

Edited by
Ben Fletcher-Watson
and Jayni Makwana



Lioness, Captive, Visionary

what does it
mean to be a
dangerous
woman?



Ben Fletcher-Watson and Jayni Makwana (editors)
Lioness, Captive, Visionary: what does it mean to be a dangerous woman?

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Lioness, Captive, Visionary:

*what does it mean to be a
dangerous woman?*

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FOREWORD

The Dangerous Women Project (DWP) was launched ten years ago by Dr Peta Freestone and Professor Jo Shaw, to wrestle with and dissect the figure of the ‘dangerous woman’. Between International Women’s Day 2016 and International Women’s Day 2017, daily essays were posted on the DWP website, sent in by writers from around the world. In the words of Dame Mary Beard, the Project is ‘a great chance to explore what we expect of women, of how they should behave and of what counts as women “stepping out of the line”.’

In the decade since, three books have been published by the team at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), bringing together different collections of contributions. *The Art of Being Dangerous: Exploring Women and Danger through Creative Expression* (Leuven University Press, 2021) gathered together a range of pieces of visual art, poetry and creative writing, while *Dangerous Women: Fifty Reflections on Women, Power and Identity* (Unbound, 2022) dealt with politics, law and sociology. *Women Who Dared: From the Infamous to the Forgotten* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025) provided a global view of feminist history, taking in every continent in a span stretching from antiquity to the 21st century.

To mark the DWP’s 10-year anniversary on 8 March 2026, we invited a new generation of writers to offer short insights into their favourite dissenting women from history. From educator and activist Chief Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria to priestess

baliana from the Philippines, not to mention Nancy Cunard, Marielle Franco and more, their stories of resistance and resilience added to the rich tapestry woven since 2016. Some of those presentations have been turned into the essays within this short book.

Dr Helen Shutt's essay on activist and educator **Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti** places her political action in the wider context of British imperialism. The 'Lioness of Lisabi', as she was known, used music, public spectacle, petitions, nudity and even picnics as potent weapons in the fight for justice. Ransome-Kuti's harnessing of creativity – especially song – in her cause is mirrored in the legacy of her descendants, including her son Fela Kuti.

Our second piece, by Dr Kate Ash-Irisarri, travels back centuries to the struggle for Scotland's Crown in 1306. **Isabel Macduff, Countess of Buchan**, appears here through various lenses, from chronicles to romantic novels, and even railway advertisements. Her imprisonment 'in a wooden hut, in one of the towers of Berwick castle' placed her on public display as punishment for daring to crown a controversial King of Scotland; yet her legacy as a 'wicked conspirator' and 'sensual countess' demonstrates the long shadow of a woman willing to transgress.

Dr Sheelalipi Sahana places her focus on human rights defender **Gulfisha Fatima**, imprisoned like Isabel, but now for the crime of conspiracy to instigate riots. Sahana uses Fatima's poems to explore her role as a political prisoner in Modi's India, seeking freedom not just for herself but for minorities fighting for equal treatment as citizens. The word *Azadi* (freedom) resounds through the essay as a call for solidarity around the globe.

As Dr Elsie Albis notes, the struggle for recognition of our common humanity is constant – her essay on **the baliana** shows that this pre-colonial figure from the Philippines can be at once a healer, a subverter of gender norms, a leader, a she-devil, a teacher, a

warrior and a priestess. Moreover, Albis explains that anyone can claim her role for themselves, even today. By calling for justice in the face of oppression, we can revive the baliana for our own times.

The book ends with Dr Georgi Gill's encomium to **Anna Burns**, Booker Prize-winning author of *Milkman*. Gill thrills to the portrait of a paranoid Northern Ireland where language and gossip are weapons, and even your car is scrutinised for signs of political-religious affiliation, calling the novel 'nuanced, witty and devastating'. Burns' own life (as 'the only Booker winner to thank a housing charity, a foodbank and the Department of Work and Pensions in the winning novel's acknowledgements') models a persistence that could be said to drive all five dangerous women featured in this pamphlet.

I would like to thank our five wonderful authors, my co-editor Jayni Makwana for her tireless work on the manuscript, Jo and Peta for their inspiring example, and all the staff and Fellows at IASH.

Ben Fletcher-Watson

HELEN SHUTT

FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI: 'THE LIONESSE OF LISABI' AND THE WOMEN OF ABEOKUTA

Dr Helen Shutt is an interdisciplinary theatre practitioner and researcher who was awarded her PhD in Theatre Studies from the University of Glasgow in 2023. She is particularly interested in using participatory arts methods to support modes of expressing and understanding gender-related issues. Alongside her work in the UK theatre stage and screen sectors, Helen has worked internationally exploring sex and gender-based issues, collaborating with organisations in India (Think Arts), Malawi (Theatre for a Change), Mozambique and Sierra Leone (Timap for Justice). Her monograph *Playwriting and the Craft of Audience Participation* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2026.

It was fortuitous timing that when IASH put out a call for suggestions of 'Dangerous Women' to be featured as part of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the project, I had just been learning about the Nigerian activist and educator, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978). She is retrospectively recognised as being ahead of her time in adopting what we would now describe as intersectional, pan-African and decolonial principles in her fight for women's rights. In the many articles, podcasts and papers documenting her life, she is consistently described as formidable, fierce and, yes, dangerous. Indeed, the Nigerian press dubbed her the 'Lioness of Lisabi' (Agunbiade, 2020).



Figure 1: image via UNESCO

While undeniably an impressive individual, it seems to me that her strengths lay in her commitment to working with other women and her conviction in the power of collective action. While there is much to say about her lifetime's work, in this discussion I will focus on the Abeokuta's Women's Revolt, which took place in the late 1940s. Ransome-Kuti played a significant role in spearheading this uprising, however, the movement saw thousands of women across different social strata uniting and deploying a range of protest methods from the conventional, to

more creative and subversive techniques. For this reason, I believe it offers an illuminating contribution to this project's central question, 'what does it mean to be a dangerous woman?'

Born in Abeokuta in Southwest Nigeria in 1900, the daughter of mission-educated Christians, Ransome-Kuti was one of the first girls to attend the local Grammar School and was later educated at Wincham Hall in Cheshire, UK. Returning to Abeokuta, she married Reverend I.O. Ransome-Kuti, Principal of Abeokuta Grammar School, and together they had four children. Scholar Judith Byfield describes the couple as 'members of a Christian elite whose social status was further enhanced by their literacy and their cosmopolitan experiences' (Byfield, 2016, p.111). Both were proponents of Nigerian nationalism and were inspired by Trade Unionism. This melting pot of influences, described by Byfield as 'Yoruba gender ideology, Christianity, and democratic theory' (Byfield, 2016, p.109), would inform the political work to which Ransome-Kuti dedicated her life.

While she would become increasingly committed to overthrowing colonial rule, photos of Ransome-Kuti and her young children in buttoned-up Victorian dress reveal the early influence of British customs. The legacy of her English schooling was further demonstrated when, in 1932 she founded the Abeokuta Ladies Club, a selective organisation for Christian, educated women, that ‘planned social evenings, picnics, and lessons in “English Cookery”’ (Byfield, 2003 p.265).

