



# Surviving the Oppression in the Time of the Troubles: Anna Burns's *Milkman*

## Troubles Dönemi'nde Baskıya Karşı Dayanmak: Anna Burns'un *Milkman* Adlı Eseri

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### ABSTRACT

Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018) recounts the story of an eighteen-year-old woman, named the middle sister, who struggles to survive the communal oppression and physical and psychological violence at the time of the Troubles in the Northern Ireland in the 1970s. The novel revolves around the middle sister's tumultuous relationship with her family, boyfriend, and neighbours, and her attempts to avoid the stalking and sexual harassment of a Republican paramilitary, named Milkman. Accused of being different due to her habit of reading-while-walking, the middle sister is perceived as a threat to the community and stigmatised by the people. Demonstrating the operation of the communal oppression from the eyes of a young woman, *Milkman* also portrays in the background the violent atmosphere of the Troubles and its trauma experienced by the individuals. While the middle sister strives to protect herself from the neighbours' gossips and calumny, she also tries to avoid Milkman's threats and abuse. The middle sister, who struggles to survive in such an environment prevailed by oppression and abuse, also witnesses the general sense of paranoia and fear instilled in people's minds due to the constant threat that the political conflicts and violence pose on the society. Therefore, this article aims to examine how the novel displays the working of violence and oppression in this tense and dreary atmosphere, and discuss how oppression is performed in every social layer, from a small neighbourhood to the whole country, both physically and psychologically.

**Keywords:** Anna Burns, *Milkman*, the Troubles, oppression, Irish novel

### ÖZ

Anna Burns'un *Milkman* (2018) adlı romanı, 1970li yıllarda Kuzey İrlanda'da Troubles dönemindeki toplumsal baskı ve fiziksel, psikolojik şiddete karşı dayanmak için mücadele eden middle sister isminde on sekiz yaşındaki bir kadının hikayesini anlatmaktadır. Roman, middle sister'in ailesi, erkek arkadaşı ve komşularıyla olan çalkantılı ilişkisi ve Milkman isimli Cumhuriyetçi bir milisin takiplerinden ve cinsel tacizlerinden kaçınma girişimleri üzerinden ilerlemektedir. Yürürken kitap okuma alışkanlığı yüzünden farklı olmakla suçlanan middle sister toplum için bir tehdit olarak algılanır ve insanlar tarafından kınanır. Toplumsal baskının işleyişini genç bir kadının gözünden anlatan *Milkman* ayrıca Troubles döneminin şiddet dolu ortamını ve bireyler tarafından deneyimlenen travmasını da arka planda resmetmektedir. Middle sister



bir yandan komşuların hakkında yaptıkları dedikodulardan ve üzerine attıkları iftiralardan korumaya çalışırken bir yandan da Milkman'ın tehditlerinden ve tacizinden kaçınmak için uğraşır. Böylesi bir baskı ve taciz ortamında hayatta kalmak için çaba gösteren middle sister tüm bunların yanı sıra politik çatışmaların ve şiddetin toplum üzerinde kurduğu daimi tehdit yüzünden insanların zihinlerine işleyen yaygın paranoya ve korku hissine de tanık olur. Bu sebeple bu makale, romanın bu gergin ve kasvetli ortamda şiddet ve baskının işleyişini nasıl sergilediğini incelemeyi ve baskının küçük bir mahalleden bütün ülkeye kadar toplumun her katmanında fiziksel ve psikolojik olarak nasıl uygulandığını ele almayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anna Burns, *Milkman*, Troubles, baskı, İrlanda romanı

