkman is on his way to devour her., “again this milkman was picking up on my secret desires and dreams. But he was the wrong man” (MM, 67).

She knew the milkman was selfish and had done wrong. Time and time again, the milkman follows her to exploit her physical attributes. Because of the chance nature of their marriage, there has never been a moment of lack of love or affection between them. The spouse has completely abandoned his role as a husband, and it appears that he has only one hidden interest. “his predatory nature pushed me into frozenness every time” (MM, 2), to make her sexually abuse. It is stated that a man and a woman are like its two wheels. That particular wagon could not move without you. However, this proverb is only found in literature, and women are cruelly dehumanized in society. There appear to be cruel disparities between the sexes in Milkman. Women are afraid to speak out against the abuse that male members inflict on them. The novel’s postulated scenario takes place during the Irish Revolution’s conflict, when the majority of women experienced double marginalization. Because of her femininity, the young woman is being used as a commodity, while on the other hand, a paramilitary soldier threatens her life every day.

The topic of women being observed in society is pervasive and complex. Women may experience controlling behaviours, movement surveillance, and emotional or physical abuse at home from spouses or family members. In public spaces, women are seen and harassed; they are often the object of unwanted scrutiny, stalked, or verbally abused. Women are scrutinized and harassed in public places, they are frequently the target of unwanted attention, stalking, or verbally abuse. The author of the novel Anna Burns depicted the violence and oppression that a young woman faced on a daily basis and her struggles against social and political adversities during the troubles, a period of intense political conflict between the British governments backed Loyalists and Irish Republicans that occurred in Northern Ireland in the 1970s.

The protagonist of the tale is calm, inoffensive eighteen-year-old woman known as the Middle sister, rather than a political or activist character. A first-hand narrative of the troubles, the book presents a microcosmic society that mirrors the effects of the troubles on the nation as a whole. In

addition to depicting the political upheaval, Burns's work illuminates the social constructs of the Northern Irish communities by addressing topics like sexual harassment, communal persecution, and morally repugnant and social calumny. The physical and psychological trauma that the troubles inflict on Northern Ireland. As a result, it recounts the tale of the Middle Sister's survival inside her neighborhood. Thus, *Milkman* by Anna Burns reveals how violence may operate in a multitude of ways and across social classes, illustrating the tension that arises throughout the battle as seen through the eyes of a young woman.

The novel explores the stigma attached to women who confront societal expectations or challenge the current state of things. Middle sister faces isolation and gossip from her community when she is seen talking to Milkman, highlighting the double standards and social consequences faced by women who dare to assert their independence. Women in *Milkman* often internalize societal norms and expectations, leading them to police their own behaviour and conform to oppressive standards. This internalized oppression continues the cycle of subordination and makes it difficult for women to break free from societal constraints. Overall, *Milkman* offers a critique of gender inequality and the ways in which it intersects with other forms of oppression. Through its portrayal of female characters navigating a unfriendly and patriarchal society, the novel sheds light on the complexities of gender dynamics and the enduring struggle for women's independence and empowerment.

Because of a variety of circumstances in her surroundings and personal life, the main character often referred to as middle sister is shown as being indecisive. This indecisiveness is a central aspect of her character development throughout the novel. Here's how her indecisiveness manifests navigating social expectations like Middle sister is constantly navigating the rigid social expectations placed upon her by her community, family, and peers. This pressure to conform to societal norms contributes to her indecisiveness as she struggles to balance her own desires with the expectations imposed upon her.

Middle sister is acutely aware of the potential consequences of her actions, particularly in the politically charged and surveillance-heavy environment of Northern Ireland during the troubles. This fear of stepping out of line or disobeying authority figures causes her to hesitate and second-guess herself, leading to indecision. Middle sister finds herself entangled in complex relationships with various characters in the novel, including Milkman, her Maybe boyfriend, and her family members. These relationships are fraught with tension and ambiguity, and middle sister's uncertainty about her feelings and intentions adds to her indecisiveness. Middle sister grapple with internal conflict and self-doubt throughout the novel. She questions her own beliefs, desires, and identity, which further contributes to her indecisiveness as she struggles to find clarity amidst the chaos of her surroundings.