A cohort who would not initially have been part of the Ladies Club were the Abeokuta market sellers- hardworking women who traded in oil, tie-dye fabric, rice and produce. Cheryl Johnson-Odim describes how, supposedly, Ransome-Kuti observed one of the market women singing in church with her hymn sheet upside down. Realising that she and likely the majority of her peers could not read, she began offering literacy classes through the Ladies Club (Abumrad, 2025, 15:40). I think it is important to note, however, that the education went both ways. Through the literacy lessons, the market women brought to Ransome-Kuti’s attention the struggles that were dominating their lives at the time, particularly the extreme taxes being enforced by the colonial administration.

British interference in the marketplace dated back to the turn of the century. Although historically – and in other parts of Nigeria – women did not pay income or poll tax, colonial officials perceived the Egba women of the Abeokuta region as wealthy traders. Therefore, from 1918, they were taxed independently. Women had to pay taxes from a younger age than men, and colonial officials often resorted to violent and abusive methods such as stripping adolescent girls so as to determine their age. With a war in Europe to fund, taxes were raised throughout the 1940s and the women were subject to these increasingly punishing demands without any female representatives to defend them in the local courts. The market women shared with Ransome-Kuti and other members of the Ladies Club the brutal treatment they had received, and the

failings of any attempts to challenge these measures (Byfield, 2003, p.266).

As was the case in many British colonies across the Globe, the colonial administration employed a policy of Indirect Rule and it was through a local king, the Alake, that these taxes were enforced. There had been earlier attempts to challenge the implementation of taxes upon women, and in the 1920s, the market women had been represented by Madam Jojolola, who held the role of 'Iyalode of the Egbas'. However, following her death, the women lacked one centralised leader to represent their cause. Into this space entered Ransome-Kuti who, alongside other members of the Ladies Club, began petitioning the Alake, writing letters and going to the press. Her commitment to democratic politics was demonstrated when the Ladies Club became the Abeokuta's Women's Union, founded 'to establish and maintain unity and cooperation among all women in Egbaland' in 1946 (Byfield, 2003, p.267). No longer an elite organisation, the Union was open to all women, and efforts were made to ensure that it was an inclusive environment; meetings were scheduled around market times to suit the market women, and members were advised that 'no member of the Union should think herself better than others, all must move freely and happily' (Byfield, 2003, pp.267-8). In a draft speech titled "Women on Civic and Political Education", Ransome-Kuti writes:

The women of this country should now begin to think of forming themselves into one big and powerful unit. ...if we can merge our organisations together, how powerful and respected Nigerian women will be.

(Byfield, 2016, p.118)

The AWU Guidelines stipulated that members should avoid ostentatious clothing, and at this time Ransome-Kuti stopped wearing Western clothing and was only ever seen in traditional Yoruba dress. In a similar commitment to her Nigerian heritage,

she pointedly only spoke Yoruba in negotiations with British officials, despite her fluency in English. She was, infamously, the first woman in Nigeria to learn to drive a car and she utilised that skill for her political movement, driving out to multiple communities in the region and recruiting women to the Union, so much so that the membership swelled to over twenty thousand (Abumrad, 2025).



Figure 2: image via UNESCO

Over time, the AWU members realised that their letters and petitions were having little effect. They began to employ different approaches; the market women went on strike and took part in rallies throughout the town. When Ransome-Kuti and other leaders were arrested for marching without a license, they creatively rebranded their gatherings as ‘picnics’. In 1947, one such picnic saw 10,000 women march to the Alake’s palace, where they set up camp for days. It is at this juncture that I will introduce the first of two men related to Ransome-Kuti, who tend to be more widely known than her. Wole Soyinka, the Nobel prize-winning writer, was her nephew and a young boy at the time of the uprising. He recalls this event and the strong impression it made on him in his autobiography *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, describing it as ‘the Great Upheaval’ (Soyinka, 1981, p.181). More

recently, he can be heard discussing the uprising in the podcast series *Fela Kuti: Fear No Man*, dedicated to the life and work of another high-profile man related to Ransome-Kuti, her son; the musician and founder of Afrobeat, known to many around the world simply as 'Fela'. Soyinka, who worked as a messenger boy for the women during the protest, described how tensions ran high, patience had been tested and the women approached the rally as though going to battle. This is exemplified in the gesture of removing their head ties: 'the moment there is going to be a conflict, off would come the head tie. It is like throwing down the gauntlet, when a woman takes off her head tie and ties it like a sash around her waist, the men scatter' (Abumrad, 2025, 31:15).

In their encampment on the grounds of the palace, the women, in their thousands, sang at the Alake, employing the Igbo tradition of 'Sitting on a Man' whereby women would gather outside the home of a man and sing derogatory songs with the intention of shaming and ridiculing him. The following lyrics, translated from Yoruba to English, are from a song the women sang at the Alake, demonstrating their desire to humiliate and threaten him:

For a long time you have used your penis as a mark of authority that you are our husband. Today we shall reverse the order and use our vagina to play the role of husband on you... O you men, vagina's head will seek vengeance.

(Abba, 2022)

In *Fear No Man*, presenter Jad Abumrad speculates as to how witnessing this use of song as a form of political rebellion might have had a profound impact on a then eight-year-old Fela. The Afrobeat pioneer famously stated, 'music is the weapon', a maxim that his mother, and the women she collaborated with, demonstrated to powerful effect (*Fela Kuti: Music Is the Weapon*, 1982).

Byfield notes that this particular rally also saw examples of elder women choosing to disrobe and expose their naked bodies to the Alake, a gesture she describes would have been seen as an ‘abomination’ (Abumrad, 2025, 44:30). In this rebellious act, the women harness the suspicion, or horror, projected upon the female body as a means of resistance. Boldly choosing to expose their bodies in this way is a pointed reversal and reclamation of the enforced stripping that many of the young women had been subject to. These women understood that men viewed the female body as inherently dangerous, and they defiantly used this prejudice to their advantage, baring their bodies to instil fear, chaos and shame amongst the male leaders.

The women achieved their desired outcome, in the short term at least. The District Commissioners viewed the town as ‘virtually uncontrollable’ and the Alake was smuggled out into exile in the dead of night (Byfield, 2016, p.119). He abdicated (albeit temporarily) some months later. Ultimately, the uprising led to Tax Reforms and the appointment of four women, including Ransome-Kuti, onto a new Government Council.

There is much to be learned from these women. They came together from a cross-section of society, employing a wide range of methods to achieve their demands and challenge the exploitative measures of a ruling male, colonial class. As a Theatre Studies scholar, I found the use of performative techniques particularly striking. We see the powerful use of costume in the removal of the head ties as a signifier of ‘going to battle’. The women utilised creative expression and song in the African practice of ‘Sitting on a Man’ to convey derision. They employed bodily gestures and intentional exposure of the naked form to bring shame upon the men that had abused them. All of these inventive, creative and unsettling acts see a diverse group of individuals united in one resolute collective of ‘Dangerous Women’.

