



Constructing and Weaponising Gender: Masculinity, Femininity and Psychological Manipulation in *American Psycho* and *Gone Girl*

Mrs. K. P. Jeba Kapal, Research Scholar (Part-Time) Reg. No.: MKU23PFOL11138, PG & Research Centre in English, The Madura College (Autonomous), Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7534-3188>

Dr. A. Chandra Bose, Associate Professor, PG & Research Centre in English, The Madura College (Autonomous), Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4077-5631>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23350033

Abstract

Gender in contemporary American literature and cinema is seen as an identity class and an antisocial social performance through which energy, status, vulnerability, and management are negotiated. This paper examines how Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho (1991) and Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl (2012) construct and weaponise masculinity and femininity in the novels. Although the texts differ in genre, setting and narrative method, both thriller novels reveal the psychological consequences of inflexible gender expectations. This demonstrates how gendered performances can become instruments of identity manipulation. Patrick Bateman embodies an excessive form of consumerist and competitive masculinity wherein wealth, body appearance, sexual entitlement, professional reputation and emotional detachment are transformed into signs of masculine authority. Amy Dunne, through comparison, develops and strategically deploys culturally recognisable sorts of femininity, mainly the idealised 'cool girl' persona, domestic perfection, emotional vulnerability, and victimhood. The analysis uses a qualitative comparative technique that combines feminist literary criticism, gender performativity, masculinity studies, psychoanalytic methods of identity, and theories of energy and illustration. The analysis argues that both works portray gender as constructed rather than fixed, while also showing that social expectations can be manipulated from within. The thriller "American Psycho" depicts a masculinist culture in which identification will become inseparable from consumption, opposition and domination. At the same time, "Gone Girl" interrogates the expectations imposed on women and the strategic possibilities those expectations create in life. The comparison portrays that psychological manipulation in the works is inseparable from the gender oriented overall performance. Bateman's masculine character produces invisibility, while Amy's feminine character generates social credibility and interpretive power. Nevertheless, the texts reveal the instability of gender stereotypes and the traumatic effectiveness of weaponised identity.

Keywords: Gender Creation, Psychological Manipulation, *American Psycho*, *Gone Girl*, Patriarchy, Identity Crisis, Power, Feminist Complaint.

Introduction

Gender is not a mere a biological distinction; it is also a cultural gadget that organises expectations about appearance, behaviour, sexuality, authority, emotion, relationships, and social cost. Many literary and cinematic narratives often make these expectations and have visible presentation of characters that conform to gender norms, resist them or deliberately perform them for strategic ends. In such narratives, masculinity and femininity can grow to



be types of social situation. A person may gain credibility or social safety by acting conventionally, while others may gain respect by acting unconventionally. The mental dimensions of this system come to be especially sizeable whilst gendered identities are consciously manipulated.

Bret Easton Ellis's thriller novel *American Psycho* (1991) and Gillian Flynn's thriller novel *Gone Girl* offers distinctive complementary examinations of this phenomenon. *American Psycho* presents Patrick Bateman, a wealthy Wall Street professional whose carefully maintained identity rests on status, consumption, physical appearance, competition and masculine dominance. His narration destabilises the difference between reality and fantasy while it exposes a social environment in which extreme violence can coexist with professional success and superficial respectability. Bateman's identity is therefore no longer built in isolation; a subculture rewards particular performances of masculinity. *Gone Girl* (2012) centres on the characters Amy Dunne and Nick Dunne, whose marriage becomes a struggle over competing narratives, expectations, and public perceptions. Amy's construction of the 'cool girl' identification demonstrates how femininity can be shaped according to male expectancies and later strategically repurposed. The novel explores the pressure on women to seem appealing, sexually confident, emotionally accommodating, and, at the same time, easily perfect, while also criticising them when they fail to meet these contradictory expectations. Amy's manipulation is stressful precisely because it exploits assumptions about what a lady, spouse, sufferer, or proper character is expected to look and behave like. Therefore, the two works can be examined as research on gender as performance and approach. Bateman and Amy are not equal and their works should not be treated as morally symmetrical. Their juxtaposition shows how exceptional gendered scripts produce exclusive varieties of power. Bateman benefits from systems of masculine privilege and institutional credibility, while Amy identifies the cultural scripts surrounding femininity and uses them to assemble persuasive narratives. Both characters display that social identity depends, in part, on others' recognition.

