

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ANNA BURN'S MILKMAN

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Fazl-E-Haq, Dr. Aamir Shehzad, Sumbal Parveen. Discursive Representation of Women's Subjectivity: A Feminist Critique of Anna Burn's Milkman -- Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 18(18), 85-96. ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: Discrimination, Gender Subjectivity, Discursive Praxis, Feminism.

ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to analyze Anna Burn's novel *Milkman* from feminist point of view. Women have always been subjugated, discriminated and enslaved throughout the world, more or less varied, in different societies. Even though in European societies it is less and mildly expressed and felt but cannot be completely relegated. This phenomenon can be clearly observed by analyzing the literature of these nations where *Milkman* is not an exception. The role of language is made explicit in making such discrimination and subjugation. In this study the textual discourse of the novel is analyzed critically and observed that how female are being mistreated, discriminated, subjugated and kept in a specific social context and discourse. The study also focuses on the power relationships between male and female which have been produced and reproduced through text as dominated and subjective. The study concludes that female subjectivity, discrimination and dominance are not only restricted to Asian society but are also a part of English society which is considered to be the most educated, cultured and modern society of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Women have always been subjugated, discriminated and exploited throughout the history in every society. Although the matter, slightly, varies from society to society yet the issues regarding the feministic exploitation are the same throughout the globe. They are not considered as equal to the men which is a universal problem; though the ratio of equal and unequal and due rights is varying. This study brings gender related issues under consideration, in which gender identity, gender discrimination and gender subjectivity are focused. It

is understood that literature acts as a representative and mirror of a society, and more or less truly depicts systems and issues that exist in that society. Such nature of literature provides an opportunity researcher to take a literary work and analyze it with feminist perspective. Anna Burn is an Irish American writer, he novel *Milkman* is set in European society 1970s and an explicit narration of all of the gender related issues in the society besides other political, social and economic issues. After a thorough reading of *Milkman*, it can be surmised that female subjectivity; dominance and discrimination are not restricted only to the Eastern culture but is also a part of European society. The mindset, the philosophy and the discourse are the same which keep female gender in a specific social and gendered context. The research in hand aims to study and to show up the power relationship between male and female which have been produced and reproduced through text as dominated and subjective. The text will be analyzed in the backdrop of feminist criticism to understand how female are being treated, subjugated, discriminated and kept in a specific social paradigm.

In gender related issues, the debate of gender subjectivity is an important aspect as it abnegates the idea of inborn sexual identity which divides human beings into man and woman (Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology, 2014). This kind of view questions the essentialism of sexual difference in something which is more than a binary division between male vs. female, heterosexual vs. homosexual, etc., because it assumes that these divisions are problematic as the term of gender encircles a whole range of identities across a whole spectrum. Particularly the idea like what is meant by the phrase to be equal (Butler) and the idea that the division of gender into binary opposition of male and female can be regarded as a process of othering' (de Beauvoir, 2012) are the areas that this topic examines.

Subjectivity means, according to Post-Modernist Theory, to take the perspective of one's self, rather than any neutral or objective perspective beyond one's self experience. Subjectivity observes as to how a woman herself (the "subject") lives and sees her role in life. It takes the experience of women as individuals and human beings. It looks at the attitude of women as to how they see their roles and activities as contributing (or not contributing) to their meaning and identity.

Beauvoir (2012) when she said, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (p.61), pointed towards the problem that subjectivity is meant to be addressed; that through almost all of human history and philosophy the world is being looked through male eyes, considering other men as the components of the subject of history, and considering women as Other, secondary, non-subject, even aberrations. As my own memory demonstrates, the difference between the two genders is not just a neutral difference. It is based on the principle of otherness' (de Beauvoir, 1972). In many cases, to be like men I had to be not like women.

Individuals, generally, have gender, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and political identity issues. All of these issues are overlapping each other and are interdependent. The Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy (2014) is

about gender that it is one's discernment of being male, female or any other sex. The sex of a person is not confirmed with surety at birth. However one's actions are the manifestations of one's gender identity; which is expressed through speech patterns, social interactions, manners and grooming. The gender role and behavior is determined by the hard written social norms. These gendered roles are accepted by the people who base on their perceived sex. Whenever the identity of a person is jeopardized he/she starts a struggle to retain it. The strictly bifurcated society on the basis of male and female, offer more hardships in the path of gender identity in which both the sexes represent two binary opposites, but at times overstep from their proper domain for getting more power. The gender identity is shaken by gender discrimination because it denies a specific gender to express and enjoy its proper right. In patriarchal societies, particularly the feminine gender is kept suppressed for the sake of exploiting it. Another issue under study is gender discrimination which is discussed briefly here.

