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RESISTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN ANNA BURNS'S' MILKMAN (2018)

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Abstract

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This study examines the role of hegemonic masculinity and its impact on the social constructions of masculinity as portrayed in Anna Burns's' *Milkman* (2018). Centered on Gender Studies and grounded in R. W. Connell's theory of Hegemonic Masculinity (1995), it investigates how traditional gender roles and authority are both resisted and assimilated by the novel's characters. The research demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity not only reinforces patriarchal norms and misogyny but also intensifies female resistance, shedding light on the complex interplay between power and gender. While it has often served as a barrier to gender equality by perpetuating patriarchal norms and misogyny, it has also ignited feminist activism by aggravating resistance. By examining this dynamic, the analysis highlights the ongoing gender struggle for equal rights and societal justice. The study also explores how these gendered power structures manifest in the everyday experiences of the characters, illustrating the pervasive influence of hegemonic masculinity on their lives and interactions. This deeper understanding offers valuable insights into the impact of hegemonic masculinity on societal structures, contributing to the broader discourse on gender and power. The research recommends the necessity of continued critical examination of the resistance against hegemonic masculinity to advance gender equity to challenge entrenched patriarchal systems.

Keywords: Hegemonic, Masculinity, Feminist, Misogyny; Gender

Introduction

Literature has long been shaped by masculine dominance, reflecting the broader male-centric nature of society. While each book and theorist offers a unique perspective on the role of literature, feminist thought has profoundly altered our interpretation of literary texts. This shift arises because feminist theory challenges traditional perspectives, highlighting how gender biases influence the creation and reception of literature. By bringing these biases to light, feminist criticism has broadened our understanding and appreciation of diverse voices and experiences in literary works. Hegemonic masculinity, as presented by R. W. Connell, is based on Feminism and it is a movement that advocates social, political, economic, and cultural equality between genders. The movement has been criticized for focusing exclusively on women's rights and for promoting the idea that women are oppressed and treated unfairly in society. The current study explores how Anna Burns's novel *Milkman* addresses these issues and how they are connected to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. (Uddin, Anwar, 2024) In examining the objectification of women, this analysis explores its complex relationship with hegemonic masculinity. By investigating how women are often reduced to mere objects within cultural and societal narratives, this exploration seeks to uncover the underlying power dynamics and gender hierarchies sustained by prevailing male-centric norms. The term objectification is defined as "treating someone as an object that can be controlled, manipulated, and used for a certain purpose" (Gillett & White, 1992, p. 12). The seven qualities that characterize objectification are - instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (Kronsell, 2006). Hegemonic masculinity, a form of oppression, is mostly directed towards women. Not only are they subjected to harassment, but made victims of sexual gazes, pornography, and sexual assault.

This phenomenon leads to internalization and self-objectification, where women start to view themselves as objects to be evaluated based on their appearance (Duncanson, 2015). Gender inequality is deeply embedded in society through a complex interplay of social, cultural, and symbolic forces. Bourdieu (2001) argues that hegemonic masculinity is not only a product of overt power dynamics however, it is also strongly ingrained in the roots of any society, including but not limited to, language, education, and everyday practices. He further presents the very idea of *habitus* – an idea that comprises a set of dispositions shaped by social conditions. It explores how individuals are conditioned and how they perceive as well as react to the world. Given this context, both men and women internalize the very norms that further spread gender inequality. Connell (1987; 1995a; 2005) argued that gender is a way of forming social relations in society, and masculinity is a formation of practice within that system. "Masculinity and femininity are dynamic and relational processes" (Ritchie, p.1, 2022). Masculinity can take various shapes – fluid, dynamic, and hegemonic positions are not the only masculinities available in each society. The entire structure can be viewed as positions that are occupied in any given situation - the beliefs, ethics, and values implemented in that certain course of action may differ from those of another event. One of the core elements of the construction of hegemonic masculinity is constructed as a gender position. (Jewkes et al., 2015) *Milkman* (2018) provides a critique of the hypocrisy embedded in a male-oriented society and the role of power dynamics operated upon women through the defiance of patriarchal roles, rooted in societal structures. The novel also highlights the objectification of women and the stereotypical approach of society that has a devastating impact on women's lives.