This paper investigates three important questions by the intensive study of the novels. The first one is how is masculinity and femininity built in *American Psycho* and *Gone Girl*? The second one is, how do the protagonists rework gender expectancies into instruments of mental manipulation? And the third one asks, what do the two works suggest about the connection among gender performance, social strength, and identity? The analysis argues that both texts present gender as risky and performative. However, they emphasise unique social mechanisms; the novel *American Psycho* focuses on masculine privilege, client capitalism, and institutional normalisation and the novel *Gone Girl* focuses on gender expectations, marriage, media narratives and the politics of victimhood. Indeed, both validate the gender oriented concerns through the novels.

Literature Review

Gender studies are the fundamental theoretical basis for studying these texts. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has been the foundational distinction between biological intercourse and the social procedures that produce femininity, famously by emphasising that womanhood is culturally fashioned rather than biologically given. This sort of perspective is useful for the novel *Gone Girl* because Amy's character identity is repeatedly shaped by expectations surrounding desirable womanhood, marriage, sexuality and emotional behaviour.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further develops the idea that gender is



constituted through repeated acts, gestures, conventions and social expectations. Overall, gender performance does not necessarily mean people are consciously pretending to be someone else; instead, gender becomes recognisable through repeated cultural practices. However, in both novels *American Psycho* and *Gone Girl*, the protagonists make the strategic dimensions of overall performance visible in a strange manner. Bateman consciously manages his career identity and intake practices while Amy intentionally assembles recognisable versions of femininity for a one kind of audiences.

R. W. Connell's paintings of hegemonic masculinity apply especially well to *American Psycho*. Hegemonic masculinity describes culturally dominant varieties of masculinity that legitimise male authority and set up hierarchies amongst masculinities and among women and men. Bateman's world is organised around competition, wealth, bodily health, sexual fame, professional prestige and dominance. His identity is linked to a broader masculine hierarchy rather than simply being a personal psychological abnormality.

Michael Kimmel's scholarship on masculinity also helps explain the importance of fame, opposition, and masculine validation. Masculinity may be understood as a social achievement that should be tested and known. The intense opposition among Bateman and his friends, which includes their fixation on enterprise cards, restaurants, clothing, bodies, and professional fame, illustrates how masculine identity becomes performative and comparative.

Consumer culture is another important lens for reading *American Psycho*. Jean Baudrillard's theories of the spectacle and the sign value provide a useful framework for understanding how commodities operate as markers of identity. In *American Psycho*, the restaurants, generation, physical appearance and professional reputation often function as signs and symptoms through which characters distinguish them. Bateman's obvious individuality is ironically produced through conformity to a shared client code. His identity will become difficult to separate from the gadgets and rituals that symbolise elite masculinity.

Feminist scholarship on media illustration is specifically relevant to *Gone Girl*. Susan Bordo's paintings on the cultural creation of the women body demonstrate how femininity is regulated through expectations about appearance, field, sexuality, and desirability. Amy's self-presentation can be studied as an excessive fictionalisation of this process. Her 'cool girl' identity is produced through a deal of cultural expectations. She is expected to be appealing but convenient, sexually confident yet not threatening, unbiased yet accommodating and thrilling while remaining ideal.

Laura Mulvey's influential paintings on visual culture and the male gaze also help explain how femininity can be organised around being seen and evaluated. Although *Gone Girl* is a literary text, its adaptation and media-focused narrative make questions of spectatorship, public photography, and visual credibility especially important. Amy knows people no longer respond absolutely to information; they respond to recognisable pictures of innocence, marriage, femininity and victimhood.

Psychological approaches to identity and manipulation similarly light up both works. For example, Erving Goffman's "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" conceptualises social interaction as performance where the people manage impressions for specific audiences. This model helps to explain Bateman's expert character and Amy's multiple public identities through their novels. Their characters distinguish between non-public expertise and public presentation, but their strategies operate within distinct power systems of their own character.



