Identity Crises and Unnaming in "Milkman" by Anna Burns

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Abstract
This article aims to investigate the connection between the post-Brexit identity crises and the (un)naming strategies used in Anna Burns' *Milkman*. To this purpose, it explores the manner in which the language of identity packages ideological content by reflecting on the Northern Ireland shattered identity, which alludes to the national identity crises generated by the 2016 Referendum in the UK.
In using a qualitative approach based on the Critical Stylistic Analysis Toolkit proposed by Jeffries in 2010, more specifically a selection of Critical Stylistic Devices, the article uncovers the author's ideological standpoint by exploring her peculiar onomastic choices when referring to people, places, actions, events and states.
Keywords: *unnaming, identity crisis, Brexit, critical stylistic analysis*

Anna Burns' *Milkman*, published in 2018, is considered to be an illustrative Brexlit novel, despite its not dealing directly with the Brexit phenomenon. The main criterion for the selection of this literary text was its representation of some persistent identity crises in the UK and the author's reflecting complex issues such as class and gender while depicting women's marginalisation and men's violence against them.

In analysing the author's deliberate unnaming strategies employed across the novel, we can investigate the ideological implications of the linguistic items intended to reveal, indirectly, the

author's views on the Brexit issue. It is a challenging task as Burns does not use names in *Milkman*, but choses to refer to the characters of the novel, the countries, the places and even the relationship between people by means of definite descriptions, that is descriptive linguistic items which expose an ambiguous and confusing reality, where people are identified in terms of the (real or potential) relationships established with other people and by their own actions, while places are defined by their geographical position.

Our article proposes a qualitative approach that involves analysing a specific literary text – *Milkman* – through the lens of critical stylistics, with special focus on the author's deliberate choice of linguistic items to uncover subjective perspectives. It adopts Jeffries' (2010) analytical toolkit employing four of his critical stylistic devices: 1. Representing Actions, States and Events; 2. Exemplifying and Enumerating; 3. Assuming and Implying and 4. Naming and Describing. These tools were purposively selected taking into consideration the topic proposed and textual evidence.

Milkman is a novel inspired by Anna Burns' time spent in Belfast during the Troubles, a conflict between the Protestants, who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, and the Roman Catholic Nationalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to be part of the Republic of Ireland. The conflict is similar to the one raised by the 2016 Referendum in UK where the nationalists, the Brexiteers, vehemently contested the UK's membership of the EU. However, no clear reference to the Republic of Ireland, to the UK or to Brexit can be detected in the novel as the author chose to name the two countries "the country over the border" and "the country over the water" (namely England) in order to emphasize the fact that the two countries are divided.

The author's not giving names to the country or the city where the action takes place adds an element of ambiguity to the literary text. Unnaming as a literary strategy is also applied to the characters, including the protagonists: a woman character who reports the story and an older married man, whose personal name is not mentioned in the novel and is referred to as the milkman. The identity of the milkman is even more ambiguous as he is not really a milkman, he did not ever deliver milk or drove a milk lorry (Burns 2018: 2). Somebody McSomebody, first sister, second sister, third brother, first brother-in-law, maybe-boyfriend, maybe-girlfriend and even "a non-relationship relationship" (Burns 2019: 306) also raise questions of identity. The idea that people can be defined by the relationship they have with the others is similar to the way people were perceived during the pre- and post- Referendum period in the UK when the British citizens were frequently defined by their vote as Leavers/Brexite(e)rs or Remainers. Burns employs various linguistic items to add confusing and ambiguous notes to the idea of non-relationship relationship (Burns 2019: 306) and uncover the author's belief that people were not who they claimed to be. It may also be an allusion to the way in which the British reacted after the results of the Referendum became public and they desperately attempted to get an Irish passport to continue benefitting from the EU citizenship rights.

Burns' strategy of apparently unnaming people, places and actions across the novel is actually the author's original manner of outlining significant social aspects. Thus, Burns uses the adverb *maybe*, to build compound common nouns such as *maybe-boyfriend* and *maybe-girlfriend*, which, apparently, are ambiguous, but actually uncover the author's perspective as long as the adverb bears evaluative connotations. This word combination is not completely unusual in English, where terms such as "bride-to-be" or "wife-to-be" or husband-to-be" indicate, in formal or semi-formal contexts, the status of a person who is engaged to be married. Moreover, the employment

of the ordinal numerals to refer to the female characters in the novel may also represent the author's strategy to establish hierarchical relationships among the characters of the novel or simply to establish the age gap between the middle sister, the main character and her siblings, considering that she comes from a large family, with both younger and elder sisters, all of them being unnamed in the novel.

Burns' manner of naming across the novel is interconnected with the issue of identity. Thus, the main character's perception of reality is another facet of the identity crisis. Burns suggests that a person is defined not only by the relationship developed in time with the others but also by accepting and being able to cope with the temporal and spatial dimensions of one's own life. It may also reflect the rejection of reality represented at an individual level by the main character's desire to walk and read at the same time books from the nineteenth century. Sister even mentions it: "I did not like the twentieth century-books because I did not like the twentieth century" (Burns 2018: 5).

