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**THE ABSENCE OF NAMES AND THE LOST INDIVIDUALITY IN *MILKMAN* BY
ANNA BURNS**

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ABSTRACT

Milkman, Anna Burns' new novel, is set in a nameless country, peopled by nameless inhabitants. A preliminary analysis is herein provided, with a closer look at the protagonist, *middle sister*, an 18-year-old girl who is being stalked by an older married man, referred to only as *the milkman*. The novel adopts the stream of consciousness technique, and employs the narrator as the voice of the protagonist, although speaking from a future point of her life and recollecting the events of her involvement with the milkman. The abuser plays a central role in the narrative, and at the end it is revealed that he actually is named Milkman; the importance of naming the villain is a key point of the story. Whilst withholding the names of the characters and delving into the protagonist's mind, the author creates a distrustful and conflicted atmosphere. Those are some of the most astonishing aspects of the novel, once it is possible to perceive its historical allusions, as pointed out by the author herself in a number of interviews: *The Troubles*; a conflict that happened in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The socio-political and religious environment is easily recognized by any reader familiar with Irish history; however it is possible to interpret the story in terms of a more universal experience of civil war and terror.

Keywords: Milkman; Anna Burns; The Troubles.

RESUMO

Milkman, novo romance de Anna Burns, se passa em um país sem nome, habitado por personagens sem nome. Uma análise preliminar é feita neste trabalho, com foco na protagonista; conhecida como *middle sister*, a garota de apenas 18 anos é perseguida por um homem mais velho, que chamam de *the milkman*. O romance adota a técnica de fluxo de consciência e coloca a protagonista como narradora falando a partir de um momento futuro, lembrando como sua comunidade não a tratou como vítima e sim como a responsável por seduzir um homem casado. O assediador tem um papel central na narrativa, e ao final, é revelado que seu sobrenome, de fato, é *Milkman*; a importância de atribuir um nome real e não apenas um apelido ao vilão é um ponto chave na história. Enquanto nega nomes aos personagens e mergulha no subconsciente da protagonista, a autora cria uma atmosfera de desconfiança e conflito. Estes são alguns dos aspectos mais notáveis do romance, e é possível conectar suas alusões à história que se passou em Belfast, durante um período conhecido como o Conflito na Irlanda do Norte. O contexto sociopolítico e religioso é facilmente reconhecido por quem está familiarizado com a história irlandesa, porém é possível interpretar esta narrativa de acordo com qualquer vivência com guerras civis e terrorismo.

Palavras-chave: Milkman; Anna Burns; Conflito na Irlanda do Norte.

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THE ABSENCE OF NAMES AND THE LOST INDIVIDUALITY IN *MILKMAN* BY ANNA BURNS

Lauane Campos Souza¹

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Synopsis

In *Milkman*, names are missing. The people, as well as the places, are all referred to by nicknames; in this sense, the reader has to get used to the fact that the main character is only “middle sister”, and the country where she lives is just “our side” and “this side of the road”.

Middle sister is telling us her story in a future moment, remembering when she was eighteen years old and she met the milkman. “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” (BURNS, 2018, p. 2). This man appeared to her in a normal day, by the end of her shift at work, driving slowly by her side and offering a ride home. Middle sister is reading *Ivanhoe* while walking back home, – this habit of hers, as we will see, gives people something to talk about, and creates an opening to the milkman’s approach – and she refuses the ride since she doesn’t know this man, who apparently knows her entire family, and her routine and even her “maybe-boyfriend”.

The milkman appears again and again, during her running in the parks and reservoirs, after her French class downtown etc. He speaks in a non-threatening way, so she does not know how to deal with a situation that represents no physical harm. This takes the reading to the city where she lives: civil war and sectarian conflict. It is a country marked by distrust, violence and dispute; the main difference is religion, and people live in separate places according to their beliefs.

What the milkman is doing is a psychological abuse and she understands that he wants her. The community where she lives starts talking about these encounters and they decide that middle sister is having an affair with this much older married man. Of course she does not have a say on this, they would never believe a girl in this situation. The impact of these meetings obliges her to change the schedule of the runnings, and she even starts taking the bus

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after work. Middle sister tries everything to avoid the next encounter, because she is afraid of him and his threats against her maybe-boyfriend.

