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All but a Pose? Unlikeable Heroines in Contemporary Fiction by Women

Abstract

The present research grows out of an engagement with emerging trends in contemporary fiction by young women authors whose works frequently feature unrelatable and ultimately unlikable female narrators and/or protagonists. Within the framework provided by dissociative feminism and nascent Femcel/Femceldom Studies, I investigate the portrayal in fiction of female protagonists who are young and talented, but who nevertheless struggle with strong self-destructive tendencies. In the first part of the article, devoted to *Conversations with Friends* (2017) by Sally Rooney and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016) by Eimear McBride, I enquire whether the two authors' young protagonists fall into the trap of repeating their own patterns, or whether they manage to overcome the self-delusion that smart and sensitive types like themselves are prone to wallow in, both physically and mentally. The second part turns to Lisa Taddeo's and Eliza Clark's troubled narrators in their respective debuts, *Animal* (2021) and *Boy Parts* (2020), offering a comparison of the two novels in terms of their treatment of predatory, cunning, and deceptive female protagonists. In an attempt to dissect the empathy and support gained among readerships by unconventional female protagonists, I also explore the ways in which misogynistic narratives about female depravity are appropriated and reclaimed by female authors who then "recycle" them for their own purposes, daring to challenge the patriarchal order.

Keywords: Eliza Clark, dissociative/post-wounded feminism, femcel, Eimear McBride, Sally Rooney, Lisa Taddeo.

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INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have seen an unprecedented rise in fiction by women which seems to have gained even greater momentum in recent years. Female authors have won major prizes—to mention but a few notable examples: the 2018 Nobel for Olga Tokarczuk (awarded in 2019), her 2018 Man Booker Prize for *Flights* (shared with her translator Jennifer Croft), Bernardine Evaristo's and Margaret Atwood's joint Booker in 2019. Even more importantly, the last couple of years have spawned a number of outstanding debuts, novels, and short stories alike. Whereas the old-school prizes for established authors such as Atwood have long been anticipated, it is the ranks of "fresh bloods" that have captivated audiences and critics, to the degree that it is now difficult to imagine the literary world without Eimear McBride's multi-award winning *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) or Sally Rooney's best-selling *Conversations with Friends* (2017), followed shortly by the equally popular *Normal People* (2018) and its acclaimed TV adaptation.

Naturally, Rooney and McBride have not been the sole contenders—the literary scene has also warmly welcomed up-and-coming writers including Ottessa Moshfegh, Kristen Roupenian, Emma Cline, Lisa Taddeo, Eliza Clark, Kate Elizabeth Russell, and Halle Butler. While the work of these authors is diverse, they may safely be identified as representing a new kind of writing of female experience. In the present article, I wish to highlight a common element in their work, i.e. the emergence of a new type of narrator and/or protagonist who emerges as a violent and feral anti-heroine and an unrelatable and ultimately unlikable narrator. In her 2019 essay "The Making of a Millennial Woman," Rebecca Liu notes that ours seems to be the age of the unlikeable woman whose "rise . . . is a victory." Referring specifically to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Lena Dunham's *Girls*, Liu goes on to lay bare the frequently shadowed side to these—and many other—fictional characters which she defines as their "par excellence . . . deeply disempowered" condition. In this vein, their unlikability gains a more disturbing significance—apart from corroborating the medially attractive self-ironicising element, the characters' unlikability testifies to the existence of a serious social problem which Liu describes as "a colossal social failure to provide substantive avenues of flourishing, care, and communal generosity." A similar point is made by Rebecca Walker who, in a discussion of Sally Rooney's novels and their female protagonists, notes how Rooney's characters, young women of means and (relative) privilege, nevertheless "suffer intensely in their inner psychology and in relationships" (336). The inhibited "flourishing" (ibid.) and the experience of intense suffering are indeed addressed, in various forms, by many millennial women authors,

from Ottessa Moshfegh's grim and repulsive *Eileen*, through the neurotic, unhinged and self-induced insomniac narrator of her second novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Emma Cline's narcissistic and spoilt teenage protagonists in *Girls*, to Kate Elizabeth Russell's traumatised Vanessa, a modern Lolita for the #MeToo era.

This article is structured in two parts, the first devoted to Rooney's and McBride's novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016). Their works might be considered as representing a "milder" strand in fiction in which the violence is less graphic, more internalised, and often directed inwards, at the characters themselves, who fall victim to self-harming practices and self-destructive behaviours. In what follows, I offer a comparison of the two novels and their treatment of the predicament of being a young and talented woman who nevertheless struggles with strong self-destructive tendencies, posing the question of whether, in the end, the characters fall into the trap of repeating their own patterns, or whether, perhaps, they manage to overcome the self-delusion that smart and sensitive types are prone to wallow in, both physically and mentally. In the second part of the article, I turn to Lisa Taddeo's and Eliza Clark's troubled narrators in their debuts, *Animal*[1] and *Boy Parts*. Both novels have provoked considerable discussion in popular and critical circles alike; both have been just as avidly loved as detested. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both feature predatory, cunning, and deceptive female protagonists. Given that women have long been boldly seizing authorial positions as writers, artists, and performers versus the objectified—not to say, compromised—statuses of "writees," "artistees," and "performees," I endeavour to investigate the contemporary implications of these acts and the significant alterations to the distribution of power across gender divides, resulting in shifts in subject/object positions.

