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A Feminist Apology for Contemporary Romance Literature-Exploring Masochism and the Internalized Male Gaze in Todd's *After*

A B S T R A C T

The unprecedented popularity of the *After* series by Anna Todd has prompted a space for conversations surrounding popular contemporary romance fiction for young adults and the factors guaranteeing its success. This research paper sets out to explore how the popularity of *After* must ring certain alarm bells for the contemporary feminist discourse since it directly undermines everything that the feminists criticize when it comes to representations of women by male authors. The analysis section reveals how despite being a woman herself, Todd has penned her novel from an internalized male gaze that divests the female protagonist Tessa of any agency and reduces her to the position of spectacle for the male character's masochistic fantasy. In doing so, Tessa unwittingly and self-detrimentally adopts the role of "the three women" that Giles Deleuze speaks of in his seminal text on masochism. The paper affirms the need for a criticism of the internalized male gaze amongst women authors in contemporary feminist discourse to combat such derogatory representations of women and promote more nuanced and agential portrayal of women in future contemporary romance literature.

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اعتذار نسوي لأدب الرومانسية المعاصرة استكشاف المازوشية والغزو الذكوري الداخلي في رواية "أثر" لتود

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المُستخلص

أثارت الشعبية غير المسبوقة لسلسلة "أثر" للكاتبة آنا تود مساحة للنقاشات حول روايات الرومانسية المعاصرة الشائعة بين الشباب والعوامل التي تضمن نجاحها. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف كيف أن شعبية "أثر" يجب أن تثير بعض الجدل للخطاب النسوي المعاصر، إذ إنها تقوض مباشرة كل ما ينتقده النسويون عندما يتعلق الأمر بتمثيلات النساء من قبل الكتاب الرجال. والتحليل يكشف كيف أن تود، على الرغم من كونها امرأة، إلا أنها قد كتبت روايتها من منظور آخر ذكوري داخلي؛ مما يسلب البطلة النسائية "تيسا" أي وكالة ويقلص دورها إلى مجرد عرض لفانتازيا مازوشية للشخصية الذكورية. من خلال ذلك، تتبنى تيسا بشكل غير واعٍ وعلى نحو ضار لنفسها دور "النساء الثلاث" التي يتحدث عنها جيل دولوز في نصه الأساسي حول المازوشية. تؤكد الورقة ضرورة النقد للغزو الذكوري الداخلي بين الكاتبات في الخطاب النسوي المعاصر لمكافحة مثل هذه التمثيلات المهينة للنساء وتعزيز تمثيلات أكثر تعقيداً ووكالة للنساء في أدبيات الرومانسية المعاصرة المستقبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الغزو الذكوري، الغزو الأنثوي، جيل دولوز، المازوشية، أدب الرومانسية المعاصرة.

Introduction

The concept of the male gaze has its roots in Sartre's existential musings about the gaze and the subjective reality. However, it did not take the feminist literati long to draw upon this concept and invest it with the negative connotations of violence, power and control that have come to be associated with the term the "male gaze". In his article titled "Theorizing the Male Gaze", Edward Snow talks about the problem with the male gaze insisting that the recent feminist hijacking of the term edges the precarious zone where it "becomes an unwitting agent of the very forces of surveillance it wishes to oppose" (Snow, 1989, p. 31). According to Snow, feminism's insistence on the male gaze being the site of "sadistic spectatorial possession" (Snow, 1989, p. 30) reinforces and reduces the male vision to power, violence and control and pronounces guilty, damaging and illicit any view of the woman by a man.

If Snow's musings are to be taken as holding any ounce of truth, and if the feminist scholarship has really pronounced invalid male writers' views and characterisations of women, then the latter has no choice but to turn to the portrayal of women by women authors to find positive and realistically nuanced reflections. However, a closer inspection of popular romance literature from the twenty-first century suggests that the portrayal of women by female characters can be as lopsided and unidimensional as the feminists have been accusing male writers of creating.

It is therefore the premise of this research to uncover how some women writers have unfortunately failed to sustain or adopt what feminists term the "female gaze" coined in response to Laura Mulvey's widely pondered notion of the "male gaze" in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 19). Instead, these women writers appear to be afflicted with what this research calls the "internalisation of the male gaze", and therefore continue to perpetuate derogatory and superficial portrayals of women in literature.

A case in point is the highly successful teen romance *After* by Anna Todd. Provided that the novel does not necessarily form the bulk of what many might deem as serious or canon literature, its massive popularity is food for thought for what kind of literature the younger (mostly female demographic) finds itself gravitating to and the reasons behind this departure.

The *After* series is a contemporary romance listed as a New York Times bestseller with over 12 million copies sold and translated into thirty-five languages (Schuster, n.d., p. 1). According to Dan Kois, the bulk of *After's* readership demographic is “young women” since the novel was originally penned as a Wattpad fanfiction and subsequently turned into a novel following its massive popularity on the platform (Kois, 2015). The fact that the novel has found its mainstream audience in the demographic of adolescent girls and young women raises concerns surrounding the themes and portrayal of women disseminated by it.

It is one of the premises of this novel to unveil how as a contemporary romance novel, *After* not only perpetuates extremely dangerous and problematic portrayals of women, it simultaneously fails to inform the novel with an autonomous female gaze and therefore continues to push women as occupying the position of the spectacle instead of the agent who should not only be in control of her own destiny but, as a protagonist, the plot of the novel. A subsequent offshoot of this premise is the way in which the internalisation of the male gaze manifests in the novel, giving way to Deleuze's concept of the three women that formulate the masochist's fantasy and Tessa, the protagonist's reduction to it.

