

THE FEARSCAPE OF BELFAST IN ANNA BURNS' *MILKMAN*

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Abstract: *The paper analyses Anna Burns' 2018 novel Milkman from the standpoint of gender and literary spatial theories. It explores the urban spatial constraints of presumed Belfast during "the Troubles", marked by sectarian violence and fear. The focus of the discussion is on the sense of topophilia and gendered spatiality, with particular concern for the narrator-cum-protagonist of the novel, who experiences the "male gaze," liminality, and fractured subjectivity.*

Keywords: *gender, literary spatial theories, Northern Ireland, trauma, violence*

1. Introduction

The charged cityscape of Belfast holds a prominent place in the aesthetics of terror, due to the legacy of violence, fear and trauma associated with the Northern Irish ethnic and national conflicts, especially in the last third of the twentieth century. Despite attempts to change this popular image in public discourse after the Good Friday Agreement, through the project of "rebranding" the city as a place of love and reconciliation rather than antagonism and violence (Heidemann 2016: 1-2), fiction writers remain critically focused on the recent past. In post-Agreement fiction, unlike in post-Agreement public discourse, critics such as Neal Alexander (2009: 281) identify a "retrospective tendency" and "an explicit or implicit preoccupation with the ways in which the unresolved events of the past threaten to disrupt or jeopardise those of the present". In his article "Remembering to Forget", Alexander discusses the post-Agreement novelistic practice of "re-membering – putting together the pieces of a fractured psychological or historical puzzle," which clashes with the dominant political practice of "erasure from memory" (ibid.). In a similar vein, critics such as Caroline Magennis point to certain common preoccupations in the post-Agreement texts which explore intersectionality between political and gender-based violence. While in her works *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles: Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures* (2021) and "Sex and Violence in Northern Irish Women's Fiction" (2020) Magennis remains mindful of a number of differences in themes and other literary features of these writers, she underlines their increased interest in "the effects of violence on Northern Irish women's psychic, emotional, and sexual lives" (Magennis 2020: 336).

Anna Burns's novel *Milkman*, published to great acclaim in 2018, is a case in point, even though the city of Belfast and Northern Irish conflicts are never specifically mentioned in the text. The author's systematic erasure of both character names and toponyms possibly mirrors the post-Agreement state politics of "remembering to forget," and results in a "palpable sense of heaviness within her work" (Magennis 2021: 136). In another paper, we have discussed this narrative technique as parallel to the gendered strategies of evasiveness, silence and amnesia

as coping mechanisms in the context of an oppressive culture in the seventies Northern Ireland, which is metaphorically represented through the protagonist's memory lapses and *jamais-vu* (Kondali and Vukotić 2022). But Belfast's particular "topography of terror" (Heidemann 2016: 2) is clearly evoked in the distinctive geographical and socio-political setting described by the eighteen-year-old protagonist and narrator who is referred to as "middle sister" and "middle daughter." When she finds herself trapped in a vicious web of sexual harassment by an older, prominent paramilitary stalker, known as "milkman", along with his disturbing and unsolicited attention, gossip, social surveillance, shaming and threats with violence, the middle-sister's experience of the already terrifying urban environment becomes agonizing. As Burns herself explains in her interview with Sheila McWade (2020), "Although the place where Milkman is set is never identified, it is a distorted version of Belfast in the late 1970s." Indeed, Belfast is evoked in the countless references to the profoundly militarized and ethnically divided city zones, as well as in the expressions denoting geographical, residential and social segregation, such as "our community" and "their community", "over the road", "over the water" and "over the border", and in the general atmosphere of scrutiny and control resulting in further tribal divisions between "renouncers-of-the-state" and "defenders-of-the-state". A sense of place is also established through what Sheila McWade and Catherine Toal, among others, identify as the particular "Belfast rhythms and vernacular" and "Burns's mixing of familiar Belfast phraseology ('away you on') in characters' discourse (McWade 2020; Toal 2018).

