

GENDER INEQUALITY IN BURNS' *MILKMAN*: A MARXIST FEMINIST STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates gender inequality in Anna Burns' novel Milkman. Burns' novel is depiction of the ways in which women are exploited through capitalism. It highlights the role of powerful institutions and absence of women in those power structures that ultimately makes women the slaves of patriarchy. The novel also explores the ways in which women are exploited, controlled and crushed by political and institutional power. This study discusses the debates surrounding Marxist feminism and the ways in which Marxist feminism can be mobilized as an analytical tool to engage women centric novels such as Anna Burns's Milkman along the thematic lines of objectification, commodification, capitalism, institutionalized patriarchy, the panopticon, and gender inequality. This study develops a hermeneutical Marxist feminism to evaluate the thematic concerns in Anna Burns' Milkman. In doing so, this research reveals how this novel based on gendered oppression and violence dramatizes and expands the core aspects of objectification and dehumanization developed by both Marxism and feminism. This study is indebted to Engle's conceptualization of economic independence in Marxism as it interprets gender inequality in the context of capitalism. This study situates Marxist feminism as a critical reading approach to understand gender-based oppression and inequality and proposes an anti-capitalist future for women's empowerment.

Keywords: Gender inequality, Marxist Feminism, Patriarchy, Power Structures, Gender based violence, Capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality creates societies that are less cohesive and have higher rates of crime and violence. Countries with greater gender equality are more connected. Their people are healthier and have better living conditions. Feminism emerged as a result of violation of women's basic rights, gender based violence and oppression. Feminism emerged in waves; first wave was concerned with women's political rights; legal issues primarily the right to vote to make women have a say in national and political affairs. Second wave was about the deconstruction of stereotypes as it exposed the discursive and imaginative exploitation of women by male authors. The third wave was concerned with inclusivity of different women and emerged as a voice against westernisation of feminist movement. Marxist feminism is a type of feminist theory that takes its theoretical foundations from Marxism, particularly the critique of a capitalist system as a set of structures, practices and institutions that encourage the exploitation of labor, promote the alienation of human beings and devalue the freedom. For Marxist feminists, women's empowerment and equality cannot be achieved under capitalism. Marxist feminism is reluctant to treat "women" as a separate group with similar interests and aspirations.

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Marxist Feminism explains the theoretical frameworks that emerged out of the amalgamation of Marxism and Feminism both. Both these movements have points of contact especially their prioritisation of systematic inequalities that are foundation of oppression against marginalised (Rhrenreich, 1976). Marxist feminism as per Holmstorm is an emancipatory, critical framework that aims to systematically understand and explain gender oppression (Holmstrom, 2002; Sayers, (2021)). Political economy as per Armstrong is "sex conscious" as well as "class conscious". *The Socialist Feminist Project: A Contemporary Reader in Theory and Politics* discussed the place of sex and gender in politics. Marxist Feminism shares the same concerns. This study evaluates gender inequality in context of capitalism in Irish Society via critical interpretation of Anna Burns' *Milkman*. Marxist feminism is a feminist ideology which focuses on the dismantling of capitalism as a way to free and empower the women. Gender inequality is due to lack of opportunities for women to earn and own the sources of production.

In patriarchal society, the wives are expected to be modest and dutiful to their husbands and other members of families. Burns' (2018) depiction suggests that practical solution of the problem of Irish women is what Engels calls economic independence. The lack of opportunities for women to earn and own their sources of production leads to economic oppression. Anna Burns' *Milkman* is depiction of the same. It shows the ways in which women are exploited through capitalism. It highlights the role of powerful institutions and absence of women in those power structures that ultimately leads women to become slaves of patriarchs. The novel also explores the ways in which women are exploited, controlled and crushed by political and institutional power. Paramilitary in the novel is an example of such power. This study evaluates the status of women in Northern Irish Society in the era of the Troubles with Marxist Feminist lens. It utilizes Marxist Feminism as an analytical tool to highlight the institutionalized patriarchy and gender based violence.

