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Silence, Surveillance, and Social Control in Anna Burns's *Milkman*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the interconnected operations of silence, surveillance, and social control in Anna Burns's Milkman (2018), a novel set in an unnamed Northern Irish community during the Troubles. Through the experiences of its eighteen-year-old narrator, the novel depicts a social environment in which political suspicion, patriarchal expectations, gossip, and the threat of violence shape everyday conduct. Drawing primarily on Michel Foucault's account of surveillance and disciplinary power, this study argues that surveillance in the novel is not confined to state observation or the stalking behaviour of Milkman; it is also reproduced through communal scrutiny and the narrator's growing habit of monitoring herself. Silence consequently functions in two contradictory ways: it can protect a person from unwanted attention, but it can also prevent disclosure, support, and resistance. Gossip and unwritten social rules extend this pressure into personal relationships, mobility, reputation, and women's behaviour. The paper concludes that Burns presents power as a dispersed, everyday process: surveillance generates fear, fear encourages silence, and internalised surveillance strengthens social control. Yet the narrator's growing recognition of these mechanisms also opens a possibility of recovering agency.

Keywords: Anna Burns, Milkman, silence, surveillance, social control, Michel Foucault, gender, the Troubles.

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Introduction:

Anna Burns's Milkman (2018) portrays an unnamed community in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, a period of political conflict and sectarian division. Rather than presenting political violence only through public events, Burns shows how conflict enters ordinary routines, family relations, romantic relationships, and community life. The novel's unnamed setting and characters give the

narrative a wider significance: individual identity is shaped by political categories and by the constant pressure to demonstrate where one belongs. The narrator, an eighteen-year-old young woman, becomes the target of unwanted attention from an older man known as Milkman. His repeated appearances, combined with rumours circulated by the community, transform ordinary activities into sources of anxiety.

The novel's power structure operates through three closely related mechanisms. Silence limits what people can safely say; surveillance makes them conscious that their movements and relationships may be observed; and social control enforces community rules through gossip, shame, exclusion, and threats. These mechanisms are not independent. The possibility of being watched encourages people to remain silent, while silence allows rumours and dominant interpretations to circulate without being challenged. This paper explores how Burns represents these processes and how they affect the narrator's privacy, identity, and agency.

The central argument is that Milkman depicts power as both external and internal. It is exercised by Milkman, state forces, political structures, family expectations, and the community; it is also internalised when the narrator begins to anticipate judgement and regulate her own behaviour. The analysis therefore uses Foucault's account of surveillance and discipline as its principal theoretical lens, while attending to the gendered and communal dimensions of control.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault, Surveillance, and Disciplinary Power:

Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power offers a useful framework for examining the novel's atmosphere of observation. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault explains how modern power can operate not only through direct force but also through routines of observation, normalisation, and self-regulation. His discussion of panopticism develops the idea that the possibility of being watched can influence behaviour even when a person cannot confirm that observation is taking place (Foucault). The individual begins to act as though surveillance may occur at any moment, and the observer does not need to intervene continuously for discipline to be effective.

This framework illuminates the narrator's response to Milkman. He follows her, knows her routines, and appears in places where she does not expect him. The narrator describes him as "trailing me, tracking me, knowing my routines, my movements" (Burns 198). His knowledge of her movements gives his presence a coercive force beyond any single encounter. The narrator also wonders whether he might be observing her through "binoculars," a "telescope," or a "camera" (Burns 198). The uncertainty is significant: even without proof of continuous observation, the possibility that she is being watched restricts her sense of freedom.

Surveillance in the novel is also institutional and communal. The narrator refers to photographs and hidden cameras associated with state forces, while the community observes behaviour and transforms it into gossip. These different forms of watching overlap. Foucault's framework helps explain how the narrator's awareness of observation becomes self-monitoring, but the novel also requires attention

to political conflict, gendered vulnerability, and the informal authority of the community. The theory is therefore used here as an interpretive lens rather than as a claim that every form of surveillance in the novel is identical.