Research problem

While contemporary feminist diaspora speaks voluminously about the importance of inventing the female gaze, the reality of most popular contemporary literature, especially one that is penned for teen and young women of the twenty-first century, suggests that there is still a long way to go when it comes to divesting women's portrayals in literature from the “objectifying” male gaze that the feminists love to vilify.

This research primarily uncovers how *After* as the cannon piece of young adult contemporary romance continues to portray women from the male gaze despite being penned by a woman writer. The second question surrounds the theme of the masochistic fantasy. The research seeks to find the ways in which the fantasy sold to young women in the novel is one that, according to Giles, is actually the fantasy of the masochist male thereby promoting self-detrimental attitudes in them.

Significance of the Study

There is a certain point in mainstream literature penned for and by women where feminist criticism divests from the fantasy sold to women. For some reason, this divestiture is a hush-hush topic in both mainstream media as well as academia, however, it is obvious that if feminism wishes to see any concrete results surrounding representations of women in literature with its criticisms, then it must explore, criticize and vilify not just the male gaze and questionable portrayals of women in novels penned by men but also turn their the nozzle of their cannon towards works of women and point out instances of internalized male gaze in writings by women. The reason this is of extreme significance is because writings by women often bypass feminist criticism that considers them the holy grail of women's representation and refrains from rebuking problematic portrayals out of fear of discrediting women out of the literary space. This stance, however, does more to undermine positive representation of women than encourage it.

This research hopes to dispel the taboo associated with calling into question the portrayal of women by women as well as uncover how internalized male portrayal works in cahoots with male masochistic fantasies to continue to undermine and sideline the representation of women in popular contemporary romance literature.

Framework of the Study

This study rests its premise on the musings of Laura Mulvey who coined the term male gaze and Giles who specified the workings of the male masochist fantasy. The literature review section analyses both concepts in detail preparing the reader to see the ties between the internalized male gaze amongst women writers as well as Giles's

ponderings on male masochism. Precisely, it picks up Mulvey's idea of how the male gaze reduces women to the position of spectacle and correlates it with how the reduction of women to the position of spectacle is the natural offshoot of Todd's erroneous judgement that confuses male masochistic fantasy with women's fantasy and in doing so perpetuates it as the norm for young women. This framework will inform the thematic reading of the novel *After* by Anna Todd in the analysis chapter drawing relevant conclusions that directly answer the problems posed by the research paper.

Literature Review

Alyce Corbett in her insightful article *In Search of the Female Gaze: The Evolving Possibilities of Postfeminist Aesthetics in Contemporary Film and Literature* speaks liberally on the origins of the concept of the gaze. Corbett attributes Sartre as the founder of the concept although the latter expounded the concept of the "gaze" in gender-neutral and existential terms (Corbett, 2023, p. 6). Corbett, however, is not the only student of feminist studies to draw this connection, which begs some room to investigate the musings of Sartre to explore how his existential concept of the gaze became a sexist one.

In his seminal work, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores the concept of existence and perception. He declares that the "the look" is the maker and creator of all things existing. According to Sartre, as we look, so we create a reality around us. He cites an example of an onlooker whose "reality" comprises the "deep, raw green grass" (Sartre, 1933, p. 255) which may not be the "reality" for the onlooker across the other side. Corbett calls this tendency of Sartre to define the world around him through his subjective gaze as "solipsistic" (Corbett, 2023, p. 7), but important as it reveals something about the importance of perception and the formation of our reality. An important claim of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* was the role that the gaze places in the phenomenon of "othering". According to Sartre, it is this gaze, that makes the looker the subject and the one that is looked at the object in the limited scope of our reality.

When one puts together Sartre's conclusions about the gaze as the definer of our reality and the seminal force that differentiates the subject from the other, it becomes obvious why feminist writers have started to put a considerable amount of focus on the importance of the gaze, how the media and literature have allowed this gaze to be predominantly masculine and how it perpetuated misogynistic and derogatory concepts of what femininity and the female essence is. Researchers such as Abeer Majeed Abdel Nabi Saleh in their study "Transformations of philosophical thought on the naked body and its impact on modern European sculpture" have also spoken about how our realities are borrowed from the visual arts around us (Saleh, 2019, p. 436).

In her article, *We All Want to Be Seen": The Male Gaze, the Female Gaze and the Act of Looking as Metaphor in Emma Cline's The Girls*, Alicja Piechucka credits Laura Mulvey as the founder of the term "the male gaze". Both Corbett and Mulvey agree that the term was first coined by British Feminist film Scholar Laura Mulvey in her essay "*Visual Cinema and Narrative Pleasure*". This concept of the female gaze, which Mulvey originally expounded within the context of cinematography and film has now transcended all other media including literature.

According to Piechucka, Mulvey's analysis in her essay mostly draws on Lacanian and psychanalytic principles tied with "scopophilia and voyeurism" (Piechucka, 2020, p. 5). Mulvey dissects Alfred's *We All Want to Be Seen*, Emma Cline's *The Girls* 75, and certain Hitchcock classics including *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and *Marnie*. Her analysis of the male gaze in the classic *Rear Window* focuses on how the plot of the film shifts from linear motion to that of an erotic one. *Rear Window* features a non-committal, but internationally acclaimed photojournalist living by himself who attempts to break the monotony of his uneventful days by secretly gazing at the whereabouts of his neighbours using mostly a telephoto lens.