Research Questions

1. How does the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity reflect societal expectations and values of traditional masculinity?
2. How does hegemonic masculinity resist feminist thought?

Significance of the Study

This research establishes that the conventional masculine attitude rooted in Irish society instigates men to behave in a society-driven way that promotes female oppression. This serves to thwart gender equality and propagate female resistance. This research could help us understand how hegemonic masculinity is constructed and how it can be deconstructed in the context of literature.

Research Methodology

This research has employed a qualitative approach to explore various notions related to hegemonic masculinity present in the novel, *Milkman* (2018). This method enables the researcher to acquire an exhaustive analysis. The theoretical approach of Hegemonic Masculinity, proposed by R.W. Connell (1994) is incorporated to establish the research's standpoint. Connell defines Hegemonic Masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (1944, p. 77). It is a practice that validates men's assertiveness and warrants the subservience of ostracized groups such as women and other men who do not conform to traditional roles adhered to by society. This patriarchal attitude is legitimized by society and embodies attributes such as physical power and emotional strength (Connell, 2020) and is upheld and strengthened through societal structures such as the family, media, and education (Connell, 2017). Connell (2014) introduces the concept of hegemony, which is based on the analysis of class relations by Antonio Gramsci and refers to the social dynamic that enables a group to take and maintain a leading position. (Soomro, Shayan,

2023), this means that at any given time, one form of masculinity predominates over others. Hegemonic masculinity embodies patriarchy and the dominance of men and guarantees women's subordination. However, this does not mean that members of a hegemonic group are the most powerful in society, as the dominance of every male group can be challenged by women. Thus, hegemony is a historically flexible relation. In her work, "Confronting Equality: Gender, knowledge, and global change", Connell (2020) underscores the idea of masculinity "as a power project". She demonstrates that to understand masculinity, "it is necessary to examine the social gender that shapes and governs all social practices and to consider its connections to other social structures such as race and class" (2020, p. 29). To do this, Connell proposes a three-fold model that "distinguishes between power, production, and emotional attachment" (2020, p.3). Connell notes that in Western societies, the concept of power is often equated with the subservience of women and the supremacy of men, a worldwide structure that is often disparaged. She draws this from Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of power. Different types of power are interconnected and play a role in shaping masculinity. The second structure, production, relates to the allocation of capital, means of production, and divisions of labor, which are also important in the social construction of masculinity. (Dad, Shabbir, Sultan, et. al. 2023), Emotional attachment, based on Freud's concept, is an emotional energy that is directed toward an object, and the practices that form and realize desire are also a part of the gender order. These relationships between people, whether heterosexual or homosexual, consensual or coercive, and mutually pleasurable or not, are all important aspects of masculinity.

Literature Review

In a research study conducted by Brigida and Pinho (2021) entitled "Mourning the Troubles: Anna Burns's' *Milkman* as a

