Patriarchy Or Feminism: A Butlerian Critique Of Anna Burns’ Milkman

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Abstract
This paper explores the complex gendered power relations by applying Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity to analyze the gendered discourses Burns’ Milkman (2018). The chief argument of the paper is to expose the social assumptions that naturalize, mystify and perpetuate the unjust gendered norms. The analysis focuses on which Burns’ fictional characters sustain and which characters subvert the unjust power relations among members of the society. Endorsing Butler’s notions of gender, Burns suggests modifications in the existing gender norms and advocates moderate way of social relationship based on symmetrical power relations avoiding the both extremes of patriarchal domination and feminist convictions of overthrowing heterosexual power structure or to abolish gender altogether. The paper finds out that heroine of novel, middle sister, switches between social determinism and free will and finally she is able to find her way within the social constraints. It means that she is not a subjugated being but she has a challenging spirit. This paper, therefore, argues that Burns supports individualism and Milkman has a humanizing appeal.

Introduction
In today’s world, the issues of gender discrimination, violence against women and abuse of power are prevalent almost in every society. Colonialism in Northern Ireland resulted in segregation of society into the colonizer and the colonized. As a result of colonization, a sense of inferiority was instilled in the minds of the native people who began to believe that servitude is the lot of the colonized. The British conceived themselves as the master and the masculine whereas the colonized were seen as the slave and the feminine. Such assumptions, reinforced by the British, placed the Northern Ireland (the colonized) into a subaltern position, a situation where women have been victim of power abuse both at homes and in public places. Burns’ Milkman deals with how women are forced to live the life of subordination and subjugation and how coercive gender
norms and asymmetry of power relations affect women’s lives in the Northern Ireland during the Troubles (1969-1998). Different scholars and theorists call the Troubles with different terms. Kennedy-Andrews (2003) regards the Troubles as “political violence” (p. 7). The general condition of women during the Troubles in Northern Ireland is, “that women’s most important role
is that of mother…even women who are not mothers have that potential” (Rolston, 1989, p. 44). McGuiness (2010) argues that “gender inequality” and social abuse “still prevalent” in Irish community (p. 172). Pierson (2017, as cited in Ryan, 2020) claims that Northern Irish society considers women second class citizen and because of their gendered status, women are being segregated and marginalized. Danaci (2020) articulates that the Troubles was a “traumatic and catastrophic” era in the history of Northern Ireland (p. 291). Surveying the views of these writers, it is argued that in Northern Ireland the social institutions are structured in such a way to reinforce the male dominance in the social relationship between women and men.

**Research Problem**

In today world, issues of gender discrimination and abuse of power are prevalent almost in every society of the world. This paper explores the extreme aspects of both patriarchy and feminism through a Butlerian critique of Burns’ Milkman. By applying Butler’s (1990) notion of gender performativity, the analysis focuses on how Burns demystifies the social assumptions that sustain man’s superiority and discourage women’s empowerment and how her heroine, middle sister, challenges the stereotype role of female and subverts patriarchal domination.

**Research Objective**

To investigate different forms of power abuse faced by women in the patriarchal society at agency level as well as at institutions levels through discourses as portrayed in the texts under consideration.

**Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity**

Butler is an American poststructuralist feminist and gender theorist. Her theory of gender performativity is based on poststructuralist view of language and gender and it comes under the broad spectrum of social constructionism. She contests the essentialist view of gender which is based on gender binary and fundamental difference between the two sexes. She opposes certain forms of feminism because “feminist theory restricts the meaning of gender … sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism”, that is why, feminists should not take for granted “certain expressions of gender” because these views have the potential of producing “new forms of hierarchy and exclusion” (pp. xii-xiii). Butler regards gender as “doing” and not “being”, as a verb rather than a noun, an act or more specially a sequence of acts. She argues that gender is social construct, performative and changeable.

**Literature review**

Burns’ Milkman (2018) is written in the post-conflict period, but it is set in the era of Troubles (1969-1998) which refers to sectarian conflict between the Catholic nationalists and the Protestant loyalists. The conflict resulted in killings, bombings, kidnappings, hijackings etc. The Nationalist paramilitaries (IRA) regarded themselves as the freedom fighters and were busy in a war against the British Army for freedom. In such social and political contexts, feminist movement remained
underdeveloped and feminist issues were totally ignored as observed by Galligan and Wilford (1999) who posit that nationalist women had better postpone “feminist issues in favour of the more important nationalist cause” (p. 173).