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KATE ASH-IRISARRI

ISABEL, COUNTESS OF BUCHAN: THE WOMAN WHO STOLE A HORSE TO CROWN A KING

Dr Kate Ash-Irisarri is Lecturer in Late Medieval Scottish and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on Older Scots writing concerned with representations of the past, the history of emotions, and the reception of the Middle Ages in contemporary culture. She has published widely on these topics, and is the author of *Rewriting the Past in Scottish Literature, 1350–1550* (2025). Her current project explores literary representations of joy in late medieval Scotland.

In 1986, British folk-rock band Steeleye Span released their twelfth studio album, *Back in Line*. Several of the songs on the album – including ‘Lanercost’, and ‘Take My Heart’ – relate to the fourteenth-century Scottish Wars of Independence, which saw Scotland contest English claims of overlordship in a series of conflicts lasting from 1296 to 1357. The album’s song, ‘Isabel’, presents a first-person account of a woman who claims to have ‘crowned [her] lover king’, and who, having been captured, is displayed ‘in [a] cage in full public gaze’. The narrator proudly recalls her involvement in resisting the might of the ‘soft southern dogs’ and declares that, although her body is ‘caged and disdained’, her ‘heart flies with [her lover] still’. Given the chance, she insists, she would ‘do it all again’. But who was this mysterious

Isabel, and how much of this story reflects historical reality rather than the modern tradition of romancing the Middle Ages?

Given the references to Bannockburn in the song, the king in question can only be Robert I (the Bruce), while the titular Isabel is Isabel Macduff, Countess of Buchan. Although the surviving sources provide only scant evidence for Isabel herself, several aspects of her life can be established with reasonable certainty. She was the daughter of Colban, earl of Fife, and Countess Anna (Watson, 2004). By 1297, she had married John Comyn, earl of Buchan (d. 1308), whose cousin, John Comyn of Badenoch, was murdered by Robert the Bruce in early 1306. Isabel's husband, along with the rest of the Comyn family, was a staunch supporter of John Balliol, who had been installed as King of Scots in 1292 before being forced to abdicate by Edward I of England in 1296. The Comyns subsequently emerged as the principal rivals to Robert Bruce's claim to the Scottish throne, making the murder of John Comyn of Badenoch not only an act of personal violence that prompted Bruce's excommunication, but also a decisive political intervention in the struggle for the Crown.

Isabel's political position, however, appears to have diverged from her husband's, and she played an important role in Bruce's inauguration just a few weeks after Comyn's death. Writing in the 1350s, the Northumbrian gentry chronicler, Sir Thomas Gray, records in *Scalacronica* that Bruce 'had himself crowned as King of Scotland at Scone... by the Countess of Buchan, in the absence of the earl who was then staying in England' (2005, p.53). The Macduff earls of Fife traditionally held the honour of placing the crown on the monarch's head at the inauguration; however, in 1306, the earl of Fife was both a minor and aligned with the English. As the earl's aunt, Isabel was the most senior available member of the family, and she stepped in to fulfil this hereditary duty. According to later tradition, which seems to have originated in John Capgrave's fifteenth-century *Chronicle of England*, Isabel:

‘stal from hir lord alle his grete hors’, arriving at Scone with ‘swech men as sche trostid... and there sche sette the crowne upon Robardis hed’

(Hingeston, 1858, p.173)

‘stole from her lord [i.e. husband] all his best horses [arriving at Scone with] such men as she trusted... and there she set the crown on Robert’s head’

Following the inauguration, Isabel remained with the Bruces, accompanying Bruce’s wife, daughter, and sisters on their flight north after the disastrous Battle of Methven. The women were captured by William, Earl of Ross in September 1306. Bruce’s sister, Mary was incarcerated in a wooden cage at Roxburgh, and the record shows that Isabel was condemned to the same punishment at Berwick. Gray tells us that ‘she was put in a wooden hut, in one of the towers of Berwick castle, with criss-crossed walls, so that all could watch her for spectacle’ (2005, p.53). The records of Edward I’s punishment of Isabel also state that Scots men and women were prohibited from talking to her. Not only did Isabel become a spectacle, an object of wonder and fear, but speaking to her became dangerous and politically incendiary (Ash-Irisarri, 2025, pp.72–7).

Scottish histories do not mention Isabel’s presence at Bruce’s inauguration, a silence that may have served to reinforce the image of his accession as a legitimate succession rather than a contested seizure of power. As Nicola Royan argues, the ‘abnormality’ of Isabel’s role could have provided Bruce’s opponents with grounds to challenge the legitimacy of his kingship (p.133). From the outset, however, English accounts were far more explicit in condemning her actions and sought to portray her in the most damaging terms possible. The fourteenth-century *Flores Historiarum* describes her as an ‘adulteress’ (*adultera*) (Luard, 1890, vol. 3, p.130), while the *Passio Scotorum Perjuratorum* – a satirical pseudo-homily attacking Bruce’s seizure of the Scottish throne – presents Isabel as a ‘wicked conspirator’ (*impia*

conjuratrix) who ‘transgressed the bed of her husband and burned with lust after the crowned fool [Bruce], calling him “Daffy”’ (Marquis of Bute, 1885, p.172). The very specific emphasis on Isabel’s alleged concupiscence renders ‘Daffy’ a term of endearment between lovers and transforms her political intervention into a moral failing. The *Passio* offers the most sensational explanation for her actions, replacing political agency with accusations of sexual transgression and casting both Isabel and Bruce as morally compromised. It is this image that Steeleye Span’s narrator embraces to situate Isabel as a modern romantic heroine.

Attempts were made by Sir Robert Keith and Sir John Mowbray to secure Isabel’s release, but without success. In 1310, she was removed to the Carmelite friary in Berwick, and in 1313 she was placed in the custody of Sir Henry Beaumont (d. 1340), the husband of Buchan’s niece, Alice, where she was likely held under a form of house arrest. At this point, Isabel disappears from the historical record, and the date of her death remains unknown. The English image of Isabel as romantically attached to Robert the Bruce endured beyond the Middle Ages, with their assumed intimacy becoming a recurring feature of later representations of her. In Barbara Erskine’s novel *Kingdom of Shadows* (1988) and Robert Low’s *The Lion Wakes* (2011), Isabel is, likewise, depicted as Bruce’s lover, while in Monica McCarty’s *Highland Guard* novel, *The Viper* (2011), she appears as a ‘proud, lushly sensual countess’ and as the woman who challenges Lachlan MacRuairi, a fictionalised member of Bruce’s Highland Guard, to ‘love again’ (publisher’s description). These later representations of the Countess of Buchan are as significant as the omissions found in Scottish chronicles and the character assassinations in the English material. They demonstrate the persistence of a concern with Isabel as a woman who transgressed accepted boundaries. Across both medieval and modern retellings, Isabel emerges as a dangerous woman: politically influential, sexually independent and unwilling to remain within the limits expected of her. The

hostile accounts of her actions seek to contain this threat by reducing her political agency to sexual deviance, while later romanticised versions often transform the same qualities into signs of passion and allure. Whether condemned as a conspirator or celebrated as a heroine, Isabel's enduring afterlife rests upon the unease generated by a woman who intervened in the making of a king.