## Introduction

The winner of the Booker Prize in 2018, Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018) is the story of a young woman and her struggles against the social and political adversities during the Troubles, the period of severe political conflict that took place in Northern Ireland in the 1970s between the Irish Republicans upheld by IRA and the Loyalists supported by the British government. The novel has made the author the first Northern Irish writer to win the Booker Prize, bringing her an international recognition. The work can be considered as experimental in terms of narrative owing to its elimination of any specific names regarding the characters and the setting. Although the setting is associated with Belfast, Northern Ireland in the time of the Troubles due to the author's background (Charles, 2018, December 4), most of the characters are unnamed, and only identified in accordance with their personal traits or their relation to the protagonist. Among various inhabitants of the town, ranging from spies to I.R.A. members, gay cooks, car enthusiasts, poisoners, and milkmen; the narrator, also the protagonist of the story, is not a political or an activist figure, but a quiet and inoffensive eighteen-year-old woman, named 'middle sister'. A personal account of the Troubles, the novel portrays a microcosmic community which reflects the impacts of the Troubles on the macrocosm, the country itself. Along with the representation of the political chaos, Burns's work also sheds a light on the social constructions of the Northern Irish communities by touching on the issues such as communal oppression, sexual harassment, social, political, and moral calumny and hypocrisy. Thus, the physical violence the Troubles imposes on Northern Ireland in the 1970s and its outcome echo through the middle sister's survival story in her community which enforces both physical and psychological violence on her. The novel works on these concerns via the narrator's oscillation between the ongoing social and political conflicts, and her coming of age in the midst of communal oppression. Anna Burns's *Milkman*, then, not only presents the tension at the time of the Troubles from the eyes of a young woman, but also lays bare how violence operates in various forms and social layers.

## The Troubles and the Systematic Exercise of Violence

The Troubles was a deeply traumatic and catastrophic period in the history of Northern Ireland. As mentioned earlier, essentially a conflict between the Republicans, who pursued an independent Northern Ireland freed from the British dominance, and the Loyalists (Unionists), who supported and were supported by the British rule and

the government, the Troubles gave way to several political, social, and religious factions and disputes within the country. Although the origin of the conflict dates back to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the triggering event was the Republic of Ireland Act in 1948 which led to the declaration of the Irish Free State as a completely independent republic in 1949. The Republic's leaving the British Commonwealth prompted the nationalist and Catholic movements to take action for the rights of the Northern Catholics in the parliament and in Northern Ireland both of which were prevailed by the Protestant predominance (Rose, 2001, pp. 4-5). Defending Northern Ireland's right to declare independence, the nationalist movements gained popularity in the political scene and among the Irish Catholics over the years. However, the conflict became violent when the police used disproportionate force on the protestors during the civil rights march in Londonderry in 1968, and when the British government sent troops to Northern Ireland to repress the opposing voices in 1969 (Rose, 2001, pp. 7-8). These incidents marked the beginning of the tense and virulent years of the Troubles. The peak point of violence, and political, social, and religious polarisation occurred in 1970s (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1999, p. 154) due to Bloody Sunday<sup>1</sup> and continued until the Belfast Agreement in 1998. According to Hayes and Campbell, "Bloody Sunday had a profound political and social impact on Northern Irish society... Northern Ireland embarked on a tortuous journey which involved significant intercommunal violence, conflict between the state and paramilitary groups, as well as a series of often failed attempts to address the underlying social and political causes of the violence" (2005, p. 20). Indeed, during this period, violence displayed itself not only between the political and military forces of both countries, but also within the Northern Irish community itself; among the civilians, neighbours, friends and relatives. In addition to its practice within different social layers of the community, violence also manifested itself in various contexts. While the British government used the brutal police force to quell all sorts of protests and riots, the Republicans resorted to extreme actions, such as bombings and executions, which resulted in killing a great number of Protestant civilians. In return, equally large number of Catholic people, including paramilitaries and civilians, were killed by the Loyalist Protestants and the state forces (Hayes & Campbell, 2005, p. 21). This reciprocal acts of violence between the two parties were echoed within the communities in the cities as well. The cities like Belfast were divided into regions either dominated by the Republicans or the Loyalists. There emerged certain areas, known