In review of Milkman, Alter (2018) argues that Milkman is “a story of brutality, sexual encroachment and resistance threaded with mordant humor” (para. 3). Downs (2018) in review of Milkman quotes Appiah, who says, “Anna Burns’ utterly distinctive voice challenges conventional thinking and form (para. 4). Souza (2019) argues that there are two groups of women: the issue women and the pious women. The issue women discuss their gender issues and they are placed in the category of “beyond-the-pale” (Burns, 2018, p.152) whereas the pious women are subjugated beings. Singh (2019) posits that Burns’ Milkman deals with feminist questions in regard to race and gender and explores the gap between words and experience. Hutton (2019) argues that Burns’ choices of words enable her “to deconstruct the mentalities and structures of Northern Irish society” (p. 358) and to give voice to the voiceless who strives to find that voice. Moseley (2019) argues that narrator of Milkman is quiet, withholding and uncommunicative, but at the same time, she is garrulous, intellectual and witty. Farsi (2020) argues that Burns’ Milkman (2018) depicts the emotional schemas and cognitive strategies of the female protagonist, the narrator of the novel, in response to the threats of the society that surrounds her. Drong (2020) argues that middle sister’s taciturnity like Cordelia in King Lear has severe repercussions on her life but it openly opposes “the intra-community social codes” (p.7). Estevez-Saa (2020) claims that Burns’ Milkman (2018) is a highly experimental novel in which the protagonist is subject to violence and she has been a victim of sexual harassment in a conservative society. Ryan (2020) argues that middle sister is seen as “beyond-the-pale, intemperate and outlawed” by the community (Burns 2018, p. 199). Eigeartaigh (2020) argues that gender binary in Milkman restricts women to “traditional role of wife and mother” and empowers men to control and intimidate women both at home and in the wide public places (p. 45). Within nationalist narrative, “women are coerced and intimidated into silence,” says Ailbhe Smyth (as cited in Eigeartaigh, 2020, p. 46). She argues that as a result of “patriarchy and the church” feminism fails in its attempt to liberate women from domestic abuse and sexual harassment and middle sister’s experiences of sexual harassment exemplify the “collusion of nationalism and patriarchy in the repression of women” (pp. 47-48). Piatek (2020) argues that Burns, through her narrative style of combining “seemingly contradictory elements such as logorrhea and silence” portrays the traumatic realism of “insidious trauma” (p. 105). From the above discussion it can be argued that violence against women is perpetuated through deep-seated naturalized and commonsensical assumptions in androcentric and patriarchal society of Northern Ireland. Burns’ Milkman depicts the lived experiences of middle sister who strives to survive experiencing various forms of power abuse both at home and in the public places.

Research Methodology
This research study is qualitative in nature exploring the extremes of both patriarchy and feminism through Butlerian critique of gendered discourses in Burns’ Milkman. Butler’s (1990) perspective
of gender performativity is applied to collect and analyze the data by focusing on the abuses of patriarchy both at situational and institutional levels in order to expose how women are tortured by male. APA style of references is used both for in-text citations and the list of references.

**Butlerian Critique of Gendered Discourses in Milkman**

Burns’ Milkman (2018) consists of seven chapters. It is narrated by unnamed narrator known as middle sister. She has three brothers and six sisters. She is the fourth one, the middle daughter. The novel deals with the lived experiences of middle sister in the hair-trigger society during the Troubles. Burns exposes how abuse of power affects the life of middle sister and how she becomes the victim of patriarchal domination both at home and in the public places in Northern Ireland. Burns’ Milkman begins with the words, “The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died” (Burns, 2018, p.1). According to Myrestrand (2019), the whole plot is compressed in this first sentence of the novel. This sentence tells the whole story of violence and oppression against women. It shows asymmetrical power relations between man and woman and abuse of power by male. Middle sister is labeled as a cat which symbolizes her helplessness and powerlessness. She is treated as a prey and voiceless creature before the predator, McSomebody who represents the patriarchal domination. Thus, the first sentence of the novel serves as an index to gender asymmetry based on unequal power relations. Burns, in the first chapter of Milkman, sets the context and points out that Northern Ireland is a society where rumor, nosiness, violence, bomb scares and hijackings, political conflict, religious tensions between the Protestant and the Catholic are common, a locality where women are forced to bow before male domination or else they will not be tolerated.