Gender Discrimination/ Sexism

The concept of gender discrimination is based on prejudiced attitude and treatment of a person on the basis of gender. It can affect both the genders but women and girls are particularly subjected to this sort of treatment. Many gendered roles have been assigned on the basis of this gender discrimination in which the idea that one gender, especially man, is superior to other one, is prominent. According to the Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought (2007) "either sex may be the object of sexist attitudes, however; ... it is commonly held that, in developed societies, women have been the usual victims" (p.631). Feder, Jody & Cynthia Brougher (2013) say that gender related appearance, identity and mannerisms or other gender related traits of an individual, with regard to an individual's designated sex at birth, are based on gender identity. Gender inequality not only includes control over material resources, but it also encompasses gender norms regulations and stereotypes which leads to inequalities and discrimination.

According to *Humanity Divided; Confronting Inequality in Developing Countries* (2015) gender is, irrespective of a person's socioeconomic class, a civilised social stratification whose differences vary in different cultures and times. These gender differences, in most of the communities, promote male gender towards better socioeconomic and political positions as compared to feminine gender. Most of the international organizations and national strategies, for years, aim to promote gender equality in almost all the societies of the world. Next related issue is the difference between gender and sex which is discussed below.

Gender and Sex

The social and cultural differences rather than biological are responsible for the classification of men and women. The social construction and associated characteristics make the roles of men and women, while sex is based on biological characteristics, on the other hand, associated with male and female. That is why the boundaries of gender differ from society to society and from

culture to culture, while that of sex remains the same throughout the world. Anderson (1988) states

Gender refers to the social roles and status differences between women and men in a society. These roles are determined by social, cultural and economic organizations of a society and the prevailing religious, moral and legal norms. 'Sex' is a biological term while "gender" is psychological and socio-cultural one. (p.23)

The roles and rules for both the male and female are defined by the society. Even though the attitudes, values and customs associated with gender are socially constructed, but individuals also bring their own identities with them innately.

The basis of sex is the physical characteristics of a person like different reproductive structures for both the opposite sexes. The external genitalia, sex chromosomes, and sex hormones for both the sexes are different. Sex is something inherent which is determined before birth as to whether one is male or female. Contrarily gender is a complex thing which is based on the association of an individual with an internal sense of being male or female. Gender is based on a person's perception of his/her sex and the feeling that how people perceive it. The next topic under study is the role of language in gender subjectivity and discrimination which is discussed below.

The Role of Language in Gender Subjectivity and Discrimination

Language is the medium of conflict for men and women. This interplay of language, gender and feminism can be looked through a wider sphere of political landscape which will help us to understand it more comprehensively in the contemporary society. According to Mills (2011), the researchers on language and gender often base their research on written and spoken texts from popular literature and mass media which can add more to the linguistic study of gender and can bring a lot of theoretical insight into it. Most of the researchers and critical thinkers are of the view that language has a vital role to play in the construction of individuals' identities, social practices and social structures. According to Mills (2011) the poststructuralist idea of discursive and textual nature of society keep the language as a focal point for researchers rather than keeping it at a marginal position and a sub-disciplinary area.

Discourse, from feminist point of view, is an expertly organized and valuable linguistic phenomenon and is not only confined to the construction of gendered relation. Austin (1962) is of the view that it is greatly contemplated to examine gender through the use of language, and that our words have the power to perform actions. According to Ali (2012) gender is constructed through different individuals, groups and social institutions. The gender identities are made with the help of language through different social institutions like family, religion media, literature etc. Moreover literature plays an important role in the construction/deconstruction, promotion and propagation of gender identities through different tools of its own.

The paradigm of gender construction through language is liable to vary from culture to culture, society to society and time to time because both of them are variable and dynamic. Joseph (2004) states that language and gender is not a singular, fixed and intrinsic, rather it is dynamic, reflective and socially constructed. This innovative idea broadens the sphere of research in the field of applied linguistics. Language is used by us differently on the bases of our differing social backgrounds and which, in turn, is determined by our religion, gender, race and social class.