Although it seems that there is no exceptional plot twist in this story, the narrative gets the reader captive. By the end, middle sister grew more conscious of what is being done to her and is acting more actively. She gets to the point of finally talking to people about the rumors, to understand how this escalated so quickly and how nobody sees her as the victim she is.

A girl, named tablet's girl, is famous for poisoning other people's drinks; one of her victims happens to be middle sister and after this incident, tablet's girl is killed. This causes a shift in the community's mind, since the only reasonable explanation is that the milkman caused this murder for protection of middle sister. The neighbors start to avoid her by fear, and stand watching every move she makes in public.

Not long after that, the milkman is assassinated. This was earlier warned at the very first line of the book: "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, 2018, p. 1). His death brings up who he really was in the news, and one of the most important issues we will discuss in this paper: his last name was actually Milkman; which sounds controversial since none of the characters have names in the story, so why does he?

1.2 Sections

This first section intended to explain the main happenings of the book, which will be more closely analyzed next. The author's statements outside the narrative will be analyzed in section two. The third section describes the narrative and the stream of consciousness technique used by the writer.

Fourth section attempts to summarize the possible space and time of the story, with a timeline of the Troubles, a violent conflict that took place in Northern Ireland, during the 1960s. This section will also mention the absence of names and how this is connected to the scenario.

Women is the theme of section five, their behavior during the Troubles and a comparison between the pious women and the issue women, mentioned in the *Milkman*. Then, a conclusion to this paper.

2 THE AUTHOR

The author claims that the story of *Milkman* happened in Belfast in the 1970s, during a period called The Troubles, also known as the Northern Ireland Conflict. However, since the novel uses no names of places and people, this information was given on interviews, and it will be treated as *paratext*² in this paper, since in our investigation (see section 4.1) no concrete facts were found inside the novel to confirm this allegation.

Anna Burns was born and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, more precisely in a Catholic district, Ardoyne. She is now 56 years old and *Milkman* is her third book. The writer now lives in East Sussex, England, and declares that leaving Ireland was important to her writing, as some kind of expunge of the trauma.

So far, the release of *Milkman* has given many profits to its author, who suffers from chronic pain in her back, due to complications of a surgery; this made the writing very tiresome and complicated for her, and she had to count with the government financial help to be able to finish the book. All that struggle was well compensated, because in the same year Anna Burns became the first Northern Irish author to win the Man Booker Prize.³ The monetary part of the prize will help with her health condition, and she is excited to write again soon. More recently, Burns was elected to integrate the Aosdána, an important association for Irish artists.

In some interviews, Burns is asked if the protagonist was inspired in her own life during the Troubles, and although she clarifies that no, middle sister is not Anna Burns and this Milkman is only fictional, she admits that some characteristics may have come out of herself such as the reading-while-walking habit: “I used to walk and read when I was younger, and I’d get all sorts of reactions from people in cafés and bars. They’d say, ‘I’ve seen you on Royal Avenue, you were reading Thomas Hardy.’ I thought, ‘Is this even something to point out? Am I that noticeable?’” (NEW STATEMENT, 2018).

Burns demonstrates some concern on how her answers about the book can interfere in the reader’s interpretations of the story. When she explains that *Milkman* is actually set in

² Paratexts are, for literature, the parts of the book that do not belong to the narrative itself; such as the foreword, the cover, the acknowledgements, etc. The interviews will also be faced as attachments. Further information on this: GENETTE, G. Introduction to the Paratext. *New Literary History*, v. 22, n.2, 1991, p. 261-272. Available at: <<https://is.gd/mhCDwu>>.

³ The award is one of the most famous in the literary world. “The prize, which launched in 1969, aims to promote the finest in fiction by rewarding the best novel of the year written in English and published in the United Kingdom.” See more on: <<https://thebookerprizes.com/fiction/history>>.