**Gendered Binaries**

According to Butler (1990), within the matrix of heterosexuality and essentialism, it is impossible to challenge gendered norms because to see women in gender binaries is to give them stereotyped roles. The oppositional binaries, the notion of the basic differentiation and the categorization between man and woman must be smashed in order to achieve gender symmetry. Endorsing Butler’s views of gender, Burns exposes the existing coercive gender order to show how women’s marginalization and otherization is sustained through language use especially by enforcing gender binaries. She calls the whole society a divided society, “I’m male and you’re female” (p. 8). The sentence, “I’m male and you’re female” exposes gender discrimination and highlights the linguistic convention that the term male precedes the female one. The clause, “you’re female,” means that women are other, inferior and weak. On the other hand, “I’m male” means that man is superior to woman. It implies that these binaries are constructed to privilege male at the expense of female. In this male and female territory, females are viewed as subordinated to males. Seeing from Butler’s notion of gender, this categorization is problematic and is the main cause of women’s disempowerment in the public sphere. Burns is highly critical of the hidden and powerful gendered ideology in the nationalist projects and exposes it through her protagonist, middle sister, in Milkman. Middle sister does not believe in such categorization and blurs it
through her performative acts.

**Male Supremacy and Female Subordination**

Burns exposes that long period of colonization and sectarian conflicts have inflicted the minds of the people. Men have developed a sense of superiority and women have accepted the supremacy of men. Therefore, women are supposed to be submissive and are not allowed to challenge the existing social set up. They are treated as listeners whereas male members of the society such as Milkman, first brother-in-law and McSomebody speak at their disposal to humiliate and exploit women. The male paramilitaries give them the impression that they are engaged in active politics for the liberation of the colonized from the colonizers. But women are unaware of the hidden agenda of nationalist paramilitaries who in disguise of Nationalist Cause manipulate them. Burns shows middle sister’s utter helplessness before Milkman by stating, “I said nothing when the milkman curbed, then slowed, then stopped my run” (p. 9). Similarly, McSomebody interferes in the private life of Middle sister. He attempts twice to develop relationship with her but “he [is] being rebuffed” by her (p. 117). Middle sister’s rejection of McSomebody blurs the subject/object dichotomy that is promoted by the supporters of patriarchal domination. Being in subject position, McSomebody is treated as an object while she performs the role of an agent. Burns exposes McSomebody’s superiority complex and his arrogance when he talks of himself in first person plural, he boasts, “We will be next you, always next you … You made us look at you. You made us think” (p. 117). This shows that he undermines his agency in order to declare that middle sister makes him propose her. Therefore, she is responsible for this. He comes to middle sister with the hope that by exposing his “true self” to her, by telling her that he is a “renouncer-of-the-state, a true patriot” and he is ready “to lay down his life, to sacrifice everything for the movement, for the cause, for the country” she will be so “impressed… that she will leap into his arms” (pp. 130-131). But his pride gets wounded when he is once again rejected by her. Rejecting his proposal, middle sister demonstrates her moral courage and her free will.

Burns exposes that it is society where women have been assigned stereotype gendered roles and they are expected to conform not to deviate from them. McKay (2017) calls Northern Ireland an “armed patriarchy” (p. 305), a society where women suffer brutality and violence at the hands of men who consider themselves the heroes of the state. The renouncers consider women stupid and incapable of understanding. Woman is viewed as a “cipher, some valueless nobody” (p. 133). It means that women are seen as worthless and nobody. A woman has no identity or individuality as the word “nobody” indicates. They are executed on baseless charges of informership or traitorship by the state forces. It implies that women are vulnerable to oppression and violence both by the renouncers-of-the-state and the defenders-of-the-state. Burns exposes that there exists master/slave relationship between men and women. But middle sister does not want to be in master/slave relationship at any cost. She does not accept the coercive gendered norms of the society that deprived her from freedom of choice. Middle sister’s silence before Milkman, her reading-while-walking and her running sessions are examples of performative acts that challenge and subvert the gender norms.
Seeing from Butler’s perspective, middle sister is in the process of becoming subject though seemingly she submits to higher authority exemplified by Milkman. Moreover, middle sister’s behavior shows the difference between her inner self and her outer self, a split subject. The inner-self is subversive and it questions the authority of the male whereas her outer-self or the social self seems to be submissive and quiet. Middle sister is victim of harassment by Milkman, by McSomebody and even by her first brother-in-law. She puts up with all of them just because here the conditioning of males and females would not allow her to oppose them. This shows the operation of power from top down by making the victim (middle sister) to submit to the will of more powerful and superior, Milkman. Thus, Milkman, in Butlerian terminology, can be described as the coercive gendered norms which try to constrain middle sister but she, as free subject to some extent, utilizes various strategies within the available tools to subvert and not to submit to him. She has the challenging spirit. She does not accept male domination. Being hunted by Milkman, she is the hunter of maybe-boyfriend. Her relationship with her maybe-boyfriend at maybe-level is seen as unconventional, unofficial and not proper coupledom. Therefore, it serves an example of subversion.