Being able to understand one's place in the world and accept the times one lives in is also a significant aspect related to identity and self-awareness. Expanding the idea at a national level, the UK's uncomfortable position in the EU and its desire to reposition itself on the global stage may be compared to sister's denial of her contemporary time. Her desire to live in the past by reading nineteenth century books can be associated to the British people's desire to revive the country's glorious imperial past.

Despite the fact that the author employs unnamed characters and unnamed places, there are clues which allow the reader to place the action in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. She deliberately uses this strategy in an attempt to depict the general state of the country and introduces two contrastive sides: defenders and renouncers (Burns 2018: 22), inevitably reminding the reader the two identities outlined by the Brexit referendum in the UK, respectively,

the Leavers and the Remainers. The distinction is made clear by the author herself when employing personal deictics such as the personal pronouns *us* vs. *them*, and the possessive determiners *our* vs. *their*:

> Us and them was second nature: convenient, familiar, insider and these words were off-the-cut, without the strain of having to remember and grappled with massaged phrases or diplomatically correct niceties (Burns 2018: 22).

The author implies that one's identity could be reduced to one's belonging to one side or another in the same way that the Brexiteers identified themselves with their own choice or vote during the referendum. People's belonging to the defenders' group or to the renouncers' group is reflected at the level of language by what the author calls "tribal identifiers" (Burns 2018: 22): the employment of the adjective *tribal* denotes that people shared common traits, beliefs and viewpoints.

> It was unanimously understood that when everybody here used the tribal identifiers of us or them, of their religion or our religion, not all of us was and not all of them was, it goes without saying, to be taken read. (Burns 2018: 22)

These fractions and the way in which people understood all the unwritten rules and regulations of the district are illustrated by the issue of names and the banned list kept by an unnamed clerk and an unnamed clerkess. The author invokes the power of history by employing this noun phrase. The same idea is enhanced by the noun phrase *the age-old conflict*, built with the noun *conflict*, concisely presenting the relationship between the two sides, pre-modified by the compound adjective *age-old* describing the deep-rooted and long-lasting situation. The infusion of names with the past's wounds prevents the inhabitants of each country from borrowing names which are banned on their territory. The distinction is outlined by the employment of the demonstratives *this* and *that*.

> The banned names were understood to have become infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict, enjoinments and resisted impositions as laid down long ago in this country by that country, with the original nationality now not in the running at all. (Burns 2018: 23)

A significant aspect is the fact that the list to which the inhabitants instinctively adhered, was also divided into two categories of names: those allowed in the community and those not allowed and the reason for their prohibition was their belonging too much to "the country over the water" (Burns 2018: 23). The author discloses her ideology on the issue by employing the verb *to belong* and the adverb *too much*, building thus an assumption that outlines the absurdity of the situation: the names belonging to the other country were prohibited as they *belonged too much*. Burns emphasizes the fact that, during such times of crisis, people were labelled and defined by their words as coming from one side of the water or another, similarly to the way in which the British citizens were identified with their vote during the Brexit crisis. The author employs another contrastive binary pair, which is frequently repeated across the novel: *the issue women* vs. *the traditional women*. The distinction between the two categories of women is also related to identity, the conflict enabling the reader to get a more comprehensive picture of the community. The general atmosphere is described as being psycho-political (Burns, 2019, p. 24) and the two sides are clearly delimitated by employing personal deictics to set borders:

> ... matters didn't stop at our names and their names, us and them, our community and their community, at over the road, over the water and over the border. (Burns 2018: 24)

Moreover, the author exemplifies and enumerates other criteria which enabled people to differentiate from one another by contrasting

nouns and adjectives that trace a firm line between the two categories of inhabitants:

> The right butter. The wrong butter. The tea of allegiance. The tea of betrayal. There were our shops and their shops. (Burns 2018: 25)

The connection between the identity and time is also relevant. The collective identity crisis is depicted by the author using strong evaluative adjectives such as *paranoid, suspicious, turbulent*, and illustrative metaphors:

> These were paranoid times. These were knife-edge times, with everybody suspicious of everybody... It was that people were quick to point fingers, to judge to add on even in peaceful times, so it would be hard to fathom fingers not getting pointed and words not being added, also being judged in these turbulent times. (Burns 2018: 28)

Burns also uses the noun phrase *these turbulent times* to describe the uncertainty and the confusion with which people had to cope. Furthermore, the author depicts the crisis moments as *knife-edge times*, which outlines the alarming general state of the nation that was split into two categories of inhabitants: the Brexit supporters and the Europhiles.

Other lexical items enable the reader to conceptualize a hypothetical view providing thus a persuasive power to the message. Hence, the employment of the impersonal construction built with the modal *would* (*it would be hard*) indicates that some actions are considered normal taking into consideration the tumultuous times described*: fingers not getting pointed, words not being added and being judged*. The passive constructions omitting the agent package ideological information as the author deliberately hides the doer of the action.