In addition, I intend to examine the empathy and support garnered among readerships by unconventional female protagonists who dare to subvert the patriarchal order, while simultaneously remaining deeply entangled in its power dynamics. Also worth investigating are the ways in which misogynistic narratives about female monstrosity are appropriated and reclaimed by female authors who recycle them in order to put them to alternative purposes. With recourse to nascent femcel and femceldom studies, as well as the theoretical context offered by the tenets of dissociative feminism, I wish to turn the spotlight onto the portrayal of young female characters struggling with difficult choices, making bad decisions, and battling complex emotions (e.g., anger, jealousy, and disappointment).

[1] *Animal* is Taddeo's 2021 literary debut; her first published work was the 2019 non-fiction book *Three Women*.

Among the literary creations signalling a shift in the representation of the female experience is the figure of the "femcel," a creature who seems to be claiming her rights to representation with notable vehemence. The femcel, in some respects a descendent of—or a millennial sister to—Sara Ahmed's figure of the "feminist killjoy" (2023), receives an overly simplistic definition in the popular online resource UrbanDictionary, which categorises her as "a female incel" or "a woman who can't get a relationship." The facile gender-reversed symmetry here feels rather suspect. There is, in fact, much more to the femcel than simply being a reflection of the incel. Indeed, the female figure is frequently characterised by drastically different features, for instance, the fact that her celibacy is not always involuntary. In fact, femcels invariably find intimacy, sex, and the purely physiological aspects of relating intimately and (sometimes) romantically to another person difficult, to say the least, and even repulsive, off-putting, or violent, in some cases. In their recent study of what they call the "contemporary gender politics of involuntary celibacy," Jacob Johanssen and Jilly Boyce Kay note that the emergence of a femcel identity might appear to be a reaction against toxic masculinity, especially in its incel variety, but that such a premise is misguided—any form of a viable "toxic femininity" cannot be read as a mirror to its male counterpart because the latter's toxicity is always directed against "bad" women and frequently involves violence towards those evil "others" who are held solely responsible for the incels' predicament (3). Toxic femininity, in contrast, focuses predominantly on women themselves, their mental and physical states, their choices and predilections, which might—but do not necessarily—lead to favouring celibacy, or a variation thereof (11). Recently, the term "femcel" has become an appealing label for young feminists who reject patriarchy, along with its entrenched masculinity, domination, and violence. Groups of women self-identifying as femcels are emerging and connecting with each other via social media platforms (e.g., TikTok/BookTok, Reddit, etc.) which also tend to rank popular authors of contemporary fiction such as Ottessa Moshfegh, Sally Rooney, or Halle Butler as Internet femcels' informal matriarchs. The protagonists of these writers' novels seem to inspire femcels in terms of social and political views as well as with regard to aesthetics, including fashion and make-up. As such, we may already refer to the emergence of a femcel movement which—and this is particularly interesting—appears to have a close relationship with literature. Femcels are said to share a group of specific characteristics: they experience misandry, loneliness, alienation, and celibacy, self-imposed or otherwise. At the same time, they feel emotions that are not readily explored in literature about women: anger, fury, jealousy, bitterness. It is believed that femcels often struggle from mental health problems (depression,

bipolar disorder, eating and personality disorders) and share strongly developed introspective abilities. Undoubtedly, the rise in popularity of the term "femcel" has coincided with an increase in the representation of female protagonists who share similar characteristics in prose written by young women. Therefore, these similarities cannot be ignored, but any hypotheses undoubtedly require further research. The groundwork was laid by Emmeline Clein in her 2019 article "The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating," which drew on earlier writing by Leslie Jamison. In Clein's view, the "credo" of the contemporary dissociating young woman, exemplified by Waller-Bridge's Fleabag, Ottessa Moshfegh's heroines, or, to a slightly lesser extent, Sally Rooney's protagonists, embraces engaging in fatalism, exhibiting a "so what?" attitude, assuming an overall dispassion, and favouring disengagement, all of these being points made previously by Jamison. However, despite the self-deprecating "allure" of dissociative feminism, Jamison advises proceeding with caution when pondering whether to go all the way with "disaffected affect" (117). Referring to Lena Dunham's TV series *Girls*, Jamison introduces the term "post-wounded" to describe the predicament of young women who "are wary of melodrama, so they stay numb or clever instead. Post-wounded women make jokes about being wounded or get impatient with women who hurt too much. The post-wounded woman conducts herself as if preempting certain accusations: Don't cry too loud; don't play victim" (120). Still, without disavowing the post-wounded, dissociative attitude, Jamison emphasises that "suffering is interesting, but so is getting better" (126), and that "[t]here is a way of representing female consciousness that can witness pain but also witness a larger self around that pain—a self that grows larger than its scars without disowning them, that is neither wound-dwelling nor jaded, that is actually healing" (ibid.). The post-wounded woman's "jadedness" is also echoed in the behavioural patterns exhibited by Rebecca Liu's "Archetypical Millennial Woman" for whom "deflective irony" is always easier than "confront[ing] [her] own traumas." Nowadays, with social media being one of the main channels for communicating feminist content, it is worth examining these attitudes from an artistic perspective and tracing their symptoms in contemporary women's writing, especially given how emergent femcel literary studies seem situated at the complex intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and mental health. Such a strategic placement invites a joint examination of loneliness, isolation, and cultural expectations of women's attractiveness and sexuality, as well as their professional position and social status. This kind of research also sheds light on how women's portrayals are influenced by the societal understanding of concepts of beauty, success, and happiness, and the peculiar and very individual phenomenon of "worlding"—as Eimear McBride puts it,