**Middle Sister is not a Subjugated Being**

Burns shows that middle sister is not a traditional girl. She does not want to be a subjugated being by playing stereotyped role of subordination. But within the confines of gendered norms, she strives to liberate herself from the shackles of male domination. She hates all those men who exploit and victimize women. Similarly, she does not like all those women who support patriarchal domination. Interestingly, she does not want to turn the table upon men as issue women try to do. She is not ready to live with her maybe-boyfriend in the red-light street, an area where young couples who do not want to get married go there and settle down. The red-light street is called red-light street because it is the place where unmarried couples live together. Burns unveils the unusual, unspeakable and invisible things through multiple voices of people and their reactions about the red-light street. Living together without wedlock, media declare it “depravity, decadence, demoralization, dissemination of pessimism, outrage to propriety and illicit immoral affairs” (p. 42). Middle sister does not want to follow the traditional women, nor does she want to live in the red-light street with her maybe-boyfriend. In other words, she is not like the traditional girls who get married at young age to fulfill the expectations of patriarchal domination as exemplified by the group of pious women, nor does she want to be like unmarried girls who live with boyfriends without wedlock in the red-light street. Applying Butler’s perspective of gender, the pious women are intelligible subjects who have accepted traditional role of wives and mothers. Women are not supposed to live the life without marriage vows as, “Marriage, after territorial boundaries, is the foundation of the state” (p. 42). If they remain unmarried, it means they befit into “monster” or “whore” paradigm in Sjoberg’s and Gentry’s (2007) terms. Therefore, middle sister is expected to get married but she is not ready to get married to whom she does not love. In Butler’s terminology, middle sister is not properly gendered; she is not an intelligible subject but a free subject though being determined by gendered norms and within these social
norms she subverts. It must not be misconceived that she is against marriage like the unmarried girls who live with boy-friends in the red-light street.

Burns shows that this society is so masculine dominated society that even third brother-in-law, who is feminist, believes in gender binary and considers middle sister’s harmless habit of reading-while-walking objectionable and unreasonable. It is seen as a threat to the status quo. Her reading-while-walking is more unnatural, threatening and unbearable than Milkman’s abuse of power and the lewd remarks of first brother-in-law. This shows that women’s activities are seen through male perspective as how third brother-in-law talks about middle sister’s “habit of reading-while-walking … it’s not safe, not natural, not dutiful to self” (p. 58). Even middle sister’s longest friend does not like it. She criticizes middle sister for her silence. But middle sister is not ready to give up her silence because she thinks that her silence is a sign of her power and insubordination in this disempowering world. Burns argues that a sense of an imposed collective mindset is felt throughout the book and an individual is expected to succumb to this collective cognition for the sake of survival because it is considered more important than individual own autonomy. And middle sister is not that an individual to submit to that collective mindset perpetuated and maintained by dominant ideology. Seeing through the poststructuralist Butler’s perspective, gendered norms that have been naturalized and sustained by heterosexual power structures in the course of time, cannot easily be challenged because gendered norms constitute and constrain the subject who fulfills the requirements of that patriarchal domination. As a result of social determinism, two types of subjects are constituted: those subjects who submit to gendered norms are satisfied with the existing gendered norms, but those who are not fatally conditioned or determined, subvert the existing gendered norms. Burns suggests that women need to have doughy and adventurous spirit to challenge the stereotype role of women and Burns’ heroine of Milkman, middle sister, has that challenging and subversive spirit.