Milkman by Anna Burns is a novel that has concerns of both class and gender. It's a novel with graphic details of violence against women in a capitalist society that is based on patriarchy. This novel is a depiction of what happens when capitalist horrors combine with patriarchy. The lives of women are affected badly both by capitalism and male dominance. Women are objectified and dehumanised. They are viewed as "things" that can be bought and owned. The milkman in the novel thinks he OWNS the middle sister. He disregards any sort of consent of the middle sister and just starts pursuing her. This novel is also about the social pressure and conformity that make women numb and silent. It is a depiction of 21st century panopticon and surveillance in a capitalist regime. It is about the powerful institutions that further subjugate the women. This novel is, in short, a guide to woman's life and a way to understand her silence and endurance in a society that victim blames her for not speaking up for herself on time. It revolves around the hindrances that a woman faces. It shows how a woman is not voiceless, she's silenced. She is not weak or indecisive rather she is traumatized, blackmailed and deprived of agency and freedom.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marxist feminist approach historicizes reproduction in relation to production. It does so to highlight the exploitation and oppression of women under capitalism. Marxist feminist theorists also theorize revolutionary subjectivity and the possibilities of an anti-capitalist future. This ideology believes that the reason behind all the never-ending gender-based violence and oppression has to be the power structures in male dominating society, the backing up of crimes of male gender against the female via institutionalized patriarchy.

The middle sister couldn't say NO to the Milkman because he is powerful and is under paramilitary. She has no say in her own life decisions. She has no power to live the way she wants to. She doesn't stop the Milkman rather she keeps doing the things he demands. Reputation is one of the problems in the way of women empowerment. A female is entitled to save her honor while a male can harass, chase and exploit women without having to face any punishment. Even if a woman says NO in the society, she's faced with the problem of "victim blaming", "slut shaming" and "secondary victimization". In late 1970s, William Ryan in his book *Blaming the Victim* wrote about victim blaming which highlighted the fact that people are labelled as lazy or ignorant and are blamed for their sorry conditions and how it is believed that anyone can pull one's own "bootstraps" if he or she works hard (George, 2003; Appelrouth & Edles, 2020).

This is the case with gender-based oppression too. Women are unable to pull their bootstraps because of capitalist patriarchal power structures that provide backup to the criminal activities of powerful men making them invincible.

Friedrich Engels with his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) laid the foundation of Marxist Feminism where he says that gender oppression is reproduced culturally and it is sustained via institutionalized inequality. He also says that the first oppression coincides with "that of female sex by a male" (Engels, 1972). Engels considers economic dependency of women on men the main reason behind gender-based oppression. In this context, it is valuable to highlight the concept of "becoming of women" by Simone de Beauvoir (1971) and the concern of having "no room of her own" by Virginia Woolf (1929). Both the concepts go hand in hand with economic independence of women. While Simone de Beauvoir talks about gender constructs by male dominating society, Woolf gives the reason of silence of women indirectly; she says that women have no room to work. They have to have privacy and room of their own to earn money. They have no room for economic independence. Marxist Feminism sees gender discrimination in the light of capitalist structures. There are several systematic ways in which women are deprived of their positions in the power structure of the states. For instance, they're limited to their houses, children and marriage. The most cliché discourse about women has to be about the bounds of marriage. But it remains as relevant today as it has always been. Limiting a woman to her house or in the circle of marriage makes her weak because it removes all her chances to get economic independence. Marx called economy the base. The foundation for which the super structures work. The means of production are in hands of men because women are limited to their houses. The "absence" of women is systematic. The representation of women by male created thousands of misconceptions and stereotypes via imaginative exploitation. Virginia Woolf rightly says that "For most of the history the anonymous was a woman". It is not just a statement but a fact. Women had no representation of their own even in literature. They had to work under the male names because with their female identity their work wouldn't be taken seriously. George Eliot and Brontë sisters are the perfect example of this.

Marxist Feminism is quite parallel to social Feminism and material Feminism. It deals with the explanation and deconstruction of whole of the question of women's absence in context of capitalist power structures. The objectification of women and dehumanising them have been part of the capitalist structure. Elaine Showalter is really significant here as she describes the whole approach of feminism in number of phases. Her description of the first phase which she calls "feminist critique" is relevant in context of Marxist Feminist study. She calls out and exposes the absence of women in "production". She gives the concept of "Gynocritics" based on the idea of women being the producer of the textual meaning. She included various dimensions in it like female creative abilities and the psychodynamics, linguistics dealing with the issue of female language, literary career of women and the individuality. She explains the last phase as "gender theory" where she talks about the literary effects of culturally and socially derived binaries of sex and gender which is similar to what Simone de Beauvoir calls "becoming" a woman. She says that one is not born woman, rather one becomes a woman. (Beauvoir, 1961)