Silence as Fear, Protection, and Power:

In Milkman, silence is more than the absence of speech. It is a response to danger, uncertainty, and the difficulty of making an experience intelligible within a community governed by political suspicion and social expectations. The narrator's early experience of inappropriate sexual remarks from her first brother-in-law illustrates how silence can arise from unequal power. She explains, "I did not speak because I did not know how to respond to this person" (Burns 2). Her silence should not be read as consent; rather, it reveals the difficulty of responding to an older person in a situation where she lacks confidence and power.

Silence also shapes the narrator's encounters with Milkman. His behaviour is indirect: he appears unexpectedly, makes quiet pronouncements, and leaves the narrator uncertain about his intentions. Because the threat is rarely expressed as an explicit command, it becomes difficult for her to identify and report what is happening. Her uncertainty is reinforced by a social environment in which an experience may not be taken seriously unless it is visibly physical. Silence thus benefits the person exercising power because the target struggles to name the conduct and explain its effects.

The novel also presents silence as a form of self-protection. Faced with rumours and intrusive judgement, the narrator sometimes adopts an expression described as a "terminal face—nothing in it; nothing behind it" (Burns 182). This blankness can be understood as a defensive refusal to provide further information for public interpretation. Yet protection comes at a cost: when the narrator cannot trust others enough to explain her situation, silence also limits the possibility of receiving help. Burns therefore avoids presenting silence as either wholly submissive or wholly resistant. It is simultaneously a shield against exposure and a barrier to communication.

The distinction between public speech and meaningful communication is especially important. People in the community speak constantly about the narrator, yet they do not necessarily speak to her or listen to her account. She describes people who "knew me to see but not to speak to" (Burns 7). Rumour fills the space in which direct conversation and verification might have taken place. In this way, the community's abundant talk produces the narrator's silence: other people define her experience while she finds it difficult to correct their account.

The chip-shop episode following Tablet Girl's death makes this social silence visible. The narrator suddenly becomes aware of the silence in the shop and discovers that others are staring at her (Burns 239). No direct accusation is required; the collective gaze and absence of speech communicate suspicion. Silence becomes a social act that isolates the narrator and makes her feel judged without offering her an opportunity to respond.

Surveillance: Stalking, State Observation, and Communal Watching:

Milkman's surveillance of the narrator is personal and gendered. His knowledge of her routines makes her feel that she has no secure private space. The threat extends beyond his

physical presence because she begins to imagine possible methods of observation. Her questions about binoculars, telescopes, and cameras demonstrate how surveillance enters consciousness: the narrator must consider not only what Milkman is doing but also what he might be able to see. In Foucauldian terms, the possibility of observation becomes disciplinary because it changes how she experiences ordinary movement and choice.

The state's monitoring intensifies this vulnerability. The narrator describes photographs taken of her with Milkman and with other people, alongside the use of hidden cameras (Burns 198). Her association with him can therefore expose her to suspicion even when she has not chosen the association. The novel presents a climate in which being seen with the wrong person can become politically dangerous. Surveillance makes social contact itself potentially incriminating and blurs the boundary between private life and public interpretation.

The telephone episode extends surveillance into the home. The narrator explains that people open telephones to check whether a listening device might be inside (Burns 246). The significance lies not only in the possible presence of a bug but also in the normalisation of suspicion: people have incorporated checking into ordinary behaviour. The practice illustrates how a surveillance culture can recruit individuals into monitoring their own environments.

Community surveillance is less technologically visible but no less consequential. Neighbours observe unusual behaviour, evaluate relationships, and circulate rumours. The narrator becomes conscious that her conduct may be interpreted by people who do not know her circumstances. Surveillance thus operates through a combination of direct following, state observation, technological suspicion, and everyday communal scrutiny. Its cumulative effect is psychological: the narrator describes herself as having been "closed down" and turned into a "carefully constructed nothingness" (Burns 303). The language suggests that observation has affected not only her actions but also her sense of self.

Social Control: Gossip, Community Rules, and Gender:

Social control in Milkman is exercised through unwritten rules about acceptable behaviour, political belonging, reputation, and relationships. The community acts as an informal authority, deciding which actions are normal and which make a person suspect or an outsider. Burns's depiction of "gossip, secrecy and communal policing" presents social control as a daily practice rather than only a formal punishment (Burns 59–60). Individuals who fail to conform may be regarded as "beyond the pale" (Burns 140), a phrase that signals exclusion from the accepted social order.