Burns portrays how rumor affects middle sister’s thoughts and actions. Middle sister is tormented by the whole community that she affairs with Milkman. Even the members of her family believe in the rumor. She is seen as a femme fatale, a “sort of mob-woman … Out-of-the-pale” (p. 54). Her mother’s mind is so poisoned by rumor that she accuses her daughter of meeting with Milkman regularly at dot, dot places. Burns shows that the whole community especially the members of her own family play the role of gazer and oppressor. Middle sister decides that people especially her mother will not “get anything from” her (p. 57). Therefore, middle sister becomes inward-looking and prefers to be silent. But it does not mean that she is a subjugated being like traditional girls or ambitious women. She considers silence her power as Glenn (2004) views silence as power and not a passive consent. Middle sister’s silence is a sign of insubordination and subversion in this disempowering world; therefore, she deliberately avoids the use of language. Seeing through community perspective of troubled society, where women are underestimated and trivialized, where rumors are taken for granted as truth, where women are doubly marginalized and intimidated into silence, the rumors about relationship between Milkman and middle sister are seen as facts. Burns emphasizes the fact that rumor about Milkman and middle sister is baseless and misleading. The social norms devised by the supporters of the
patriarchal domination give a sense of power and license to all kind of men to harass and intimidate women; hence sexual harassment of women is a natural practice in this society. Burns shows how male interferes in the private life of female and how middle sister is pushed into difficult zone and even non-being zone and how her heroine becomes able to turn the corners and finds a way of living a normal life again. Seeing through Butler’s notion of gender performativity, this shows that middle sister is socially conditioned, seems a subjugated being, but actually she is an emerging subject. The seed of subversion is there in her mind. She tries to subvert unjust gendered norms through her repeated acts of silence, reading, walking and running. And at last, she is able to come out from of non-being zone into being.

Wrong-Spouse Business
Burns highlights that wrong-spouse business is the lot of the girls in this society. Girls become victim of the wrong-spouse practice to fulfill the requirements of heterosexual power structure and to play the traditional roles of mothers and wives. For example, middle sister’s eldest sister who was in love with boyfriend but he deserts her. She gets married to wrong-spouse known as first brother-in-law but still she longs for her dead ex-boyfriend. Similarly, Burns illustrates this wrong-spouse practice through pious women who are like middle sister’s mother. Middle sister’s mother has been in love with the real milkman since her school days but she fails to get him. Though she has many children from her husband, she does not love him, “instead she hated him” (p. 92). Middle sister realizes the sad story of her mother and father when the real milkman is shot by state forces taking him for Milkman. Burns ironically calls traditional women as pious women and through the character of real milkman, she exposes the jealousy among the pious women who compete with one another to get him over but they fail in getting him. Now when he is shot her mother and all other pious women also attend him in the hospital with the hope to get him over. They do not care that they will be accused of informership or traitorship. They attend him, offer him gifts and serve him at home as well after hospital. Mother is distracted to see them near him and she tells all these to her middle daughter and thus the secret of the pious women’s wrong-spouse practice is exposed. Burns shows that community does not criticize the pious women for their illicit relationships just because they have been submitted to prevailing gendered norms. In the eyes of the community, these women are normal women. Mother adds that, “a proper girl, a normal girl, a girl with morals intact and sensibility” is not expected to be involved with paramilitaries but a proper girl agrees to what is “civilized and respectful” (p. 122). It means that a proper girl, instead of coming in clash with the norms and traditions of the society, prefers to compliance. Seeing through community point of view, the sanctity of girls lies in the fact that they should get married as soon as possible. Therefore, her mother, as the voice of the community, cannot stop herself from seeing the wedlock side of things and brings every conversation to “matrimony, to the marriage vows” (p. 122). Moreover, through the representation of ambitious women who long for tough guys of paramilitary of high status, Burns shows the willing submission of these women to male authority and domination. But her heroine, middle sister, is against the wrong-spouse business because it is not based on love. Middle sister disappoints her
mother by “choosing the path of the tag-along woman” (p.123). Being unconnected, unbounded and unmarried, middle sister is seen as a woman of loose character, a whore, a monster and a femme fatale who has illicit relationships with men.

Endorsing Butler’s notions of gender, Burns illustrates proper women through the characters of middle sister’s mother, her eldest sister, the group of pious women and a group of ambitious women who are intelligible subjects and have accepted the male domination. Middle sister considers them “alien” living on “another planet” (p. 127). They do not subvert but play the traditional role of mothers and wives. Both pious women and ambitious women have been trapped in heterosexual power structure. Eldest sister has submitted to the authority exemplified by her husband. She is helpless, voiceless and even hopeless to escape from it. This means that she has lost her freedom and individuality. But, middle sister hates this wrong-spouse business and does not want to be the part of it. It implies that middle sister is not an utterly subjected subject but she is becoming a new subject who challenges masculine domination. Interestingly, Burns through the character of middle sister shows the transition from the old gender norms to the new ones.