The existing criticism of *American Psycho* focused on misogyny, customer capitalism, postmodern fragmentation, violence and the instability of Bateman's narration. The studies on *Gone Girl* often examine marriage, media subculture, women's anger, misogyny, unreliable narration, and 'cool girl' discourse. This study contributes to those discussions by placing the two works in a comparative study and treating gender itself as a strategic technology of social recognition rather than arguing that masculinity and femininity function identically. Hence, the paper examines how each gender dialogue offers specific possibilities for strength and manipulation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative textual evaluation of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical and focuses on narrative construction, characterisation, habitual motifs, communication, social behaviour, and representations of gender. The two texts are tested against selected theoretical views from feminist critique, gender studies, masculinity research, consumer-culture theory, and performance theory.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is organised around four interconnected standards such as gender creation, gender performance, mental manipulation, and social power. Gender creation refers to the cultural expectancies through which masculinity and femininity come to be recognisable. Gender performance refers to the repeated behaviours and appearances via which characters keep socially legible identities. Psychological manipulation refers to deliberate or strategic attempts to shape how others perceive, interpret, or respond to a man or woman. Social energy refers to the capacity to shape results through repute, credibility, institutional position, cultural expectations, or control over narrative.

Comparative Perspective of the Novels

In particular, five major comparative classes guide the analysis. First, the study examines body presentation, apparels, grooming, physical fitness, sexuality, and appearance. Second, it analyses professional and financial reputation as sources of gendered authority. Third, it investigates relationships and emotional expectations, particularly marriage, intimacy, jealousy, and management. Fourth, it studies public photography and narrative credibility, including the role of media and social institutions. Fifth, it considers the ethical effects of weaponised gender performance and the extent to which the texts critique the social structures that make such manipulation viable.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on the two primary literary texts rather than attempting a comprehensive evaluation of each model, evaluation, or essential interpretation. Because each work incorporates worrying fabric, the analysis emphasises mental, cultural, and representational significance in preference to reproducing photo descriptions of violence. The argument also avoids treating either protagonist as a customary representation of men or women. Instead, Bateman and Amy are analysed as exaggerated fictional figures through which particular cultural anxieties are being seen.

Masculinity as a Performance of Status in *American Psycho*

American Psycho constructs masculinity through a tightly connected device of financial fulfilment, bodily field, client knowledge, sexual competition, and expert authority. Bateman's identity depends heavily on external markers. His condominium, clothes, physique, restaurant reservations, business cards, and knowledge of luxury goods repeatedly



establish his social function. These gadgets and practices do not merely decorate his identity; they help create it. Bateman's expert surroundings intensify this process. The guys around him are remarkably similar, and their conversations regularly revolve around symbols of reputation. Their identities become interchangeable because shared cultural codes produce them. This interchangeability subjects Bateman to the fact that it partly makes his overall performance seem legitimate. Masculinity is consequently represented now not as an inner essence but as a competitive public success.

Consumerism and Masculine Identity in *American Psycho*

The novel's distinctive interest in commodities shows how consumer culture turns fabric gadgets into signs of masculine identity. Bateman's consumption is obsessive because he uses merchandise to talk difference. His individuality is caught within a standardised system of elite wish and desire. Therefore, Ellis links masculinity to a client tradition that promises distinctiveness while producing conformity. This relationship between consumer ideology and masculinity reveals the emotional emptiness of Bateman's interiority. Therefore, the inability to form meaningful human connections is not always presented as a private mental disorder for this novel. Yet, it is reinforced by an environment that mechanically evaluates people by appearance, price and social usefulness.

Violence, Entitlement and Institutional Invisibility

Bateman's violence should not be reduced to an easy statement about male nature. The novel presents an alternative location of severe violence within a social environment characterised by misogyny, competition, objectification and indifference. One of the most traumatic factors of the narrative is how easily Bateman's social identity can overshadow or make it difficult to understand recognition of his motives. His professional popularity gives him a form of credibility that people no longer possess. Bateman's volatile narration complicates interpretation of the novel in a critical mode. Whether the precise activities are literal, imagined, exaggerated or ambiguous, the cultural critique remains substantial. The social world is so devoted to recognising the successful masculine professional that it can ignore evidence that contradicts this identification. Therefore, masculinity operates as a simple and personal performance but operates as a social shield.