There's a whole history behind the voiceless women. Excluding them from means of production and representation of them by males is one of them. Anna Burns' novel under study revolves around the woman's struggles in a patriarchal society. Marriage, Male, Home and Family become the signifier of constant claustrophobic and walled existences woman has been bound to live in. A society in which she is not even allowed to raise her voice or to cry as it's as futile as it can be. Kishwar Naheed calls out women's subjugation and gender discrimination and sees them in light of masculine construct of "fidelity". She says that women are "crushed with the weight of custom and tradition". Woman is nothing but a commodity. Commodification or objectification is an idea closely related to feminist theory. It's the idea of seeing a woman as an object. Martha Nussbaum (1995) identifies aspects that are included in the idea of treating someone as an object. He gives seven features including instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity. Instrumentality means treating a person as a tool for objectifier's specific purposes. For instance, in a capitalist society women are used as a tool for marketing and brandism. They are reduced to an object for commercialisation. They are not given the opportunities to be a part of power structures or have their means of production rather they're used as objects, as bodies. As Susan Bordo (1999) says that women are defined in terms of bodies and men are defined in terms of mind and genius. Denial of autonomy means treatment of women as an entity that lacks autonomy or agency and self determination.

It means limiting a woman to follow her man or the institutionally derived patriarchal patterns. Women have no agency or consent. Inertness has similar connotations in this regards. It means lacking agency or power to take decisions or to stand alone. Fungibility is the treatment of women as they're the objects that are interchangeable. Violability means seeing women as an entity that lacks boundary integrity. Ownership is simply seeing women as something that can be owned. It is treatment of them as something that can be owned by another person; something that can be bought or sold. Lastly, denial of subjectivity means women have no subjectivity of their own and their experiences and feelings are invalidated.

Three more features are added by Rae Langton (2009) in the model; Reduction to body, limited to appearance and silencing. Reduction to body means reducing women to their body or body parts. Reduction of appearance means reducing women to their appearance that is how they look and appear. Silencing simply means treating women as people or objects that have no voice or have no capacity to speak. Haslanger presents a model about women's objectification by men and gives us conditions for it.

1- Haslanger says the condition one is when it comes to women's sexual objectification by the male gender and how the male gender VIEWS and treats the female gender as object of its sexual desire.

2- Haslanger says that male gender DESIRES the female gender to be submissive and be an object and male gender forces the female gender to submit.

3- Haslanger explains the third condition that men BELIEVE that women are meant to be submissive and objects.

4- Not just meant to be or forced to be rather, men believe that women are submissive and objects.

Gender discrimination according to Kant too is inevitably linked with dehumanising and objectifying the women by the structures. Objectification of women according to him is the lowering the status of a person from being human to being an object. He describes it in terms of individuality of a person and the capacity of a person to have a nature and choice which he calls rational nature with choice. He says a person who is a human has a capacity and ability to navigate his/her own ways and life. A human who is deprived of the right to choose or consent is automatically objectified. Humanity makes human beings special. Someone with humanity has the power and ability to make a choice and to have an agency. A being with humanity has a choice to choose what's important and valuable for her. Human beings are different from animals because they have a thought process, dignity and agency. This humanity makes a being a human. When women are deprived of these human traits, they become inanimate objects. (Kant, 1797) Both Marxist and psychoanalytic arguments are an important influence on feminist critiques of the family, within which women and children are figured as relatively disempowered, oppressed and economically unrecognised.

Like Burns' *Milkman, Asking For It* (2015) is a book by Irish author Louise O'Neill. Irish writings are filled with women suffering from institutionalised patriarchy and tribal and conservative patterns where women are victim blamed. In Burns' narrative the middle sister is blamed by the community and becomes the hot topic of gossip where the perpetrator remains unchecked and unpunished. Similarly, O'Neill's narrator is raped by number of boys and instead of getting justice, her whole town turns against her like she "asked for it". Emma, the protagonist deals with the aftermath and the consequences of being brutally raped. This is about the tribal and conservative society where men are backed up socially, culturally and institutionally, a society that makes victim of abuse and assault feel that it was their own fault. Similar is the case with Burns' middle sister who is blamed by her neighbourhood and her family. She is even told by her own elder sister that she invites the government surveillance and stalkers because of her reading habits, considering her reading or thinking as something that attracts the wrong men. Similarly, *Room* (2010) written by Irish author Emma Donoghue is an account of a woman who is locked inside a little room in the basement with her kid by a psychopath husband. She has no contact with the world and the man considers her as his object. Similarly, Roddy Doyle's novel, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) is about marital rape and abuse. Paula Spencer, from a working-class background in Dublin, reveals in the novel a compulsion to tell her story, a feeling that is heightened by the contrasting code of silence about her experience that is maintained in the society around her. The protagonist of Doyle's novel thus represents wounded, exploited and marginalized subjects, disrupted and silenced through the structures of patriarchal society.