The War of Wills between Mother and Middle Daughter

Burns portrays the war of wills between middle sister and her mother. Middle sister’s mother wants her daughter to play the role as she has played. She criticizes and annoys middle daughter for being unmarried. According to her mother, middle sister’s “non-wedlock” is self-centered and “disturbing of the God-given order” (p. 45). Middle sister knows that it is not only her mother but there are also “a whole chivvy of mothers doing their damnedest to get their daughters wed” (p. 45). Burns exposes the fact how gendered norms are imposed on girls even by their mothers and how nationalist ideology works in disguise to exploit women. Burns highlights that marriage becomes an institutional system of power that shapes the thoughts and actions of individuals in such a way to submit to that power structure. Now the question is whether middle sister will bow before the authority exemplified by her mother or she will marry at her free will when she wants to get married. Hence, it becomes “a battle of wills” between middle sister and her mother (p. 46). Mother emphasizes the importance of marriage by stating, “Marriage … was a divine decree, a communal duty, a responsibility … obligations and limitations and restrictions and hindrances” (p. 50). Marriage is not a bed of roses but it does not mean to yearn for romance without marriage bond. She advises her daughter to fulfill the “proper female aims and objectives” in the world of reality (p. 50). But middle sister’s response shows her subversive nature. She is not ready to marry any men recommended by her mother for her because she knows that none of them in any way is matchable. It is worth noting that middle sister is not a traditional girl to accept what is told to her.

Seeing through the lens of Butler’s notion of subjectivity, this shows that middle sister is not an intelligible subject like her eldest sister or like her mother. It means the existing gendered norms constitute her gender identity, constrain her but at the same time, she subverts them. Thus, she switches between social determinism and free will. Her silence before men reflects social determinism whereas her anger before her eldest sister shows her free will. For middle sister, her
mother is “living on another planet” and she considers her mother so “a stereotype, [and] a caricature” that she will never become herself (p. 52). Burns shows the drastic contrast between the wills of mother and of middle daughter. In Butler’s terminology, both mother and eldest sister are subjected subjects. They are so socially conditioned that they become the mouthpiece of coercive gender norms of patriarchal society. But middle sister is not exclusively gendered to be made to submit to patriarchal domination.

**Beyond-the-Pale**

Burns exposes gender discrimination through the use of vocabulary. For example, the phrase beyond-the-pale shows the height of patriarchal domination. Middle sister, her third brother-in-law, the real milkman, women with issues, tablets girl and tablets girl’s sister are seen beyond-the-pales just because they fail to fulfill the requirements and expectations of hegemonic heterosexuality which promotes male domination and female subordination. Third brother-in-law is an extremely feminist, therefore, community considers him beyond-the-pale. Seeing through the lens of Butler’s notion of gender performativity, third brother-in-law is marginalized because he fails in fulfilling the expectations of heterosexuality. Similarly, middle sister is viewed beyond-the-pale because she does not bow before masculine domination. The real milkman is considered beyond-the-pale because he does not accept the authority of the renouncers and he does not cooperate with them. Burns makes it clear that these persons are seen beyond-the-pales because they are threat to heterosexual power structure and to nationalist ideology. Third brother-in-law fails in fulfilling the requirements of heterosexual gendered norms; therefore, he is diagnosed as insane and imbalanced who has reached “bananas stage” (p. 13) how Burns describes him, “This man fought men. Never did he fight women” (pp. 11-12). This quotation from Milkman shows that third brother-in-law’s behavior is subversive or in Butler’s terms, he is not properly gendered. Unlike first brother-in-law, third brother-in-law does not treat middle sister in insulting manner. Moreover, unlike Milkman who symbolizes the masculine domination, third brother-in-law is not in the habit of asking manipulative and nosey questions. Through the character of third brother-in-law, Burns highlights that men will never be dictatorial towards women, if women do not accept the superiority of male willingly. Middle sister thinks third brother-in-law as a deterrent to Milkman. Therefore, she would be able to run safely without any disruptions by Milkman. This is her plan to keep Milkman away and continue her running in the company of her third brother-in-law in the parks and reservoirs. Seeing through Butler’s notion of subject or subject formation, middle sister is becoming the subject by exercising her free will within the available tools and she chooses her third brother-in-brother to challenge the gendered norms exemplified by Milkman.