"making something out of nothing" ("In Conversation")—which seems to denote an important rite of passage in many a young woman's journey towards becoming her true self. "Young protagonists," McBride goes on to say, "are at the mercy of their impulses, and of experience more generally" (ibid.); hence, they are traveling without roadmaps, which at some point might turn out to be their very bodies, bruised and scarred and bearing witness to freshly accumulated losses, debts incurred, and insights gained.

BOHEMIAN CONVERSATIONS—FEMININITY OF THE POSE: SALLY ROONEY AND EIMEAR MCBRIDE

Conversations with Friends and *The Lesser Bohemians* both fit the format of the coming-of-age novel. The texts focus on the "worlding" processes that their protagonists, Frances and Eily, go through in their own ways, sometimes chaotic, sometimes misguided, but always unique and authentic, although, for Frances at least, this entails embracing a modicum of inauthenticity and "fronting" in her self-presentation before others. While Rooney's and McBride's protagonists might not be blood-thirsty, revenge-driven *femme fatales* like their peers in Clark's and Taddeo's works, they are no strangers to violence, though it is often directed inwards, surfacing as various forms of self-harm (or death wish) that they indulge in. These acts, though, stem from a hypersensitivity which characterises both young protagonists, who are in fact only embarking on the process of "worlding"—Frances (*Conversations with Friends*) and Eily (*The Lesser Bohemians*) are just getting started in the world, and indeed they seem to have quite a lot in common with each other.

At the core of the two novels lies the story of a young woman's affair with an older man—in Rooney's work this involves a curious *menage à quatre* comprising Frances, her best friend—and former girlfriend—Bobbi, and the sophisticated artistic couple Melissa and Nick. This is the realm of the contemporary Dublin elite, consisting of artists, writers, actors, and all sorts of "influencers" and performers whose world Frances and Bobbi take by storm, finding themselves in quite the bourgeois drama of adultery, loyalties betrayed, and secrets exposed. This is the world of grown-ups, one which, on closer inspection, proves to be as shambolic and troubled as that of young Frances and Bobbi. All of the protagonists, in fact, are characters in the making, and Rooney proves her mastery as a psychological observer "revealing the bittersweet truth about the workings of innocence and the pains of growing up" (Schwartz). Her characters discover that being an adult does not automatically mean that one fits in, as the example of Nick, Frances's married lover, poignantly illustrates.

McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians* engages similar motifs, in particular with regards to Eily who—as Toby Lichtig puts it, referring to McBride's highly praised debut novel—when compared to the first girl who was "half-formed," is "two-thirds there." Eily has gained the first third with her very decision to leave rural Ireland and come to London to pursue her dream of becoming an actress; importantly, though, she is anything but the conventionally unhappy Irish woman escaping to England in search of refuge and deliverance (Murray 471). Eily is brisk, determined, curious, and at once scared to death and thrilled by all the prospects London offers. Unfurling "this bud of life I own" (McBride, *Bohemians* 3), she thrusts herself into the whirl of auditions turning into all-night parties, accidental hook-ups, drunken wanderings all over the city with strangers—or perfectly alone, indulging in an exploration of the physicality of the whole experience. Along the way she encounters Stephen—20 years her senior and a seasoned actor going through a professional and personal crisis. Stephen is evasive, aloof, reluctant to commit, with a troubled past that still haunts him; their union seems the least likely thing to happen but against the odds—or perhaps precisely because the stakes are so much against them—they make it work, exorcising their demons in the process. Both have a surfeit—Eily, though she tends to make light of it, is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and Stephen—as he reveals to her during one terrifying long night—suffered similar violence from his own mother and apparently, later on, also from his wife, with whom he has a daughter. As Ruth Gilligan notes, McBride forces readers to confront the "deeper considerations of the performative nature of the self," reminding us that any relationship entails the coming together of two very different entities.

Both texts revolve around the sense of novelty that makes youth so unique and difficult, even if the dilemmas that Frances and Eily face are, objectively speaking, as old as time. Each protagonist struggles in their quest for self-discovery which—marked as it is in both their cases by ambition, hypersensitivity, and insecurity—frequently leads them towards self-harm, neglect of their own well-being, and excruciating internal battles over how to reconcile their budding consciousness and self-awareness with the demands posed by the particulars of their immediate reality. Frances often finds herself thwarted by her own conception of herself and the "proper" way to be in the world which, as Alexandra Schwartz puts it, "follows an attractive ascetic principle . . . that to act in the world is to do inevitable harm to it." Frances thus downplays her problems, including health issues, and withdraws to her self-professed altruism, according to which it is better to refrain from actions whose implications might affect her public persona of the smiling girl who is always agreeable and encouragingly polite, even if this attitude leads her to situations and predicaments she is not happy about.