Apart from these Irish writers, there is a wide range of works in world literature that depict the horrors of the war and how the trauma is multiplied for the women. The times where the power and authority disrupt the peace, women are doubly marginalized. Not only the times of The Troubles for

Ireland but the horrifying world wars affected women the most. Women are not only displaced and horrified in times of war, they're even snatched their right to get educated or to have basic human needs. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Husseini is one such example. The novel is also based on gender based violence and oppression in times of war. There is double agony of the women as they live first under the power structures and on top of that those power structures are being governed by patriarchy. The novel also resembles Burns' narrative in a way women are treated and their abuse is never validated. Husseini writes: "*Learn this now and learn it well. Like a compass facing north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always*" (Husseini, 2007)

METHODOLOGY

This study discusses the debates surrounding Marxist Feminism and the ways in which Marxist Feminism can be mobilised as an interpretative and analytical tool to engage women centric novels like Anna Burns' *Milkman* along the thematic lines of objectification, commodification, capitalism, institutionalised patriarchy, panopticon and gender inequality. This study develops a hermeneutical Marxist Feminism to evaluate the thematic concerns in Anna Burns' *Milkman*. In doing so, this research discloses how this novel based on gender based oppression and violence dramatises and extends fundamental aspects of objectification and dehumanisation developed by Marxism and Feminism both. This study owes a debt to Engle's conceptualisation of Economic Independence in Marxism as it interprets the gender inequality in context of capitalism. This study marshals Marxist Feminism as a critical reading approach to understand the gender based oppression and inequality under capitalism and proposes the anti-capitalist future to empower women.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Milkman by Northern Irish author Anna Burns is a historical psychological narrative about a young girl who is only eighteen years old and a powerful man in his forties. This novel is based on political oppression and gender-based violence. According to Marxist theory, for any society, economy is the base and it is in the hands of those who own the means of production. Those who own the means of production have power. That power is owned by the capitalist. All the powerful institutions are in hands of male gender. For instance, paramilitary in Burns' narrative. Due to the institutional power that Milkman holds in the novel; the Middle Sister remains passive throughout the novel till the end. She doesn't have power to say 'No'. She has no power to go against the power structures of the society she lives in. The Middle Sister in the novel is that subaltern for which Spivak asks the rhetorical question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 2010). In this novel, she can't speak. She can't speak because Milkman is being protected by institutions and capitalism. The whole capitalist society doubly marginalizes the women. There is gender based oppression.

Innuendo and Fear

The novel *Milkman* by Anna Burns revolves around the state of innuendo and fear of a community because of political instability and the power politics especially in context of women. The protagonist is being harassed by a powerful paramilitary person who has enough power that even the neighborhood is fearful of the middle sister as it assumes her to be having an affair with him. Burns exposes the ways in which power works that too in a patriarchal regime that is based on institutional inequality. She also exposes the way women are silenced. The 21st century ways of silencing a woman include excessive surveillance and cameras. She's being chased, being photographed, misperceived and anticipated. She has no way to say No to Milkman's advances because the state backs such powerful individuals. There's no law against this harassment. The middle sister explains that she is living in a time where she's eighteen and has been breathing in a society that is "hair triggered" having ground rules: "*if no physically violent touch was laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled, ... Then nothing was happening*" (Burns, 2018, p. 6)

Victim Blaming

The victim blaming of women is a problem wide spread. Whenever a woman tries to speak up, she's counter questioned and there's victim blaming. She's blamed for her late awakening. She's blamed for not speaking up. She's blamed for her own suffering and she's blamed for her sorry condition. Nobody sees the institutionally designed structure that is made to silence her. She's silenced by both repressive and ideological state apparatuses. As Engels said, gender oppression is reproduced culturally and it is sustained institutionally. The capitalist society is based on patriarchy. It also oppresses women in various ways especially through economic power. The powerful institutions are male governed. The

absence of women makes it a point that women are economically dependent and powerless because of economic oppression. The powerful institutions include military, paramilitary, police and judiciary. The middle sister remains unresponsive and numb against all the advances and harassment by the milkman because she has no back up. The gender based violence is so normalised in the society that even the oppressed don't understand that they're being oppressed. Nobody dares to take a stand against the powerful paramilitary man in the novel. Rather the neighbourhood starts gossiping about the middle sister.

