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## Objectification of Women in *Milkman* Novel by Anna Burns

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### Abstract

*This study strives to disclose women's objectification in literary work through the lens of feminism. The object of this study is a novel entitled Milkman (2018) by Anna Burns. This study strives to classify the forms of objectification experienced by female characters and how they deal with it. This study employed a qualitative approach and analyzed in the form of essays. Therefore, this study uses Nussbaum's (1999) objectification and Gooden's (2004) resistance ideas to examine the object of the study. This study discovered that Middle Sister was subject to six out of seven types of objectifications by male characters. They are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. In addition, this study also discovered that Eldest Sister was subject to two different types of objectifications by her husband. They are a denial of autonomy and inertness. However, this study also uncovers how these women choose to resist objectification. They deal with it by relying on other women, avoiding, and fighting back against the source of the problem. Mainly, the data findings disclose that the object is a manifestation of Northern Ireland women's lives in the late nineteenth century and centered on the issue of women's objectification.*

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**Keywords:** *feminism, Northern Ireland women, resistance, women's objectification*

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality has existed since the ancient matriarchal era, but still often occurs until the present patriarchal era (Hannam, 2007). There is no doubt that gender roles constructed by society are a matter of constant debate. Traditional gender roles depict men as strong and rational figures. Meanwhile, women are always illustrated as emotional, weak, and even obedient. The pattern of male domination often oppresses women because men are considered the main control holders in society, while women have little influence or can be said to have no rights in the general sphere of society. This causes women to be placed in a position that is not submissive or inferior. However, the nature of these problems and questions about them have changed over time. Nowadays, issues related to gender are different from issues that existed in the past. Gender issues can be seen from different sides that cover various aspects from a modern perspective. One example of this is the objectification of women.

The word "objectification" has become more common these days. Objectification involves reducing one's worth from a being with humanity to an object (Kant, 1998). Humanity is the rational capacity of the individual to make rational choices. It is what distinguishes humans from animals and other inanimate objects. In theory, not only women can experience objectification, but men can also experience it. Even so, in practice in everyday life, women are the victims most often. Over time, women demand that their rights and freedoms be treated equally and not made objects. However, objectification of women still occurs whether they realize it or not. Women are still under pressure from then until now, not vanishing permanently, just underground becoming slightly visible than earlier.

Women's objectification can be discovered in society such as at work, in magazines, on social media, and so on. For example, like in a magazine. It can be seen through the case of a British-born American actress, Nicollette Sheridan. In April 1995, the adult magazine, *Playboy*, featured three photos of Nicollette Sheridan playing in the Pro-Celebrity Tennis Classic of Chris Evert (Nussbaum, 1999). *Playboy* magazine wrote the caption, "Why We Love Tennis" with a photo focus on her skirt hiked up to expose her black underpants. The title of *Playboy* magazine at the time decreased a talented actress, a skilled tennis player, into a body ready to be exploited by men: it says there, basically, she thought she presented herself as a skilled tennis player but henceforth she presented herself in front of men as a sexual object. From the photos and descriptions displayed, it can be interpreted how women's bodies are constantly used as objects to attract the attention of the opposite sex for one-sided gain.

Moreover, the practice of women's objectification as well occurred many years ago in many places, one of them in Northern Ireland. At that time in wartime, traditionally, women have always been associated with peace, motherhood, nurturing, and a symbol of national unity (Aretxaga, 1997). It has perpetuated the notion that women have a homogeneous conflict experience, namely as passive victims without violence. The objectification and violence during The Troubles harmed women in Northern Ireland; they are the victims of daily armed police and military patrols, body and home searches,

harassment, and even murder. Paramilitary organizations will discipline wives of 'unfaithful' prisoners for betraying their communities. Women are "desexualized" in society. The female body emerges to provide much softer material than the male for the inscription of state meaning. In this way, their bodies were transformed not only into visual representations of Irish women but also as creatures subject to control when the war was over. Like their homes, women's bodies are raided by male soldiers in surveillance operations. They are removed from their human nature and reduced to objects to be controlled by men.