Northern Ireland, she also has the care to explain that this does not change or impact the story; she expects the reader to interact with the romance according to their own experiences.

Although it is recognisable as this skewed form of Belfast, it's not really Belfast in the 70s. I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions," Burns explains. "I see it as a fiction about an entire society living under extreme pressure, with long term violence seen as the norm (THE GUARDIAN, 2018).

In this sense, the author's posture is in agreement with Roland Barthes' famous article on the death of the author. When Burns opens the possibility that *Milkman* could be set in any place at any historical moment, she is permitting the reader to live the story and interpret it in their own terms. "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1977, p. 1480). This paper agrees with the notion that when the author is used as a kind of nourishment for the book to be validated, the text can lose its value. An interpretation free from the author's interferences is what opens space for the reader. Reading *Milkman* without thinking about the whereabouts of the setting can be a freeing experience, and as we saw, is also the author's intention.

3 NARRATIVE

3.1 Narrative focus

Since middle sister is telling the story in her own point of view, the narrative focus will be analyzed according to Norman Friedman's definitions of *the I as protagonist*: "The protagonist-narrator, is limited almost entirely to *his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions*. Similarly, the angle of view is that of the fixed center" (Friedman, 1967, p. 1176, our emphasis). To illustrate the place of narrative where middle sister is talking about her feelings and perceptions, as the definition demands, we can use this initial moment on the book:

But I had not been having an affair with the milkman. I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me. I did not like first brother-in-law either. In his compulsions he made things up about other people's sex lives. About my sex life (BURNS, 2018, p.1).

The protagonist constantly refers to herself in the first person "I had not been", "an affair with *me*", and describes the way she feels about this rumors and pursuing. Still on Friedman's discussion, we can also set this narrative in the *Selective Omniscience* definition, which establishes that the reader's knowledge of the situation is limited to the mind of only one character; in this case our protagonist holds all the information and gives it to the reader by her own terms. Friedman also mentions that this type of definition may lead to the stream

of consciousness technique, depending on how far the author will enter on the character's consciousness.

In *Milkman* the reader may find some difficulty following the narrative exactly because of this phenomenon. The narrative imitates middle sister's line of thought and the paragraphs' length enhances that. Sometimes in the narrative the author starts one subject, and later on, maybe 2 or 3 pages, we will find this subject resumed.

3.2 Stream of consciousness

Before diving into middle sister's mind, it is important to understand what the stream of consciousness is for literature. This term was coined by William James (1842-1910), and it belongs to psychology, as it applies to mental processes. The psychologist describes the consciousness as a river or a stream; chain or train could not be good definitions, because it flows rather than is joined together (JAMES, 1955, *apud* CARVALHO, 1981). In literature, the stream of consciousness is controversial since it is not yet clear if it represents a *genre or a technique* (HUMPHREY, 1954, p.1). In his book, *Stream of consciousness in the modern novel*, Robert Humphrey provides an extent of definitions and new problems that surround the term. In this study, we will not dive deeply in his problematizations; instead middle sister's voice will be quickly analyzed in a skeleton outline (HUMPHREY, 1954, p.47).

3.2.1 Monologue intérieur

Interior monologue, according to Humphrey, is often a term confused with stream of consciousness, but since it is about literary technique, perhaps it is more accurate. In the direct interior monologue, the author almost completely disappears; as it is the case of *Milkman*. The protagonist voice is so strong, that mere interferences such as "she said" or "she thought" are not engaged by the author. Differently from the usual monologue, there is no established audience; and that is also middle sister's case, since she is remembering her past, but to no one in particular.

This skeleton outline was proposed by Humphrey in his analysis of Joyce's character Molly Bloom. He depicts every line of thought of the character in the scene when she is trying to sleep; we will reproduce this with middle sister's scene at the chip shop. She had just recovered from the poisoning, and she decides to get some chips (which are, curiously, mentioned 36 times).