Perhaps also prompted by her insecurity, Frances's social and romantic engagements are deeply marked by a fear of rejection which causes her to obsess over others' impressions of her. She self-analyses with what feels like a grudging relish; still, the introspective scrutiny hardly ever yields any real resolution:

> Was I kind to others? It was hard to nail down an answer. I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones. Did I only worry about this question because as a woman I felt required to put the needs of others before my own? Was "kindness" just another term for submission in the face of conflict? (Rooney 176)

The apparently simple category—niceness—continues to breed problems for Frances; taking up the issue with Bobbi only seems to add to the confusion because, for Bobbi, all things necessarily come down to questions of power and its configurations within the accepted modes of the social contract:

> Maybe niceness is the wrong metric, I said. Of course it's really about power, Bobbi agreed. But it's harder to work out who has the power, so instead we rely on "niceness" as a kind of stand-in. I mean this is an issue in public discourse. We end up asking like, is Israel "nicer" than Palestine. (301)

Yearning to feel in control of her interactions, Frances struggles to maintain airs and graces. This is partly why her affair with Nick comes as such a shock to herself—she discovers that, by letting go of some of her self-composure, she gains power over another person in a configuration essentially repulsive to her in its blatant banality and bourgeois predictability, the very things she has always tried to distance herself from. The more engaged she becomes in their relationship, the more acutely she suffers from the realisation that it may come to a bad end, a sentiment she openly shares with Nick during one of their "trysts": "I ran my finger along his collarbone and said: I can't remember if I thought about this at the beginning. How it was doomed to end unhappily. He nodded, looking at me. I did, he said. I just thought it would be worth it" (159). Despite these misgivings, Frances cannot afford to lose the gratification that Nick's attraction promises. Her friendship with Bobbi did not give her such an experience; in fact, in their partnership, Frances has always played the role of the more ordinary counterpart, with Bobbi stealing all the limelight with her exuberance, charisma, and total non-conformity, the latter made possible largely thanks to her social standing and inherited wealth. Bobbi could afford her flamboyance and idealistic defiance which have not only come naturally to her but which have actually

been encouraged by her family. Frances, of much humbler middle-class origins, has always been expected to account for her decisions, actions, and attitudes. However, despite her intense introspective proclivities, she still prefers to shirk responsibility for her decisions and choices, evading accountability whenever such an option emerges. In a commentary on the motives of Rooney's heroines, Lucinda Rosenfeld notes that in Frances's case, these often come down to "the ravages of 'late capitalism'" inflected by "discomfort with current liberal-left shibboleths regarding 'the patriarchy'"; indeed, while Frances embraces the social and sexual freedom at her disposal, the way she employs the tools it generates remains persistently intent on diminishing her self-esteem and self-worth. As Rosenfeld puts it, Frances—like many other contemporary heroines—is a "self-loather . . . racked with self-disgust . . . seeking out [her] own debasement." Bobbi seems to fall out of this self-hating framework, offering up a persona at once stronger and "healthier" in terms of her views and actions, and curiously more vulnerable or guileless, despite her outspoken and apparently reckless ways. While their bond has surely been a defining relationship for both of them, Bobbi has always been dominant, and Frances the more grounded sidekick; because of the affair with Nick, power seems to shift between them and Frances embarks on a path that is hers exclusively, not shared with Bobbi. Significantly, before they were friends, they had been lovers: this queerness seems to sit particularly well with Bobbi's buoyant self-re/presentation, while Frances appears to have experienced quite a struggle in shifting from a "romantic/intimate" to a "friendly/neutral" relation. Perhaps, though, this only further expands the complexity of friendship between young women—closeness between women, much as it can be passionate and consuming, is rarely free from resentment, jealousy, or rivalry, and this surfaces in the complexities of Frances's and Bobbi's bond.

Juxtaposed with these two, Eily might appear somewhat blander, but this is just a veneer which conceals her unabashed spirit and an appetite for life best expressed in her own words: "New again opens for me. Girl I've been, woman I'll be" (McBride, *Bohemians* 91). In a most straightforward sense, the pronouncement may be read as referring to the fact that Eily, while still a virgin, is actually quite intent on losing her virginity. Significantly, these are her own words, uttered with all the certainty that youth grants; by no means is this a case of a girl sheepishly doing male bidding. Eily will not tolerate this: she plays by her own rules and answers solely to her own urges and desires.

What is true for both Eily and Frances is very aptly defined by Silvia Antosa in terms of a significant rite of passage: "The necessary rite of transition from childhood to womanhood for a young girl has to do with sex and sexual awareness, thus challenging the long-standing taboo

concerning female sexuality in relation to the process of 'education' of women in literature" (205). Indeed, McBride's and Rooney's fiction offers bold new ways of writing sex and presenting girls as willing sexual beings who may enjoy their nascent sexual lives. In Rooney's writing, though, sexual exploration and the drive towards uninhibited self-expression are frequently accompanied by guilt-tripping and the desire to be seen as pliant and docile, eager to be subjugated and tamed in sexual encounters. Both Frances and Marianne retain an expectation of violence from their partners, a yearning which may function as a substitute for their own self-loathing looking to be expressed in a way that would be free from the restraints of self-accountability. As Rosenfeld observes, "the male characters don't always comply. Neither the married lover in *Conversations with Friends*, nor Marianne's sensitive boyfriend in *Normal People*, is willing to strike the heroine, despite her requests." This sensibility, while it departs from the conventional conditioning of women as docile and passive because it allows them to reclaim agency, leads to their choosing to be "their own worst enemies . . . [rather than] men's victims" (ibid.) which, though problematic and potentially misguided, remains an informed decision.