Piechucka notes while the story follows a suspenseful plotline of uncovering a mystery, Mulvey directs her focus insightfully to the portrayal of women and the one-sided perception imparted by the stringent male gaze. According to Mulvey, the

perception of Jeffrey is meant to be that of the audience, the apartment block opposite Jeffrey spies formulates the screen. His watching contributes “an erotic dimension” to his “look” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 15). In other words, the male protagonist becomes both the instrumental gaze through which the audience sees the action unfold as well as supplies an erotic dimension to it through the means of voyeurism.

In her article, “What Have Clothes Got to Do with It? Romantic Comedy and the Female Gaze” Paula Marantz Cohen also quotes Mulvey to bring to light the fact the balance of plot and spectacle in the film is predicated on the Male Gaze. Mulvey suggests that the plot of the film with its linear story-telling function is “analogous to the male sex act in its insistent forward motion”, and its “drive for closure” (Cohen, 2000, p. 76). While the spectacle diverts from this forward plot and is mainly comprised of women on screen, Mulvey suggests that the function of women on screen is not so much to drive the plot forward as it is to serve as “resting points and diversionary asides” both of which are part of a reward for the male protagonist’s struggles. This is the case with most of the Hitchcock classics, the Bond movies or Robin Hood.

Cohen draws on Mulvey’s analysis to establish how both the plot and spectacle work together to establish a heterosexual male-centric gaze which forces the male and female viewers to acquiesce to this one-sided perception of our world where the action is the most important entity while material objects (including women) occupy a secondary fetishistic place and their primary purpose is to be looked at.

Cohen suggests that this plot-spectacle hierarchy has been the standard formula for narrative film and unfortunately, stories that feature female protagonists have been made to conform to it.

Corbett, who traces the origins of the female gaze is wont to quote Simone de Beauvoir who penned one of the most celebrated feminist texts of the 20th century, *The Second Sex* There are several interesting parallels between Simone’s texts and that of Sartre that can allow us to consolidate our theory about the male and female gaze. According to Simone, biblical myths have often cast women as the secondary

sex and the other. She points out how the imagery of Eve drawn from the flesh of Adam is the most literal symbol that reduces her to a secondary place and ever since then Eve and her daughters have remained as the “inessential who never returned to the essential” and who serve as the absolute “Other”(Beauvoir, 1949, p. 358). Modern-day literature, Simone believes, continues to disseminate this status of women as the second sex. Combined with Sartre’s ideas of the Other as the one that is gazed at and that is there only as an object constituting the reality of the subject, one can draw the corollary that women have always been the object of the male gaze in which their position is often relegated to a secondary status.

John Breger in his book *Ways of Seeing* explains how, historically, visual images have been employed by writers, directors, and cameramen to shape our view of the world. According to Breger, these viewpoints are not innocent of agenda and the consumers of these films and literature must question and uncover the power structures these represent. He continues to assert that “Men dream of women. Women dream of themselves being dreamt of. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at (Berger, 1972, p. 15). According to Berger, women constantly get reminded through the intent gaze of others on them to act, behave and look a certain way. This gaze emerges from a place of close judgment and often the glance of judgment is none other than their own. This is a fatal point that speaks of the internalized male gaze. This self-adjudication is obviously the result of social indoctrination (Berger, 1972, p. 17). Berger believes that literature, film and popular media disseminate the notion that success for women lies in how closely they fit the beauty standards designed for the most part by men and how successfully they can mold themselves into beings that are desirable to men.

The female gaze then, as Corbett suggests is about supplanting women in the place of the male gazer and thereby allowing women to become the subject in their own reality instead of the marginalized and objective other; to have a subjective consciousness and agency and to impart their own meaning onto the events unfolding around them instead of having to rely on images borrowed from the masculine

repertoire. Berger also argues about how it is hypocritical of them to accuse women of vanity when for centuries the idea of desirability has been instilled in them.

However, as this research will portray, there are times when female writers fail to meet this objective and end up supplying the type of gaze that conforms with the male gaze instead. Featuring female characters as protagonists and penned by women, these novels fail to present the women-centric world in which the woman for one is not the gazer but the one that gazes. The novel under question, written by Anna Todd falls in this very category of the “failed female gaze” or the internalized male gaze. As the analysis section will reveal, despite being penned by a woman and featuring a female protagonist, the gaze of the novel is anything but female. Not only does it reinforce the plot-spectacle hierarchy where the main driver of the plot is not the female protagonist but her male love interest, but it also substantiates John Wilson’s claims in his article “Masochism and the Female Gaze” that establishes an intrinsic link between the two (Wilson, 2015, pg. 115-120).

As stated earlier, it is the premise of this research to not only establish the failure of women writers in erecting a distinctive self-substantiating female gaze but also to assess how this failure resides in an almost masochistic tendency amongst these female characters that forces them to take up the role of the female tormentor/ mother-figure for the voyeuristic pleasures of the male characters.

This makes it imperative to understand what comprises a truly masochistic experience and the male-female dynamics involved in it. Researchers such as Edward P. Razarian and Lorrain Markotic have spoken extensively on masochism and especially Deleuze’s understanding of this phenomenon. Deleuze wrote extensively on masochism and its divisiveness from sadism in his book *Coldness and Cruelty*. However, of chief essence in his book, are the concepts of the father, and the three women.