Furthermore, the objectification of women in Northern Ireland is also reflected in one of the literary works. It is a novel entitled *Milkman* by Anna Burns. The novel will also be the object of this study. This study will analyze the women's objectification depicted in it. This issue mainly focuses on what kind of objectification women experience, how objectification affects their lives, and how they deal with objectification that is addressed to them. This novel tries to reveal objectification and resistance by presenting the women's problems. Meanwhile, the other reason for conducting this study is because *Milkman* discloses a real situation of the long conflict of The Troubles in Northern Ireland and its effect on the lives of women at that time. This study will give more information to readers about what kinds of objectification toward women is found in *Milkman* novel. Therefore, the title of the thesis is "Objectification of Women in *Milkman* novel by Anna Burns".

## METHODS

The qualitative approach was applied in this study because the data from the object of study is in textual form, which is then analyzed and transformed into an essay. The qualitative method was essential for defining and analyzing the research content. This method served as the primary data source, assisting in the analysis of the study's content. The research employed quotations, both direct and indirect, to explore the issues in Anna Burns' novel "Milkman." Therefore, the qualitative method was deemed the most suitable for this research.

The novel "Milkman" by Northern Irish writer Anna Burns, published in 2018 by Faber and Faber, served as the data source for this study. Comprising seven chapters and 368 pages, the novel was selected due to its prestigious Man Booker Prize win in 2018. "Milkman" explores the lives of women in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, a conflict lasting over 30 years. This study analyzes the narratives related to women's objectification and their resistance to it throughout the novel.

The data collection process began with multiple readings of Anna Burns' "Milkman" to gain a deep understanding of the plot and identify the issues within the novel. Text highlighting was then employed to mark instances of women's objectification and their resistance, as related to the study's theoretical framework.

The descriptive method was applied to analyze the collected data, supporting the study. This research described the primary issues of women's objectification and its effects. The analysis of "Milkman" involved text and context-based interpretation,

examining fictional devices. Additionally, the analysis drew on the concept of women's objectification from Nussbaum's "Sex and Social Justice" (1999). The use of fictional devices and theory contributed to the analysis process, revealing the underlying meanings. The findings were presented in essay form, accompanied by detailed analysis..

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN**

Different forms of objectification ensue of the female characters in Anna Burns' *Milkman*. That objectification will be explored in short essays.

#### **1.1 INSTRUMENTALITY**

To see and/or treating of women as an instrument to be used for men's goals is known as instrumentality (Nussbaum, 1999). It emerges when men cannot resist seeing women as a collection of body parts that can be used to satisfy their pleasure. The male character reduces the female character to a passive object. It can be discovered in the below quote:

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 (Burns, 2018, p. 1).

The narrative above shows how a woman is made a tool to satisfy a man's desire. The male character stares at the female character as if she were an object, not a human. The harassment looks subtle and invisible to others, but it is disturbing to her. For the man, the activity of gazing at and commenting on sexual matters on specific body parts belonging to a woman can give him satisfaction. The phrase "*That was gave him pleasure*" indicates how women are usually only regarded as an instrument for men's pleasure. This action is problematic since, in this narrative, the man is her first brother-in-law, who does not carry out his role as a family to protect her. Men often consciously reduce women's bodies as instruments for various reasons, one of which is a stare to fulfill their sexual desires.

#### **1.2 DENIAL OF AUTONOMY**

Denial of autonomy is when men treatment of women as if women lack autonomy and do not have self-determination (Nussbaum, 1999). The depiction of the statement can be seen below:

brother-in-law, had sent her round to see me...I had just so much anger – at her, for being the wee wife, for doing always exactly what he told her to (Burns, 2018, p. 4).