Perhaps owing in part to her non-millennial generational status, Eimear McBride (born in 1976) offers a more straightforwardly positive perspective on sexuality and its potential, a stance which aligns her more with Sarah Hall (born 1974) who imbues sex with the power to liberate and regenerate her otherwise battered heroines, than the unequivocally Gen Y Sally Rooney (born 1991). McBride has openly stated in her non-fictional work *Something Out of Place: Women and Disgust* that gradually, finally, women in literature—and elsewhere, for that matter—cease to function as "things to be looked at," and instead become "actors with their own desires" (50–51). She goes on to reveal to those who still doubt that girls have all sorts of sex; they masturbate, watch porn, and fantasise wildly, because sex is a formative experience, though the realisation might not emerge easily, given how its public manifestations still tend to follow—albeit to a gradually lesser degree—the tried and discredited tropes of, for instance, the innocent schoolgirl, the seductive femme fatale, or the ruthless dominatrix, all manufactured for someone else's pleasure and gratification. To facilitate the rejection of such outdated modes of representing female sexuality and desire, a new approach to recording women's sexual experiences is required, one exemplified by writers who do not shy away from giving readers the "real thing," undoctored by social expectations, conventions, or moral double standards. Seen and recorded that way, sex becomes the language through which young protagonists get to know themselves and others, too (Lichtig). Moreover, as Lichtig notes, sex also "serves [the readers'] understanding of [the] burgeoning

relationship[s]" that the protagonists get involved in, thus bringing the reading experience intimately close to the real-life channels of reaching out to other human beings.

"GIRLS OF PREY"—THREATENING FEMININITY: LISA TADDEO AND ELIZA CLARK

While sex is by all means a driving force for Joan, the protagonist of Lisa Taddeo's *Animal*, the novel—showcasing the heavily sexualised nature of the heroine—focuses on the link between trauma and sexual violence. In the past few years, fiction and drama by women have recognised the appeal of flawed and angry antiheroines who reject the demand to be "likable," and Joan, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, joins Phoebe Waller-Bridge's Fleabag (2016–19), Arabella from Michaela Coel's acclaimed 2020 TV series *I May Destroy You*, the characters in Megan Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* (2021), and Emerald Fennell's twisted tale of revenge *Promising Young Woman* (2020), among others.

Animal comes with several trigger warnings, one of which is actually stated directly by the narrator herself close to the very start of her narrative. Joan addresses the as-yet undisclosed recipient of the story in the following way: "If someone asked me to describe myself in a single word, *depraved* is the one I would use" (Taddeo 7, emphasis in the original). Depravity has been an integral part of her life which, at least to some extent, explains why the world which she moves in is a dark realm of abuse and dysfunction. The violence of Joan's past, which seeps into her present and, perhaps, will continue to mar her future, gets a very striking and vivid depiction in the novel thanks to Taddeo's sharpness of observation and expression. At one point, Joan says of a waitress: "She was the kind of simple, inarguable pretty that I had never been. I was sexually attractive. Sometimes other women didn't see it" (37). These three sentences reveal a lot about the narrator, both in terms of her appearance and her attitude towards herself and what others might think of her.

Examples like these proliferate in the novel, and add up to a vivid representation of Joan's warped sense of the world and her position in it. Taddeo seems to derive as much pleasure from drawing on the bizarre and kinky as Joan does from going around wreaking havoc with her rapaciousness, cynicism, and cold, even cruel, detachment from any traces of emotionality. In this murky domain, Joan wields absolute power which she exerts with apparently no qualms whatsoever, flaunting her exquisite disregard for conventional morality or any ethical codes of conduct. These, however, are required essentials for her to succeed in her mission which is

to find her long-lost half-sister Alice, who, as we gradually discover, is the key to exorcising the "dark death thing" (7) that befell Joan when she was a ten-year old girl. Childhood trauma, Joan staunchly believes, made her the way she is now, and the unspeakable atrocity of her past releases her from any societal moral norms. She is a victim and a survivor but sadly, she is also "radically one-dimensional . . . [and] has no interests apart from sex and trauma" (Newman). Joan relentlessly sexualises every event, every person she encounters, even if just in passing, and appears to take a perverse pleasure in degrading acts and experiences. Such an attitude might be read as a sign of what Stephen Marche diagnoses as a significant literary transition: namely, the arrival of "the literature of the pose" which obliterates "the literature of the voice" and, instead of aspiring towards personal fulfilment, favours "contempt and social anxiety" as its "dominant modes."

Joan is all about "pose," especially in terms of her obsessive hypersexualisation of herself and everyone around her, including her parents, and a determined pursuit of debasement. Marche refers to this as "sexual immiseration," which he regards as "the most remarkable feature of the literature of the Pose." In his view, sex is banal, no matter how much of it any given character has, and "the writing of the pose is anathema to originality and daring" (ibid.), something which is evident in the way Taddeo writes Joan's character, with painstaking attention to Joan's many affects and self-professed quirks but essentially failing to enrich her protagonist with a human complexity. The edifice eventually crumbles, though not until Joan has tried her utmost to convince the reader of her self-professed depravity and unscrupulousness.