There was a queue, a big long one, winding round two of the salon walls and I joined the end of it. Immediately others came in and joined the queue behind. Most of these

people I knew to see but not to speak to – middle-aged women, coming in for the suppers, some men, some children, some teenagers. Nobody I knew personally though, was in there at the time. While waiting, I settled in to enjoy the smell, also I did more ‘*je suis, je ne suis pas*’ in my head, as well as mentally counting how many people were in front of me. As I was doing this, however, the people I was counting began to drop out of line. A few left the shop immediately, with most stepping to the side or else to the far end of it. This meant I reached the counter nineteen people before I was supposed to reach the counter and as I did so I had a sensation that those behind had fallen away as well. Soon I was the only person in the queue, though this queue, unaccountably, was still present in the chip shop. Behind the counter, one of the two serving women in a big white apron came towards me and placed herself directly in front. Her arms were akimbo and she didn’t ask my order, didn’t look at me either as I gave it. Instead she seemed to direct her gaze somewhere to the side of my head. Not quite worried, but a little bit of something, I watched as she moved off to get the chips for me and wee sisters. It was then I became aware of the silence and, given I’d always lived in this district and had since childhood, without properly acknowledging it, been attuned to the currents, subtleties and rhythms of this district, I can only think slowness after my recent illness was the reason I was so behindhand at this point. It was at my back, the silence, making shivers at my back, and I couldn’t turn, though my mind began racing. *Don’t let it be Milkman. Oh please, don’t let it be Milkman.* Then I did turn and it wasn’t Milkman. It was everybody else. Every single person was staring at me in the shop (BURNS, 2018, p. 238-239).

- 1) notices the queue and describes it;
- 2) people she knows to see, but not to speak to;
- 3) enjoys the smell;
- 4) to distract herself, counts ‘*je suis, je ne se pas*’;
- 5) *mentally* counts how many people are in front of her;
- 6) people start to get out of line;
- 7) she reaches the counter before she expected;
- 8) now she is the only person in the queue;
- 9) the attendant does not look at her;
- 10) this worries her, who was the attendant looking to behind her?
- 11) worried about something;
- 12) waiting for the chips;
- 13) awareness of the silence in the shop;
- 14) she rambles on her childhood in the district;
- 15) the rhythms of the district;
- 16) maybe her illness left her behindhand;
- 17) she cannot turn on her back;
- 18) her mind is racing (although this is not felt in the writing);
- 19) the italics are her voice at that moment;
- 20) prays that it is not the Milkman;
- 21) she finally turns on her back;

22) almost 20 people are staring at her.

This is only one paragraph, and she is consistent in her line of thought. She starts the paragraph describing the shop when she arrives, and by the end of it, she is just staring at the other customers, who were in front of her and decided to move to the back of the shop. This movement that people make is justified by the previous events: middle sister was poisoned by tablet's girl, and later, tablet's girl was assassinated. The community assumes that this murder happened because tablet's girl messed with middle sister, who appears now to be the protégée of the Milkman. When people leave the queue and stop at the back to stare at middle sister, we have an image of the community as one character, who is always lurking and watching every step of her.

The community acting as a whole is also a reminder that in times of political violence, the collective society is stronger than a couple of individuals. Growing up in that area taught middle sister to stay out of the public interest, she tried hard not to be noticed; but the so-called affair with the milkman put her in the center of the gossip. There are some moments when she questions her attitudes towards the public opinion; "I felt then, as now, the losing of my step. I was falling over, slipping in, when my usual procedure was to keep away from gossip, from loose tongues" (BURNS, 2018, p. 107). Maybe her attempts to be so private were also used to produce more talking; and when she says she was losing her step, it is about being paranoid and unable to repress her feelings in this unnerving situation.

After the chip shop incident, middle sister goes back to a conversation she had with her mother about the "real milkman", her mother's love interest and the milkman of the area, known as "the man who didn't love anybody". This new subject goes on for about 20 pages, and then she returns to the moment she left the shop, holding the chips and confused about what happened and already regretting she took the chips and did not leave the money.