Figure 3: image via British Railways Board Records Office, available under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

Alongside this image of Isabel, in the 1930s, the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) advertisement for 'It's Quicker by Rail', promoting travel to Berwick-upon-Tweed, drew upon the condition of her imprisonment by depicting Isabel displayed in a cage outside the walls of Berwick Castle. The image, designed by Doris Zinkeisen, reproduced a much older mode of transforming the politically significant woman into a public spectacle. Where

Gray's *Scalacronica* recorded Isabel's role in Bruce's inauguration and her punishment, LNER's image continues to participate in the afterlife of Isabel's story in which her body becomes the site through which competing meanings are performed for public consumption. Here, a medieval act of political humiliation is transformed into a tourist attraction.

From the scant historical evidence to the reimagined lives of contemporary fiction and song, Isabel, Countess of Buchan remains a figure of fascination precisely because so little can be recovered about her with certainty, though the evidence that does survive situates her as a figure who posed various threats to English and Scottish claims to legitimacy and authority. Across the varied representations of her, Isabel repeatedly emerges as a woman who could be seen to have unsettled expectations; condemned by some as a transgressive figure, romanticised by others as a heroine or unfortunate prisoner of Edward I. The afterlife of Isabel's story demonstrates how attempts to explain and contain the actions of a woman who made a brief appearance at the centre of a political crisis ensured that she could never entirely be forgotten.

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SHEELALIPI SAHANA

GULFISHA FATIMA: THE FLOWER OF FREEDOM

Dr Sheelalipi Sahana researches decolonisation, colonial children's literature, and race science. She has worked as a Heritage Collections Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, on the construction of race in Scottish Enlightenment thought through the visual depiction of Indians. She completed her PhD in English Literature from the University of Edinburgh in 2025; articles based on her research into women's agency, architecture and the built environment have appeared in *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, and Routledge's *Nation and Nationalism in South Asian Literature*.

In 2020, Gulfisha Fatima participated in protests organised in Delhi against the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens proposed by the right-wing Indian state. Both were designed to redefine legal citizenship and regulate undocumented migration in the country. The Indian Government passed the CAA in 2019 and implemented it in 2024. It seeks to give all illegal migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan amnesty and an accelerated path to citizenship, except for Muslims. Mukul Kesavan writes in *The Telegraph* that 'couched in the language of refuge and seemingly directed at foreigners, the [CAA's] main purpose is the de-legitimization of Muslim citizenship' (2019). In protest, largescale

demonstrations in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh and other cities across India were spearheaded by Muslim women and students who resisted their disenfranchisement from their homeland with slogans of 'Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge' (We will not show our papers). Gulfisha Fatima was arrested by the police in a 'conspiracy case' alleging her involvement in instigating communal riots (South Asia Justice Campaign, no date). Booked under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), Gulfisha, along with 19 other activists, scholars, and human rights defenders, was incarcerated without trial. After repeated postponements and plea denials, Gulfisha was granted bail by the Supreme Court in January 2026 and released from Tihar Jail after six years.

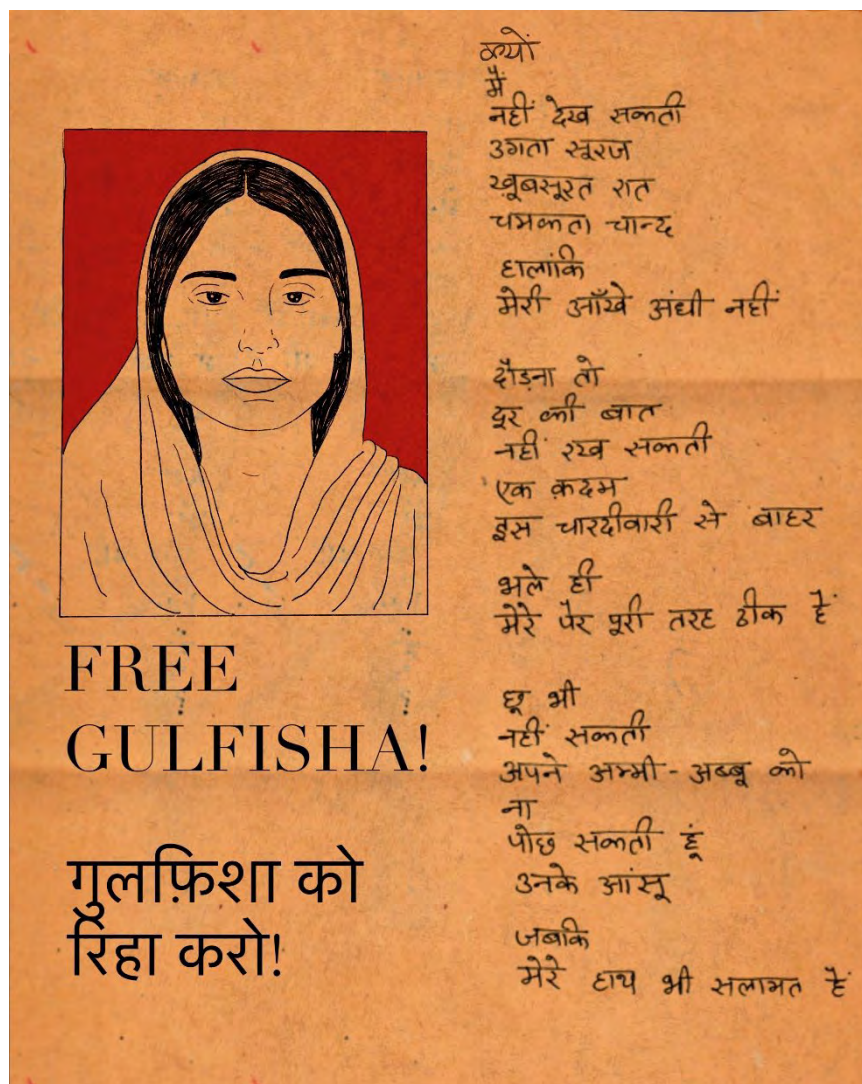


Figure 4: 'Gulfisha Fatima' by Priyanka Paul, www.instagram.com/artwhoring

The political buzzword in India over the last decade has been ‘anti-national’; anybody that raises their voice against Hindutva ideology is brandished with the thought-terminating label arbitrarily and brought under public scrutiny as being ‘seditious’. Seditious against whom? Seditious how?

These are left undefined in the law’s blurry rhetoric, while the nation-state’s borders harden every day. The draconian and colonial UAPA law, first introduced in British India, was stringently amended in 2019, granting the central government excessive powers in stamping down on free speech and political mobilisation by incarcerating individuals as ‘terrorists’ and ‘anti-national’ for critiquing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s fascist communal policies that abjectly target the Muslims of the country. Using the language of decolonisation, the imagined utopia of a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ negates India’s millennia-old sedimented histories of migration, settlement, and diversity.