Gendered Response to the Belfast Agreement”, the scholars argue that the narrator and protagonist in *Milkman*, a Catholic with brothers involved in a group like the IRA, choose to disengage from the conflict at hand. The paramilitary officer who stalks her serves as a representation of the Troubles, from which she distances herself. It is this detachment from the violent reality of a society where violence is the primary means of evaluating others that sets the novel's narrator apart and makes her a subject of curiosity and criticism to Milkman, the men, and the community's surveillance structures. She turns to reading 19th-century novels while walking as a means of escape, which furthers the author's critique of the Belfast Agreement. Her position as "the other" in a community divided into loyalists and nationalists was a persistent issue during the Troubles and continues to be problematic post-peace process. [Shehzad & Parveen \(2021\)](#) conducted a research study on the novel *Milkman* entitled “Discursive Representation of Women’s Subjectivity: A Feminist Critique of Anna Burns’s *Milkman*”. The scholars argue that *Milkman* critiques various forms of accusation, subjugation, and violence that the narrator experiences. The accusations of the narrator’s mother of her being immoral due to her illicit relationships with married men serve as an example of domestic violence on women by women. The novel predominantly gives a clear glimpse of patriarchal societal structures and its perspective towards females. *Milkman* serves as a powerful commentary against a society that perpetuates gender-based inequality, and oppression and acts as a reminder to contend with patriarchal attitudes. [Neupane’s \(2021\)](#) research entitled “Commodification of Women in Anna Burns’s *Milkman*” investigates how *Milkman* (2018) portrays females who are treated as commodities in a male-governed society in which they are predisposed to withstand their nightmarish existence instigated by male-autocracy. The novel delves into the harsh

reality of the "Irish troubles through the perspective of a 14-year-old girl. The story portrays how the constant military presence has affected the psyche of the town's inhabitants against the backdrop of a chaotic and violent society. The novel challenges the perpetuation of society for gender inequality, unlawfulness, and subservience upon females through inappropriate attitudes including rape, female feticide, and physical and verbal abuse. [Pettersson’s \(2017\)](#) research study on “Constructions of Masculinity in Salman Rushdie’s Novel the *Satanic Verses* argues that masculinity is a social construct, it is an intricate and multi-dimensional construct that can be observed as femininity. The research accentuates that masculinity does not bear a fixed and static position but rather is shaped by social, cultural, and past contexts. [Zeeshan \(2022\)](#), while resisting the patriarchal despotism annotates that; it is “the society who fails to understand the distinction between reason and unreason, rational and irrational, mad and sane” (p.69, 2022). She criticizes “the schizoid and deranged societal autonomy” (p.70) that influences the individual to behave in a certain way. [Bashir, Firdaus, and Sajid \(2023\)](#) explore how the current society has taken up a new persona of inflicting violence, especially with the rise of the capitalist society. They further argue that in this patriarchal capitalist model, the female proficiency for “sustenance” is considered merely “non-productive”. [Simon de Beauvoir \(1949\)](#) in her book *The Second Sex* presents a groundbreaking analysis of how women have been oppressed throughout history. In this work, de Beauvoir argues that women have been socially constructed as the "other" in opposition to men, who are seen as the normative standard. She states, “For him, she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not he concerning her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute -- she is the

Other" (1949, p.16). This social construction culminates in female subjugation and decentralization in various societal roles no matter economics, politics, and culture. Although *Milkman* (2018) has been studied by different scholars through diverse lenses, it has still not been explored through the lens of Hegemonic Masculinity. The study tries to fill this gap in a way that other researchers try to delve into this area as it is deeply connected to both Feminism and the hegemonic control that is present in the novel. The theory of Hegemonic Masculinity by R. W. Connell (1995) has helped to understand and formulate this whole study of control and resistance that females face in a masculine world.

Discussion and Analysis

Milkman (2018) is a masterful artistic exploration of the pervasive control exerted by hegemonic masculinity over women. The character of the middle sister is a clear depiction of what masculinity is all about. She deals with all different types of masculine power controlled by the men of the community. Her whole world changes after the encounter with the Milkman. He puts a shadow around her deepest thoughts by just approaching in different ways. She could have been a big feminist, but the power of the Milkman and societal filth makes her just another woman who is trying to be free of that hegemonic shadow. She tells us the story after all this happened and that gives us an idea that she was trapped in all those paths of masculinity and power that led to the destruction of her feminist thought. She is a reader, and a brilliant literary mind, but Milkman has changed her ways of being. The only comforting thing that she had in her life "reading while walking" has been put on hold by this hegemonic identity known as the Milkman. She has now become "beyond the pale" just because of this encroachment by this man of power. (Tahira, Muhammad, Asma, 2023), She suffers silently and all those people around her are living in denial—denial of the