The author approaches the issue of flags and emblems as identity markers of the two sides which she defines, through the words of *maybe-boyfriends'* unnamed neighbour, as *pathologically and narcissistically emotional* (Burns 2018: 25). The adverbs *pathologically* and *narcissistically* remind the reader of Brexit being perceived as the outcome of national collective narcissism rooted in the imperial nostalgia. The author also employed the adjective *instinctive* and *emotional* in the same context. The Brexiteers were considered to have voted pro-Leave urged by irrational emotive patriotism and instinctive feelings. The author insists on the idea that flags are such a patriotic, nation-defining symbols (Burns 2018: 26) and, although the two sides shared the same flag, it was not welcomed in the community of the maybe-boyfriend. The idea that nationalists who believe in flags and emblems are instinctive and emotional and make decisions based on their emotions reminds the reader the emotive patriotic speeches of the Brexiteers' leaders during the Campaign.

Burns insists on people's subjective view of things, often misperceiving reality or exaggerating, influenced by their personal beliefs. During such times, people lose rationality and become paranoid. The adjectives *subjective, personal* and *eventually crazy* are suggest that people view things through the lens of their own ideological standpoints.

> Even I knew though, that people with ideological causes didn't always act in the name of their cause. Personal slants happened, singular irregularities, subjective interpretations. Crazy people. (Burns 2018: 169)

The author enumerates the things which commonly influence people whenever they act in a particular manner, employing noun phrases such as *singular irregularities* and *subjective interpretations*. Moreover, Burns debunks the myth according to which people blindly follow ideologies and personal sets of values and thus make their own decisions. The author insists on people's unpredictability which,

during the Brexit Campaign, was very high, taking into consideration the way people changed their minds in the very day of the Referendum.

Furthermore, the Leavers' Campaign based on untruths and false promises created a confusing and alarming atmosphere where people could no longer distinguish between truth or lie, good or bed. Such an effect on people is described in Burns' novel when middle sister confesses:

> I wasn't sure anymore what was plausible, what was exaggeration, what might be reality or delusion or paranoia. (Burns 2018: 169)

The nouns *exaggeration, delusion, realty* and *paranoia* are employed to depict the main character's inner struggle to understand the world around her and find her own sense of identity, a feeling also described by the British during the post-Brexit period. The interior crisis is indicated by the author in the paragraph where middle-sister describes herself as *almost-blank* and *almost-empty* and alludes to the fact that the solutions for the crises seem plausible on paper, but in real life, they do not work. Burns contrasts the world of preciseness and clean-cut methods (Burns 2019: 179) against reality which, most of the times, cannot actually be effective. The employment of the adverb of degree *almost* enhances the idea that things are relative and the solutions for the crises were to be found somewhere in the middle.

A discussion during the French class dealing with the colour of the sky is also representative for the way in which people perceive reality. The firm division between the two categories of inhabitants, Renouncers and Defenders, which can be easily associated with Brexiteers and Remainers, is deconstructed by the French teacher who explains how people prefer to simplify things rejecting complex truth in favour of stable and widely accepted versions. While in the novel all the students describe the sky as being blue, ignoring the orange, pink and red shades of the sunset, during the Brexit Campaign, the voters

preferred embracing a long-lost but familiar past instead of a future in the EU. This oversimplification can also be detected in the ballot paper where the British were given two options: Leave or Remain a member of the EU. Burns suggests that, while Brexit might not seem the right solution and though EU membership had come to an end as the UK could not find its place in the Union anymore, there could have been found another way to deal with issue. The old colonial feelings revived by the Brexiteers during the Campaign determined a large category of voters to decide a non-EU trajectory for the UK in their desperate attempt to revive a long-lost national identity. The Brexit phenomenon is defined in the novel by the noun phrase *political problems*, which frequently occurs just like a refrain.

Burns describes the fear of losing national identity and transforming into *that country over the water* felt by middle sister's mom. The general atmosphere of confusion and anxiety is gradually built firstly by suggesting uncertainty employing the negative form of the verb *know*, and eventually by describing transformation using the verb *to turn* in the present continuous. The adverb *definitely* intensifies the negative connotations of the adjective *worried.* The deictics of place, the adverbs *there* and the demonstrative are employed to portray a part of the country where people have *loose morals.*

> I don't know what we're coming to, said ma and yes, definitely, she was worried. We're turning into that country over the water. Anything happens there. Ordinary murders happen there. Loose morals happen there. (Burns 2018: 237)

The noun phrase *ordinary crimes* is employed to uncover an assumption regarding the fact that murders commonly took place in the country. The employment of the adjective *ordinary* pre- modifying the noun *crimes* alludes to the dehumanizing effects social phenomena may have on people during harsh times such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland and Brexit, in the UK.

Conclusions

Though apparently not dealing with Brexit, the novel reflects on the Northern Ireland's shattered identity, alluding to the national identity crises generated/ revealed by the 2016 Referendum in the UK. The connection between naming and identity crisis is linguistically reflected in the novel by the author's deliberate choice of ambiguously describing people, places and events instead of clearly naming them.

While not naming people, places and events in the novel, Burns efficiently adopted the strategies of Naming and Describing, Representing Actions, States and Events, Time, Space and Society Representation and Enumerating and Exemplifying to expose subjective views on the issue.

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