1 British forces killed thirteen unarmed civilians during a civil rights demonstration on 30 January 1972, a date that is remembered as 'Bloody Sunday' (Hayes & Campbell, 2005, p. 1). This event triggered the conflict between Northern Ireland and the British Government, marking the decade as one of the most disturbing and tense periods in the history of the Troubles.

as 'no-go' areas, where members of the opposite side would be threatened or executed for intruding (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1999, pp. 133-135). Along with the conflict between the Republicans and the Loyalists, violence was also exercised by the forces within the community they prevailed in. For instance, the Irish paramilitaries captured the Irish girls who dated British soldiers, and punished them by shaving their heads and covering their bodies with tar and feathers (Coulter, 1999, p. 135). As a way to establish and maintain their authority and control, both the Republicans and the Loyalists (with the British State) used harsh deterrent force over their communities. As Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth articulate, "[a] surprisingly high proportion of the deaths in each community has been perpetrated by organisations that claim to defend that community" (1999, p. 135). Correspondingly, all these cases of the mutual demonstration of violence indicate that the ramification of violence encompassed all fields of the society with various sources of provocation. As the violence turned reciprocal and communal, the line between who is right and who is wrong became blurred, and what was left was sheer ferocity and destruction on the part of both parties.

## **Oppression in the Form of Violence and Its Portrayal**

Burns's novel begins with a flashforward scene that brings the story to a conclusion: "[t]he 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). The rest of the novel is built in a manner that leads to this moment. After this scene, the narrator begins to tell how a man named Milkman walks into her life and disrupts its balance. Not an actual milkman, but a forty-one-year-old Republican paramilitary who is also married, Milkman sets eyes on the protagonist, the middle sister, during her daily walks, and starts to stalk her, crossing her path unexpectedly, menacing and frightening her. Already a subject of gossip in her neighbourhood for her reading-while-walking activity, the middle sister is immediately stigmatised by the community as Milkman's paramour and accused and plied by her family members without being able to defend herself. Cornered by the psychological harassment of both Milkman and her community, the middle sister finds herself in a predicament which she strives to ignore and avoid by taking up with her maybe-boyfriend, reading, and jogging. However, Milkman manages to penetrate into every part of her life, including these activities. The novel portrays the middle sister's struggle to get herself out of this predicament imposed by Milkman and her community. Much like her failure in avoiding Milkman, the violent atmosphere of the Troubles finds a way to infiltrate into the

narrative despite the protagonist's attempts to avoid the outer reality by burying her head into the literature of the past centuries. As Costello-Sullivan argues, the Irish novels written in the twenty-first century "emphasize not only the representation of personal or cultural trauma but also the act of representation itself and the *curative* power of such representation. This narrative engagement with the process of narrativizing mimics the healing function of testimony as awareness of the process of telling empowers the trauma victim to author his or her own life story" (2018, pp. 22-23). In line with this argument, Devers states that *Milkman* "[presents] an ordinary, unnamed 18-year old girl's perspective of her life unintentionally ensnared by the politics and forces of the Troubles – Northern Ireland's complicated and destructive ethno-conflict that pitted neighbors and communities against each other and divided a nation into factions and mini-factions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century" (2019, January 4, para. 4). 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.

In an interview, Burns states that violence, apart from the one caused by the Troubles, was interiorised in her society, and the streets would be bloodstained on a daily basis due to the everyday violence among people (Burns, 2018, November 29). Through the protagonist's observations of the conflicts as a third and relatively neutral party<sup>2</sup>, *Milkman* displays how violence operates in every part of life. Demonstrated in the novel, even for the apolitical middle sister, the impact of violence becomes inevitable to ignore:

Of course, as regards living here, a person could not help but have a view. Impossible it would be – in those days, those extreme, awful crowd days, and on those streets too, which were the battlefield which were the streets – to live here and not have a view about it. I myself spent most of my time with my back turned in the nineteenth century, even the eighteenth century, sometimes the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries, yet even then, I couldn't stop having a view. (Burns, 2018, p. 112)

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2 This neutrality is partial, since the protagonist resides in a district which is dominated by the Republicans. However, she witnesses violence exercised both by the state and by the paramilitary forces, thus manages to assume an objective stance in evaluating the actions of both political positions.