Milkman being a harasser in the form of a paramilitary. Anna Burn has carved the characters and story in such a way that the reader can see the underlying horrors of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy that are connected in such a way that it becomes hard to differentiate them. The analysis further tries to unchain the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in the novel and how they are acting as a resistance in the way of middle sister's feminist thought.

i. **Hegemonic Masculinity and Patriarchy**

Milkman (2018) delves into the complexities of hegemonic masculinity and its relationship to patriarchal society. The novel explores how societal expectations and norms shape the constructions of masculinity within the novel's setting, Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Milkman's character delineates the functionality of hegemonic masculinity and how it leads to the further exercise of patriarchal power and absolute authority over the other gender. This hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal control leads to the ultimate downfall of the main character – his very actions, dominance, and manipulation lead to his destruction. Furthermore, the novel's plot highlights the societal expectations for both hegemonic masculinity and femininity and how it is enforced on an individual. The novel's plot reiterates how an individual is expected to adapt and conform to the rules designed and crafted by society. This is also experienced by the protagonist herself in the novel, "It wasn't that I fell into the difficult zone. It was that I was pushed" (Burns's, 2018, p. 205). Milkman's behavior is deeply rooted in a patriarchal society, where men are often seen as having the right to exert power over women and control their sexuality as Connell (1995) states, "Men's interest in patriarchy is condensed in hegemonic masculinity and is defended by the cultural machinery that exalts hegemonic masculinity" (p. 241). This patriarchal system of control has put the middle sister into an abyss of mental torture. She is not able to do small

things in everyday life that make her happy. She loved "reading while walking" but now she is not even able to go out of her house due to the constant fear of encroachment by the Milkman. "For the first time I did not do my reading while walking. I did not do my walking. Again I did not tell myself why" (Burns's, 2018, p. 11). As Demetriou (2001) argues patriarchal societies reinforce traditional gender roles and power dynamics, which in turn upholds hegemonic masculinity and the oppression of marginalized groups (p. 351) The age difference between the Milkman and the narrator further highlights how patriarchal society enables and supports men's abuse of power: Middle sister is lacking the understanding and awareness of how she is being subjected to patriarchal norms and expectations. She is living in a community that is dominated by the men of power and their rules. She is not sure of anything as anything and everything goes against women in such a community. (Puente, Carbonell, 2024), The Milkman's behavior towards her is portrayed as a form of encroachment, violating her boundaries and autonomy. Middle sister expresses her intuition and repugnance towards certain situations and people, but she does not realize that her intuition and repugnance are valid and should be taken seriously. She does not know that she has a right not to like or put up with certain situations and people. "At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment (Burns's, 2018, p. 7). This highlights the impact of hegemonic masculinity on the protagonist's life as, hegemonic masculinity is the notion that there is a leading form of masculinity that is strengthened and supported by society, characterized by violence, autocracy, and power over others (Connell, 2017). Similarly, Milkman's behavior, in this case, is a clear example as he uses his power and authority to exert control over the protagonist. He makes her life difficult by using his power of coming in her way. It not only

highlights the individual problem of the Milkman's behavior but also illustrates how it is a societal problem, reinforced by the patriarchal structures in the society. It highlights the need for a shift in societal norms and values to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures. "But I did not know intuition and repugnance counted," (Burns's, 2018, p. 7). This sentence shows that the narrator does not realize that her intuition and repugnance are valid and should be taken seriously. She does not know that she has a right to not like or put up with certain situations and people especially when she did not know that she had the right to like and choose and also the fact that she does not have to tolerate anyone or everyone approaching her. (Burns's, 2018). This emphasizes the narrator's lack of understanding of her agency and rights. It illustrates how patriarchal societies can make women feel like they have to accept any form of treatment and behavior from men. Middle sister has a quiet resistance in herself against the control and surveillance imposed on her by the men in her community, particularly her brother-in-law. "Eldest sister came round to see me because her husband, my now forty-one-year-old brother-in-law, had sent her round to see me. She was to apprise me and to warn me." (Burns's, 2018, p. 9) Her use of profanity, "Fuck off," and her questioning of the authority of those monitoring her, "What's that mean - Been seen? Who's been seein' me? Your husband? ", demonstrate her defiance against patriarchal societal norms that seek to control women's behavior and interactions. She is continuously trying to chain out of the control of men around her. She is already dealing with many men of power in her life and the entrance of Milkman has made it even worse for her to manage.