This paper acknowledges and builds on the importance of the interrelation between space and gender pioneered by feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose (1996: 62), who claims that space is "a fantasy of something all enveloping, something everywhere, unavoidable, unfailingly supportive". Recognizing space as a projection of our longing for an imagined reality that supports our vision of real life, Rose asserts that the enabling and surrounding mode of our understanding this reality is space: "the medium through which the imaginary relation between self and the Other is performed" (idem: 63). The interdependence of space and social relations, and hence also gender roles, is also evinced in Doreen Massey's (2005: 9) definition of space as "the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny". Sociocultural structures affect human perceptions and experiences of space, and while to some degree space is "always under construction" (ibid.), the gendered nature of space is established as crucial in the male-female dichotomy of the sociocultural system. The gendered spatiality of the domains of public and private is made evident in respective norms and practices since, according to Massey, the "spatial is political" (ibid.). The patterns of entitled male domination intersect with the complex and violent context of Northern Ireland, raising questions about the body, female subjectivity, and agency.

2. Navigating the city with spatial anxiety

While in an earlier interview Anna Burns explains that "this skewed form of Belfast" transcends the specific temporal and spatial context, so that it can be perceived as "any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions", or "an entire society living under extreme pressure, with long term violence seen as the norm" (Allardice 2018), and a number of critics have interpreted Burns' systematic erasure of names primarily as a strategy of

universalisation, Burns maintains that the depicted fictional world “feels like Belfast” even if the descriptions do not closely mirror the real place (McWade 2020). Indeed, in this sense we tend to agree with Catherine Toal (2018), who insists that “*Milkman* needs to be recognized as a book that sounds the soul of the people and the place it portrays”, and that readers should remain keenly attuned to “a reality that is encapsulated by the absurdist-generic names rather than transcended by them”.

The “reality” in *Milkman* which Toal refers to *feels* oppressive and dangerous, as experienced by an extremely sensitive and hypervigilant narrator-protagonist, a young woman who devises a set of strategies for her navigation of what we could safely interpret as a “geography of fear”, to borrow the term from Fran Tonkiss’ (2005) spatial theory. Evidently, middle sister and a number of other characters perceive Belfast city streets and zones as threatening due to a number of intersecting factors, manifested in different forms and varying degrees of sectarian and gender violence. Additionally, the spatialised anxiety has been internalised, just as “milkman’s coercion, like the many rules and restrictions internalised by the community, is assumed rather than defined” (Ni Éigeartaigh 2020: 49). The protagonist is subjected to both political and sexual harassment throughout the novel, by the community and by a paramilitary officer of high rank called Milkman, who stalks and preys upon her so that she remains always “straight on the alert” (Burns 2018: 8). As we have argued elsewhere, her extreme alertness (hypervigilance) can be interpreted as a post-traumatic symptom and a coping strategy used by women who may never have been raped, but still perceive certain places and situations fraught with danger and risk (Kondali and Vukotić 2022: 288; Brown 1995: 107-108).

The threats of Belfast city streets in *Milkman* are both perceived and searingly real. Strangely enough, despite being heavily regulated through a series of most absurd “unspoken rules and regulations” which “everyone – *everyone* understood” (Burns 2018: 22), the streets of Belfast are the site of repeated acts of political and gender-based violence which have become the norm in the characters’ everyday life, from “bombs and guns and death and maiming” (idem: 21) to widely accepted sexual predations and encroachment:

At the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in a 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? At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment. I had a feeling for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people, but 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: 6)

The quotation illustrates the insidious assumptions signified in the palpable, physical and hence evident sexual aggression understood as a social norm and heavily worked by Milkman. As Natalie Wall (2023:77) points out: “By carefully walking the boundary between visible and invisible violence milkman can get away with casting all community suspicions onto middle sister”. The pattern of the collective vigilance generates a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust, indeed “a homogenizing climate of fear” (Magennis 2021: 147), that weighs heavily on the

protagonist's sense of the urban environment. The pressures of entrenched sectarianism and patriarchy, among others, are underscored by the socio-spatial organisation in the community that reduce Middle Sister to an existence of vulnerability and anxiety.

In Burns' at once poignant and humorous descriptions of the overall "psycho-political atmosphere" (Burns 2018: 24), the Belfast cityscape is in many ways presented as fearscape, and characters constantly display symptoms of *topophobia*, as "fear of the place" as understood by Dylan Trigg (2017). A number of disorders and in general post-traumatic symptoms such as panic attacks, hypervigilance, avoidance, etc. are evident in the characters' language, the phrases they unofficially use to refer to certain landmarks perceived dangerous, and in their uncommon behaviour related to these places. Therefore, it has been argued that the narrative is infused with a heightened sense of the environment and how the characters engage it: "The novel presents an acute awareness of feelings and a sensitivity towards change in individual and collective moods. Women, in particular, seem acutely aware of the landscape of feeling" (Magennis 2021: 140).