Melissa Katsoulis's review describes the novel as an *American Psycho* for the #MeToo era—a comparison which, while somewhat sweeping, is undoubtedly "catchy" and entices one to read the book, promising a certain recognisable type of thrill. Still, Joan is not a psycho-killer, and her pursuits, while for the most part immoral, narcissistic, and perverse, have more to do with self-destruction and are generally directed against her own self, even if she professes otherwise. She falls in line with the post-wounded women described by Jamison because whenever she gets a chance to choose how she wants to act, she always goes for a cynical, detached, and bitterly disillusioned reaction. A certain affinity with Patrick Bateman can be detected in the ways in which she portrays the world around her—every husband philanders, every wife dreams of being degraded, every girl is only looking to test her budding sexual attraction and bring men to their downfall. People are indiscriminately opportunistic, motivated by pleasure, money, and power, and in order to attain these goals many would not think twice before committing a crime. The excess of atrocities, while initially

refreshing in its potential to unsettle the reader and make them question their assumptions, becomes overwhelming and confusing, and leads to the narrative losing credibility and originality, much in line with Stephen Marche's argument with regard to the inescapable hollowness of literature of the pose—the "triumph of the Image over the Word" is only a pyrrhic victory because in the long run, "the literature of the Pose is unsustainable." At the same time, the accumulation of misery and dread corresponds to the somewhat hallucinatory quality of the Californian setting—the sense of uncanniness, foreboding, and rising tension is augmented by the relentless cries of the coyotes at night or the incessant traffic noises and ambulance sirens piercing the humid Los Angeles air. In this way, echoes of *Animal* might be discerned in Bret Easton Ellis's latest novel, *The Shards*: both works subscribe to what could be called "California/Los Angeles Gothic" and share a similarly oppressive atmosphere of fear, persecution, and threat.

Where Taddeo succeeds is in creating a narrator who does everything within her power to discourage readers from liking her, yet for whom readers still cheer. As such, Joan represents "femcelcore" at its finest (or worst?), wearing her depravity, disenchantment, and utter self-absorption like a badge of honour. She gladly reveals everyone else's hypocrisies, but never flinches at condemning herself in equal measure, exposing how, according to her worldview, everything comes down to sex, money, and power; men are prey, sexually and financially, and women constantly compete against each other in relentless rivalry for the best prospects. Even Alice, the sister whom Joan has been so intent on finding, is not spared—when Joan sees her for the first time all she can feel is hostility and jealousy: "She wore no makeup and I wanted to kill her . . . But first I wanted to put her in a cage, fatten her up, feed her hormones and pig cheeks and Fanta. Knock her teeth out and shave her eyebrows. I wanted her to die ugly" (Taddeo, *Animal* 224). Curiously enough, what Taddeo has in store for Joan is deliverance and rehabilitation, an intention she manages to obscure until the very end of Joan's narrative when several shocking revelations take place. The novel draws to a close with a sequence of Joan in labour pains, driven to the hospital by Alice, and just about to give birth to a baby daughter. It is in fact this daughter who turns out to be the addressee of the entire story, which then seems to acquire certain confessional qualities, with Joan rising to the status of a character in pursuit of atonement or expiation. Neither Alice, nor the daughter—nor the reader, for that matter—know whether Joan is going to survive the birth, whether these are her last moments or whether she is actually already dead. This indeterminacy does leave some space for speculation of a potential happy ending, but it feels rather arch. Another issue which cannot go unnoticed is that Joan, a feral and unhinged, hypersexualised

and revenge-driven character, appears to find peace and even a modicum of contentment through means as conventional as becoming pregnant and giving birth to a baby daughter. Does that take the femcel out of her? Is this the acquiescence and final humbling of her hitherto incorrigible nature? Has Taddeo really, in all honesty and with clear purpose, intended to communicate such a final message? Does this not betray the character of Joan and go against the grain of everything she professed to be and believe? Or is such a reading deprecating and simplistic? The narrative maintains ambiguity in these matters and does not end on any definitive note. In an interview for *Salon*, the American news website, Mary Elizabeth Williams asked Taddeo if *Animal* was "a summer read" but whether Taddeo's answer is revealing remains open to debate:

> I mean, maybe. It depends on what kind of a beach you are looking for. I would examine who the person is, which beach reader we're looking at. For me, it is a beach read. It was a beach write. For me, I guess this is the closest I could come to writing a beach read. So hopefully it is, for some people, a beach read. (Taddeo, "'Bad women'")

Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* is certainly no beach read, for any kind of beach preference. Again, as in *Animal*, an angry protagonist-narrator is the focus—the thirty-something Irina is a talented photographer but works at a local pub; she identifies as queer, and—similarly to Joan—she was sexually abused by her teacher when she was a teenager. Like Joan, Irina, too, has a predilection for violence which she quite actively seeks and then determinedly wallows in the ensuing self-abasement, being no stranger to self-harm. In contrast to Joan, she has a living mother, though, for the most part, Irina wishes she were dead—their relationship is fraught with misunderstandings and resentments, with the mother always eager and ready to criticise Irina on all matters, to which Irina responds with equal malice. The father is not really in the picture but Irina's circle of intimates also includes Flo, her best friend, though again their bond is by no means healthy, especially given that the two used to be romantically involved, echoing the pattern in Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* where Bobbi and Frances also used to be a couple. Irina seems to be at a difficult point in her life—once hailed as a "wonder kid" in art school, scoring a major photography exhibition, now she finds herself artistically stunted, working at a job below her qualifications, with her days marked by a procession of pointless, inconsequential hook-ups and an all-consuming ennui. Things take a new turn when she meets "Eddie from Tesco" and develops an obsession with him. She taunts him to become a model for her photography sessions, which she still performs from time to time;

as the novel progresses, we learn that she has a very strong sense of her artistic persona and knows full well what she likes creatively—first of all, she photographs boys and men almost exclusively, and they always have to meet her very clearly defined requirements. In her street-scouting for models, she looks for ephemeral, feminine boys, frequently gay and queer, whom she photographs in very unsettling scenes which teeter on the thin line between consensual BDSM practices and downright abuse, although she always gets her models to sign a consent form and also usually checks if they are of legal age.

The novel's twist is revealed only late in the story, though as readers we are provoked into sensing that something is amiss at numerous moments. Nevertheless, the revelation that Irina is a fetishist psycho-killer who murders and chops up her boy models keeping their various body parts as trophies and mementoes comes as a profound shock. As disturbed, sick, and twisted as she is, Irina does not really appear to be an entirely unlikable character. Rather, she possesses a certain "refreshing" quality which might make it more challenging for the reader to despise her unhesitatingly. Granted, she enjoys disturbing art; she drinks and takes drugs; she does not care about most things, herself and her reputation included, but she is also a fine photographer who was accepted by several art colleges, among them Goldsmiths; in discerning circles she is a recognised name. There is also a great deal of determination in her—for example, even after a night of wild partying and attempted rape, which culminated in violent sickness, she regains self-control, replies to emails, reports to work, and even calls her mother back. What ultimately facilitates her—at least partial—"redemption" in the eyes of readers is probably the unorthodox femininity that she represents and which serves as a potent riposte to the long history of literary (and otherwise) domination of women by men. While there can be no denying her bloodthirsty urges and murderous record, the type of femininity she stands for—feral, unhinged, unconventional—is certainly worth acknowledging, especially seeing how it prompts further reflection and discussion.

There is, in addition, her art, which can also be read in terms of a radical feminist involvement bent on subversion and reversing the male gaze, though the way she executes this is, to put it mildly, troubling. When she works, she is highly focused and sure of herself and what she wants to achieve. She efficiently manages her models and persuades them to do exactly what she desires, which frequently raises questions of consent and exploitation. She is very much objectifying the young men and boys she photographs, to the point of actually turning them into twisted, even tortured, assemblages of random body parts caught at uncomfortable angles and frequently in sexually gratuitous poses. She gradually loses herself in

her pursuit of the perfect shot, spiralling into a dangerous obsession which, however, is not entirely devoid of logic and rationale—Irina begins to see her art as retribution for centuries of misogyny and how women have been consistently and effectively denied power, autonomy, and respect of their boundaries. During the opening night of her Hackney Studios exhibition, a female critic approaches her and comments on one of her pieces:

> "The way you've played with consent here is wonderful," she whispers. "Critical, bold, a wonderful actor, your boy. Discomfort radiates from the screen." It turns out she writes for the *Observer*—so there's at least one good write-up for me. I smile at her and empty my glass. I'm there on the screen. That's me. With the bottle, the power, a great big camera and bigger hair. (Clark 278)

The irony could not be greater—in fact, there was no "play" with consent, there was simply no consent to begin with. Irina is sexually aroused by the power she feels when she forcefully subjugates and violates Eddie, recording everything on camera and then submitting the result as her main entry for the exhibition. Irina succumbs to the adrenaline rush brought on by the nearly absolute power she seems to hold over Eddie, and the conviction of her invincibility pushes her even further so that towards the novel's conclusion, she is engaging in a volatile power play with a fellow artist from the exhibition, Remy:

> I tie his hands together, above his head, then to the bed frame. He tells me I looked amazing tonight, and asks if I wore the dress with him in mind. I laugh at him. He keeps fucking talking, so I stuff a pair of socks into his mouth. Then I slap him. I slap him harder, and harder, till his lip bursts. . . . I ask him if he's okay. In what I think is some attempt at bravery (toxic, masculine bravery), he nods. . . . I prod and puncture his stomach. . . . I cut a thin slice from his belly button to the dip of his collarbone. He is whimpering, and crying, now. When I ask if he's okay, he nods. . . . I run the tips of my fingers through the blood on his chest, and I draw a smiley face on his torso. (280–81)

Irina seems to be genuinely surprised that all this feels so easy to do—and that there are apparently no consequences. She becomes even more brazen and stops at nothing in her handling of Remy, until her own body refuses to cooperate and she runs to the bathroom to vomit; when she gets back, Remy has run away. Irina loses her grip on herself, and, dissociating from reality, descends into a wild fantasy from which there may be no turning back, or at least this is how we as readers are invited to look at the story's resolution—or, in essence, lack thereof.