Deleuze’s Masochism

To begin with, masochism is a primarily male experience for Deleuze. When he speaks of masochist characters, he fundamentally speaks of male characters whose

masochistic tendencies stem from a suppressed need to seek approval from the father as a means to assuage his guilt over feelings of hostility towards him since both he and his father are subconsciously competing for the affection of the mother. According to Deleuze:

The masochist feels guilty, he asks to be beaten, he expiates, but why and for what crime? Is it not precisely the father image in him that is thus miniaturized, beaten, ridiculed and humiliated? What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father's likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the humiliated father. Hence the father is not so much the beater as the beaten (Gilles, 1991, pp. 60-61)

In describing the art of masochism, Deleuze professes that the masochist by no means understands pain, punishment and humiliation differently than others. The difference only lies in that the masochist sees suffering, humiliation, expiation, and pain as necessary prerequisites to enjoy the pleasure that will eventually follow. In addition, the longer the masochist must wait for the pleasure, the greatly he experiences it. In the words of Deleuze, the masochist “postpones pleasure in expectation of the pain which will make gratification possible” (Gilles, 1991, p. 71).

Deleuze describes the four basic characteristics of masochism. The first of these is the “special significance of fantasy” (Gilles, 1991, p. 74). The masochistic experience is lived by the masochist as a form of a dream for its own sake. The second is “suspense” (Gilles, 1991, p. 75) or in other words, the thrill that builds up due to waiting and delay; the third characteristic is “demonstrative” (Gilles, 1991, p. 75) or in other words, the particular ways in which the masochist expresses his suffering; the fourth is the “provocative fear” (Gilles, 1991, p. 75) which involves the masochist provoking the torturer to punish him in hopes of the pleasure that is to follow, and finally, for Deleuze, the last characteristic of the masochist experience is the “contract”. According to Deleuze, although the masochist is held by chains, in reality, he is bound by the word alone. This not only allows consent on the part of the male victim but also equips him to use his persuasive and judicial efforts to train the torturer.

Another important concept in Deleuze's discussion of masochism is that of the three women. According to Deleuze, most of the women populating Masoch's novels fall into three categories. The first is what Deleuze describes as the "Grecian" woman (Gilles, 1991, p. 47). But she is also variously described as "the pagan, hetaera or Aphrodite" and the "generator of disorder" (Gilles, 1991, p. 47). This is a woman who dedicates her life to love and beauty without any sense of binding stemming from Christian scruples. This extrication allows her to create mayhem and gain dominance over men. The Aphrodite considers both sexes as equal. She disavows traditional concepts of religion, Church and marriage as concepts generated by men to validate their supremacy over women. She is, therefore, modern, adventurous, and "lives for the moment" (Gilles, 1991, p. 47).

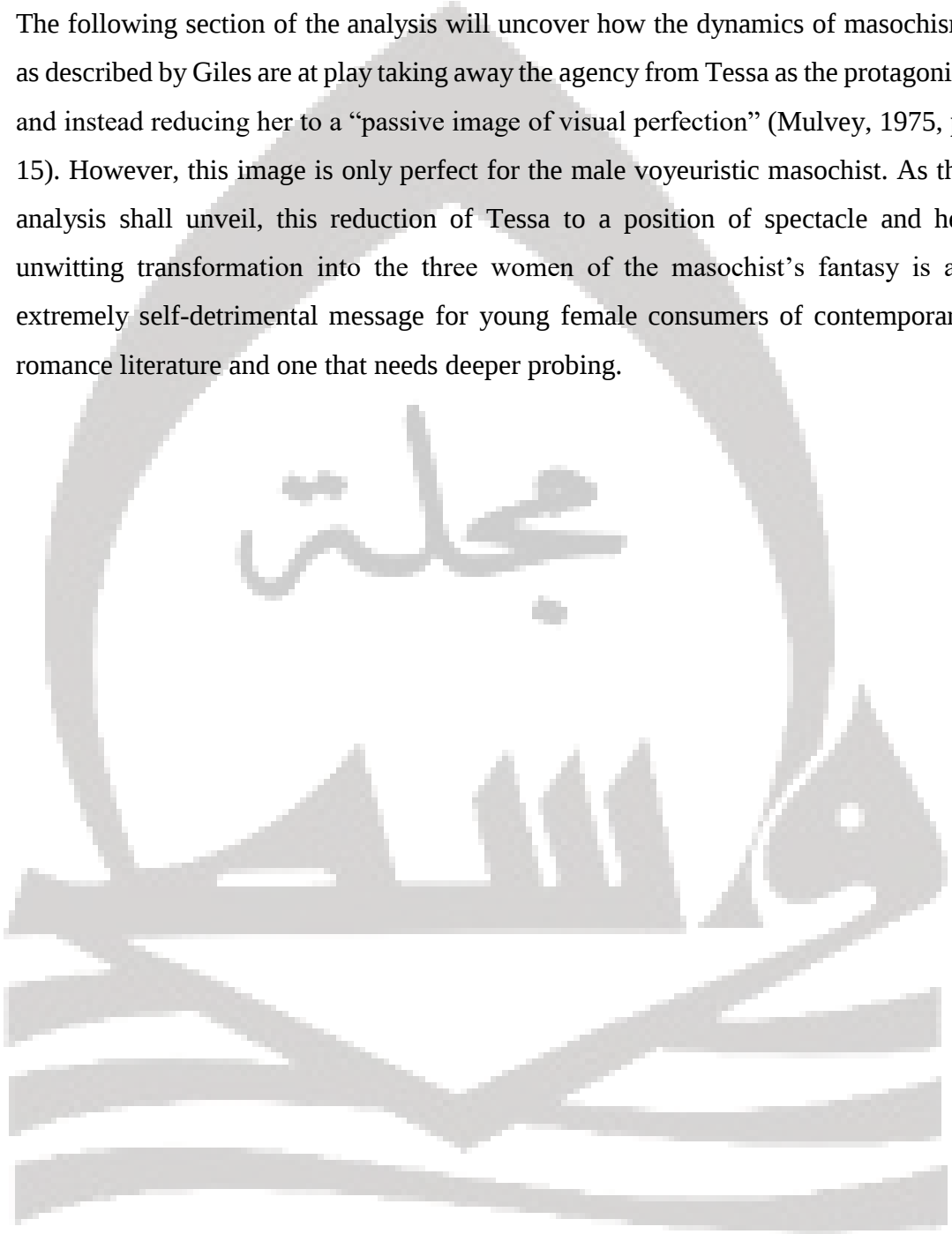
At the opposite end is the sadist. This woman loves inflicting pain on others but a key aspect to her characterization is that her sadism is mostly prompted by a man. In afflicting pain, she is in collusion with either her own male victim or some other man with whom she yearns to foster some kind of relationship. It is equally noteworthy that in masochism, the sadist woman will eventually become a victim of the man she colludes with, which also appears to be the case with Tessa.