Among other things, the protagonist has the habit of reading while walking, which she uses both as a dissociation technique and a conscious strategy for a somewhat safer navigation of the charged city zones. Her attempts at blocking out the multiple threats and divisions which permeate her daily existence and which are imbedded in the dominant spatio-social order are therefore also a method of extracting herself from the vicious network of knowledge in the community that she describes as follows: "Purposely not wanting to know therefore, was exactly what my reading-while-walking was about" (Burns 2018: 65). Her reading-while-walking seems to function as a challenge to spatial constrictions of the gendered practices created by the socio-political order that she strives to block out. This tenacious habit, along with the eschewing of the current century in favour of the more distant past in her reading preferences, appears to create an interstitial space for her in which she can resist the predominant condition of the environment. Interstitiality arises as a potential location that Middle Sister can claim as her own, opposing the domineering social conventions of her community that exerts control over clearly contoured spaces. At the same time, with her unusual walking practice, she challenges the expectations of how public space should be used and how women should conform to specific societal standards. Confronting life on her own terms in this manner, the protagonist seeks to redefine the gendered spatialisation of her town and (re)negotiate her femininity and agency.

There are repeated references to certain (un)conscious mechanisms and strategies which reflect the characters' perception of the sites generally perceived as threatening, such as "the ten-minute area" a "ghostly place" on downtown outskirts which takes ten minutes to walk through, "hurrying, no dawdling, though no one in their right mind would think of dawdling here", or "the usual place", which is an established term for the cemetery, used by "everybody, including the media, the paramilitaries, the state forces – even some postcards", and, finally, "'dot dot dot' places", the locations which the protagonist's mother finds indecent and disapproves of (Burns 2018: 81-82, 47). These placenames and associated practices reflect a series of specific spatial strategies, such as avoidance of places which are feared to be dangerous or inappropriate, or both. The narrator's city becomes a contested terrain, in which diverse and overlapping limitations of social, political and sexual nature are embedded in the physical geography of the unnamed urban landscape.

3. The gendered “geography of fear”

In the vein of an affective geographer, Burns invites us to consider these placenames and the wide range of emotions of fear and terror they invoke, as symptoms of a chronic *condition*, as a sense of prolonged anxiety and discomfort which is closely tied to the sense of place. Hence, as *Milkman* displays such a keen awareness of both time and space, it also reflects what Robert Tally Jr. has defined as “a fundamental spatiotemporality”, in particular a sense of “topophobia” as a condition of persistent “place-mindedness” (Tally 2019). In his study *Topophobia: Space, Narrative and the Spatial Imagination*, he (2019:38) explains topophobia as “a provisional label for that condition of narrative, one that is necessary to any reading or writing of a text, in which the persistence of place and the subject’s relation to it must be constantly taken into account” In this sense, the spatial anxiety the protagonist feels throughout the narrative due to the pervasive political and gender-based violence could, more broadly, be compared to the cartographic anxiety typical for the fictional representations of space in general (see Gregory 1994: 70-73). Understood in this way, Belfast cityscape in Anna Burns’ *Milkman* is charged with symbolic potential as the novel joins the continuing debate on the production and meaning of space in both public and literary discourse. At the same time, the novel testifies to “the thriving state of novel writing in Ireland, especially in the hands of Irish women writers” (Estévez-Saá 2020: 86).

From the outset of the novel, Middle Sister strives to navigate and narrate unspeakable experiences of gendered violence, surveillance, and control, implying the coercive force of patriarchal values and attitudes that instil menace, disorientation, and aversion: “It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman. 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” (Burns 2018: 1). The quotation reveals the dominant patriarchal gender relations that mirror discourses of power in which the behaviour of men is established as normative in relation to the social interactions, gender differences and spatial practice in the city. From the first contact between the narrator and Milkman the pattern in which he pursues and harasses her is set, whereby turning the city into a tangled web of terror, with “those invisible and insidious forms of harm that resist representation and thus communication” (Malone 2021: 9). Milkman approaches the narrator from his car as she is reading-while-walking, and keeps pestering her. “And there he was, again out of nowhere” (Burns 2018: 5), enforcing male domination and predatory practices in the public space that inflicts a traumatizing existence of continuous menace and surveillance.