ii. *Hegemonic Masculine Resistance Towards Feminist Thought*

Anna Burns's represents the deeply rooted influence of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal control especially in the light of

feminist thoughts. The story's setting is a community where patriarchal control is the absolute authority. Middle sister, the protagonist, is the only character who critiques the societal norms and questions the prevalent patriarchal control that is taking charge of their lives. Her interactions with the Milkman render her reputation as an outcast. She must navigate through the consequences of her actions. It also illustrates the difficulties and dangers of breaking free from patriarchal norms and values, particularly for women, and emphasizes the importance of it for achieving true equality and freedom. Furthermore, *Milkman* presents a thought-provoking portrayal of how hegemonic masculinity shapes the characters' perspectives on feminist thought and the challenges of challenging the status quo in a patriarchal society. The power and influence of women in the novel's community are determined by their connection to men in positions of power, specifically paramilitary men. The limited agency and power lead to a broader commentary on systemic gender inequality and patriarchal structures. (Burns's, 2018). This aligns with the idea of a "patriarchal bargain" put forth by feminist theorist Kandiyoti (1998), which posits that women in patriarchal societies are often forced to accept a secondary status in exchange for access to male privilege and protection (p. 279). Middle sister also does that when she goes to her third brother-in-law for running. She considers him to be a good man for the sole reason of him being a macho man. The community respected him for being a big man with muscled arms to fight for women and because, "he expected women to be doughty, inspirational, even mythical, supernatural figures" (Burns's, 2018, p. 13). In this case, the women in the novel can wield power and influence only if they are connected to powerful men, suggesting that they have made this patriarchal bargain. This bargain hinders their way toward feminist ideas and for the same reason middle Sister is

not able to break free of the Milkman by confronting her. Additionally, the transformative potential of collective female solidarity is formidable. By illustrating how women unite and support each other, the story reveals the profound strength and influence that emerge when they join forces against systemic oppression. This collective power becomes a potent force for challenging and reshaping the structures of hegemonic masculinity that seek to dominate and control. This idea is supported by feminist theorist Bell Hooks (2000), who argues that collective action is essential for women to challenge and dismantle systems of patriarchy. And it was for his behavior that they beat him up, not for the irritation of guns, for wearing a balaclava when everybody knew who he was anyway; not for threatening me either, a woman, one of their soul sisters. No. It was for being a man and coming into the Ladies' unannounced. He had shown disrespect, been dismissive of female fragilities and delicacies and sensibilities, and had shown no courtesy, chivalry, gallantry, or honour. (Burns's, 2018, p. 34) Although it is unclear, the novel's female characters possess a strong sense of agency and empowerment when it comes to protecting their rights and asserting their position in society. Another male character, somebody is beaten up as he tries to harm his middle sister because she rejected his offer of a relationship. This shows that the female characters in the novel are not passive victims of patriarchal oppression, but rather active agents in challenging to both stop and understand it. Middle sister seems to be impressed by this event of women taking control of themselves and making all the possible efforts to dismantle the hegemonic control by the men of the society. This attitude and behavior of the female characters stems from feminist thought that can be understood through the lens of hegemonic masculinity theory. According to Kimmel & Wade (2018), hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant and idealized form of masculinity that is