In chapter 2, the middle sister comes to know that even her mother believes the rumours that are spread about her and the Milkman. She feels further disgrace and discouragement. The gossip and blame game of neighbourhood against the middle sister is based on the patriarchal notion of women having to protect their honour while because of capitalist back up and institutionalised patriarchy they have no honour to defend. Society at large blames women. It also exposes the society's mindset on sexual harassment. The middle sister remains silent and doesn't defend herself against the gossips because she knows that the society she lives in would rather question her own credibility. She senses that this very doubt of her and her situation would rather be picked up on and "*would lead to comment on her own credibility*" (Burns, 2018). The novel highlights the fear that limits the women. The fear that is instigated to silence them. The fear that is justified and inevitable. The fear that can't be ignored. By the end of the novel, the view of unresponsiveness and the numbness of the protagonist is rejected by her resilience. She manages to continue to jog even after whatever happened to her. She manages to continue her life. She doesn't give up. When the milkman dies, the protagonist continues her jogging that is symbolic of her not giving up on life and a possible near future where she stands as an individual. The middle sister in the novel is the most woke character in the whole novel giving us the idea that the silence of women has most of the time nothing to do with the ignorance or dullness. It is the fear inflicted by the power structures that invade every aspect of her life. It is the way power and capitalism exploit her. It is the way misuse of power by male governed paramilitary works. Marxist Feminist study of this novel suggests that one way to free and empower women is to dismantle capitalism.

Violence and Silence

The phrases like "Country over the water" and the description of the violence in the times of The Troubles in Northern Ireland presents before us the picture of the history of Northern Ireland but Burns novel is not a novel that's primarily concerned with historical narrative. The style of the novel is quite parallel to Joyce and Faulkner's Stream of consciousness that makes it a not so easy read but Burns remains rhythmic throughout the novel while presenting before us the alarming and breathless graphic details of violence and Silence both. The violence that's not silent but the silence is violent. The internal monologue of the narrator "middle sister" who is just an eighteen years old girl and an acute observer of her own community dwells us to the backstory. Burns in an interview sheds light on her personal experience saying "she grew up in a place filled with violence, distress and paranoia". Her novel Milkman is also about that violent regime. The narrator's significant years of life were filled with psychopolitical atmosphere. It was a horrible place of tribal identification and a place of dos and don'ts. Despite this, Milkman is not primarily a novel of politics of history. Anna Burn herself explains that it's 'political' only if you think of it as a writing concerned with organizational structures and power. It is only political if you connote it as how power is achieved, how it dominates and how it impacts women.

Violence and Silence are both important and recurrent motives in the novel. Violence can be seen best in context of our main antagonist, the Milkman. Milkman is a powerful paramilitary officer. He's so powerful that he is free to do whatever he wants to do. There is no law or rule that could punish him for doing anything. He's involved in all kinds of corruption. A paramilitary person is supposed to perform the duties for the citizens and country but contrary to this, Milkman exercises his power to commit crimes. He thinks of the Middle Sister as his property with whom he can do anything that he wants. He sees women as mere objects that are submissive. He doesn't respect or think about the Middle Sister's human right of being able to choose or decide what she wants to do with life. This is violence. This is pure form of violence where women are objectified and are seen as things that can be bought and sold.

Sexual harrasment and panopticon are also prevalent in the novel because of which the narrator is never alone. She's always chased and being seen by the milkman. She is deprived of her personal space and is stranded. There's a constant fear because of surveillance and control. There's fear for not having any law or police or institution that could protect her because Milkman was the institution. The Silence goes hand in hand with violence. All this objectification, chasing, stalking, non consensual

photography and surveillance make the narrator numb to the core. Her inability to speak or to take action is because there's "no law for sexual harassment" unless "there's a proof" (Burns, 2018). "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). The dehumanising element in the novel can be understood via both Marxist and Feminist lens. Susan Bordo's binary of body and mind where male is associated by the mind and female by the body and Marxist alienation in context of means of production and division of labour and economic independence are interrelated and have a point of contact i.e. commodification and capitalism. This novel is about the horrifying result of multiplying sexual harassment trauma by the conditioning of women to remain silent and numb.