This kind of inconsistency is very common throughout the narrative. The protagonist starts describing a situation, and in her own memories she gets lost talking about other subjects. Indeed the stream of consciousness explains this technique, because when thinking we tend to link one subject to another, until we lose track of where we started. The fact that she is remembering could make this confusing, since her tone tends more to orality than of thoughts coming at the present. However, the narrative flows easily and there are no loose ends, nothing is forgotten and the narrator manages to give her story a beginning, middle and an end; this is managed to represent a story being told, not just thoughts meandering about in the protagonist's mind.

4 THE TROUBLES

4.1 Setting

Milkman appears to have no concept of place or time. In this section it will be investigated if inside the narrative there is any proof that could indicate where middle sister lives and when this story happened.

Next some excerpts from the book that may indicate some timeline:

I preferred to walk home reading my latest book. This would be a nineteenth-century book because I did not like twentieth-century books because I did not like the twentieth century (BURNS, 2018, p.5).

While explaining her reading-while-walking habit, middle sister sets her story in the *twentieth-century*.

I didn't own this territory so that meant he was allowed to run in it just as much as I was allowed to run in it, just as much as children in the *Seventies* felt entitled to drink their alcohol in it, just as slightly older children would later in the *Eighties* feel justified sniffing their glue in it, just as older people again in the *Nineties* would come to inject themselves with heroin in it, just as at present the state forces were hiding in it to photograph renouncers of-the-state (BURNS, 2018, p.7, our italics).

Middle sister describes how the parks and reservoirs are used by children during three decades. As we know, she is much older when the narrative is made, she is remembering when she was 18 years old; and being older entitles her to describe which substances this kids were using in each decade. Either way, we can assume that the story takes place somewhere after the 1970s.

when I mentioned boys I knew who loathed each other yet united in rage at the loudness of *Barbra Streisand*; boys incensed at *Sigourney Weaver* for killing the creature in that new film when none of the men in that film had been able to kill the creature; boys reacting against *Kate Bush* for being catlike, cats for being female-like, though I didn't tell about cats being found dead and mutilated up entries to the point where there weren't many of them left in my area anymore (BURNS, 2018, p. 8l, our italics).

Barbra Streisand is a singer, actress and filmmaker born on April 24, 1942, in New York; her "loudness" could be explained for her singing.

In the excerpt "boys incensed at Sigourney Weaver for killing the creature in that new film when none of the men in that film had been able to kill the creature" she was certainly describing the science-fiction film *Alien*, first released in 1979. The actress Sigourney Weaver (Susan Alexandra Weaver, born on October 8, 1949, also born in New York) in the role of Warrant Officer Ripley succeeds in killing the Alien, in a predominantly male crew. Mentioning this movie, the protagonist gives us a more certain clue: the movie was released

in 1979, so any of the events of *Milkman* could have happened before this year, once the boys of her community had already watched the movie, to be able to criticize the protagonist.

Kate Bush was born in July 30, 1958, in England. Bush is also a singer, and she might have been accused by these boys of being “catlike” for her dancing performances.

In conclusion, those artists were all making huge success in the previous mentioned decades, and their country of origin does not explain where the story takes place, because they were international attractions. However, we can keep in mind that middle sister lived her childhood during the last decades of the twentieth-century.

At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said ‘their side did it’ or ‘our side did it’, or ‘their religion did it’ or ‘our religion did it’ or ‘they did it’ or ‘we did it’, when what was really meant was ‘defenders-of-the-state did it’ or ‘renouncers-of-the-state did it’ or ‘the state did it’ (BURNS, 2018, p. 22).

The State is not clearly indicated, but the description is very similar to the sectarian conflict that took place in Northern Ireland. However, political problems, bombs and guns, are constant in any kind of civil war. This conflict may have taken place in Belfast as well as in Iraq or Palestine or Israel.

4.2 Political problems

Now we will take a look at the scenario suggested by the author. In this paper we are attempting to propose a reading of the novel without searching for outside information related to the author, nevertheless we must also consider the reasons why Anna Burns would write a book with such characteristics and leave their true representation in the dark. For that, it is important to understand what was happening in Northern Ireland back then.