Anna Burn's *Milkman* is set in Ireland in late seventies during the political turmoil of separation and segregation; when political strife was so high that physical, psychological and social issues were completely considered to be of no importance. Even being injured and murdered without a political reason was considered to be a cause of shame and bad name for an individual as well as his family. The Middle sister (it should be noted that hardly any important character in the novel has a proper name.), who is always busy studying while walking, is being followed by a state renouncer named Milkman, who is above forty years of age and this becomes an issue for the whole of the society. Even though she refuses to be his girlfriend or his mistress, she is constantly for being charged so even by her mother, her sisters and eldest brother in law. She has a secret affair with another boy who is referred to as Maybe-boyfriend and who is a car mechanic and lover of cars and Super-charger, but she never mentions him to her mother or sisters. That's why her mother wants her to accept the advances of Somebody Mcsomebody who, according to her mother is a good character boy, but in fact is not so. The whole story revolves around the affair of this Middle Sister who is constantly being discriminated, exploited, tortured, subjugated and ill-treated, mostly because of her inert character and of being a female character of the society; who are considered to be the property of male and where male members of society are free to dispose them off in whatever manner they want. We witness her mother always to lecture her on how to behave and how to avoid the Milkman and to choose a boy like Somebody McSomebody of the "right faith". She is then poisoned by the Tablet Girl, who has a split personality syndrome and who always poisons people under different pretexts. The Milkman is shot dead by the state forces after a long follow up which satisfies her mother and her sisters, especially Third Sister who feels jealous of her sister's misconcepted successful perfect match with the said Milkman. Her real lover the Maybe-boyfriend turns out to be a gay and she is completely disillusioned. Almost all of the female characters of the novel are mal-treated, harassed or discriminated by both the male and female characters only because they are female. All of them are snatched of their right match partner (for marriage) by some other rogue male member of the society.

The extreme form of women subjectivity is described even in the first sentence of the novel *Milkman* when the narrator says that Somebody McSomebody put a gun to her breast and called her a cat and threatened to shoot her, "Somebody McSomebody pushed into the toilet and shoved me up against the sink. He was holding a handgun and it was stuck in my breast so then I knew that the death of Milkman wouldn't mean, for me, the end of Milkman" (p. 306). This passage is the continuation of the first sentence of the novel where she says that along with putting a gun to her breast somebody called her a "cat". Here in this passage

somebody is said to have followed her into the bathroom and pushed her towards the sink. It is also an extreme form of subjugation and violation to threaten a woman to death. And the reason for it is only refusing his advances of love and "no-relationship". Here the novelist wants to display that women in society are not allowed to refuse the advances of a man because they are considered to have no choice. They are considered only to fulfil the desires of male folk, otherwise they have no right to live. The purpose of their lives is considered only to make male folk happy, let be anyone. We can observe in the novel that Somebody attacks her on the very day when Milkman, the misconcepted boyfriend of the narrator, is dead. So Somebody attacks her because her old lover is no more in this world, and she has no choice than to choose another one and that other one must be Somebody. The last words of the passage on page no: 306 are worth noticeable. She says that she came to the conclusion that the death of the milkman does not mean the end of milkman for her. She was being followed, investigated, and always threatened by milkman. He is no more in this world but other persons are taking his place and are pursuing her, bullying her and subjugating her, even more than him because then the situation was worst for her. Moreover the point must be noted that the narrator is attacked in the bathroom which is considered to be the most private, most secure and most protected place by society. But for women these places have become places of trap where they can be preyed and attacked. It is ridiculous that the state renouncers or the society has made this action as "one quarter rape" (p.310).

With the Milkman gone, she is no more secure and safe. The society was a sort of a Jungle where only power is the test of survival. This person could fuck her there, could beat her and could shoot her to death because no one was there to help her or save or take revenge for her. Only might is right there in the society South Ireland during seventies. That is why the novelist depicted it in her novel. Sexual harassment is one of the tools used against women. The narrator of the novel *Milkman*, being a female, undergoes several incidents where she is being harassed. The following is one of the incidents where she is harassed in extreme conditions and extreme situation.