CONCLUSION

It is typical of predators to take on unassuming guises—the quiet neighbour, the elderly lady, or the well-mannered professor—but when a well-groomed girl with an interesting hobby or profession turns out to be the antagonist, the sense of something being out of place proves hard to come to terms with. A pretty girl being a ruthless killer seems to go against common sense, and this incongruity often works to the perpetrator's advantage. Irina is a very attractive young woman, who is fully aware of her good looks and what they can do for her. At the same time, she feels insecure, always worrying about spoiling her appearance or letting herself go. Thus, interestingly, Irina in a sense falls victim to the paradigm which particularly oppresses women, but also men, though to a different degree; she is at once furious at having to comply with the standards imposed on women, and paralysed with fear at the mere thought of losing her good looks and the twisted comfort and security that they promise. In this sense, Irina—and also Joan from Taddeo's *Animal*—are both "unlikable" and hard to identify with, because as young and attractive women, they stray from the conventional narrative within the framework of which they should rather be dutiful and kind, perhaps slightly troubled, but not neurotic or depraved. Instead, they are feral and unhinged, driven by obsession, compulsion, egotism, and self-indulgence; they are predators—but are they really completely beyond comprehension and "redemption"? Female unlikability and/or instability as categories date back to Freudian discussions of hysteria as a peculiarly feminine condition whereby pliant femininity is feted while "unruly" femininity—potentially hysterical and excessive—only deserves to be repressed and controlled. Judged in this way, many contemporary female protagonists could only hear one verdict—guilty as charged; but what if their depravity should be linked to Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Mary Russo's identification of a "female grotesque"? Or, more recently, to Eimear McBride's investigation of "dirt" vis-à-vis the female body, and the female experience par excellence (*Something Out of Place*)? The ways in which both Kristeva and Russo articulate the tensions surrounding female identity align with McBride's reading of dirt as "matter out of place" (*Something Out of Place* 9). In this light, female depravity, viewed through the lens of abjection, reveals how women who transgress societal norms are often marginalised and stigmatised as the "other." Abjection, as Elisabeth Gross explains this foundational concept of Kristeva's theory, functions as a reaction of subjective horror or disgust to something that appears to challenge or threaten our cherished sense of self, and might occur when we are forced to confront our repressed "corporeal reality" (92). Combined with

Russo's theory of the grotesque, which celebrates the unruly and the non-normative aspects of femininity, these stances expose the fragility of female identity within patriarchal structures, highlighting how an exploration and endorsement of depravity can ultimately serve the purpose of perverting the tradition-sanctioned trope of a "damsel-in-distress" so as to redress the balance—or surpass it—with patriarchy, and subvert conventionally prescribed gender roles.

While a justification of the violence perpetrated by some of these young female characters feels misguided, their "depravity" might be granted some validation and legitimacy, in view of how they dare to move beyond patriarchal values which only allow the existence of such violence when it serves a didactic/self-improvement purpose. Could the "evil" heroines be simply allowed to stay the way they are, i.e. dangerous and depraved, and liking it? Acknowledging that the trope of the "evil" woman goes as far back as the Biblical Eve or even earlier, an investigation of the "fallen" women of, for example, 19th-century literature, reveals that, while they were sinning with regard to, or against, their society, they were not transparently "evil" characters. Quite the contrary, they were often represented as victims with whom readers were invited to sympathise to some degree, understanding how their "crimes" were often out of proportion with the punishments they received. Perhaps what distinguishes the contemporary young heroines most from those prototypes is their staunch refusal to be approached as objects of pity or sympathy. This is evident in the various "poses" they assume in their attempts at preserving their carefully constructed personas which, within the socially and culturally embedded patriarchal frameworks of today, might end up enmeshed in the prey/predator dichotomy. It may even feel as if in our roles as readers, critics, and writers, we, too, are moving around in circles—just as the unlikable, unhinged femcels and girls of prey are.

Perhaps the entire debate comes down to the question of "turning the tables" on patriarchal order and conventions in the sense of creating art and writing fiction which break away from any arbitrary expectations external and/or alien to the goals and desires of women. While in some cases the protagonists and narrators are obviously grappling with trauma and its aftermath, struggling to understand and overcome it, there are also instances of characters who, by common standards, are simply not nice people. Nevertheless, they may still deserve some level-headed advocating to prove that they have every right to be so. After all, the history of male unlikability in literature is long and twisted; one need not even refer to psychopaths and killers like Patrick Bateman or Hannibal Lecter to gauge how incompetent, crude, or egotistical male characters hardly ever come in for the same criticism and censure as their female equivalents.

Working from this premise, in the present article I have emphasised women's right to do "bad" things, arguing that their transgressions might have an even greater potential and appeal than the exploits of their male counterparts. The female characters in the novels by McBride, Rooney, Taddeo, and Clark I discussed may or may not care whether they become legends in the mould of male villains; some, like Rooney's Frances, will continue to seek out social validation or will settle for a quieter—"lesser"—life built from scratch with their chosen partners, the way that Eily and Stephen try to do in McBride's novel. Others may upend their life so as to give the best to their children, even if this might ultimately mean their own undoing, as in the case of Taddeo's Joan. The fate of others, like Clark's Irina, may remain indeterminate, leaving them suspended in a vicious circle of their own misguided choices and conflicted desires. The fact that these "girl-bosses," killjoys, femcels, and women-predators oppose easy categorisation challenges patriarchal and other conventional discourses which have attempted to shape and control them.

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