This law’s weaponisation of imprisonment as a method of removing dissenters from public life, making them languish behind bars without any legal recourse to challenge vague and unfounded claims, operates as a technique of wearing down individuals facing the bureaucratic demon of the judiciary. Writing from Tihar Jail during her fifth year behind bars, Gulfisha reflected on the shrinking of her life: ‘Though incarceration has done no harm to my body, yet it has successfully managed to inflict on my mental health [...] I long for freedom crazily and feel excruciating darkness of interminable uncertainty for release. But it has helped me realise the sheer fragility of life’ (Fatima, 2024a).

Despite the state’s efforts to break the spirits of political activists, love and solidarity outshines and outlasts any regime. In personal letters to her parents and friends from Tihar signed ‘Caged Gulfisha Fatima’, Gulfisha wrote about the fluid secularism of India that spills over every aspect of life, inside and outside bars:

Interestingly, in jail most people respect and observe fast of every religion. Hasina observed Navratri fast, Nancy observed Roza, Nusullah observed Navratri, Madhuri [observed] Ramzaan. It shows there is still hope and love which can alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

(Fatima, 2024a)

Gulfisha is a first-generation scholar with an MBA degree and was working as a radio DJ for All India Radio at the time of her arrest in Seelampur, northeast Delhi. Gulfisha is also an advocate for women's education, and organised adult literacy classes for women at the protest sites. She continued her commitment to building women's initiatives by running classes for incarcerated women as part of her '*Padho Padhao*' (Learn and Teach Others) programme, teaching literacy, providing legal aid, and writing letters for women prisoners. Gulfisha built a system of agency and solidarity among the prison inmates through the sharing of resources, and by providing care that served as an act of resistance from within a system that stripped her of her freedom. In this way, she continued her act of protest.

Her friend Anuradha Banerji reveals that, despite the state's interference, interception and censorship of their personal correspondence - striking out 'incendiary' details with correction fluid - Gulfisha and Anuradha were able to communicate through metaphors, allusions, and narrative euphemisms that became strategic manoeuvres and acts of self-censorship. Writing, disguised and masked, became a tool of remembrance and an act of free speech to make legible Gulfisha's story, and to record this event in history. It was to remind her, 'you are not forgotten, and they haven't succeeded in making us forget' (Banerji, 2025).

A *litterateur*, particularly of dissident left-wing poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's verses, Gulfisha wrote poems of her own in prison. Freedom, and its inverse, imprisonment, are the two prominent leitmotifs in

her poetry. Gulfisha writes of the physical and metaphysical confinement of her body and mind, conversing spiritually and intellectually with Faiz, who she came to recognise as an ideological ancestor. Faiz had also been imprisoned, but by the post-colonial Pakistani state in 1951 for his alleged involvement in a ‘conspiracy case’ (even the legalese matches) to overthrow the government. Just as Faiz chronicled his *Zindan Nama* (prison story), Gulfisha writes of her own ‘*zindan zindagi*’ (prison life), of its routines, its limitations, and its aspirations.

Gulfisha’s poems address the uncertainty of allotted time; detained without trial under UAPA, she agonises over not knowing how long her incarceration will last. With each bail petition denied, and no sign of a trial in the six years that she was in jail, she could not hold on to the finitude of this period as a salve to soothe her. In her poem “Listen! Faiz”, she delineates this difference between her incarceration from Faiz’s: in Faiz’s poem “*Chand roz aur, meri jaan*” (A few more days, my love), he was able to draw comfort and provide comfort to his loved ones with the eventual promise of freedom, whereas Gulfisha notes that she does not have this ‘*waqt-e-mu’ayyan*’ (finiteness of time) on her side. In prison, there is no answer to the question ‘how many seasons like this? / how many seasons more?’ (Fatima, 2024b).

Her family also reflected on this, with her father Syed Tasneef Hussain remarking that ‘lights and lamps are for the others, our fate is filled with darkness’ (*The Wire*, 2024).

In the wake of this uncertainty, she holds onto material and legible signifiers of release. One of her poems, “Forgetting”, stresses how her time in prison is not divided into seasons but calendar dates:

*For the history exam
everything I would learn by heart,
but would always forget
the dates.
I forget now almost
everything
but remember
only the dates.*

(Fatima, 2024b)

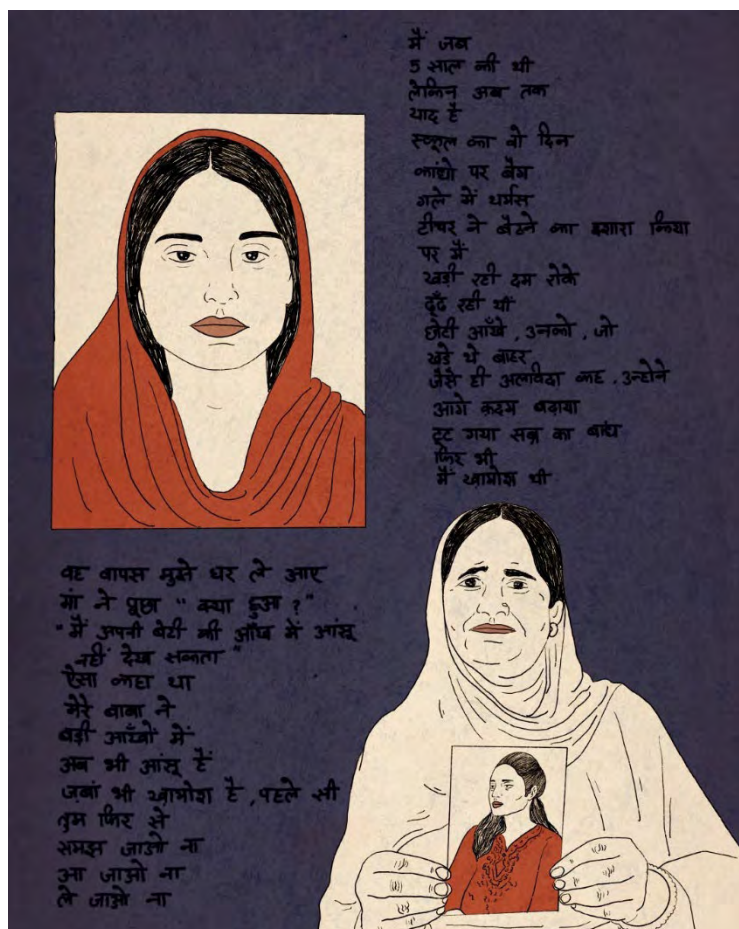
‘Tareekh’ or court dates, govern her state of mind. The Hindi title of the poem, ‘Bhul’ can translate as ‘forgetting’ and/or a ‘mistake’, speaking to the price Gulfisha must pay for the ‘mistake’ of protesting for the rights of minorities in the country. In another poem, she elaborates on the state’s increasing clampdown on the voices of the ‘mazloom’/’oppressed’, who nevertheless keep raising their hands in protest.

