

# MILKMAN THROUGH THE LENS OF FOUCAULT: POWER, SURVEILLANCE, AND RESISTANCE IN ANNA BURNS' NOVEL

<sup>1</sup>S.Felshy Glarinda, <sup>2</sup>Dr. K. Vijila

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar, (Reg. No. 2111274012016), St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti

## Abstract:

Anna Burns' novel *Milkman* intricately explores the psychological and social ramifications of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, presenting narrative rich in fear, suspicion, and violence. Through the lens of the unnamed young woman, Burns delves into the pervasive atmosphere of tension that characterizes the period. This article examines *Milkman* through the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault's concepts of power and surveillance, highlighting how these elements permeate the narrative and shape individual and community dynamics. By analyzing key passages and employing textual quotations, this study elucidates Burns' nuanced portrayal of a society under siege and the subtle acts of defiance that sustain its people.

Keywords: Suspicion, Dynamics, Psychological, Violence, Surveillance.

## Introduction

Anna Burns' *Milkman* is a compelling exploration of life during the Troubles, a period marked by political conflict and violence in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to 1998. The novel follows an unnamed narrator, referred to as "Middle Sister," as she navigates the complexities of a divided community. Employing Michel Foucault's theories of power and surveillance, this article delves into how Burns portrays the impact of political conflict on individual lives and community dynamics.

## Foucault's Theory of Power and Surveillance

Michel Foucault's theory of power is essential to understanding the dynamics at play in "Milkman." Foucault posits that power is not merely repressive but also productive, operating through societal norms, institutions, and discourses to shape and control individuals' behavior. Surveillance, a crucial mechanism of power, disciplines society by instilling a sense of being constantly watched, thereby regulating actions and thoughts.

## Pervasive Atmosphere of Fear and Suspicion

Burns vividly depicts a society entrenched in fear and suspicion, echoing Foucault's notion of a panoptic society. The protagonist's community is one where "to be interesting is to be noticed and to be noticed is dangerous" (Burns, p. 7). The narrator's association with the enigmatic Milkman, a paramilitary figure, becomes a focal point of gossip and scrutiny,

illustrating how personal interactions are politicized and weaponized. This mirrors Foucault's idea that power operates through the subtle, pervasive monitoring of individuals.

### **The Impact of Political Violence on Daily Life**

Burns portrays the omnipresent influence of political violence on daily life through the narrator's experiences. The novel describes how "nobody was able to be sure what normality was because there had been no normality" (Burns, p. 19). This uncertainty permeates the community, affecting relationships, behavior, and perceptions of safety. The omnipresence of surveillance, both by the state and paramilitary groups, creates an environment where trust is scarce and paranoia is rampant, reminiscent of Foucault's disciplinary society.

### **Power Dynamics and Control**

The theme of power and control is central to "Milkman," aligning with Foucault's theories. The titular character wields an unsettling influence over Middle Sister, embodying the oppressive forces at play in the community. Burns writes, "He didn't touch me. That was one of his devices. If he had touched me I would have known. Instead he just permeated" (Burns, p. 60). This subtle yet pervasive control reflects the broader mechanisms of power that govern the lives of the characters, from paramilitary intimidation to societal expectations. Foucault's concept of power as diffuse and embodied in societal norms is evident in Milkman's insidious presence.

### **Acts of Resistance**

Despite the oppressive atmosphere, "Milkman" also highlights acts of resistance, both subtle and overt. The narrator's refusal to conform to societal norms, her relationship with "Maybe-Boyfriend," and her ultimate confrontation with Milkman are all acts of defiance. Burns suggests that these small, personal rebellions are crucial in maintaining a sense of self amidst the turmoil. Foucault's idea that power relations are always accompanied by possibilities for resistance is reflected in these acts of defiance.

### **Conclusion**

"Milkman" by Anna Burns is a powerful exploration of the impact of political and social conflict on individuals and communities, enriched by Foucault's theories of power and surveillance. Through the lens of the unnamed narrator, Burns captures the pervasive atmosphere of fear and suspicion, the intrusion of political violence into everyday life, and the dynamics of power and resistance. The novel's nuanced portrayal of a society under siege offers profound insights into the human condition and the resilience of the human spirit.

## Works Cited

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