**Double Marginalization of Women**

Burns highlights that women are doubly marginalized in the Northern Ireland. They have been maltreated by the male members of the community as well as by the British Army. Burns exemplifies it through the character of middle sister who faces abuse of power at home and in the
public places. Burns depicts it symbolically through killing of cats by the locals as well as by the British Army. The dead cat reminds middle sister the days of her childhood when “cats were subversive” and when men and boys killed them or shot them with stones (p. 93). Cats symbolize all those girls who are subversive whereas dogs represent the renouncers-of-the-state. It is important to note the similarity between cats and girl such as middle sister and the close likeness between the dogs and the renouncers. Moreover, the act of killing of cats by the locals and by the soldiers symbolizes the double marginalization and violence against women during the Troubles. The renouncers and dogs are killed by the soldiers. It is argued that women are the victims of higher degree of oppression and violence as compared to men. Being humiliated and suffered at hands of British Army, the renouncers turn their brutality towards the females of the area to compensate. Burns highlights that in such environment, it is not desirable for the wives, the mothers, the sisters and the daughters to go out of their houses to bear witness to what is done to their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers (renouncers) in the streets. Women are stopped, questioned and even intimidated at gunpoint by the soldiers. Therefore, they cannot dare to come out of their doors because it cannot be “agreeable to any woman to have the drip-drip effect of sexual comments made to her” by these soldiers (p. 95). In this social and political context, middle sister’s walking, reading and running habits are challenging and her walking through the ten-minute area towards her next point is the most daring.

Before the appearance of Milkman, middle sister assumes agency. But when she almost collides with Milkman, she becomes a subjugated subject and her agency is undermined, “I did not move … everything in me then stopped” (p. 102). His soundlessly approaching to her indicates that he is a predator who approaches towards his prey. Milkman’s strategy of exercising his power is indirect and subtle but the connotations and implications of his words annoy her. From Milkman’s reference to her maybe-boyfriend and to her eldest sister’s ex-boyfriend, middle sister infers that Milkman is going to kill her maybe-boyfriend and make her suffer like her eldest sister. Middle sister’s fearful fantasies and her catastrophic thinking anticipate “maybe-boyfriend’s violent death” (p. 115). She thinks that Milkman’s phraseology like death by carbomb serves an example to tell her that maybe-boyfriend’s colleagues from “the other side” are going “to kill her maybe-boyfriend out of sectarianism. No” (p. 115). The word, “No,” means that maybe-boyfriend’s colleagues are not going to kill him, but Milkman is going to kill him “under the catch-all of the political problems” and “out of disguised sexual jealousy” (p. 115). Therefore, she begins to defend her maybe-boyfriend by telling him a lie. This implies that middle sister does not speak before Milkman when it is a question of her life but she begins to tell him a lie when it is a question of her maybe-boyfriend’s life. Seeing from Butler’s perspective, middle sister is determined by social and political context of the society exemplified by Milkman but her speaking and explaining indicate that she is not fatally conditioned or determined to submit to patriarchal domination.

Burns mixes real experiences of life with that of fantasy through narrative technique in order to speak the unspeakable and to unveil the invisible things. Middle sister is running with her third brother-in-law but in her imagination, she is alone in a room with her maybe-boyfriend. This
interior monologue portrays the subversive nature of middle sister. In the company of her maybe-boyfriend, she forgets who she is and what she is doing. She posits, “I was getting wet” and she begins to “forget everything … who I was, what I was doing … everything about anything, except being there, in that moment, with him” (pp. 18-19). This shows her emotional ecstasy and her willingness to fulfill her desire. Thinking about maybe-boyfriend, middle sister wants to escape from reality into the world of maybe-relationship, but Milkman’s pressure brings her back to reality.

Applying Butler’s (1990) theorization of gender, middle sister is in the process of becoming, she assumes agency within the discourse. She keeps distance from first brother-in-law and from Milkman and rejects McSomebody who wants to marry her. It is important to note that how Burns exposes the reality through her technique of narrating the fantasy, and it is through her technique of focalization that she is able to social assumptions that support stereotype gendered roles. Burns’ heroine, middle sister, challenges these unjust gendered norms which restrict her freedom. Middle sister’s imagination shows her desire for crossing the limits and in other words, she wants to challenge the male domination. And in the emotional exaltation in the company with maybe-boyfriend, middle sister forgets everything about herself. It implies that she can get rid of her uneasiness caused by Milkman only in the maybe-relationship with maybe-boyfriend. Analyzing the middle sister’s remarks about her living with maybe-boyfriend, it is clear that she does not want to lose her free choice whether she is in maybe-relationship or in officially proper relationship with her maybe-boyfriend.