*Yesterday in the black night,
On the doors of prison,
There was a knock,
Of innocent winds,
Of echoes of loved ones,
The lightning too,
Screaming to appeal for mercy, Demanded our release,
The mourning of delicate branches, Was included,
In public,
After the unsuccessful attempt, Became uncontrollable,
Began flowing,
The tears of fragile rain,
Clashing with drum of the earth,
The thump of raindrop,
Raised the,
Uproar of complaints,
However,*

*The deaf serpents,
Kept dancing with,
Venomous fangs unfurled,
The barbed web spread,
And,
The oppressed kept their hands raised, Yesterday in the
black night.*

(Fatima, 2023)

Gulfisha juxtaposes the artificial vertical boundaries of the prison complex as standing erect against the fluidity of a natural environment that is porous and unruly. The poem is an auditory lament in its ‘screaming’, ‘thumping’ and ‘roaring’ cries that protest the silencing of dissident voices and the invisibility of the ‘oppressed’ in the ‘black’ serpentine opacity of Hindutva rhetoric.



Despite the state's attempts at suppressing opposition, the poet reiterates that people are like rain, 'uncontrollably' falling on the surface until the structure gives in and the voices seep through. Art percolates through these barriers, as is ironically evident in the original paper on which this poem was sent, which carries the signature of the Welfare Officer of Central Jail, Tihar, next to his comment: 'Allowed'.

Figure 5: 'Gulfisha Fatima' by Priyanka Paul,
www.instagram.com/artwhoring

Gulfisha also sent drawings and paintings home from prison. In one of the self-portraits, Gulfisha is sitting inside the brick walls of her cell, and with blood flowing from a wound on her foot, she writes the word ‘Azadi’ – freedom. *Azadi* has been a popular protest anthem in South Asia, calling for the freedom of minorities to exist as rightful citizens of the country. Originating within the Kashmiri liberation movement of the 1990s, the chant has spread and been reimagined in subsequent resistance movements, such as the 2020 anti-CAA protests in India, women’s rights movements in Pakistan and Iran, and more recently, by South Asian students in the US and elsewhere calling for the liberation of Palestine (Mariya, 2024; Wani, 2020). Gulfisha uses ‘Azadi’ in her drawing to call for her physical freedom from incarceration, and for the longing that her heart yearns for: the freedom to exist as an individual with dignity as part of the Muslim community in India.

Gulfisha’s parents call her ‘Gul’ / flower. Gulfisha Fatima stands as testament to the cultural and transnational solidarity that cannot and will not be erased, fighting until every political prisoner who has been unlawfully detained is released, and every public demand has been met. This is her demand and her dream: to see the *Gul-e-Azadi*,¹ the ‘flower of freedom’, continue to bloom.

¹ This phrase is a play on Faiz’s poem “Subh-e-Azadi” (Dawn of Independence), which he penned during the anti-colonial Indian independence movement in 1947.

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ELSIE C. ALBIS

BALIANA FROM BIKOL: THE DANGEROUS PRIESTESS

Dr Elsie Albis is an Associate Professor of Literature at Ateneo de Naga University in the Bikol Region, Philippines. She holds a PhD in Literature from the University of Santo Tomas-Manila and is a writing fellow of three national writing workshops in the Philippines. She integrates her creative and scholarly pursuits to contribute to the growth of Bikolnon studies. She is a recipient of the 90th British Council Anniversary Fellowship at the University of Edinburgh for her Bikol rendition of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She believes in the power of literature, theatre, and translation in remembering, enduring, and responding to the storms we universally face.

Recently, a new trend has taken over social media.

#FirstInMyBloodline is a hashtag adopted by internet users, particularly women, who celebrate their milestones, such as travelling alone, pursuing a postgraduate degree, deciding not to have children, or generally accomplishing anything that breaks grand narratives and generational norms. If I were to follow this trend, I would say that I have had my own share of firsts, such as being a research fellow in the UK, having the honour to write about my community and having the privilege to write about women I consider to be dangerous. However, I could not take full credit for it. I am here because of the stories that have been passed onto me by my family. I am here because of the rich traditions that dwell in my hometown in Bikol, Philippines. I take

pride in sharing that I am a descendant of a dangerous woman. As much as I am critical of the concept of *#PinoyPride*, by which Filipinos would always rejoice in the global achievements of anyone with Filipino blood, the presence of baliana in Philippine history gives me a sense of pride. Baliana? *Isay ka po baya? Sino ho kayo?* Who are you?

The baliana is the *#FirstInMyBloodline* to celebrate gender pluralism. She is Bikol's own babaylan – a powerful woman in the precolonial Philippines. The Spaniards called her *aniteras*, *diwata*, or *babaylan*, *baylan*, or *balian* (Halili 2010, p.116). She comes in many names and forms. Every region refers to her differently. In Bikol, she is baliana. And more interestingly, she can be transgender. According to Grace Nono (2023), a leading babaylan scholar who has immersed herself among the indigenous communities for decades, baliana are predominantly women. However, transgender baliana were also highly respected during precolonial times when gender relationships were more egalitarian and, as Brenda Alegre (2022, p.51) describes, 'inclusive and celebratory of otherness'. In Bikol during rituals, balianas are accompanied by effeminate men who imitate them, known as asog, which suggests the presence of transwomen and gender pluralism in early Philippine society. Realubit (2001, p.64) provides a clear picture of this imitation during a ritual:

See in these early Bicol performances a distinctive movement: the sounding of the gong or patong to call the worshippers to the rite; second, the baliana marching up to the performing area gesticulating and dancing, with the tribesmen behind doing the same thing; third, the entoning of the soraque, or the religious hymn, and the dialogue between priestess and chorus; fourth, the partaking of the food; fifth, the dancing, now fast and vigorous, accompanied by cries and loud singing as the entire tribe run and stomp around the altar in supplication; and lastly, the falling

down in front of the altar of sacrifice, everyone exhausted after the ritual.



The baliana is also *#FirstInMyBloodline* to be a multitasker, acting as a leader, a healer, and a keeper of memory. She serves as a spirit medium who can communicate with the divinities (Realubit, 2001; Conde, 2009). She is a village doctor and counsellor with respect to matters that concern life beyond death (Gerona, 1988). She is a keeper of law and wisdom, from planting season to harvest, and from rituals of birth to rituals of burial and wake. She gives voice to the ancient truths of the human condition through her prayers, spells, lullabies, stories, poetry, art, and drama (Lopez-Ledesma Tan, 2001, p.10).

With her prowess in the early Philippines, the Spanish missionaries focused on converting baliana to Christianity *because she is dangerous*. Therefore, she is the *#FirstInMyBloodline* to be ‘*traidores*’ (a.k.a. antiheroes) to the Spanish conquistadores. People listened to her, so the Spanish colonisers were scared of her, labelling her as *hechicera* [witch, sorceress, old hag], *diabla* [she-

devil], *sacerdotisa del inferno* [priestess of hell], and *bruja* [old hag] (Nono, 2023).