He was saying that anything went here, that I should know anything went here given I was from here. As he spoke my mind was racing, thinking, this boy is stupid but he's dangerous stupid and he wants This is not the sort of place, you sub-cat' he began, but then he ran out of words.... He wants to fuck me and he wants to beat me and from the look of things might even now want to shoot me. (p. 308)

Somebody McSomebody, after being frustrated from by the narrator in his love towards her, in the novel *Milkman*, attacks her in the bathrooms of a bar. He takes a pistol with him and puts it in her breast. He calls her "sub-cat" and because of too much emotion he runs out of words. At that point the narrator feels that he could do anything with her. He could beat her, fuck her and even shoot her. She was alone and could not have the courage or strength to protect her because of her feminine and fragile physique. These thoughts of the narrator also show that she feels extremely insecure because of her being a feminine gender. She is deliberately shown so feeble mentally and emotionally so weak

because of the prevailing conditions of the contemporary Irish society. The narrator wants to signify that women's harassment was so prevalent in Ireland during seventies that they could not be spared in public places like "a renowned public bar". So what would have been situation in private places like offices, hospital clinics and other work places? She says that by this action of him he wanted to "wrest back (his) pride and control after being flouted twice by me" (p.307). By 'this is not the sort of place' Somebody means that this is not the society where she can consider herself as safe and secure without the help of a man. He could do anything with her at that moment, because she was alone and nobody was there to help her.

Different discourses are used which discursively represent gender identity and discrimination in the novel. The following paragraph from the novel *Milkman*, will reveal that women's individual identity is not counted. Even if they are made relationship with, by any men, they enquire about a lot of things.

I myself... had tried out a few other boys with the view... to one of them becoming maybe-boyfriend but then I stopped because... those others had fallen short. They had asked too many questions, testing, proving questions, obviously a checklist – to evaluate, pass judgment, see if I was good enough – not questions coming from interest in wanting to know who I really was. (p. 284)

When the narrator comes of age and tries to make friendship with a boy, each of them asks her a lot of questions. Probably they have a long list of questions which they ask her. They even try to test her for her different qualities and relationship, which she is to prove. We have no clue in the novel that she or any lady has also asked any question about any maybe-boyfriend. That is why, she says, "I stopped". These maybe-relations tried to evaluate her and "pass judgment" about her, which frustrated her and she felt being annihilated which compelled her to leave trying any maybe-relationship.

Identity crisis is one of the bases of gender discrimination which leads to gender subjectivity and gender subjugation. They are considered to have no identity of their own. They are judged by the relations that they have with any other male member of society i.e. father, brother or husband. Similar is the case with Middle sister (the narrator of the novel). She is neither popular in the society nor interesting. But when her encounter with the Milkman is sniffed by her first brother in law and rumours start about her in the society, she "becomes 'interesting'. The last thing she ever wanted to be. To be interesting is to be noticed". She is never "interesting" and being "noted" even reaching the age of eighteen but when she meets Milkman she becomes "interesting".

The following passage from the novel *Milkman* is related to the narrator of the novel who is sexually abused by her first brother in law. This sexual abuse is a constant tool in the hands of male to humiliate and suppress female folk. Resultantly she feels depressed and humiliated.

When I was younger, when I was twelve, when he appeared on my eldest sister's rebound after her long-term boyfriend got dumped for cheating on her, this new man got her pregnant and then got married right away. He made lewd remarks about me to me from the first moment he met me- about my quainte, my tail,

my contry, my box, my jar, my contrariness, my monosyllable- and he used words, words sexual, I did not understand. He knew I didn't understand them but that I knew enough to grasp they were sexual. That was what gave him pleasure. (p. 1-2)

This is the very first page of the novel where a second character is being described by the narrator. Here in this passage she gives a brief but accurate character of her first brother in law. Here she gives two examples of this man's character, both of which are the evidences of women's sexual abuse. First instance is that he suddenly comes in First sister life "dumping" her first long time boyfriend through intrigues, make friendship with her and immediately makes her pregnant. The depiction in the narration shows that making her immediately pregnant was a trick upon her in order to marry her immediately, which she repents now, because she is not happy with him. First he abuses her sexually and then exploits the situation by getting her married. He displays an extreme degree of cleverness in this case because becoming pregnant without husband was considered to be immoral and a stigma for a girl's character at that time even in Europe. He exploits this situation in a very clever way.