The protagonist's attempts to avoid the world surrounding her by reading anything that is not of the twentieth-century content do not spare her from the touch of the outer world. Violence is a reality of her society that is impossible to turn a blind eye to. Having an opinion about the conflicts despite her intentional indifference, the middle sister is quite aware of her position as a resident of a Republican dominated district:

for us, in our community, on 'our side of the road', the government here was the enemy, and the police here was the enemy, and the government 'over there' was the enemy, and the soldiers from 'over there' were the enemy, and the defender-paramilitaries from 'over the road' were the enemy and, by extension – thanks to suspicion and history and paranoia – the hospital, the electricity board, the gas board, the water board, the school board, telephone people and anybody wearing a uniform or garments easily to be mistaken for a uniform also were the enemy, and where we were viewed in our turn by our enemies as the enemy – in those dark days, which were the extreme of days, if we hadn't had the renouncers as our underground buffer between us and this overwhelming and combined enemy, who else, in all the world, would we have had? (Burns, 2018, p. 114)

As presented in the extract, the novel avoids identifying the political sides and countries as well as people's names. While the country "over there," or as sometimes called "over the sea," refers to England, the word "renouncers" is preferred to "Republicans," and the term "opposite religion" is used instead of "Unionists." As the subject matter of the work involves political conflicts, community pressure, and sexual harassment, the narrative, through the ambiguity in naming, adopts a bleak, and almost surreal tone and language so as to demonstrate the thematic tension and menace in the form as well. As Burns, commenting on this unnameability in one of her interviews, articulates, "[a]lthough 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... I see it as a fiction about an entire society living under extreme pressure, with long-term violence seen as the norm" (Burns, 2018, October 17, para. 5). This avoidance of using specific names for locations and parties, then, indicates that what is told in the novel could apply to any geography where similar political and social conflicts occur. In addition to its implication of universality, according to Burns, "the lack of proper names" assumes a dual function, as "[it] adds to

the atmosphere and tension in the book, to the sense of paranoia, the under-the-surface panic and unease, even if it also seems to offer an apparent protection to the characters of their real selves against the surveillance world they are living in" (Burns, 2019, March 15, para. 17). However, the latter function of un-naming as providing anonymity is unable to spare the characters from the sense of unease. It is demonstrated how people, under this political tension, avoid going to the hospital, since hospitals are controlled by the state, and if they go there, they will either be arrested by the state for being a potential terrorist, or accused by the Republicans of being spies of the state. When the protagonist is poisoned by the tablets girl, the mentally unstable poisoner of the neighbourhood, she is taken care of by her mother at home despite her critical condition. Therefore, hospitals are forbidden by and for the community, even in the case of an emergency, since being seriously ill is preferred to being labelled as a supporter of either view, and getting arrested or killed. As the narrator of the story, the protagonist also tells how she and her community are regarded by the other side, that is, for the police, everyone in the community is a potential terrorist, thus, "the only time you'd call the police in my area would be if you were going to shoot them, and naturally they would know this and so wouldn't come" (Burns, 2018, p. 182). Her observation lays bare how the notion 'us and them' works in the society, how people are polarised, and how everyone contributes to the normalisation of this polarisation.