In *Milkman*, characters clearly “navigate the geographies of fear” as understood by the sociologist Fran Tonkiss, who in her seminal study *Space, the City and Social Theory* contends that from a gender perspective, “women’s fear is spatialised,” and their “perceptions of danger have a specific geography” (Tonkiss 2005: 103). We find this theoretical position particularly pertinent to Burns’ fictional depiction of Belfast during Troubles, where characters’ traumas stem not only from sectarian and ethnically motivated conflicts, but also from gender violence and gender politics in general. In short, for Tonkiss (2005: 1-2) a city can be considered “as a site of social encounter and social division, as a field of politics and power, as a symbolic and material landscape, as an embodied space, as a realm of everyday experience” and she establishes that “urban spaces can be seen as structuring social relations and processes, and in turn as shaped by social action

and meanings". Cities for her (idem: 6) are "modes of consciousness and experience," and she defines city space as "perceptual as well as a physical space". What is of particular interest to us, however, is Tonkiss' examination of what she terms "the gendered use of urban space", that is the constraints in women's "spatial practice" influenced by the "spatial perceptions of violence and fear" (ibid.). While the city can be understood as a site of freedom, a place of opportunity once the private and domestic spheres traditionally connected with women's roles are abandoned in favour of the public zones, it is at the same time "a site of danger" and can be interpreted as a gendered "geography of danger", since "women's fear of male violence is manifested as a fear of space" (idem: 95, 102). Thus it may be inferred that for Tonkiss, "geographies of fear" are also "geographies of violence against women" (idem: 97). Therefore, Burns' protagonist fully fits Tonkiss' (2005: 96) definition of the "highly charged figure of the woman in the city", since in the eyes of the community she displays an aberrant behaviour and disengaged attitude, deduced thus to be "beyond-the-pale" (Burns 2018: 59-60), identified as a stranger to the divided socio-sexual order and its spatially (re)produced relations. Simultaneously, Middle Sister's conduct is perceived as a challenge to male control and supremacy, reducing her subjectivity to "a woman out of place" (Tonkiss 2005: 98).

The stark and affective experience of sexual predation contributes to the gendered experience of fear and is represented in a gradually intensifying manner, as Milkman shows up while Middle Sister goes running, with a forced familiarity, imposing a geography of intimidation and violence against women. The victim is disrupted in her routine movements in urban space and becomes traumatized, evident in her questions that were repressed for a prolonged period of time, as evident in the following description:

Also, why was he acting as if he knew me, as if we knew each other, when we did not know each other? Why was he presuming I didn't mind him beside me when I did mind him beside me? Why could I just not stop this running and tell this man to leave me alone? Apart from 'where did he come from?' I didn't have those other thoughts until later, and I don't mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later. (Burns 2018: 5)

Her sense of feeling trapped and endangered is closely related to multiple determinants, predominantly to threats from masculine authority, fear of sexual violence, and her (unwanted) visibility. As Tonkiss (2005: 95) argues, "This relation between being seen and going unseen is critical not only to women's freedoms in the city, but also to their safety". The novel traces the various spatial and social constraints enforced upon the female characters, especially upon the protagonist, that are rooted in sectarianism and gender. Her daily routine becomes criticised, controlled, and subsequently limited when her stalker implants himself into her run through the local park. Middle Sister finds herself unexpectedly running side by side with him in a section of the park, where another level of surveillance and danger is imposed on her: "An audible 'click' sounded as the milkman and I ran by a bush and this was a bush I'd run by lots of times without clicks coming out of it. I knew it had happened because of the milkman and his involvement" (Burns 2018: 7). The spatial restrictions experienced by the narrator are thus reinforced with an additional layer of exposure and vulnerability on account of her gender as the activity of running in a public space is documented as

a seemingly collusive and consensual act of intimacy, highlighted in the narrator's inference: "So now I was to be on file somewhere, in a photograph somewhere, as once unknown but now certainly known associate" (ibid.).