The female character is a wife who always acts obediently to her husband's domination. It can be revealed how the woman loses her autonomy through the man's dictates on how to behave based on the phrases above. The phrase '*doing always exactly what he told her to*' indicates how the female character undergoes a denial of autonomy through the way the male character controls the female character physically. The objectification and subordination of women mostly ensue because of the patriarchal system which exists in society. Women are consciously or not oppressed by the system. The convenience they get from their husband makes them dependent, and unable to act on their own. The powerlessness of women in possessing life has given men full authority to treat women as objects and possessions in which objectification against women becomes a common feature of society.

### 1.3 INERTNESS

Inertness occurs when men see and/or treat women as objects lacking in agency and/or lacking inactivity (Nussbaum, 1999). Inertness in the novel can be found in the below narrative:

So, he was a piece of dirt and she was in a bad way with being pregnant, with still loving her long-term man and not believing what he'd done to her, disbelieving he wasn't missing her, for he wasn't (Burns, 2018, p. 2).

Women are considered objects who are lacking in agency. Agency is the capacity to identify goals or make choices and then act upon them. The female character loses her agency when dealing with her husband. She does not have self-efficacy, or belief in her ability to do something. Women's lives were believed to be linked with their biological fate in bearing children. Their reliance on men has made them become part of men's property and their voices stay silent. In heterosexist ties, patriarchy is constructed on the basis that women as a gender are associated with caring feelings. The phrase '*still loving her long-term man*' indicates that women will give love to men, and in return men, who are associated with power, will determine.

### 1.4 VIOLABILITY

Nussbaum defines violability as a way in which men see and/or treat women as objects that can be damaged, injured, or destroyed and lacking in boundary integrity (Nussbaum, 1999). Violability can be discovered in the below quote:

he punched me and grabbed the gun off me. Then he hit me in the face with it. I wasn't wearing a balaclava. After that, he pulled me up the wall and dug the gun in my breast as before (Burns, 2018, p. 247).

The male character treats the female character like a destructible object. When things did not go as he expected, the male character feels he can hurt the female character. In a patriarchal culture, women are still seen as inferior to men. Women are still often regarded as subordinate to men. It makes women vulnerable to violence. In addition, violence can also be triggered by a gender power imbalance between men and women. This is inseparable from the stereotype circulating in society that men are stronger than

women. The main character's inability to protect the physical boundary and experiencing physical violence also shows that she is experiencing violability.

### **1.5 OWNERSHIP**

Ownership means the way men perceive women as something owned by another (Nussbaum, 1999). The narration below shows how the female character encounters the ownership notion of the male character.

because they thought Milkman had gained ownership; because of my haughtiness; because my protection was now dead; because it was now being put about I'd tried to evade retribution for cheating on him with a car mechanic (Burns, 2018, p. 245).

The female character is regarded as an object that can be owned and can be handed over to others which can be seen from the phrase '*Milkman had gained ownership*'. One time, the community considered Middle Sister to be a woman belonging to a dangerous man in the country. Then, another time the community also considered her as a woman who cheated. When society views women as property, there is a subconscious sensation that men can do whatever they want to women because you do not regard them as fully formed human beings. Society continues to perpetuate patriarchy to a level where the higher privileges that men get by being male-centered. Therefore, it gives rise to the impact of an obsession to control women that leads to women's oppression. Meanwhile, women discover that they are in an oppressed and subordinated position, society will view women as a group that deserves to be treated like that and begin to instill a stigma that women deserve it.

### **1.6 DENIAL OF SUBJECTIVITY**

Denial of subjectivity occurs when men perceive women as something whose feelings and thoughts are nothing (Nussbaum, 1999). The male character starts a rumor and accuses the female character of being a mistress and makes her become the object of gossip.

I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them, or more likely by first brother-in-law, that I had been having an affair with this milkman (Burns, 2018, p. 1).

