

A Comparative Analysis of Anna Burns's 'Milkman' and Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines'

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Abstract: This paper attempts to study Anna Burns's 'Milkman' and Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' in light of politics, violence, and personal history. It also studies how narrative technique employed in both the novels shapes our understanding of the fragmented reality. The study highlights the ubiquitous nature of politics not just through force but also through soft ways to suppress its target. Further, it shows how the politics of the state largely govern the personal in multiple ways. The literary mediations of the authors attempt to subvert the hegemonic discourse by following a non-linear mode of narration. By underscoring 'petit récit', both the authors challenge the veracity of dominant metanarratives of nationhood and history.

Keywords: politics, violence, history, narrative technique, hegemony

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018) proved as career defining points for both the writers. Both the novels are politically charged and are set during turbulent political happenings. *Milkman* scooped The Booker Prize for Burns while Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* won him the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award. In the novel *Milkman*, the author shows concentric conflicts involving different players. The common cause of it is the Troubles of Northern Ireland. The tussle was betwixt the Protestants who wanted to be with the UK and the Catholics who demanded unification with the Republic of Ireland. Set in a nameless city belonging to nameless characters, *Milkman* is enveloped with suspicion, fear and uncertainty. The state of Northern Ireland is shown to be caught up with the ethno-nationalist conflict called The Troubles. The Troubles were a violent conflict that lasted for about thirty years in Northern Ireland. The situation depicted in the novel parallels with what happened in India during the communal riots of the 1960s and the 1947 Partition of India. Religious variegation was the common cause of The Troubles in Ireland and the communal riots in India. During these conflicts, innocents were tortured, women were raped, public property was vandalised, and violence prevailed. In *The Shadow Lines*, the communal riots of the post-independence Indian Subcontinent play a major role in the lives of the characters.

An individual's life cannot be divorced from the political sphere. But when innocent lives are threatened to obey the dictates of the state, the whole apparatus begins to fall apart. Burns's characters are known by the roles they play like- Middlesister, third brother-in-law, maybe-boyfriend. This namelessness suggests that in a highly authoritative state individual identities are often erased. In *Milkman*, Middlesister is stalked by a paramilitary named Milkman but she cannot be vocal about it as the community believes in 'No physical touch; pas de problème'. His demonic interference in Middlesister's activities haunts her. This paper tries to highlight how individuals, particularly women wrestle to live a peaceful life amidst political tensions. "An audible click sounded as the milkman and I ran by a bush and this was a bush I'd run by lots of times without clicks coming out of it". (Burns 07) This quotation denotes that, in a highly surveilled domain, an individual loses its selfdom to act. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ila and the narrator in a conversation say- "But I am free, she said laughing. You're lucky, I answered. I'm not: at least in London. Why? She asked, draining her whisky. Because of the Raj?" (Ghosh, 35) This dialogue is uttered in quite a casual manner but it says a lot about how individuals experience a feeling of entrapment. Further in the novel, in a discussion involving the narrator and his friends, it is said

“Which riots? said Malik. There are so many”? (Ghosh, 243) It reflects the commonplace nature of riots and how one becomes attuned to violence.

In the novels of Ghosh and Burns, violence penetrates in the lives of individuals. Violence seems to be an everyday corroding agent. In Milkman, Burns depicts how life falls apart in a state rife with violence. While speaking about ‘the longest friend from school’, the narrator says “her entire family had been killed in the political problems so far”. (Burns, 195) Burns’s novel is an attestation of how the state regulates private behaviour. Antonio Gramsci’s terms - Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) are at play in Burns’s novel situated in a hyper-politicised environment. “only political murders happened in this place”. (Burns, 237) Everyday acts are being surveilled, screened, and watched over. The Tablets Girls and the Milkman’s death shows out and out nature of killings while the stalking and tracking of Middlesister exhibits how violence acts as a slow poison asphyxiating everyday existence. The community acts as an extended arm of state control, enforcing norms and punishing dissent. The protagonist named ‘Middlesister’ has the habit of reading-while-walking which gives her the ‘beyond the pale’ label. She prefers to read 19th century books as twentieth century offers no solace. Even the most commonplace habits are being watched over and tagged as unsocial. The inner machinery of an unstabilized state struggles to remain bound. In The Shadow Lines, Tridib, Khalil, and Jethamoshai’s death during the Dhaka riots speaks volumes of how innocents become victims of someone else’s wrongs. Their deaths have been described in a barbarous way as – “I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They’d cut Khalil’s stomach open. The old man’s head had been hacked off. And they’d cut Tridib’s throat, from ear to ear. (Ghosh, 276) In The Shadow Lines, state power is more dispersed, manifesting through bureaucracy, borders, and inherited ideologies. Ghosh demonstrates the epistemic quality of violence with questions of borders, identity, and memory.

Ghosh and Burns novels have an unnamed narrator who follows a fragmented temporality. Narrative form is used as a tool to lay bare the disarray of the states. Flashback technique is peculiar to The Shadow Lines and Milkman alike. Both the novels have a compelling narrative technique, anchored in memory. Using an intensely personal storytelling method, the novelists present a layered perspective of the private and the public. Burns unfolds her story via a first person narrator which makes the appeal all the more intense. In Milkman, Burns follows a roundabout fashion of narration. In Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines, the narrative shuttles back and forth in time sometimes talking about the narrator’s past in Calcutta, Tridib’s life in London and the communal riots. The memory driven narrative of the novel becomes its noteworthy feature. Ghosh’s narrator’s affinity for imagination serves as a mechanism to escape the bleak reality. “Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with” (Ghosh ,22) Another commonality of the novels is their semi-autobiographical nature. Although Burns doesn’t state the setting of her novel, critics say that it is identical to Northern Belfast where Burns grew up. Burns has projected herself in the novel in manifold ways. Likewise, events, places and people in The Shadow Lines have a striking resemblance with Ghosh’s life. The unnamed narrator in the novel is thought to be a reflection of Ghosh himself.

One of the central themes inherent in both the novels is the intergenerational burden of history. In The Shadow Lines, the pangs of partition are not only experienced by those who survived/lived through it (Jethamoshai, Thamma) but also the succeeding generation (Tridib). Tridib’s tragic death in the riots exemplifies how political antagonism of the past continues to haunt the present. In Milkman, the 18 year old Middlesister’s father becomes victim of sexual abuse in his childhood. Middle Sister’s life is symptomatic of a society where history and politics infiltrate every aspect of the personal. Her existence is characterized by fear and undue confrontation. The absence of physicality makes it difficult for the 18 year old to be vocal about it. Violence has a mutating nature, sometimes overt, sometimes covert. “...the political problems of eleven years were going on”. (Burns, 58) Generations together are conditioned to readily accept the dictates of the state. Instead of offering solace, the protagonist’s family keeps a constant watch on her. Judith Butler, the American feminist

philosopher argues in her book that power “operates not only through repressive means but also through the mundane regulation of daily life”- The families characterized in Milkman are dysfunctional because they bear the brunt of the erstwhile generations. These narratives question the objective nature of history by highlighting the layered personal perspectives.

In both the novels it is apparent that the ‘outer’ political occurrences strip the autonomy of the self. It tries to uncover how repression in a state undergoing political turmoil affects the individuals. Violence possesses both brutal and subtle qualities. Despite being set in different geographical landscapes, both texts delve into how political conflicts seep into the private lives. Through innovative narrative structures and intensely personal storytelling, the novels expose how individual subjectivity is shaped, and often stifled by the larger forces of politics, history, and violence.

Works Cited:

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