Some balianas fled to the mountains to lead their people in resistance against *reduccion*, a colonial campaign to eradicate them and their memory. The *conquistadores* needed to silence these influential women to successfully convert the natives. Most native beliefs and traditions associated with her were dismissed, destroyed, paganised, or Christianised because the Spanish feared her warrior consciousness (Abustan, 2015; Strobel, 2010; Villariba, 2006). Despite the erasure of her memory, however, her presence lingers in our syncretic and hybrid practices. In fact, the annual Catholic celebration of the Peñafrancia Fiesta in honour of ‘Ina’ [Mother] or our Lady of Peñafrancia can be attributed to Bikol society’s high regard for women when it comes to religious matters.

In contemporary times, the presence of baliana can be manifested by anyone who calls for justice amidst oppression. The baliana’s memory can be kept alive by resisting atrocities, fighting against injustices, continuing to tell her stories, and remembering the past. Therefore, she is also the *#FirstInMyBloodline* to be a trendsetter.

The roles of baliana as a warrior, teacher, healer, visionary, and priestess can be assumed by any empowered contemporary Filipino woman (Mananzan 2006, as cited in Nono 2023). She can be the Bikolana scholar, Doods Santos; or public servants Leila de De Lima and Risa Hontiveros, married to a Bikolnon, who are brave enough to call out corrupt individuals in the male-dominated Philippine politics; or the Bikolana beauty queen Catriona Gray for her charity work and remarkable representation of Bikol aesthetics during her Miss Universe stint in 2018.

Her memory is fluid. Her image is multifaceted. There are still many things that can be can be pursued to uncover who she is.

My sister, Esmeralda Albis, is the *#FirstInMyBloodline* to win a national competition for playwriting sponsored by the Philippine government in 2024 for her play, *Ang Pagbuo ng Baliana* (The Convalescence of Baliana). Prior to joining the competition, she was also selected as one of twelve fellows during the University of the Philippines Diliman's 7th Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio National Writers Workshop (2023) for the same piece. The stories of baliana and the gulanggulang shaman ritual we witnessed when we were still very young in our hometown in Minalabac, Camarines Sur, inspired her to create this play. In June 2026, it was staged at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium in Makati City, and was well-received by the audience as the play evokes important narratives of the past instead of just offering entertainment (Follow Spot Reviews, 2026).

The play remembers lore from provinces that has been veiled by urbanisation, migration to cities, and lack of rural and regional representations in the country's curricula. Esmeralda has reimagined the stories and healing rituals in our town, combined with what she has learned from her literature degree at Ateneo de Naga University in Naga City, into a love story of Arnold and Esmeralda that weaves the memory of baliana into the play and makes her more relatable to today's audiences. She falls in love, she suffers from the loss of a loved one, and has a larger purpose to fulfil. This play is an example of the numerous ways in which baliana's consciousness and motif can be appropriated in today's time.

*Sa Balianang nagkokonekta ng tao sa kalikasan
Matagumpay mo sanang mahanap iyong minamahal
Nasa iyo ang ilaw ng buhay ng aming kapangyarihan
Para makapaglakbay na malayo sa kapahamakan
[To the Baliana who bridges humanity and nature
May you successfully find your beloved
Within you shines the source of our power
Guiding your journey far from danger]*

(Esmeralda Albis, Ang Pagbuo ng Baliana, Sc.8)



Despite all of this, a careful approach to her memory is needed to avoid romanticisation or trivialisation of baliana's legacy. Study her. Remember her. She is being honoured in festivals, creative works, and scholarships. Her story can be found through videos on YouTube and on websites such as that of the Center for Babaylan Studies.

Question how she is represented. For instance, Paz Verdades Santos (2004) advances that baliana can be used as a metaphor to analyse women's writings. In my own research, I have argued that her memory is kept alive in the plays of Sari Saysay, a notable playwright from Bikol. His plays are peopled with female characters who serve as *aregladors* [mediators] and *gerera* or warriors against political and environmental injustices that engulf the region, which then reflects the state and the nation.

To my fellow Filipinos, shall we discover the baliana in us? Leny Strobel says we must. Grace Nono invites us to listen through sustained dialogue (2023). Writing about her is my way of encouraging future researchers to revisit her and strive to keep this dangerous Bikolana's presence alive. After all, she is one of the first in our bloodline to show what a dangerously powerful woman can do.

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GEORGI GILL

ANNA BURNS: A FANGIRL ON *MILKMAN*

Dr Georgi Gill is a poet and researcher who uses creative methodologies to explore experiences of chronic illness. She has been widely published in literary anthologies and journals, and her poetry collection *Limbo* (Blue Diode, 2021) was shortlisted for the Scottish National Book Awards ‘Best First Book’ in 2022. She was the inaugural poet-in-residence at the Anatomical Museum in Edinburgh. Georgi is a 2025-26 Public Engagement Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and an affiliate fellow at the Centre for Music, Text and Cultures.

Ah, Anna Burns, how do I love your writing? Let me count the ways. Specifically let me count the ways I love the dangerous woman you create in *Milkman*.*

Anna Burns’ novels are set in Northern Ireland (NI) during the Troubles, an ethnonationalist conflict which began in the 1960s and officially ended in 1998. A war between unionists who wanted NI to remain in the United Kingdom and loyalists who wanted NI to join a united Ireland, it was not a specifically religious conflict. Nonetheless, the Troubles exacerbated division between Protestants and Catholics. *Milkman*, Burns’ third novel, won the Booker Prize in 2018, making her the first Northern Irish writer to do so. Showing the impact of the Troubles on local communities with dazzling technical virtuosity, *Milkman* depicts working class female experience and identity. The novel can be bleak, complex and, at times, downright hilarious. So, here are the reasons I love *Milkman*:

* Only room for five. I’ve been given a strict word count.

Firstly, Burns adeptly weaves gossip and silence.

Milkman has been described as challenging, yet I hear the narrator as one woman chatting, telling me her story. The free-flowing narration reveals a lot but is also circumspect. For example, naming in the novel is relational, descriptive and local, rather than formal. The narrator is 'middle sister', and other names include 'longest friend', 'maybe-boyfriend', 'Somebody McSomebody' and of course 'the milkman'. Middle sister does not know the provenance of his name: he 'wasn't our milkman. I don't think he was anybody's. He didn't take milk orders. There was no milk about him.' (Burns, 2018, p.2) So yes, the novel is purposely opaque, but I argue that's a reflection of a cautious, paranoid community.

Milkman is a sinister paramilitary figure who, although middle-aged and married, stalks and harasses eighteen-year-old middle sister. She is frequently aware of his lackeys following her. Being watched is considered normal in *Milkman*; military surveillance cameras routinely click from behind bushes. Behaviour adaptations and self-censoring happen automatically as people attempt to live, unnoticed by neighbours, paramilitaries and the state. This is an absurd world where even the model of your car can cast suspicion on your professed political beliefs. Indeed, the narrator's 'maybe-boyfriend', a mechanic, inadvertently puts himself at risk by owning a supercharger from a vintage British racing car.