However, Deleuze professes that neither the Aphrodite, nor the sadist is the ideal for the masochist. In fact, the three women fall on a spectrum with Aphrodite and the sadist occupying the extreme ends of this spectrum. The ideal woman for the masochist oscillates between these two extremes and it is in this danger of the ideal woman assuming these opposite extremes that the masochist finds the greatest thrill (Gilles, 1991, pp. 49-55).

This ideal woman is described by Deleuze as the "intermediate feminine type" (Gilles, 1991, p. 50) who has the "tender heart of a dove together with the cruel instincts of the feline race" (Gilles, 1991, p. 50). This third type of woman has "peculiar tastes, but her eccentricities and brutal peculiarities should not conceal the tender sentimentality and inherent kindness of her nature. According to Deleuze, this

woman embodies the trinity of the masochistic ideal: she is “ cold-maternal-severe” (Gilles, 1991, p. 50)

The following section of the analysis will uncover how the dynamics of masochism as described by Giles are at play taking away the agency from Tessa as the protagonist and instead reducing her to a “passive image of visual perfection” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 15). However, this image is only perfect for the male voyeuristic masochist. As the analysis shall unveil, this reduction of Tessa to a position of spectacle and her unwitting transformation into the three women of the masochist’s fantasy is an extremely self-detrimental message for young female consumers of contemporary romance literature and one that needs deeper probing.



Analysis

Anna Todd's *After*, originally penned as a *Twilight* fanfiction, revolves around the turbulent life of its female protagonist Tessa whose whirlwind romance with bad boy Hardin changes the course of her life's trajectory imploding most, if not all of the core values, that comprised her identity.

Several critics have commented on the toxic relationship between Tessa and Hardin that sustains the major bulk of the plotline in *After*. However, pronouncing this relationship as toxic is a gross oversimplification of the sinister psychoanalytic forces at play that Todd, and many female romance writers themselves may be unaware of which can lend key insight into how the female gaze fails to perceive what it must.

Critics such as Laura Mulvey, Paula Coen and Alicja Piechucka have maintained the need for a female gaze whereby women would assume positions that would allow them to perceive the world from their own perspective instead of having to conform to one that is imposed on them and by doing so, hopefully advance them from the relegated and passive positions of "spectacle" to "plot". Unfortunately, *After* and many similar coming-of-age romance novels fail to advance this change despite being penned by women writers and featuring women protagonists. If anything, these romances reinforce the toxic relegation of womanhood to spectacles through what this research terms as the internalized male gaze.

Most significantly, the novel, much like its several counterparts also authored by women, draws an unmissable link between this internalized male gaze and the art of masochism. However, it must be borne in mind that even the masochism exhibited in these stories is for the benefit of the male characters instead of their female counterparts. In other words, we see Tessa, the protagonist, assume the identity of the torturess, instead of the masochist, thereby supplying a form of pleasure to her boyfriend instead of driving it for herself.

At the outset of the novel, we meet Tessa, the protagonist embodying the virtues of the woman that according to Deleuze is closest to the ideal that the masochist strives to attain in his fantasy. She is maternal, yet icy and stern with her values. Her derision

for her roommate Steph is ostentatious and extends equally ostentatiously to Steph's friends Noah and Hardin. It is interesting to note how, despite being closest to the ideal, Tessa fails to evoke the desired interest in Hardin who functions as a covert masochist. This rings Deleuze's ideas that for the masochist to obtain the ideal and drive pleasure, pain and humiliation are the prerequisites. Without the threat that the ideal woman can lapse into the extreme state of the hetaera on one hand, and the sadist on the other, the masochist does not find pleasure. This explains why Hardin and Tessa's first encounter fails to spark any sense of passionate attraction or even infatuation on either side. However, once Tessa begins to embody the role of the heretic and passionate Grecian, she begins to pose some form of allure for Hardin. The evolution of Tessa into the hetaera, the tortures, for the gratification of Hardin is the first glaring example of the internalized male gaze. One of the major failures in crafting the character of Tessa has been the author's inability to advance her from the position of spectacle to that of the driver of the plot. Tessa's actions are promptly motivated by her need to amuse or impress Hardin. As Hardin's torturess, she becomes part of what Deleuze described as the sadist. In her attempt to prove Hardin wrong about herself, she assumes the identity of the Grecian Aphrodite and in their most tender moments, Tessa finally becomes the ideal woman that Hardin vows to love. However, before diving into the details of how Tessa embodies Deleuze's "Three Women", the analysis will first focus on how, for the most part in the novel, Tessa remains the spectacle, instead of the plot.