Second instance of women's sexual abuse is that he constantly uses sexual language with his sister in law who is the narrator. He, whenever she is alone with him, names her private parts of body and use slang language with her. The words used by this brother in law are all sexual according to entangled bank site. According to this site the word "Quaint" was used hundreds of years ago as a pun, in South East of London, on 'cunt' (even though it was not an exact homophone), and 'contry' and 'box' are slangs of the modern time and 'tail' is another slang word in a sexual sense. The narrator says that her brother in law knew that she does not know the meaning of these words, which he used to enjoy. She says that she only knew that all the words used by him were sexual, but did not know their meanings. According to her whenever she was alone with him he used these words to her. And when her sister would come he would become silent. She says that it was reason that she didn't like him.

Women are always considered to live their lives in a wedlock relationship. If not they are considered to be immoral and against the social taboos, while on the other hand men are free from this stigma. The following text from the novel *Milkman* explains this point of view.

Why indeed? Once again I was back to pondering this 'marrying of the wrong spouse' business...Another reason was fear of being alone because of the social stigma that automatically attached to it... Then there was being bullied into it because you have to fit convention, because you can't let people down. (p.255) There are many married couples in the novel, in which the female partners are not happy. The narrator contemplates on this point and searches out for valid reasons that why these females marry partners whom they don't love after all. She comes with the conclusion that it is because of the social stigma that these women are compelled to marry. If they don't marry they will be socially isolated. No one will have relations with her. These are the social taboos which compels her to marry even a wrong person so that she may be respected in the society. These are social conventions which don't allow any woman to live in

isolation. Being not married to anyone will let your family down. That's why the narrator says, "you can't let people down". At the same time we witness an unmarried person known as "real Milkman" who does not marry but is highly esteemed, respected and even loved. We are told that he had helped a lot of people in the novel but all the beneficiaries' of his help are women. "He'd helped Somebody McSomebody's ma" at six different occasions. "Then he'd helped ma (mother of the narrator)" (p.254) at three different occasions. He had helped the narrator, her second not stop here. When he is injured in a murder attack by the state forces we observe that eighteen aged women come to his nurse him and help him. All these eighteen girls are said to have loved him during his youth time and have remained his girlfriends. But he loved one lady by the name of "Piggy" who devoted not considered to be a stigma for his family or society. He is not compelled to "have to fit to conventions". He is not considered to have "let people down". These social conventions and taboos are only for women and not for men which is an extreme kind of gender discrimination.

On the other hand women are compelled to marry even the man whom they don't love. These women are forced to marry wrong partners because in many situations their lovers love someone else and eventually men's will prevail and these women can't help saving themselves. This is a sort of gender discrimination which needs to abolish.

When the narrator who is a lady and is named as Middle sister in the novel *Milkman*, starts reasoning with his Maybe boyfriend over the issue of supercharger and driving he interrupts her accuses her of feeling shame to take him to her house. Then he accuses her of not coming to his house on Tuesdays and Thursdays. At this point she feels to be considered as wooden doll.

I had barely got into doing so when he interrupted to accuse me for the first time of being ashamed of him because instead of letting him call to my door for me I only wanted to meet him out of the way on those isolated interface roads ... Then he reinforced his proof of my being ashamed of him by delineating occasions of late when I'd recoiled from him, adding that on Thursdays I no longer stayed over with him...At first I was stumped which gave him time to fit in extra charges of an unattractive numbed state he had observed was creeping over me, that he felt was starting to invade and possess me, saying it was as if I was no longer a living person but one of those jointed wooden dollies that artists use in. (p.193)

The narrator of the novel, who is a lady, says that as she started on the subject of driving she was "interrupted". No persons of equal status will interrupt each other's. This interruption, according to Norman Fairclough often occurs when there is disparity between positions and the person in position considers it his right to speak and the co-sharer in discourse is only to listen to him. Then her Maybe boyfriend accuses her of being "ashamed" of him because she is reluctant to take him home lest other people of her community know about her relationship only because of decency and shame from the side of society. Male persons of society may have friendship with other female and take them home as well without any sort of shame or reluctance but female cannot do it.