Abuse

One day, the Young Woman's mother (referred to as Ma) speaks with rare candor about her past. She says she had a crush on the Real Milkman as a young woman. A young woman and her oldest sister work together to convince their mother to go on a date with the Real Milkman. Around the same time, Milkman is found murdered, but no one knows who committed the murder. Around the same time, Young Woman is attacked in a club bathroom by a young man with a gun. Young Woman refers to the man as Somebody McSomebody. McSomebody had been stalking her regularly for the past year. Fortunately, the other women in the bathroom manage to disarm McSomebody; then they beat him severely. At the end of the novel, the Young Woman's life has reached a state of relative peace and stability, but there are still many social and political problems that negatively affect life in her town.

Social Pressure, Repression and Conformity

The thematic threads of conformity, social pressure and repression are prevalent throughout the novel. The silence and numbness of the Middle Sister is because of this social pressure that is institutionally derived. The repressive state apparatus and ideological state apparatus (Althusser) both contribute to establish this pressure. A capitalist society is a society that represses the women doubly; by the objectification and commodification in general and the patriarchal touch to it in particular. The example for this is when the middle sister is in the middle of being harassed by the middle aged man. Instead of empathy, she receives secondary victimisation and blame. Even her elder sister does not believe in anything and doesn't support her sister. Rather, the elder sister believes the rumour. She does not hear anything from her sister. She lectures the middle sister on how to live life.

The Middle Sister receives pressure to conform, both within and outside of her home, even when the requisites of this conformation are deeply agonizing for her. For example, the Middle Sister states in narration, "Since my sixteenth birthday two years earlier ma had tormented herself and me because I was not married" (Burns, 2018 Pg. 45). The middle sister does not in any way like to go along with the social norm of marrying and having children as soon as possible, and she therefore faces consequences within her own home.

Economic oppression

For economic independence women need education. They need equal rights to learn and earn to have an access to the means of production. The novel presents various instances where the right of women to get education is in question. The educated women are not seen safe in the patriarchal society. It's discouraged throughout the novel as it provokes the men. For example, the conversation between the middle sister and the Longest Friend. Even her so called longest friend does not validate her experience of harassment by the Milkman. She rather suggests the middle sister to stop reading while walking. Her friend tells her that the reason she's being chased is because she attracts the men because of her reading habit. The Longest Friend also tends to show the internalised misogyny and imperialism. She approves and normalises the government surveillance and she disapproves the middle sister's claim that the surveillance was because of Milkman. The Middle Sister also remembers her Elder Sister and First Brother in law's views about education of women. She remembers how they would criticize the idea of women spending their energies on educating themselves.

Harassment and Blackmailing

One reason behind the silence of the middle sister is the constant harassment and Blackmailing by the milkman. There's an instance where she is blackmailed by the milkman via the reference of her Maybe Boyfriend. The milkman knows about the Maybe Boyfriend of the middle sister and it's a proof that he has stalked the middle sister throughout, extracting everything and all information about her life. When he mentions the Maybe Boyfriend, the middle sister becomes afraid and further traumatised. Milkman threatens her that he would kill the maybe boyfriend if she doesn't break up. The middle sister reminds herself of her Elder sister's fiance who was also killed in a car bomb. In the same chapter, there's a

mention of "severed cat head" that the middle sister sees. It is a symbol of violence and an indication of blood and death in the country and milkman approaches her there and threatens her about killing her maybe boyfriend in a car bomb further depicting the death and fear.

Women Issue (Feminist Women) in the Novel

Real Milkman suggests that if Middle Sister doesn't feel safe, she could get some guidance and support from a small coalition of feminist women in town. The middle sister is shocked by this proposal, knowing that all women in town who identify as feminists had to face humiliation and harsh persecution. The narrative then digresses to explain the history of feminism in the city. The feminist coalition was formed relatively recently, and people accused women of being deeply immoral. Feminists protested against the deeply unfair treatment of women, but the rest of the community simply saw these women as fake or as having irrelevant claims in an attempt to disrupt morality and it accepts the social norms. The middle sister remembers that one day, a group of renouncers vandalized a shed where a small group of feminists regularly met. So it is out of question to get help from such movements.

CONCLUSION

Milkman by Anna Burns is a depiction of state of women in Northern Irish society. It exposes how power and capitalism exploit women. It highlights the gender-based oppression and role of culture and institutions in gender oppression. The middle sister is symbolic of women's condition in a society where the means of production and power structures are solely in hands of male gender. The absence of women in powerful national institutions makes her the victim of economic oppression that leads to gender inequality. The Marxist Feminist Study suggests the dismantling of capitalist power structures as a way to counter gender inequality and a step ahead to women empowerment. This study situates Marxist feminism as a critical reading approach to understand gender-based oppression and inequality and proposes an anti-capitalist future for women's empowerment.

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