Sometimes in the novel, women modify their behaviour in attempts to evade unwanted sexual advances and bad reputations. Middle sister tries to employ silence around local gossips who claim she is sleeping with the milkman, saying only 'I don't know' when directly questioned by them. But like Audre Lorde (1984), her silence does not protect her. Gossip spreads and she is ostracised: 'I, too, came to find me inaccessible. My inner world, it seemed, had gone away' (Burns, 2018, p.178). Amid the

dissonance between reality and popular consensus, middle sister is plagued by doubts, her sense of self begins to crumble and she tells herself, '*You're a mad person*' (Burns, 2018, p.138). I find this to be a nuanced depiction of misogyny and gaslighting's impact on female identity.

Secondly, *Milkman* transcends witchy stereotypes.

Burns writes of the 'ten-minute-area', named because it took ten minutes to walk through. It was a 'bleak, eerie, *Mary Celeste*, little place' (Burns, 2018, p.81) whose reputation goes back to middle sister's grandmother's day. It is variously described as 'brooding' and 'imaginary' (Burns, 2018, p.92), and a church spire in the area is likened to a witch's hat. Middle sister walks through this liminal space as quickly as possible on her way home. The area's malign atmosphere increases when she finds the head of a dead cat, blown up by a recently uncovered Nazi bomb. She takes the cat's head, intending to bury it somewhere more pleasant. At this point, the novel has become almost parodic in its depiction of the spooky place. In other chapters, women are described as witches and cats in less absurd ways. Indeed, in the novel's first sentence, Somebody McSomebody calls middle sister a 'cat' and threatens her with a gun; casual but realistic violence that contrasts with the ten-minute-area's sinister surrealism.

Initially in the ten-minute-area, physical description is reserved for the place and the cat, whereas middle sister is presented in terms of thoughts and emotions. However, when she realises that the milkman has snuck up on her unawares, the narration catapults into her embodied sensations: 'again I got those spine shivers, those scrabblings, the scuttlings, all that shiddery-shudderiness inside me from the bottom of my backbone right into my legs' (Burns, 2018, p.102). Both middle sister and the reader have been tricked: this is not (just) a darkly comic passage playing with the notion of 'witchiness', but rather the pretend witch is revealed to be more like the cat; exposed and in danger. This underlying fear

and its physical sensations are immediately recognisable to any woman who has ever walked alone after dark, alert to the possibility of a stranger attack. We all know a ten-minute-area.

Thirdly, it is refreshingly easy to be a 'female wayward' (Burns, 2018, p.8).

In her younger years, Anna Burns used to read while walking in the streets of Belfast:

People would say to me, including strangers in clubs and shops and bars and cafés, "You're that girl who reads and walks!" I would continually be startled at having this pointed out, mainly because it seemed an activity not particularly worthy of note.

(Moraif, 2019)

She was determined to write about people's motivations in mentioning this to her, rather than the activity itself, and this writing eventually became *Milkman*.

For middle sister, reading-while-walking is a way to disengage, to not see the conflict and danger that surrounds her. Yet her unobservant behaviour means that she is observed more by the community. In a conversation with longest friend, she asks:

"Are you saying it's okay for [milkman] to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read *Jane Eyre* in public?"

"Semtex isn't unusual [longest friend said]. It's not *not* to be expected...It fits in – more than your dangerous reading-while-walking fits in...So..., then yeah," she concluded, "*it is okay for him and it's not okay for you.*"

(Burns, p.201)

Thus, in *Milkman's* society, the violent patriarchy defines how women are permitted to use public spaces. In addition to this, I suggest that middle sister is further censured for being publicly intelligent, reading, as she does, classic nineteenth century novels. As with the British supercharger, Burns draws our attention to how strictly, and absurdly, the novel's community polices itself. Like middle sister, I struggle to imagine a world where extreme violence is more socially acceptable than browsing *Ivanhoe* while strolling back from work. It is testament to Burns' talent that she convincingly creates a world in which only the reader and middle sister can see the unfair ridiculousness of these rules.

Fourthly, Middle sister does not run like a girl.

Prurient judgement by her neighbours, combined with sexual harassment by the milkman and his casual threats of violence towards maybe-boyfriend ultimately affect middle sister's relationship to her own body and the spaces she inhabits. She loves running, but when, uninvited, the milkman approaches her mid-run, she feels obliged to slow down and then stop because she is a better runner than him. This dangerous, older, married man 'didn't seem rude, so I couldn't seem rude so I couldn't be rude and keep running. Instead I let him slow me, this man I didn't want near me' (Burns, 2018, p.9). She stops only for him to criticize her running methods and disapprove of her 'arunning' and 'awalking' (ibid.). In *A Phenomenology of Fear*, Davidson (2000, p.647) writes, 'If we are to feel that we belong, and have a place in the world, then we must be able to compose a suitable space. If we cannot 'situate' ourselves comfortably in relation to other people or things, we feel, quite literally, 'misfits'. In the park confrontation, it becomes clear that the comfort middle sister is striving for in her locale is brittle and easily disturbed by the milkman and his assumption of power over her.

Recalling the incident, she tells the reader, 'I could not be fitter than this man, could not be more knowledgeable about my own

[running] regime than this man' (Burns, 2018, p.7). Considered through the lenses of Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Young (2005, p.48), middle sister does not run like a girl. She is a strong, capable runner, confident in her abilities, but the milkman turns her accurate sense of 'I can' into an inhibited, self-imposed 'I cannot'. Burns brilliantly captures how the patriarchy, represented here by one coercive man, and then reinforced by the local community, assumes the right to control a woman's relationship to her body in public spaces, and her uneasy but automatic acquiescence.

Finally, Anna Burns is a real-life dangerous woman.

A slight, softly spoken woman, she clearly chooses her words carefully in speeches and interviews. Anna Burns is not the archetypal dangerous woman. But as with middle sister, there is a place for the quietly, cautiously dangerous. Burns lives with chronic, disabling back and nerve pain, which has greatly impacted her ability to write (Marshall, 2018). Injury ultimately resulted in financial difficulties and, for a time, homelessness. In what Julian Barnes (1987) referred to as 'posh bingo', Burns is the only Booker winner to thank a housing charity, a foodbank and the Department of Work and Pensions in the winning novel's acknowledgements. She is a rare example of a working class, disabled writer whose talent shines so brightly that she has not been belittled or pigeonholed by literati who often ignore or diminish poverty and disability.

With great originality and ambition, *Milkman* speaks of the coercion, sexual harassment and social expectations known by many women. Moreover, Burns' ferocious talent and tenacity give me hope that as another disabled, woman writer I too can keep on keeping on. If I write something a fraction as nuanced, witty and devastating as *Milkman*, I'll have succeeded, and in my book's acknowledgements I'll thank Anna Burns.

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