Femininity and the 'Cool Girl' Construction in *Gone Girl*

Gone Girl offers a different version of gender production through Amy Dunne. The 'cool girl' identity represents a culturally ideal rather one than a true personality. The idealised girl is appealing, sexually confident, socially adaptable, humorous, easy and willing to revel in traditionally masculine interests. Amy's critique of this well-known character shows the contradiction at its centre: women are anticipated to perform handy compatibility while hiding the labour required to maintain it. Through Amy, Flynn shows that femininity can become a disturbing form of emotional labour. The person recognises that social approval depends on acting to embody a great. Therefore, her manipulation is constructed on cultural familiarity. She no longer invents an entirely new identity; she selects and exaggerates existing expectations. The overall performance works because other characters already apprehend and accept it as true within the gender script.

Marriage as a Site of Gender Performance in *Gone Girl*

Marriage in the novel *Gone Girl* functions as a social stage on which both partners perform expected roles. Nick is expected to look like a loving husband, while Amy is expected to look like a suitable, supportive, and dedicated wife. As the marriage deteriorates, the gap between private enjoyment and public presentation becomes increasingly critical. The



novel suggests that modern marriage can involve constant identity control because partners are judged not only by one another, but also by a circle of relatives, friends, neighbours, and the wider public. Amy's portrays the trivial marital expectations to demonstrate how gender stereotypes have become tools of narrative development in the novel. Her presentation is persuasive and aligns with familiar cultural assumptions about endangered women, troubled marriages and male responsibility. The novel examines the social conditions that make certain kinds of deception plausible on women.

Media, Victimhood, and Narrative Power

The relevant insight of the novel *Gone Girl* is about how storytelling can produce public reality. Media institutions seek emotionally legible narratives, and gender stereotypes offer ready-made frameworks for decoding complicated activities. Amy knows this dynamic and constructs a story that may organise public sympathy. The novel never argues that girls are manipulative and the men are suspicious all the times. In fact, it shows how cultural narratives shape public judgment. The lacking wife, the grieving husband, the imperfect marriage and the innocent woman are all recognisable narrative roles. Once someone convincingly occupies any such role, the audiences may also interpret ambiguous evidence in ways that strengthen the existing story.

Comparative Findings on Gender as Social Technology in the Novels

The comparative result portrays gender as a form of social production. Bateman uses masculine credibility, wealth, professional identification, and social conformity to create a persona that commands recognition in male perspective and Amy uses femininity, vulnerability, marital symbolism and culturally recognisable narratives to persuade belief in women's perspective. Their methods differ because the social assets available to masculine and feminine performances differ. Bateman's concept stems from social privilege and works toward invisibility and Amy's power operates through strategic visibility in the novels. She understands how visibility, sympathy and gender expectations can shape a persuasive narrative in their works. This distinction is crucial because it prevents a false equivalence between the characters—the texts, as an alternative, show that gendered power is structurally uneven and context-dependent.

Psychological Manipulation and the Fragmentation of Identity

Both works link gender performance to fragmented identity. Bateman's self is split between an outwardly successful professional identity and a deeply unstable inner life. Amy further splits into several versions of herself, alongside her spouse: the 'cool girl,' the sufferer, and the strategic narrator. In each case, manipulation becomes viable because identification is treated as something that can be designed for a target audience. The psychological outcomes vary in the both novels. The novel *American Psycho* emphasises vacancy, repetition, alienation and the collapse of distinction between public identity and private identity. The novel *Gone Girl* emphasises resentment, performance fatigue, marital warfare and the desire to manipulate how a character could be interpreted. Both of the novels suggest that extreme dependence on external validation can produce profound instability.