The male character assumes that she is to blame for enticing a man away from his wife. The male characters enter into a culturally imposed gaslighting scheme. Society often judges women based on domestic functions without relying on their individuality as subjects. Young unmarried women are considered an oddity in the community. Therefore, when a young unmarried woman is seen with a married man, the young woman will immediately be considered a seducer and the cause of domestic problems. These are all products of a patriarchal culture that discards women to alterity where their representation arises from men whom they relate with as men's inverted negative mirror image.

## 2. RESISTANCE AGAINST OBJECTIFICATION

Objectification in Anna Burns' *Milkman* novel affects the female characters' lives. This subchapter will explain how they reduce the effects that could abuse many aspects of their lives, especially the psychological side.

### 2.1 EXTERNAL COPING STRATEGIES

External coping strategies mean women who do this mechanism will need the help of others in dealing with the objectification they receive (Gooden, 2004). The quotation below is a first sample case of how the female characters resist objectification by relying on other women:

These women took it upon themselves to jump McSomebody which was then what most of them did. The gun fell out of the scrum (Burns, 2018, p. 247).

Women's struggle against objectification can be seen through other female characters helping the protagonist while being physically abused by the male character. Violence against women is a violation of human liberties. It will avert women from having the chance to contribute to society. Violence has a massive consequence on their lives. However, the female characters break the regulations of patriarchy when they decide to fight against violence by men. It also indicates that not all women choose to remain silent and surrender to objectification.

### 2.2 SPECIFIC COPING STRATEGIES

When women prefer to remain silent, ignore and/or fight directly at the source of the problems they face, it is called specific coping strategies (Gooden, 2004). The case of the women's resistance to objectification by avoiding can be seen below depiction:

my 'mind your own business' arising. Unfortunately whenever that happened, I'd pretty much turn perverse, refuse to learn from experience and cut off my nose to spite my face. As for the rumour of me and the milkman, I dismissed it without considering it (Burns, 2018, p. 4).

Objectification made the female character mentally painful and angry, and she choose to avoid it. No one believed in her, not even her family, making the female character even more frustrated. Women are often regarded as objects to be talked about, blasphemed, and slandered. Men feel they can judge women to put themselves in superior positions. This propaganda triggers oppressed women to perceive themselves negatively. Society participates in perpetuating the patriarchy and has trained women to hate themselves. Therefore, women feel inferior to men frequently. It has an impact on the response of women in responding to objectification. Compared to loudly denying the gossip addressed to them, women tend to respond to the objectification they receive with silence and avoidance. Women regard responding will not change anything. They will still be the ones to blame, and this is an example of the female character's powerlessness which is the effect of objectification.

## CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that objectification has been deeply ingrained in Northern Ireland for decades. This is derived from the findings and data analysis in Anna Burns' *Milkman*. The practice of objectification already existed but the term had not yet appeared at that time. Objectification is deeply rooted in the social structures and creates long-run suffering for women. Objectification also has an enormous effect on the victim through the physical and psychological aspects of the women. Men objectify women every day. This objectification greatly affects women's lives in many ways.

The effect of long-term objectification on women varies. Because every element of society has perpetuated objectification into its structure, the women who are victims are increasingly vulnerable to running away from this situation. The gender roles that have been constructed by society have had a bad impact on women. As a result, women are often afraid to act against objectification. After all, this practice of objectification is very subtle, even almost invisible. Men deny that they are doing objectification. This act outraged the women and deeply psychologically traumatized them to remember that they are who suffered the ill effects.

Furthermore, from the analysis and discussion above, it can be learned that women's objectification can be the leading cause of injustice, violence, and oppression against women. This is caused by the decrease or decrease in the value of women self into as objects in order to fulfil the needs of men. However, some of the objectification classifications are difficult to detect and even become commonplace today. Therefore, it can make women not realize if they have been transformed into an object. In the end, women cannot escape and find it difficult to escape the objectification they receive.

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