Antagonistic Performance as a Contest of Gender Identity in Anna Burns' Milkman and Little Constructions

Kevihetou Agnes

MPhil Scholar

English Department

ICFAI University Dimapur

*Abstract***:** Individuals in a society are identified first and foremost by the gender they belong to. In the process of the person acquiring an identity for themselves, the person follows certain behaviours and manners which they imitate and inculcate for themselves. As gender identity acts as an important factor for recognizing an individual's identity, a high regard is placed on obeying gender roles. When gender normativity functions as an administrative structure, individuals who fail to comply or appear according to their genders are identified as deviant personalities.

The Northern Irish writer, Anna Burns observes the domestic aspect of the lives of the people during the Troubles, representing their experiences through the characters whose lives revolve around a rigid social order with the Troubles in the background. In *Milkman* and *Little Constructions*, Burns presents the tense atmosphere built up on account of the Troubles in Northern Ireland which has intensified the Identity crisis experienced by the individuals. Burns places significance on the minute detail of the characters' experiences from the narratives. Focusing on the affairs and encounters of the individual characters with the events, Burns explores the experiences of the individuals and their response to their environment as we observe the characters' impulse to behave in a spontaneous manner not called for in their rigid social environment. Gender norms for this context plays a significant factor in disciplining the individuals as the community keeps watch of discordant individuals. The outward manifestation of unconventional behaviour and conduct and the urge to invent new responses assumes for them an antagonist personality.

Judith Butler maintains that there is no truth essence or true meaning to the term or identity of women, Butler endorses the constructed-ness of gender and its performativity. Best known for her works, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter (*1993), Butler is known for establishing the idea of the unnaturalness of gender contending that it is constructed through language. Butler's theory marks a sharp

departure from the previous views of feminism on the identity and essentialist notion of womanhood. Disturbing the structure of men/women identity category in the gender binary and exposing the arbitrariness of meaning, gender as a term has been denaturalized. The coherence of identifying individuals by their gender identity is interrupted by the concept of performativity.

Keywords: **Anna Burns, Gender Roles, Gender Trouble, Identity Crisis, Judith Butler**

INTRODUCTION:

When Identity is determined by gender roles and when this identity served the purpose of safety and survival in Burns' novels, the author presents a situation where safety and survival had been compromised by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Anna Burns' antagonist characters in being non-compliant individuals serves as an example of the strange, the irrational and the unacceptable. Observing the characters as victims of traumatic events exposes the oppressive nature of gender hierarchy which itself is a binary constructed with opposing identities. The free play of meaning outside this gender binary grounds the characters' identity as antagonists in that their behaviour is outside do not conform to the assigned gender.

Aretxaga Begona in her article *Ruffling a Few Patriarchal Hairs: Women's experiences of War in Northern Ireland* notes the existence of disparity in gendered roles as she recounts the "Peace Women" who were a "movement of women that arose in 1976." Stating that "The Peace women captured the popular imagination because it confirmed deep rooted popular perceptions that associate men with war and women with birth and life-giving processes," Begona continues in her observation of how women in their 'Learning Disobedience' pulled away from their gender roles. Creating a fresh perspective of their gender identity by participation in the military activity during the war, these women broke the convention which assigns this task as the role of men. In the article, Begona posits on the argument "But women have not been impotent victims of these forces, nor have they experienced them in the same way. Since 1969 when communal riots brought the British army into Northern Ireland, women have been anything but passive bystanders of the conflict. ...The pervasive idea that women are mere victims of war and naturally oppose it has obscured the complex processes by which women take sides, take risks, take arms and wage war. This idea obscured the complex dynamic through which women become subjects and not mere objects of social transformation." These "popular resistance" included activities where "women organized in their streets, picked the police stations, created an alarm system to warn against army raids, his IRA men in their houses, and passed information about family benefits, prison visits and state bureaucracy." Alluding to these experiences of "hardships of coping alone with family needs amidst poverty and increasing militarization created new ties of solidarity among women and developed in them a new sense of independence and self-identity," Begona finally gathers on 'Gender Trouble' and remarks "Northern Ireland was a rigidly patriarchal society in which men expected to dominate outside and inside the house. Women had full responsibility for the house and were expected to cater to their men's needs. But internment opened a new window to other possibilities of life, creating new social and psychological spaces for women." Remarking on the change of routine and roles within the family and social spaces by women's

engagement in the private and public sphere, the author suggests that "contact with other women prisoners gave them a consciousness of women's unequal position in society." This is stated with regard to an example from the women terrorists "who Elstain has called "the ferocious few" whose history proves "needless to say these images say more about social anxieties provoked by breaking stereotypes of femininity than about the experience of these young militants" (Begona).