The fear instilled by both political forces into the lives of the people causes a sense of paranoia, leading the people to operate self-censorship in their behaviours and monitor and police each other in order to assure the so-called safety of the community. As Quinn also suggests, "[t]he 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" (2018, December 4, para. 9). Indeed, the camera located in the park where the middle sister goes jogging monitors the passers and takes their picture, imposing the sense of continuous surveillance on the people even in the physical absence of the state. Therefore, the state controls the community, or evokes the sense of its control, in order to establish and sustain its power over them. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses the same operation of power by referring to the quarantine procedures taken during the plagues in towns in the seventeenth century:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, ... in which each individual

is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism ... It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (1995, p. 197)

Much like this seventeenth-century town in Foucault's analogy, the setting town of the novel is under constant surveillance by the state through cameras (and also by the Republicans through paramilitaries). Aware of this unremitting monitoring, the community is gradually drawn into paranoia, exercising the same methods of control upon itself. While the community is supervised by the state, the middle sister is inspected by Milkman and the community. As Devers asserts, "[e]veryone else is deeply involved in side-taking, judgement and policing each other's behaviours as friends, neighbors and enemies are killed, vanished or punished for being on the right or wrong side of things" (2019, January 4, para. 3). The protagonist, as well, acknowledges and comments on this condition as: "[t]hese were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody" (Burns, 2018, p. 27). Accordingly, the presence of the state forces and that of the paramilitary is replaced by the community's adoption of self-censure and policing as a result of this paranoia. The violent acts practised by the British state and the Irish paramilitary forces are recounted by the protagonist, such as the state soldiers' killing the neighbourhood dogs, the state's accidental shootings of innocent civilians mistaking them for Milkman, or the paramilitaries' plundering the neighbourhood houses in the name of the cause, yet, the act of violence, physical or psychological, is mostly portrayed through the very individuals of the community. Throughout the novel, as Kilroy aptly puts it, "Burns's targets are more insidious forces: the oppressiveness of tribalism, of conformism, of religion, of patriarchy, of living with widespread distrust and permanent fear" (2018, May 5, para. 5). Although violence is demonstrated by the state and the paramilitary, the community is also manipulated to take part in its exercise. As Charles also suggests, "[t]he whole town is engaged culturally enforced conspiracy of gaslighting" (2018, December 4, para. 12). In line with this argument, it can be propounded that Burns approaches this issue of practising violence on a microcosmic context by employing the very victims of the political disorder as the practitioners of the same violence.

This practice of violence is most evidently observed in the conflict between the middle sister and her community, displaying how oppression, in the form of psychological violence, dictates normality, punishes, and gradually isolates the individual. As Miller also pinpoints, “the conflict that most preoccupies this novel flares not between republicans and royalists or between Catholics and Protestants ... but between the girl and her community” (2018, December 10, para. 2). The middle sister lives in a society that does not indulge difference or individuality. Hers is a community where violence is normalised since it is now commonplace. While the targets girl’s wandering around, poisoning people is tolerated, the middle sister’s habit of reading-while-walking is strictly judged by the people and discouraged by her family: “[m]enace that she [tablets girl] was, in that different time, during that different consciousness, and with all that other approach to life and death and to custom, she was tolerated, just as the weather was tolerated, just as an Act of God or those Friday night armies coming in had to be tolerated. Declaring her a beyond-the-pale seemed as far as we, the community, could go” (Burns, 2018, p. 218). It seems that only the middle sister is aware of this unusual attitude of the community towards what is normal and what is not. Considering the general atmosphere of the novel, nonetheless, it can be argued that the world presented in *Milkman* is quite topsy-turvy in a way that it portrays a community where normal is abnormal, and abnormal normal. In accordance with its understanding of normality, the community tries to ‘fix’ the middle sister, since her abnormal reading-while-walking is unacceptable. In a similar vein, Foucault argues that

The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected to, brings us back to our own time, by applying the binary branding and the exile of the leper to quite different objects; the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise. All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are composed of those two forms from which they distantly derive. (1995, pp. 199-200)