privileged and reinforced by society. This dominant form of masculinity often oppresses and subordinates those who do not conform to it, particularly women and marginalized masculinities. This can be seen as a rejection of the toxic and disrespectful forms of masculinity that are often reinforced by patriarchal societies. Moreover, the attitude and behavior of the female characters towards feminist thought in the novel is influenced by the same hegemonic masculinity that is prevalent in their community. Through their actions and words, they are challenging the dominant and oppressive forms of masculinity and advocating for a more respectful and equitable society. Middle sister's life is an in-depth critique of the oppressive patriarchal society in which the characters live. The constant surveillance and monitoring deprive women of their independent agencies where they can freely live their lives as they will. According to [Ralph \(2023\)](#), hegemonic masculinity is defined as "the pattern of practice that legitimates men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women" (p. 4). In this context, the characters in the novel are conditioned to believe that men hold a dominant position in society and that women should be subordinate to them. In the community where the story takes place, women are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and to prioritize the needs and desires of men. This is exemplified by the mother's reaction to the protagonist's alleged "immoral trysts" with the Milkman. "You're some sort of mob-woman," she said. 'Out of the pale. Lost your intrinsic rights and wrongs. You make it hard, wee girl, to love you..." ([Burns's, 2018, p. 55](#)). She speaks of the community keeping her abreast, which means she knows the protagonist met him regularly for immoral trysts and assignations. The mother accuses the protagonist of "stealing other people's husbands" who has "lost her intrinsic rights and wrongs" and makes it hard for her to be loved. The eldest sister's question "Have you been

fecundated by him?" exemplifies this double standard, as it implies that the protagonist's potential pregnancy would be seen as a scandal, whereas the Milkman's actions would not be viewed in the same way - further restating the notion that women are only supposed to give birth and be a man's source of comfort and entertainment. The text, through the characters' attitudes and behaviors, critiques the oppressive nature of patriarchal systems and highlights the need for feminist thought to challenge societal expectations and norms that limit the agency of women. At this point, the protagonist is trapped in a dangerously violent situation. The unknown man is harassing her. The man's derogatory language as well as his thoughts reflect the sort of destruction, he can bring to the protagonist's life. "This is not the sort of place, your 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" ([Burns's, 2018, p. 308](#)). The hegemonic masculinity that remains prevalent in the text reiterates how patriarchal norms can catalyze violence against women in any given society. The display of aggressive behavior at the man's end is out of his sheer desire to assert dominance and control over her overall existence. Moreover, the novel also explores how language is used as a tool to dehumanize and objectify women for example the employment of words such as "sub-cat" are used to devalue the protagonist's standing in the society.

Conclusion

This study has provided a profound exploration of the challenges posed by hegemonic masculinity and its role in the subjugation of women within a patriarchal society as depicted in Anna Burns's *Milkman*. The novel vividly illustrates how entrenched gender norms perpetuate the domination of women, revealing the relentless struggle for feminine consciousness against an oppressive backdrop. Through the characterization of

Milkman and his strategies—ranging from intimidation to societal exclusion—the narrative exposes how male dominance is maintained and enforced. Conversely, the female characters are portrayed as confined by rigid societal expectations and denied opportunities for liberation or self-improvement. This stark contrast underscores the novel's critique of the inflexible gender constructs imposed by patriarchal authority. Furthermore, this investigation has emphasized the significance of resisting traditional gender roles in the quest for genuine equality and freedom. The protagonist's journey reflects the constant and perilous threat faced by women in a world governed by patriarchal control and omnipresent surveillance. By unveiling the protagonist's struggle for autonomy amidst societal expectations, the novel underscores the importance of challenging and dismantling oppressive structures. Burns's narrative not only critiques the pervasive power dynamics but also highlights the transformative potential of collective female solidarity in reshaping societal values and achieving true liberation. Through this nuanced portrayal, *Milkman* advocates for a reimagined societal framework where gender equality can be realized.

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