The Renouncers and Female Demographic
Burns highlights that renouncers are regarded as the heroes, the men of honor, dauntless, great warriors ready to lay down their lives for the cause, for the country and for their rights. Some girls and women demand their “social status and careerist ends” by attaining association with these renouncers; therefore, “female demographic” is always to be found in the area of renouncers (p. 120). Thus, these renouncers wield substantial power and rule over the areas with final say. The vocabulary used here shows the social assumptions which advocate superiority of male over female. A prized position of a woman is only possible of her association or attachment with Man of Men, the most influential renouncer-of-the-state. The capitalization of “Number One” is an example of a linguistic deviation which emphasizes the importance of man and it implies that the females who associate themselves with these men become Number One. Such representations of male renouncers and female attachment with them reflect that it seems natural for men to hold power and to rule over the area with unquestioned authority. The phrase “final say” means that they cannot be challenged or questioned. Such unquestioned authority of man serves to internalize male domination and female subordination. Hence, ambitious women want to be the mistresses of these paramilitaries because that provides them with “status and a wedge of the kudos and the glory” (p. 121). Considering themselves expert, ambitious women devise rules and obligations for other women to follow by stating: “Never let him down … Don’t be loud … don’t ask questions” (pp. 125-26). According to them, women are supposed to be obedient, submissive,
loyal and voiceless before these men of high caliber. It implies that masculine domination in all its forms must be accepted by women.

Seeing through the lens of Butler’s notion of gender, these women are the product of heterosexuality and in turn they support the heterosexual power structure. These ambitious women are conditioned and subjugated beings. The views of ambitious women about marriage are different from the views of middle sister’s mother. These observations of the renouncers of an extreme type are based on eroticism. They prefer a tough guy, a dangerous man to a common man or to a common renouncer, whereas mother advises her middle daughter to avoid the renouncer and she recommends a common man for her daughter to get married to. Ambitious women submit to paramilitary of extreme type; whereas, pious women including middle sister’s mother have accepted the patriarchal domination. They are the embodiments of reinforcing male domination though they do not want to attach themselves with the renouncers. In both cases, women are treated as subjugated beings. But Burns’ heroine, middle sister, has own perceptions of love and marriage. She strives to avoid both extremes which are the results of patriarchal domination and nationalist ideology. She does not see her glory or her status in her attachment with paramilitaries but in her independent life. She does not want to submit to any authority.

**Middle sister and Issue Women**

Burns uses the euphemistic phrases, issue women or women with issues for feminist women because feminist women are not tolerated by the community especially by the renouncers. The word feminist is seen as beyond-the-pale. She exposes the high degree of gender discrimination by stating that the word woman is not tolerated and is viewed as “beyond-the-pale” (p. 152). These issue women form a group known as an emerging feminist group. Awful things are said about these women with the issues behind their backs as well as to their faces. Intolerance on the part of the renouncers about the issue women indicates that they are not interested in solving the gender issues but they intimidate women into silence and do not let them speak for their rights. The real milkman advises middle sister to have a word issue women because he thinks that these women know the “awful lot about gender history and sexual politics” (p. 151). But middle sister says, “So no thanks. Not keen to have a word, not now, not ever” (p. 152) because she knows that having word with and even catching eyes with one of them is meant social suicide. She is determined not to commit social suicide at any cost. Burns shows extreme side of feminism through this group that is why middle sister does not want to have a word with them or consult them about her problem. This shows that Burns does not want turn table upon men but within the gendered norms, she suggests modification and changes to befit both men and women equally.

**Conclusion**

This paper finds out that sex discrimination or gender discrimination needs primary consideration to be resolved, but an irony of fate is that women issues are totally ignored in the guises of nationalist cause. Burns exposes the high degree of gender discrimination by showing that even males are not tolerated by community if they do not dominate women. Both patriarchy and church
are the deadly enemies of women by imposing unjust gendered norms. Burns exposes the extreme sides of both patriarchal domination and feminist convictions and she suggests avoiding these extremes. She favors the moderate way as exemplified by middle sister who does not like the pious women nor does she like the issue women. The pious women and issue women exemplify the two extremes of patriarchy and feminism respectively. The pious women have accepted the traditional stereotype role of mothers and wives. Issue women want to overthrow gender altogether. This paper explores that Burns does not want to turn the table upon men but she tries to promote just gendered norms based equal power relations because power abuse in any form, either by man or by woman, results in estranged relationship among the members of the family and society. Burns’ heroine chooses the moderate way between these two extremes: feminism and patriarchy. She is an emerging subject who exercises her free will to some extent. Thus, middle sister switches between social determinism and her free will. Her identity switches from silence to speech, from suppression of feelings to expression of feelings and from a silent listener to an active speaker. Burns shows that middle sister is in the process of self-realization. She is striving to find a way to live an independent life. It is in this sense that Burns is a feminist that she advocates in her novels women’s emancipation from shackles of unjust gendered norms, from the violence of masculine domination and from the sexual harassment. Though middle sister is constrained by gendered norms, she is not ready to submit to them. She strives for attaining her free will which shows that Burns supports individualism and Milkman has a humanizing appeal.

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