Sarah Resnick in her review *Female Troubles: Anna Burns novel of Visible and Invisible Violence in Northern Ireland* discusses the female characters in *Milkman* "the paramilitary groupies" whose ideologies of female power is based on masochistic ideals. This review maintains that the plot is "not on the conflict between the Catholic and the Protestants, between the IRA and the UDA, but on the tenacious pursuit of middle sister by the title character." The encroachment to Middle Sisters' life by this "high ranking, prestigious dissident" is a threat to her as he makes himself appear unannounced throughout the different daily activities and moments in Middles Sisters' life while the community is rifting with rumours of their relationship and therefore causing suspicion of her character. The rescue of Middle Sister by the some of the female characters when Somebody McSomebody attacks her in the lavatory takes on a comical scene as these women accuse him of trespassing their boundary and not for reasons that he was assaulting Middle Sister. The reviewer notes "The accusation is absurd and of course this is the point. Crimes and misdemeanours motivated by the political troubles were hard enough to make sense of; "women's issues," which were "baffling, demanding, awful bloody annoying," even more so" (Resnick).

In *Gender Trouble,* Butler emphasizes on the constructed-ness of gender which she says is a product of performativity which is a result of sedimentation and repetition of acts. The concept of antagonism as a reaction to the structure of the social order has been observed in the characters' experiences. Their non-acceptance to their subject-identity serves as a challenge to their subject interpellation to gender normativity. Butler clarifies "to claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the "real" and the "authentic" as oppositional. As a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to take the place of "the real" and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization" (Butler 45).

In *Milkman*, the character, Middle Sister becomes a target in the community for her contrariness and as she weighs in all the issues from her experience in the hypersensitive community. Her method of taking control of the situation marks her as an eccentric character which enters into the category of the "beyond the pales" of the community. Her longest friend therefore appraises her saying "you have brought it upon yourself, longest friend" (199) adding that, "The community has pronounced its diagnosis on you" (200). So far as being accused of offences for her differences, the judgements laid on Middle Sister comprised of the activities she was observed to be partaking in

It's the way you do it - reading books, whole books, taking notes, checking footnotes, underlying passages as if you're at some desk or something, in a little private study or something, the curtains closed, your lamp on, a cup of tea beside you, essays being penned- your discourses, your lucubrations. It's disturbing, it's deviant. It's optical illusional. Not public- spirited, not self – preservation, calls attention to itself and why- with enemies at the door, with the community under siege, with us all having to pull together- would anyone want to call attention to themselves here? (200)

The binary position of protagonist/antagonist characteristics is one of significance as this entails the treatment of, or moralization of individual's identity based on the structure of positive/negative.

In *Little Construction* the narrator observes the issue with the Doe sisters who had all the outwardly appearance of living normal lifestyles but who would experience, ever so often, the "psychic cracks," the "strange rage attacks," the "retaliatory violence" which sets of "the entire sexual disturbance repertoire" (171). These issues were triggered by "Any general sort of tapping therefore, or drumming, or scratching, or clicking, or fiddling would also count as examples. All are standard for what - sexually abusively speaking- could set the sisters off" (172). The narrator hints at the condition of the trauma they have experienced "these women dread the secret, uncontrollable side of their nature that once again took possession of them, and know that somewhere, sometime in their past, something unspeakable must have gone on" (172). Remarking on the alienation of these women who fulfil all the obligatory role of being "women of the community" (173) but in fact "they didn't consider they were really of the community… these women had no conscious awareness of the true state of their belonging" (173).

Providing a critique of the compulsive gender norms as the narrator comments "this is hard to imagine too, given how long they've been wives and mothers and human beings in this world" (173). As a form of coping with their fallacious lifestyles, these women have turned to denying their reality with imaginary husbands. The narrator notes "Their fantasy husbands adored their wives, constantly observed their wives, spoke admiringly of their wives, were always on the point of crossing the room to come and join their wives…"(173) which may indicate how the desires for these experiences in their actual lives have resulted to their daydreaming of ideal husbands, which in turn shows again the prescribed gender role with these expectations placed on men and how the failing of these from them results in the issues just observed.

Conclusion

Since the agitation of the characters reasons from their contesting of gender roles, the 'troubling' of gender norms connects to the disciplinary measures required for regulating the social order. By the characters' challenging the accepted behaviour, they create the ground for being a subject of trouble, both in the sense that they do not conform to gender normativity and to the political order. Butler in *Gender Trouble* states the possibility of acting and subverting from the gender binary which is a cause of gender trouble. Butler observes there are identities whose behaviour problematizes this naturalized order of gender, "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts,

in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as apolitically tenuous construction" (192).

Through the concept of antagonism, Burns' characters disturb the conventional reception of reality. The unconformity to ideology problematizes the event of their reality and debunks its structural conception. By speculating the reality of gender roles and its representation, the perceived and accepted norms of gendered behaviour and their enforcement has been analysed to inspect the oppressive regimes and imbalances involved in the fictive construction of gender as a reality.

Bibliography

Begona, Arextega. "Ruffling a Few Patriarchal Hairs: Women's Experiences of War in Northern Ireland." *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, no. 19-1 Woman and War, 1995.Culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quaterly/ruffling-few-patriarchal-hairs-womens-experiences-war.

Burns, Anna. *Milkman.* Faber & Faber, 2018.

Burns, Anna. *Little Constructions*. HarperCollins UK, 2008.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble.* Routledge, 1990.

Resnick, Sarah. "Anna Burns's novel of visible and invisible violence in Northern Ireland." *Bookforum*, bookforum.com/print/2505/anna-burns-s-novel-of-visible-and-invisible-violence-in-northern-ireland-20620.