Furthermore the subject of oppression i.e. the Middle sister herself feels that she is being treated as “no longer a living person”. This is the extreme form of subjugation, discrimination and exploitation when the object herself feels of being treated as nonliving thing. She would also have been felt extreme humiliation and degradation at the same time. She is being possessed as a wooden doll and not a human being who has any free will or options where to go and where not to go. When to go and when not go. How to behave and how not to behave. The word “possess” is used for things or commodity and not for living beings.

Domestic violence and ill-treatments are also present in the novel which show the depiction of that particular Irish society where it is rampant. Woman is shown in a condition where she is ill-treated even at the verge of death in the novel *Milkman*. The narrator is poisoned by the Tablet girl. But when she comes home, her mother subjugates her to a queer sort of treatment. She asks her a lot of questions with regard to who, how, when, and also about of her friends and their worthiness. Then she gives the following remarks;

Well, what do you expect wee girl' she said, if you go round stealing other people's husbands? Of course those women are going to try to kill you... Fool girl. Oh foolhardy! Foolhardy! Then she continued her accusation. During this time I was still curled in a ball, unable to straighten, unable to stand, with waves of pain... In the name of God!' she cried, 'are they (people) correct?... Have you been fecundated by him?'... 'Imbued by him?' she elaborated. 'Engendered in. Breeded in. Fertilized, vexed, embarrassed, sprinkled, caused to feel regret, wished not to have happened.... Do I have to spill it out? (p.222)

In this passage, the narrator displays the domestic violence prevalent in the society at that time. The narrator is poisoned by the “tablet girl”. She suffers from extreme pain and agony while her mother is torturing her with her accusation. She is at the verge of death and her mother, instead of taking her to hospital, asks her a lot of questions which she can't answer. She is vomiting because of being sick while her mother satisfies her own anger with her. She is of the opinion that she has some sort of illicit relations with a lot of men all of whom are married. And this poisoning could be the result of any such relation where any desperate wife would have poisoned her. That's why she asks, “I want you to list me all those wives” (p.223). Further she asks, “But what did they give you?” (p.223) she thinks that all this is because of her own faults. Even though later on she knows that all this was because of “tablet girl”, she does not seem to shift the accusation from her daughter to the tablet girl.... She does not believe her daughter because, “All she wanted was confirmation of the rumor” (p. 224). Her mother thought that “these spasms, this stiffness, this unable to straighten, unable to stand, weren't down to poison” (p. 224) but were the result of “usual” i.e. impregnated by the Milkman. She does not say this directly, but in a roundabout manner which tortures her the most. Her mother says, “Have you been fecundated by him? Engendered in. Breeded in. Fertilized, vexed, embarrassed, sprinkled” (p.225). All these words are ambiguous in their meaning, even though they hint towards becoming pregnant. The narrator wonders, “Why couldn't she just say pregnant?” But this is her mother's way of torturing and accusing her as she mentions, “But this was like ma”. After the

use of language like this for her daughter who is at the threshold of life and death, she tells her about abortion of the maybe pregnancy and she had to guess it from “vermifuge, squaw mint, Satan’s apple, premature expulsion,…” Then comes the turn of being procured by “drab aunts” which was news for her. “This was a news for me. I hadn’t known there drab aunts in the area” (p.224).

This is the sort of accusation, subjugation, and violence which the narrator suffers in the novel. Her mother accuses her of being indecent and immoral because of having illicit relations with married men. We never witness that she accuses her son, or the “real milkman” who has eighteen girlfriend of being immoral indecent. This is one of the kind of domestic violence which is being committed by the mother of the narrator towards her, instead of being committed by any male member of society. So women face domestic violence not only from men’s side, but also from women’s side; be it sister, mother, grandmother or mother-in-law.

CONCLUSION

European society, until 1970 had done away with most of the discriminatory laws and had ensured equal share in inheritance and property, equality in business affairs, equal opportunities of voting, equality of freedom and a lot of other equal rights to both man and woman, but could not change the mental approach and psychology of men as well as the women. Women were and are still considered to be weak and defenceless. They had/have separate toilets and wash rooms where men were/are not allowed. The novel *Milkman* apparently seems to depict Irish society of 1970s when women have been targeted and exploited by their counterparts. We see the narrator of the novel being made subject to insulting behaviour and ill treatment. It shows the picture of the contemporary patriarchal society and its approach towards feminine gender.

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