The Ireland problems started around the 12th century; however, in this study we will pay closer attention to the period known as The Troubles that dates from late 1960s to 1998 in Belfast.

The key issue of those conflicts was the status of Ireland’s Constitution. The country is divided mainly between two groups: the nationalists/republican (mostly Catholics), who want Northern Ireland to be an independent, united country together with the Republic of Ireland; and the loyalists/unionists (mostly Protestants), who want Northern Ireland to stay part of the United Kingdom.

The Protestants were the majority in the government and in the police, and were accused of discrimination and brutality against the Catholics. There were issues about job opportunities, in which the Catholics were less likely to be hired than the Protestants.

This conflict led England to get involved and build “peace walls” which divided the communities. The main actors of the Troubles were the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) both republican paramilitaries; UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) and UDA (Ulster Defense Association) the unionist paramilitaries; and also British security forces got involved, including the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary).

The conflict⁴ culminated in more than 3.500 deaths, the majority being civilians. Bombings were common and a Hunger Strike took place in 1981, with Bobby Sands, a member of the IRA imprisoned in Maze Prison, being its leader.

The debate for a solution is still present nowadays, because even after two ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement – which decided that the borders would be soft, permitting the free passing of people and goods –, the walls are still there and the violence remains a problem. In a time of assumed peace, there were still occasional bombings and casualties.

The release of the book in 2018 was very pertinent, since the Brexit (British Exit) discussion is in vogue. It represents new possible problems for the Northern Ireland and the Ireland Republic borders with the United Kingdom exiting the EU (European Union). Up to the writing of this paper, the English Parliament had not yet defined if there would be a *deal* or a *no deal* with the EU, which could make the borders of the Irelands once again hard borders, provoking new conflicts between the populations of both countries.

4.3 The names

In part Two on the book, the names are firstly explained. In the area where middle sister lives – it is not important for this paper if she is a nationalist or a loyalist –, there is a couple responsible for keeping a list of names that are not allowed in the area; according to her, this couple has ordinary names (names that are allowed), but as a joke they are called Nigel and Jason, which are banned names.

Middle sister gives us some examples, and the explanation is that those names were used in the “country over the water” – probably England. She also explains that mostly these are men’s names, and as for the women’s, there is no significant threat about them. Apparently, women’s names do not represent any historical conflict or painful memory for the country, because women were not usually involved in politics.

⁴ Learn more on: <<https://is.gd/wqF66Q>>.

Afterwards, the narrator cites some names. She is leaving her French class and says goodbye to some of her classmates: “I said goodbye on the college steps to Siobhan, Willard, Russel, Nigel, Jason, Patrick, Kiera, Rupert of Earl and the rest because as usual they were heading to the bar (...)” (BURNS, 2018, p. 79). Among these people, we can see again the names of Nigel and Jason, but this time they are indeed people from other district. Our protagonist, it seems, does not have a problem in getting involved with individuals from a different religion, as long as her community does not find out. The maybe-boyfriend, for example, lives in a different district and she keeps their relationship a secret; she is afraid of the questions her mother would ask, the pressure for marriage and the distaste Ma would feel discovering that he is not fit for a son-in-law.

As previously mentioned, the milkman becomes suddenly Milkman, with a capital letter. The first time this happens is when middle sister is talking to her “longest friend”, who helps her to understand why this gossip escalated so quickly.

I noticed she called him Milkman and that she gave him a capital letter. To everybody else he was ‘the milkman’, with only the very youngest in the area believing he was a milkman, though even then, that didn’t last long. If she was calling him ‘Milkman’, I now decided, that must be because he was ‘Milkman’ (BURNS, 2018, p. 197).

Middle sister’s reaction to this new fact shows us, that she insisted in thinking about him using a nickname, as she did with everybody else around her. This looks like an attempt of keeping emotional distance; of erasing one’s individuality, because in a setting of violence, anyone can be killed, at any time. We can assume that middle sister avoids this naming, more than just a narrative technique to present some obscurity, but rather to emphasize that they all are victims at some point.