Her perceptions of danger are circumscribed by heightened awareness of "a mental and a practical geography that influences how women perceive and use space in the city" (Tonkiss 2005: 105) and succumbing to his persistent and pervasive threatening presence, she begins to associate the streets and the city with demeaning danger and hostility. According to Caroline Magennis (2021: 162), "As Middle Sister moves through the city, she is acutely aware of which areas are dangerous and plans her walking and running routes carefully to avoid both unwanted male attention and also straying into 'no go' areas". Furthermore, Middle Sister negotiates the space "around calculations of safety and gendered readings of danger" (Tonkiss 2005: 105) and, as Ní Éigeartaigh (2020: 51) claims, her own sense of self is diminished and she "begins to give up all the activities that once defined who she was in order to hide from him". The correlation between space, constructed by social interactions, and gender differences, moulded by spatial determinants, as exemplified by in this novel, has also been elucidated by cultural geographer Don Mitchell (2000: 219), who contends that "gender is spatially constructed in that it is constructed in and through particular social spaces (however defined)".

Milkman also follows her to her French class, and the following example demonstrates the increased gendered spatial anxiety his unwanted presence induces upon her: "I glanced down to street level. This was when I saw a white van parked up the narrow entryway opposite. I froze, jolted out of the almost peaceful consciousness of just a moment before" (Burns 2018: 78). The streets become inscribed with the limitations and threats on account of Milkman's stalking, overwhelming her with a state of the "numbance" (idem: 178), indicative of the insidious consequences of the "male gaze" and the protagonist's fractured subjectivity in the socio-spatial structuring established by the terrorizing sexual molestation. In the words of Ní Éigeartaigh (2020: 51), "[b]y allowing Milkman's narrow, sexist gaze to define her, the narrator has acceded to her own silencing: "Too late I realized that all the time I'd been an active player, a contributing element, a major component in the downfall of myself" (M, 178)". The assessment indicates the profound ramifications of external and internal alienation generated by female objectification and threats of violence in a world where Middle Sister feels out of place, without agency and spatial rights. The intolerable pressure exercised by the sectarian and patriarchal power structures is also spatially produced, imposing multiple constraints on her in public space. Moreover, the predator threatens to kill her boyfriend, and she becomes alarmed and overcome with thoughts about "maybe-boyfriend's violent death. It wasn't really prediction, of course, because in his own phraseology this milkman had pretty much spelled it out for me: death by car bomb, though car bomb may not have been the actual method intended, but only an example utilised for image and effect" (Burns 2018: 115). The virulent and graphic threats, uttered in an off-hand manner, are another strategy in Milkman's othering of the protagonist, whose experience of the city assumes an internalised guilt and vicarious responsibility for these veritably grave possibilities to her own boyfriend and family.

4. Conclusion

The fearscape of Belfast as portrayed in Anna Burns' *Milkman* is complex and layered, forged in the intersection of predatory stalking of a woman by a man and the violent political and everyday topography of the Troubles. Based on findings of cultural and feminist geographers, including Tonkiss' (2005) conceptualisation of spatial legitimisation, this analysis has shed light on the fate of the female protagonist in the gendered spatiality of her community's patriarchal and sectarian norms and practices. With indirection as a way of communicating (hence few explicit place names or other specific references), this linguistic avoidance signifies a constant fright and an act of survival. Since naming could lead to informing and punishment through kangaroo courts, torture and even execution, the repercussions of knowledge and gossip underwrite the symbolic coding of space as gendered dominance. Furthermore, in mapping the repressive, often horrifying context, Burns' engaged narration showcases the deep-seated social norms and prejudices supported by sectarianism and rigid gender roles, dominated by men, and resulting in mistrust of official institutions and means of communication such as telephones perceived as directly contributing to the cartographic anxiety. Moreover, the misogynist and harsh community scrutiny exerts relentless pressure on the protagonist to conform to their communal perceptions about her status and to become the predator's girl, rendering her without agency over her own body and fate, in keeping with the prevalent women's internalisation of sexist values in the novel and enhancing the sense of dread. In this manner, Burns' novel exemplifies fictional texts that illuminate the affective impact of violence and manage, in the words of Siân White (2021: 353), "to expose realities of gendered power – where victims are feminised and therefore deemed unreliable – which contemporary society has failed to address". In this way, Burns joins other contemporary women novelists whose literary texts challenge the gendered grounds of the socio-spatial order and gendered assumptions of the victims' capacity, as well as the right to act and speak, against all odds, and in spite of fear.

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