Correspondingly, turned into an apparatus of the power (whether it is the state or the I.R.A.), the community assumes the roles of the gazer, controller, and fixer of the middle sister. Even the third brother-in-law, who is depicted as an extremely feminist

figure, thus diagnosed by the society as a beyond-the-pale, considers reading-while-walking bizarre and deviating: “you should not do that, that it’s not safe, not natural, not dutiful to self, that by doing so you’re switching yourself off, you’re abandoning yourself, that you might as well betake yourself for a stroll amongst the lions and the tigers ... that you might as well be walking with your hands in your pockets” (Burns, 2018, p. 58). Although an outsider character, who is also regarded as abnormal by the community’s standards, the third brother-in-law outlines the society’s approach to the middle sister’s habit, which is as unnatural as walking among the lions and tigers. Burns comments on this approach as follows:

throughout the book there is a sense of an imposed collective mindset, with obedience to it being of more importance in terms of survival than individual autonomy and identity. The individual, for the sake of survival, is required to be subsumed into the collective and hence the narrator’s harmless behaviors – looking at the sky, reading-while-walking, going to a night class down the town, having a maybe-boyfriend instead of getting married at sixteen etc – are seen as huge rebellions which pose a threat to the status quo. (Burns, 2019, March 15, para. 17)

By the same standards, the habit of reading-while-walking is more dangerous, unnatural and intolerable than Milkman’s harassments or his carrying explosive materials, since what he does “fits in,” while her reading threatens the peace: “[a]re you saying it’s okay for him to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read *Jane Eyre* in public?’ ... ‘Semtex isn’t unusual,’ she said. ‘It’s not *not* to be expected.” (Burns, 2018, p. 201). However, the middle sister does not submit to the communal oppression until she is openly threatened by Milkman to kill her maybe-boyfriend. Milkman’s function in the novel is to represent the general sense of menace in the society. He is, in fact, the very embodiment of the horror of the Troubles, power abuse, and patriarchy in the Northern Irish society. The menace he invokes operates the same way as the state forces do. Although it is stated that he is a killer, his true impact on the protagonist is not constructed through physical violence, but a psychological one. Without displaying any physical act of violence, the presence, or even the absence of Milkman meddles with the middle sister’s state of mind, leading her to isolation and paranoia, thus threatening her existence in the society. Raised in a highly patriarchal culture, the middle sister is unable to lay her finger on Milkman’s abuse:

At the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in hair-trigger society where the ground rules were – if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn't there? ... I did not know intuition and repugnance counted, did not know I had a right not to like, not to have to put up with, anybody and everybody coming near. (Burns, 2018, p. 6)

Her inability to diagnose sexual harassment is an outcome of the community's inherent negligence towards the issue. It is evidently observed throughout the novel that the people tend to hold the women responsible for the violation the men commit. When the gossips about the middle sister and Milkman spread among the community, her mother and her eldest sister immediately accuse the middle sister of seducing Milkman. However, the middle sister cannot defend herself against the accusations, much like when she could not say anything when her first brother-in-law sexually abused her when she was twelve. This apparent childhood trauma gives way to a feeling of learned helplessness, since, instead of defending herself, the middle sister chooses to remain numb and unresponsive to the accusations. She explains her reluctance to open up about Milkman's abuses as follows: "I sensed that this doubt – of myself, of the situation – would be picked up on and would then lead to comment on my own credibility. Even if I were to be heard, people here were unused to words like 'pursuit' and 'stalking,' that is, in terms of *sexual* pursuit and *sexual* stalking" (Burns, 2018, pp. 182-183). The protagonist is well aware of the society's mindset on sexual harassment. It simply prefers to ignore it, or merely gossip about it. The community itself through gossip, like Milkman's stalking and the state's photographing, disrupts her mental balance, tries to control her, and eventually exiles her into isolation. Therefore, in a community where violence is normalised, humanity forgotten, and morality corrupted, the victims of the oppression are 'naturally' ignored or punished. The community's misogynistic approach to women is well depicted in the novel commenting on the issue women, a feminist group who put on protests for their rights: "The word 'feminist' was beyond-the-pale. The word 'woman' barely escaped beyond-the-pale. Put both together, or try unsuccessfully to soften things with another word, a general word, one in disguise such as 'issues' and basically you've had it" (Burns, 2018, p. 152). In this sense, these women are put into the same categorisation as the tablets girl. However, unlike the tablets girl, they are considered as a serious threat to the community not only by