Now, calling the milkman with a real name only makes sense later in the story, when he dies. “It was revealed, along with his age, abode, ‘husband to’ and ‘father of’, that Milkman’s name really was Milkman. This was shocking. ‘Can’t be right,’ cried people. ‘Farfetched. Weird. Silly even, to have the name Milkman.’” (BURNS, 2018, p. 304). This brings up the question: was Milkman from another district? Was his name allowed?

Milkman is not the main character of this novel. We only hear Milkman’s voice through middle sister descriptions and point of view. He is understood as the villain, the abuser, the psychopath. Then, why give him a name? Why should he be more “important” than the protagonist herself?

We could define this naming of the villain, as what truly happens in accusations of sexual assault: the abuser, most of the time, does not suffer the consequences he deserves, and

the victim is the one who gets investigated and hated by common people. The experience of abuse makes the victims question themselves; the lack of support obliges them to hide the true story, and very occasionally a victim will have the strength to go forward with the accusations. Milkman was an important paramilitary – a famous one –, fighting for what he believed, and that is what most people will look at. He was *someone*. And middle sister, was only an 18 year-old-girl that they thought was the one chasing after a married man. The abuser is known by the name, the victim is not.

The issue of the names is a strong characteristic of Burn's novel. At the same time, this absence of real names provides a sensation of mystery and an explanation of the scenario where the story is developed. The mystery lies in not fully understanding who these characters are, since they are only called by their family relations or functions in society; this erases a person's inner personality. The scenario is represented in this technique in the form of an atmosphere created to show the reader that this is not a safe place. People die throughout the narrative, people are threatened and shot. However, the protagonist has no reactions while facing death "so I did what usually I did around death which was to forget all about it" (BURNS, p. 305), this technique could be understood as a tool from her own consciousness to suppress the pain and the trauma she went through.

5 THE WOMEN

Although they do not seem to have a strong voice, women are a big part of the community; and since they are not expected to cause problems – their names are not banned –, they sometimes surprise the district with behaviors that are not usually entitled to those groups of women.

Our protagonist is a young woman that describes some relevant female groups of her area such as the *issue women* and the *pious women*. The first group is compound by seven women who sit to discuss their gender "issues", in other words, feminists. The second is formed by religious old ladies that spend their days praying and singing.

Middle sister is terrified of being connected to the issue women, since they are not well received in the district.

I'd be committing social suicide even to catch eyes with one of them in the street. So no thanks. Not keen to have a word, not now, not ever. These women, constituting the nascent feminist group in our area – and exactly because of constituting it – were firmly placed in the category of those way, way beyond-the-pale. The word 'feminist'

was beyond-the-pale. The word 'woman' barely escaped beyond-the-pale (BURNS, 2018, p. 152).

The expression “beyond-the-pale”⁵ is mentioned several times, and it means to be outside the limits of decency, basically. People that do not live by the social expectations, will be considered a beyond-the-pale; and that is one of the biggest fears of middle-sister, as we know, she is in the center of intense gossiping about her intimate life, and not far from being totally rejected by her own community.

Surprisingly, the person who suggests that she should “have a wee word” with the feminists, is the real milkman. A man also considered a beyond-the-pale for his actions: he was not conniving with the works of the renouncers of the state, and when he found guns buried in his backyard he threw them all in the middle of the street, yelling at kids and people passing by. Because of his erratic behavior he was also shot by mistake by the state hit squads that were after the Milkman.

Middle sister is horrified by the suggestion, but perhaps it was the best advice someone could have given her. The feminists were engaged in discussing gender problems and misogyny, so they would probably believe her to be the victim and offer some guidance on what to do in a situation like this. On the other hand, this could, indeed, make her situation worse if she was seen in contact with this group.

The issue women first appeared as a “sister branch” connected to an international women’s group, which accepted all kinds of women with no discrimination. The intention was that a sister branch was created in every city and in every country to embrace all of the women, to discuss gender roles and the problems surrounding women’s lives. But in middle sister’s district, these women were harshly criticized, accused of homosexuality and abortion. The pious women were, of course, contributing to these accusations, but at some point they go to the streets to defend the women, proving themselves also some kind of feminists. The eighth woman who attended the meetings was from the other district, and she came with pamphlets on various themes about the issues treated by the international group; she provided guidance to the new sisterhood. And knowing that she was from the wrong religion was enough for the renouncers to get involved. They broke into their shed in the garden and found only seven women talking and sipping tea; the eighth woman had been warned.