The Internalized Male Gaze in *After*

One of the classic errors by Todd in writing her female characters is the focus on their visual potential (or lack thereof) instead of their cognitive or intellectual abilities. This applies not just to Tessa, but also to other female characters populating the novel. Punctuating throughout the novel are vapid passages fixated on the dresses and the physiognomy of the female characters in a way that is different from Todd's description of the male counterparts. For example, as readers, our first meeting with

Tessa's roommate is reduced to Todd's description of Steph's physical outlook, primarily staged to serve as a scene of shock.

After a moment, my eyes travel to the reason behind my mother's surprise...there's the girl lying across one bed, and her bright red hair, eyes lined with what looks like inches of black liner, and arms covered in colorful tattoos.

"Hey," she says, offering a smile, a smile that I find quite intriguing, much to my surprise. "I'm Steph." She sits up on her elbows, causing her cleavage to push tight against her laced-up top, and I gently kick at Noah's shoe when his eyes focus on her chest. (Todd, 2014, p. 12)

While the over-the-top description of the scantily-clad Steph was a plot mechanism to prompt the mother into requesting a room change, as well as add a layer to the conflict between the protective mother and the rebellious daughter, this fixation on Steph's physical outlook continues throughout the novel. Every time the character of Steph is introduced, the description is compounded with a detailed focus on what she is wearing and how physically attractive or unattractive she might be deemed by the men around her.

This tendency of Todd veers into extremity in the description of Molly, Tessa's rival in love and near-antagonist of the novel. What makes Molly the antagonist is her unbridled sexuality which is often promptly and unapologetically on display especially when Hardin is around. Once again, Molly's antagonism is not embedded so much in her character and actions as much as it is entrenched in her place in the novel as the spectacle of seduction. As readers, we do not learn anything about Molly's psychological motivations behind her ostensibly sexual displays and need for male validation. It is in the depiction of Molly as the antagonist on account of her seductive and sexual outbursts that you see the contrast between the male and the female gaze. Todd's inability to pen her novel from the female gaze reduces Molly to a "slut" (Todd, 2014, p. 168) with no redemption arc whatsoever. She has nothing to offer except for her sexuality and since this sexuality serves as a temptation to Hardin luring him away from Tessa, Molly is hence the irredeemable villain of the story.

The instances of internalized male gaze become even starker when one compares Todd's favorable descriptions of Hardin juxtaposed with the unpleasant ones of Molly's. While describing Hardin in the white T-shirt, Tessa reflects on "how good he looks" (Todd, 2014, p. 168). But when her gaze veers over to Tessa all she can see is "her stupid pink hair"(Todd, 2014, p. 168) and "how skanky Molly is dressed"(Todd, 2014, p. 168). One cannot help but notice that Tessa's reflections on Hardin's physical outlook, while superficial, are a little more humanizing. When he "looks good", he looks good as a person.

On the other hand, Molly's descriptions are reduced to her body parts: her "pink hair" and her "skanky clothes". Similar instances such as these often leave Molly as simply a spectacle in the grand scheme of the *After* narrative and reaffirm Hashim Aliwy and Azal Hani Zeidan's claims in their combined study "The Concept of Hijab in Selected Political Speeches". According to Aliwy et al., it is far easier to depict women negatively in political and literary discourse (Alhusseini & Zeidan, 2024, p. 618). Researcher Rasha Tareq Awad Al-Zubaidi is of a similar opinion in her study "A Socio- Stylistic Study of the Role of Social Identity in Selected Feminist Texts" according to which, gender is one of the factors that influence the way language is used and that feminist discourse aims to reevaluate if language encourages positive or negative portrayals of women (Al-Zubaidi, 2024, p. 568). As is obvious in this analysis, Todd finds it much easier to employ language with negative or grossly simplified connotations when describing women other than the protagonist thereby fostering the male gaze.

In contrast, a female gaze would have sought the underlying motivations and insecurities causative of Molly's sexual behaviours. It would have tried to make sense of her need for male validation and possibly brought her a redemptive arc to move her from the place of spectacle to the plot.

Apart from Tessa, the other somewhat prominent female character in the story, Steph, depicts a slightly positive growth. Her character moves from being purely a symbol of shock to being Tessa's source of comfort. But if the audience found Steph

somewhat daft, superficial and vapid for at least the first half of the story, it is only because Todd's writing fails to exert any kind of effort in bringing depth or emotional intensity to Steph's character apart from when she is required to serve as a plot-device/Tessa's temporary solace responsible for pushing Tessa into further encounters with Hardin.