The narrator's habit of reading while walking offers a revealing example. For her, reading is a personal practice and a means of turning away from the political tension around her. For the community, however, the habit becomes evidence that she is behaving improperly or failing to attend to her surroundings. Her "reading-while-walking" is treated as a public concern rather than a private choice (Burns 59). The episode shows how social control reaches into small, apparently harmless activities and pressures individuals to conform to collective expectations.

Political fear also shapes practical decisions. The narrator describes reluctance to

use hospitals because contact with official institutions may attract attention (Burns 226). This detail demonstrates how surveillance and political suspicion can alter everyday choices, including decisions concerning health and safety. When official authorities are perceived as potentially dangerous, ordinary institutions become sources of anxiety rather than reliable support.

Control over romantic relationships is another central mechanism. The narrator's mother worries about marriage, while the community judges where she goes and whom she meets. Milkman attempts to interfere in her relationship with maybe-boyfriend through indirect warnings and references to danger. His conduct turns the narrator's intimate life into a site of coercion. The rumours that she is having an affair with Milkman further weaken her control over her own reputation: the community's interpretation circulates more widely than her own account.

These pressures are distinctly gendered. The narrator is evaluated according to expectations about how a young woman should dress, speak, move, and conduct relationships. Instructions such as "Look good. Look classy" and "Don't be loud. Don't spill beans and don't ask questions" reveal the demand that women remain respectable, discreet, and compliant (Burns 303). Importantly, such expectations are reproduced not only by men but also by women within the community. Patriarchal control can therefore be maintained through everyday advice, warnings, and judgements as well as through direct male intimidation.

Social control becomes most effective when it is internalised. The narrator increasingly anticipates the judgement of others and modifies her conduct before anyone directly intervenes. She recognises that she has been "watching my back so long" that she has not fully noticed the opportunities she is losing (Burns 303). This self-monitoring links social control to surveillance: external scrutiny becomes an inner habit, limiting agency even when no explicit order is given.

The Interconnection of Silence, Surveillance, and Social Control:

The novel's central insight emerges from the interaction of its three themes. Surveillance creates the expectation of exposure; that expectation produces fear; fear encourages silence; and silence leaves rumours and communal judgements less likely to be challenged. Social control is strengthened when individuals internalise the rules and begin to regulate themselves. The narrator's experience shows that power does not require constant physical force. It can work through anticipation, uncertainty, reputation, and the fear of exclusion.

This process is not entirely one-directional. Silence can preserve privacy, and the narrator's growing recognition of the pressures around her creates the possibility of resistance. The novel's conclusion does not suggest that awareness instantly removes the effects of surveillance; rather, understanding the mechanisms of control is a necessary step towards reclaiming agency. The narrator's movement towards recovery begins when she can recognise that her restricted sense of self has been produced by a hostile social environment, not by an inherent failure in herself.

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Conclusion:

Anna Burns's Milkman represents silence, surveillance, and social control as mutually reinforcing practices through which power enters ordinary life. Milkman's stalking, state observation, suspicion surrounding telephones, communal gossip, and patriarchal expectations all contribute to a climate in which the narrator feels watched and judged. In this climate, silence becomes both a survival strategy and a source of isolation. It may protect the narrator from immediate exposure, but it also makes it harder for her to challenge rumours or seek support.

Foucault's account of disciplinary power clarifies how the possibility of observation can lead individuals to monitor themselves. Burns's novel, however, also demonstrates that surveillance is shaped by the specific conditions of political conflict, gender inequality, and community belonging. Social control is enforced through informal rules as much as through formal authority, and women may be pressured to reproduce the very expectations that restrict them. The narrator's experience reveals the cumulative effects of these forces on privacy, identity, and personal freedom.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that reclaiming agency begins with recognising how power operates through everyday acts of watching, judging, and silencing. Its representation of the narrator's gradual awareness does not erase the harm she has experienced, but it opens the possibility that she may recover her voice and define her own reality. Milkman thus offers a powerful account of how an oppressive community can regulate individuals—and of why understanding that regulation matters to resistance.

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