⁵ The Pale more than an expression, is a representation of the historical problems between England and Ireland. Inside the land known as the English Pale, the English settlers built their houses and castles; while on the outside of this ditch, the native Irish would live in simple farms and rural settlements. There was animosity between the people and the ditch was dug in the attempt to protect the cattle of the English settlers. See more on: <<https://is.gd/JctH4H>>.

Finally, 'Over our dead bodies,' said the seven in a somewhat fatalistic 'digging their own graves' fashion, which of course, played straight into the renouncers' hands. Unlike the traditional women from our district who, on occasion, would instinctively unite and rise up to put an end to some gone-mad political or district problem, these seven women – bold as they'd been in their inspired moment of standing up to the renouncers – didn't and couldn't constitute the same robust critical mass. So they said, 'Over our dead bodies' with the renouncers replying, 'Okay then. Over your dead bodies' (BURNS, 2018, p. 158).

They threaten to kill the eighth women if she ever comes back. This, in middle sister's words, stretched too far the traditional women's patience and they decide to break the curfew. Hundreds of women with their babies and pets start to spread the streets calling out all the neighbors announcing the end of the curfew. However, the media provoked a backlash when they focused on the manifestation of the seven women, although they were mixed up with the other hundreds of normal women, they became the spotlight. And disappointed the other women because their claim was "only" about harassment on the streets. Normal women expected they to use the moment to protest on huge issues such as "female circumcision, rape, child marriages, retributions by stoning, female infanticide, gynaecological practices" etc.

And although the normal women were exasperated by the issue women's behavior, they defended them on the "over our dead bodies" intimidation. They took to themselves the task to calm down the sister branch and make sure that the eighth women would never come back to their district. "Don't be ridiculous," they said. "You can't kill them. They're simpletons. Intellectual simpletons. Academe! That's all they're fit for" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161). This was said to renouncers by the normal women, because they understood the consequences of murdering the seven women and the repercussion this could cause on the media.

Here we have an important criticism: the *normal* women protecting the *issue* women, a sorority action, but also a biased one. While the issue women discuss theory on feminism and study gender roles in history, the normal women go to the streets and defend their ideals, facing the renouncers and getting things done. When they call the other group *simpletons* we can understand that they are more politically engaged than the feminists. Of course, the feminists are outnumbered and they are a new branch, still understanding what is done to women and how to change this matter. However, common people need to be immediate and active to prove their points, so feminism, in this context, is not really embracing all the women and their issues.

6 CONCLUSION

The present paper is only one possible reading of the *Milkman*. It was discussed in the previous sections, that the aspect of naming in the narrative is an indispensable tool used by the author to create an atmosphere of a society in conflict. The use of this technique provides a separation between victim and torturer, and the community that watches the unroll of events. It certainly is what makes the narrative so appalling.

To understand the motifs and techniques of the writer it was necessary to analyze the narrator of the story, some group of characters and the assumed historical setting. The decision of writing in stream of consciousness is something important to recapture, because the author provided a direct connection to the reader with the protagonist. And it also illustrated how the protagonist managed to deal with a traumatic situation from her past.

When Anna Burns won the Man Booker Prize, it was made possible to get her book worldwide. The influence of this prize takes her writing to people who never heard of Irish history or never read an Irish author that was not James Joyce. These new readers will be confused and perhaps interested in the real settings that the author imagined when she was writing this story; they will possibly go beyond the reading of the book and dive in on a new subject. Or, perhaps, the reader will feel fulfilled reading the novel and just imagining the place where this could have happened. Or yet, the readers could be familiar with Irish culture, and they would connect the happenings of the book to real characteristics of the conflict. These possibilities in the reception of a story are what make Literature so extremely important.

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