The lack of depth in the portrayal of female characters is not new in literature and, as the literature analysis section revealed, has usually been attributed to the tendency of literature written from the male gaze that largely overlooks the potential of intense female characters as opposed to their male counterparts and continues to treat women as a spectacle that is not primarily agential to the plot. Todd's inability to break away from this tradition is just another of the innumerable unfortunate instances where women authors have exemplified symptoms of the internalized male gaze as well as their inability to cater to a more sophisticated literati that wishes to see women drawn in more expansive light, fully humanized, not necessarily dominating the men around them but definitively being treated as their equal and worthy counterparts. This is one of the reasons why the commercial success of *Twilight*, especially amongst a vastly young female teen demographic, is a worrying phenomenon. While the reasons for the novel's popularity amongst women and young girls, despite being almost misogynistic to their own sex, falls outside this research's purview, suffice to say that it's not just a rare cabal of women writers that have internalized this misogyny but a pernicious disease that has taken its invisible roots in the impressionable minds of many a young girls and women, who have been constantly fed and made to believe in the inevitability of reducing women characters to a position of spectacle in order to earn the affection and attention of a highly eligible male.

Tessa as "The Three Women" in *After*

After is an especially malicious and malevolent case of internalized misogyny because it commits the cardinal sin of reducing its female protagonist to Deleuze's delineation of the peak male fantasy: the three women. By subverting her sense of self into these various women, Tessa can draw the attention of Hardin and secure him as the ultimate

prize. But even as Hardin is the trophy boyfriend, he exerts more character, agency, and dominance than Tessa.

It is very telling about the internalized misogyny and the internalized male gaze that despite being the protagonist Tessa hardly shows any agency and control over her actions or the formulation of her identity. On the surface level, the story seems to play on the “good girl gone bad” trope, however, a deeper analysis reveals some very interesting parallels between Tessa’s various transformations and Deleuze’s concept of the three women in the male masochist’s fantasy.

Tessa is the classic good girl at the start of the novel. She is the vanilla female protagonist who dresses modestly, never goes against the whims of her mother, is grateful for the life she has been provided with, genuinely appreciates her boyfriend and works extremely hard to achieve her dreams in the hopes of making her mother proud. All of that changes the moment she sets her eyes on Hardin. From the moment Tessa’s disdain for Hardin becomes apparent, along with her refusal to throw herself at him and stroke his ego, she becomes Hardin’s masochist transformative project.

What is equally interesting is that, Tessa’s natural pre-modified self is exactly the ideal the masochist hopes for. She is what Deleuze would describe as the *intermediate feminine type*, or in other words, the ideal for the masochist. From Hardin’s perspective, she must appear perfectly *cold-maternal-severe*. Her maternal instincts are clear in her disdain for Steph’s unabashedly bold dressing styles and her clique’s tattoos as well as her insistence on dressing herself modestly. She prefers finishing up her assignments to having a night out partying. She emanates a sense of responsibility and is rightfully worried about the company Steph keeps for herself. While her scruples against the partying lifestyle of Steph, Hardin and their friends appear to stem from maternally-rooted protective instincts, they also make her look, at the same time, both cold and severe. Her coldness and severity of mannerisms are especially directed at Hardin from the first moment of their encounter. She is less than impressed with Hardin’s self-assured charisma and responds at times coldly and, at times, severely to his uninvited intrusions into her dorm. Tessa’s apparent dislike

towards Hardin and his ways, along with her obvious maternal instinct to protect her friends and herself from bad company piques Hardin's interest and it is then that he makes her a project of sorts.

If one is to go back to Deleuze's comments about the masochist's fantasy, then Hardin's need to "change" Tessa from the "good girl" or the "ideal intermediate feminine type" to the bad girl with provocative and seductive behaviors or the pagan Hetaera, appear to be rooted in the masochist's perverted compulsion of finding pleasure in the possibility of losing the ideal to the pagan or sadist extremes. According to Deleuze, it is not so much the realization of the intermediate feminine woman that the masochist drives his pleasure from, but the threat that the woman might transform into one of the two extremes (pagan or sadist) on this scale of the ideal woman. We, therefore, see the unfolding of a true masochist experience where Tessa alternatively transforms from the stable yet cold maternal type into the godless and profane Aphrodite who begins savouring the idea of living in the moment and ultimately to a sadist who purposefully torments Hardin only to become his victim at the end.

Tessa's transformation into the pagan Hetaera occurs early in the novel when she defies Hardin's and his friends' judgement by indulging in alcohol. From that point onwards, Tessa appears to chronically oscillate between the Hetaera who lives for the moment, is not Christian, and defies the men (in her case both Hardin and her Boyfriend Nate) because she believes in equality of both sexes. She begins cheating on her boyfriend Nate with Hardin without compunction, and in her own words, finds it justified given her need to quell her desire for the latter.

No longer the reasonable and moderate Tessa, her scruples are thrown out by her voyeuristic needs for pleasure and she, against her own better judgment, becomes a willing participant in Hardin's plan of ruining her innocent persona. However, to Tessa's own surprise, the most blatant moments of her transformation into the pagan Hetaera for the sake of Hardin fail her in sustaining his loyalty and affection. This recalls Deleuze's claims according to which the masochist does not derive pleasure

from either of the three types of women per se but from the threat of the ideal woman falling into the state of Hetaera or the sadist. Tessa therefore finds herself becoming a clockwork of the three types of women who keep shifting into the required personas at Hardin's whims.