Neither text endorses its protagonists' manipulative behaviour. Instead, their extremity allows social grievance. Bateman's behaviour exposes the risks of a lifestyle that equates masculine fulfilment with dominance and consumption. Amy's behaviour exposes the risks and contradictions of gender expectations, especially the strain placed upon girls to encompass impossible ideals. In the same time, *Gone Girl* requires an analysis because its critique of gender politics may be appropriated in simple ways. Amy is not a proof that



femininity is inherently deceptive as like Bateman who is not a proof that masculinity is inherently violent. The characters of the both writers are built as awesome and traumatic figures. Their narrative function is to show how cultural assumptions can be manipulated when audiences rely on stereotypes rather than complexity.

The analysis of the novels *American Psycho* and *Gone Girl* demonstrates that gender performance is inseparable from systems of power and recognition. The institutions of finance, consumer capitalism, male peer culture and prestige help to construct Bateman's masculinity. Amy's femininity operates within a specific field that has been fashioned through the expectations of splendour, marriage, emotional labour, sexuality and victimhood. Therefore, the novels offer complementary critiques of gendered social structures rather than interchangeable models of manipulation.

The novels also enquire the reliability of appearances. In *American Psycho*, the surface of corporate respectability conceals, or at least obscures, Bateman's inner and outer behaviour. In *Gone Girl*, apparently the intimate marital identities are revealed as constructed performances that can be strategically revised. Thus, the reader is compelled to distinguish between who characters are, whom they claim to be and whom others want them to be. A full-size theoretical implication is that gender performativity has outcomes beyond identity. Repeated gendered behaviour can become a mechanism of authority, credibility, exclusion, or manipulation. This suggests that each instance of gender performance is consciously deceptive. Rather, the texts dramatise the point at which normal social performance becomes deliberate, strategic performance. The boundary between identity and manipulation will become volatile. Another point is that the cultural stereotypes can be characterised as shortcuts for interpretation. People frequently make judgments by familiar classes such as a hit businessman, devoted spouse, grieving husband, harmless female, dangerous guy and so forth. Ellis and Flynn show that such classes can be exploited because they simplify complicated the realities. Hence, psychological manipulation succeeds in part because audiences help to assemble what it means for them and for the society.

Conclusion

This study has examined the construction and weaponisation of masculinity and femininity in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. By using a comparative framework on gender performativity, hegemonic masculinity, feminist critique, purchaser-subculture theory and performance research, the research study shows that each text treats gender as a socially produced and strategically recognisable identity. The novel *American Psycho* provides masculinity as deeply related to repute, consumption, bodily field, professional opposition, sexual entitlement and social authority. Bateman's identity is strong not because it expresses a proper masculine essence, but because it aligns with institutional and cultural expectations of elite male fulfilment. The novel's ambiguity further shows that a society focused on surfaces may fail to recognise what lies under them. In comparison, the novel *Gone Girl* emphasises the construction of femininity through sexuality, emotional labour, marriage and public sympathy. Amy's 'cool girl' character exposes the conflicts of an idealised femininity that demands simultaneous attractiveness, independence, accommodation and effortlessness. Her manipulation demonstrates how expectations can be repurposed to shape public perception. The long-term comparison is well known and shows that gender can function as a form of social strength. Masculine and feminine performances do not have identical resources. However, each can shape how individuals are interpreted and treated. The protagonists weaponise gender now not necessarily by pretending to be another



person but through information about the expectations that audiences already attach to gendered identities. Therefore, the novels *American Psycho* and *Gone Girl* remain major texts for examining current questions of identity, sexuality, media, consumerism, marriage and psychological manipulation. Their lasting contribution lies in making visible the distance between identification as lived experience and identity as social performance. By exposing them, both works encourage readers to impeach the stereotypes through which masculinity and femininity are regarded, rewarded and occasionally exploited.

References

- [1] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Its Myths and Structures*. Sage Publications, 1998.
- [2] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, 1989.
- [3] Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press, 1993.
- [4] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- [5] Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.
- [6] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Second ed., University of California Press, 2005.
- [7] Ellis, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. Vintage International, 1991.
- [8] Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl*. Crown Publishers, 2012.
- [9] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday, 1959.
- [10] Kimmel, Michael S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- [11] Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.
- [12] Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.