men, but by women as well. This fear of being different or having a different individual in the society is ingrained in everyone in the novel, including the protagonist, who is terrified of being labelled as beyond-the-pale, avoids the issue women, or ignores the fact that her father was raped as a child.

Not only women, in this regard, but all individuals who do not conform with the society's understanding of normality and commonness are ignored and exiled. The chef, who loves cooking and is secretly gay, is othered and considered as beyond-the-pale by the neighbours. The maybe-boyfriend, who is also homosexual, struggles to be an accepted member of the community and not to be alienated like the chef by dating the middle sister. The protagonist's father, damaged by the childhood trauma of repeated abuse, and possibly silenced and ignored by the community, is drawn into depression and eventually dies. In a similar vein, the middle sister is systematically weakened and alienated, and her existence as an individual is constantly threatened both by Milkman and the society. As Miller asserts, "[b]oth regimes [loyalists and republicans] conspire to stifle any spark of independent selfhood; what matters isn't who you are but how you appear, and the tiniest transgression can be fatal" (2018, December 10, para. 7). It is evident that the society demands sameness at the cost of its members' happiness. Like the dog murdered in the film, *Rear Window*, as the middle sister draws the comparison, the community depicted in the novel cannot bear affection, since paranoia, despair, doubt, and violence have long since permeated its core. That is why, for instance, the "wrong spouse" phenomenon is quite prevalent: "[g]reat and sustained happiness was far too much to ask of it. That was why marrying in doubt, marrying in guilt, marrying in regret, in fear, in despair, in blame, also in terrible self-sacrifice was pretty much the unspoken matrimonial requisite here" (Burns, 2018, p. 256). The protagonist discovers this phenomenon when she finds out that her mother has always loved the real milkman, another beyond-the-pale character who is actually a milkman, and whose normality is deemed abnormal and who isolates himself from the community. Quinn interprets this voluntary despair in the novel's characters as follows:

Perhaps the novel's most memorable strain is the way that characters in this world can't ask for what they want for fear of not getting it, or of getting it and inspiring jealousy, or of getting and losing it, or perhaps just of getting it and not being able to bear such a large and foreign and terrifying thing as happiness. Hence what middle sister calls the "wrong

spouse" phenomenon, when you marry someone adjacent to the person you really love, the way you would avoid looking directly at the sun. (2018, December 4, para. 10)

It is again evident that the community willingly exiles its inhabitants to despair, securing mediocrity and avoiding any possible infraction or idiosyncrasy.

## Surviving the Oppression

Nevertheless, it is the beyond-the-pale characters, such as the middle sister, the real milkman, the issue women, and the third brother-in-law, that promise a ghost of a chance for the future of the society. The novel portrays the middle sister as the most conscious character in the novel about her surrounding and the abnormality of the mindset and functioning of the community, hence, the changes in her life carries significance both for her and the gist of the novel. As Charles also argues, "[m]iddle sister dares us to keep up as she talks on and on to prove she's alive, still sane in this nightmare. That she survives is a miracle. That she perseveres is a function of her indomitable courage" (2018, December 4, para.14). This courage and spirit are triggered with the recent events towards the end of the novel. She finds out that her maybe-boyfriend is gay, which provides her with an epiphanic moment: "[t]he truth was dawning on me of how terrifying it was not to be numb, but to be aware, to have facts, retain facts, be present, be adult" (Burns, 2018, p. 294). This sudden realisation of the outer reality eliminates the indifference and numbness that prevailed her disposition almost throughout the novel. In this sense, the novel reveals a sign of optimism, since, as Quinn also suggests, "as middle sister discovers, fear isn't as bad as numbness. Behind fear, animating and sharpening it, is the possibility, however tenuous, of joy" (2018, December 4, para. 10). Although she surrenders to Milkman on the way home by getting in his van, this sense of despair is soon replaced by relief with the news of Milkman's death, which causes the protagonist to realise her predicament now that the threat is expelled from her life: "while standing in our kitchen digesting this bit of consequence, that I came to understand how much I'd been closed down, how much I'd been thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness by that man. Also by the community, by the very mental atmosphere, that minutiae of invasion" (Burns, 2018, p. 303). Now fully aware of the condition she has been put through by Milkman, the middle sister evolves into a more mature and self-confident individual, having survived the abuses of Milkman, the community's gossip, the tablets girl's poisoning, and Somebody McSomebody's