Every time Tessa finds herself in an ideally romantic moment with Hardin, she is subsequently stumped by the latter's sudden rudeness, loss of interest and indifference thereby forcing Tessa to break out of the role of the feminine intermediate type and oscillate either toward the pagan Aphrodite who tries to convince herself that she is not affected by Hardin's indifference or the sadist whose every move is designed to ruffle Hardin's feathers and make him as miserable as she is. An example is when Tessa spends a romantic evening with Hardin. In a moment of sheer vulnerability, Tessa even unveils her desire to bare her virginity before him only for him to turn around and let her know of his disinclination.

There are multiple episodes in the novel where Tessa and Hardin's idyllic rendezvous is immediately followed by an abrupt and cold rescinding of affections on Hardin's part leaving Tessa in a state of complete and utter turmoil. Interestingly, the intermediate feminine stance of Tessa momentarily drives Hardin to her but once the novelty wears off, so does Hardin's desire for her. This is reminiscent of Deleuze's claims that the male masochist does not drive pleasure from any form of gratification until it comes as the aftermath of a torturous moment of waiting and pain. Tessa's feminine affections then do more to recoil Hardin and it is not until she descends into a state of the pagan Hetaera, defying the bounds of decency and ideal moderation that Hardin finds himself falling in love with Tessa in spite of himself.

It is clear from these dynamics that although the story is told from Tessa's perspective, it is not her but Hardin who is driving the plot. All of the actions of Tessa are simply in response to Hardin's moods and whims. Tessa's transformation into either of the three women is dictated by the reactions and extent of affection Hardin has towards her. She is mostly in her ideal feminine state when Hardin is the kindest. The moment,

however, Hardin's affections begin to withdraw, she immediately adopts the role of the other two women in the masochist's fantasy.

Like a true masochist, Hardin too best finds himself gravitating towards Tessa when she is oscillating either towards the pagan Hetaera or the cruel sadist. One must also note that Tessa can simultaneously transform herself into the worldly and pagan Hetaera as well as the sadist. Every time she withdraws from her role as the intermediate feminine, she goes full pagan, carousing with Hardin's rowdy friends, acting provocatively, and flirting with other men. However, it is also obvious that Tessa's transformation into the worldly Hetaera hits a painful chord with Hardin, since as a masochist, the more Tessa oscillates away from the "intermediate feminine", the more pain it imparts on Hardin. It is also noteworthy, that Tessa is aware of how her departure from the ideal woman pushes Hardin into a state of mental torture and a part of her drives pleasure from inflicting this pain on Hardin making her a true sadist. In the novel, therefore, Tessa is simultaneously the pagan Hetaera and the cruel sadist.

Finally, another important aspect of this internalized masochist male gaze is how, even as a sadist, the woman remains the victim of the male masochist. This is because whenever she transforms herself into a different type of woman, she does it at the whim of the male masochist and despite her own intrinsic unwillingness. Since there is no agency of her own, and is, in a sinister and dialectical fashion, forced to adopt the roles of the pagan Hetaera who lives for the bodily pleasures or the sadist who derives pleasure from inflicting pain on others, the woman actually ends up driving no pleasure at all. In other words, because Tessa is forced to drive sensual pleasures as a result of Hardin's whimsical changes of mood, she does not actually feel pleasure in the same way as a woman of agency would. On the other hand, the male masochist, despite being in pain enjoys these transformations of the woman into at times the pagan, at times the sadist and at times the ideal more than the woman does.

According to Deleuze, an important aspect of the male masochist fantasy is the contract whereby the masochist not only controls the extent of his customary pain and

humiliation but also reserves the reins of control and agency. It is this control via the form of a contract that makes the masochist male the predator and his torturess the victim despite the apparent power dynamics. Tessa, even in her most pagan and self-gratifying moments never truly enjoys herself. With Hardin often on the back of her mind, and with her every action tuned to Hardin's reactions, she is completely at his disposal when it comes to feeling any sort of emotion. On the other hand, even as Hardin finds his patience running thin on account of Tessa's hedonistic ways, he has the solace of knowing that his situationship with Tessa is simply part of a contract/bet he carried out with his friends to take Tessa's virginity in the shortest amount of time possible and despite developing some sort of feelings for Tessa, Hardin at least has the consolation of knowing that not only he has won the bet but it is Tessa who develops feelings for him first and, in the instance of their breakup, it is Tessa who comes out substantially more harmed, both physically and emotionally.

Conclusion

This study set out to uncover how literature by women runs the risk of falling into the same misogynistic pit via internalized male gazing as literature penned by men. Women can be just as easily indicted for reducing women characters to positions of spectacle, divesting them of agency, and subjecting them to objectification for male pleasure as male writers. Many times, women writers themselves are unaware of this internalization, however, the intentionality or non-intentionality of the internalization of the male gaze was a topic outside of the purview of this study.

Instead, this paper explores how popular contemporary romance fiction has still a long way to go before it can produce fully agential, complex women characters that can do more than sit prettily or otherwise for the pleasure or discomfiture of its audience. It also explores how the internalization of the male gaze is a deep-seated and sinister phenomenon that has today's young female demographic in a chokehold. The popularity of *After* among young women is a dangerous sign of women's unwitting alliance with the prevalent male-gaze phenomenon and when disseminated

by women, it only entrenches it further in popular media and assures women that their significance is directly tied to male validation.

Subsequently, it is also obvious that the novel *After* specifically promotes the male masochist fantasy reducing Tessa to its passive respondent. The analysis reveals how despite being the protagonist, Tessa was simply enacting the three women that according to Deleuze inform the male masochist fantasy reducing Tessa once again to a position of spectacle as well as the object from which the male recipient drives the masochistic pleasure for his own gratification.

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