assault. As Kilroy articulates, “[w]hat starts out as a study of how things go wrong becomes a study of how things go right ... 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” (2018, May 31, para. 9). Recovering the countless adversities and attacks, the middle sister comes out alive and strong, preserving her individuality. Parallel with this maturation, the end of the novel is brought with a female solidarity formed among the middle sister, her mother, and her sisters. By encouraging her mother to let go of the burden of “wrong spouse” phenomenon, reject her preordained despair, and go after the real milkman, and by reconciling with her eldest sister without causing tension, the middle sister also releases herself from her conflict with the community, since the community oppression is mostly operated by her mother and eldest sister throughout the novel. Therefore, the dark tone that prevails the whole novel begins to shatter at the end with the dancing of the wee sisters, the shared moments and feelings among women, and the resumption of the jogging.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Burns’s novel stands as a narrative of exploration of the working of political violence and oppression represented within the context of communal tyranny. Costello-Sullivan expounds that “twenty-first-century Irish narratives increasingly turn from just recognizing traumatic experiences toward also exploring and representing the process of healing and recovery, interrogating this possibility from the vantage of the authors’ time and place” (2018, p. 3). It is, indeed, what Burns does in *Milkman*. By exposing the communal oppression and the conflict between the individual and the community, with the political violence in the background, she makes the social and personal trauma visible. Although Burns does not display the violent political conflict through the narrative explicitly, the very political tension is permeated within the relationship between the middle sister and her community. The Troubles and the sense of threat it implicates is never pointed by the characters out loud. Instead, the trauma that the constant fear and tension create makes itself obtrusive through the characters’ deliberate avoidance of naming the problem and the source of the threat. Much like the community too terrified of the oppression to point it out, the middle sister strives to ignore the abuse of Milkman and the society. In the novel, the trauma that the middle sister suffers from due to the oppression and psychological violence on the part of the community she lives in is the same trauma that the country itself endures due to both

physical and psychological repercussions of the Troubles. However, Burns does not settle for merely demonstrating the trauma in question; she also embellishes her narrative with the potential of a recovery by making reconciliation and hope for the future possible for her characters. Once the threat becomes too real to ignore as she gets poisoned by the tablets girl, menaced by Somebody McSomebody with a knife, and terrorised by Milkman one last time, the middle sister understands how extremely she was subdued and forced to give up on her individuality. With Milkman's death, she confronts her true oppressor, the community, by refusing to succumb to its constraint. By continuing her jogging, the middle sister stands as an individual who rejects to be silenced by oppression and defined by her trauma. As the middle sister survives the nightmare she was subjected to, her story and eventual recovery offer a similar confrontation and a process of healing for the country itself. Consequently, as Burns's *Milkman* portrays the trauma caused by oppression in an individual context, it displays a similar struggle with trauma and oppression in a wider scope, implicitly dealing with the condition of Northern Ireland in the time of the Troubles, and thereby the novel also puts forward a process of confrontation and healing for the country through the middle sister's story.

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