

Strategies for challenging the patriarchy: critical theory in 'fight club' and 't...



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Gender studies is the interdisciplinary study based around ideas of the masculine and feminine. It also looks at sexual differences and the more fluid definitions of gender which have arisen over time. This theory can also be broken down into three sub categories: Women's studies, Men's studies and Queer studies which can be further broken down into the three categories of: gender identity, gender expression and biological sex. These three categories help us look at the social, biological, and cultural constructions of gender and help us analyse the ways in which femininity and masculinity can be viewed as fluid entities which change depending on the different factors of life that shape them. From gender studies, feminist theorists have also identified the social system of patriarchy where males are shown to take dominant roles through various aspects of life such as the workplace, thus forcing women into the position of 'other'. Through my essay, I am going to locate the patriarchal aspects of both Chuck Palahniuk's psychological thriller 'Fight Club' (1997) and Angela Carter's dystopian novel 'The Passion of New Eve' (1977) and assess the ways in which characters in the novel effectively challenge this system or conform to it. Throughout this theory there are many influencers who explore different ideas and theories surrounding the field of gender.

One of the main influences of gender theory is that of the psychoanalytic and some of the main theorists surrounding this area are Freud, Kristeva, and Lacan. In a Freudian system, gender is said to develop during the phallic stage through the Oedipus and Electra complex. The Oedipus complex explores a male's unconscious desire for his mother and the resolution of the complex being the child's identification with the same sex parent. Boys

experience this complex in the form of castration anxiety, whereas girls (whose experience is named the Electra complex) explore the same ideas but experience the complex in a form of penis envy towards the males. Comparably to this, there is a feminist psychoanalytic group who state that this Freudian system is almost accurate, apart from the fact that everywhere Freud uses the word 'penis', it should be replaced with the word 'power' to address the idea that if women do envy men, it is because of their social power and privilege, not their anatomy. The final influence surrounding gender is that of the post-modernist. Postmodernism is the 20th century movement which branched across the arts, architecture and philosophy. This affected the studies of gender by causing a movement in identity theories, thus forcing people away from the set ideas of identity and opening up ideas surrounding fluid or multiple identities. This began the thoughts surrounding queer theory and in time allowed the study of sexuality to arise.

In relation to the topic of patriarchy, a main concept is that of heterotopias and gender specific places which reaffirm the inequality between men and women and the pressure to conform to society's depiction of gender. A heterotopia is 'a zone where identities, maps of cultural meaning, relations of power and technical uses of the body are enforced in both traditional and non-traditional ways.' (Monaghan and Atkinson, 2016, p. 136). For men, an example would be a zone such as a locker room as they are shown to be 'places of doubt, existential confusion, and in some instances resistance; where boys masculine identities are enforced and monitored among themselves in largely hidden, anxiety-producing and ritual ways' (Monaghan and Atkinson, 2016, p. 136). Over time, the stereotype of males has become

that they need to be strong, confident, and heterosexual in order to portray the ideal masculine identity which is shown in the media, these stereotypes are identified by the term 'Toxic masculinity' as they show the damaging traits which are set by a patriarchal society; but are harmful to men overall. By having large group of males in these environments it forces them to see other stereotypically male characters, thus putting pressure on them to conform to this identity and creating problems later in life such as the repression of emotions which can lead to isolation and depression. This connects to the construct of 'Fragile masculinity' which refers to the ways in which men forcefully assert their masculinity, in some cases through aggression, violence or sexual domination. This is commonly seen in homosexual or transgender males who feel they are effeminate, so to counteract these feminine qualities which a patriarchal society views as wrong, they act overly masculine.

In reference to one of my chosen texts, the construct of heterotopias is evident in Palahniuk's 'Fight Club'. The fight clubs themselves and the 'project mayhem' group can be seen as heterotopias as they show an area filled with men acting in a way which confirms the stereotypical aggressive persona given to males in a patriarchal society. We also see a cancer support group called 'Remaining Men Together' filled with men who act opposingly to this and are portrayed as being emasculated by society due to their illness. It becomes obvious that these heterotopias are depicted as a space for men to take control of their masculine identities and gain a sense of escape from a strict, capitalist world. As project mayhem, they begin performing acts around the city in order to counteract consumerism and '

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break up civilisation so we can make something better out of the world’.

(Palahniuk. 1997. P208). This initially consists of smaller acts such as putting funny stickers on cars and picking fights with random strangers, but at both the beginning and the end of the novel we see the final act of project mayhem which is to destroy multiple corporate buildings with explosives. Throughout gender studies, it has been said that skyscrapers are ‘ phallic symbols, which have been made by men, to assert their supremacy over women’. (Chirag Mehta, 2000). Therefore, through this group of men choosing to destroy a representation of the phallic, it shows how they are taking a stand against the patriarchal system in place by symbolically castrating those in power. Through the cancer support group, we see a group of males who act opposingly to these stereotypes as they are encouraged to cry, this is seen as emasculating due to the view that men shouldn’t show emotion as it shows weakness.

However, through the name of ‘ remaining men’, we are encouraged to believe that even though these men are different to the archetypal man; they are still fighting to keep their masculine identities. In the group, we are introduced to Robert Paulson also known as Bob, the narrator (Jack) states: ‘ Bob cries because six months ago, his testicles were removed. Then hormone support therapy. Bob has tits because his testosterone ration is too high’ (Palahniuk. 1997. P17). This character is portrayed as a role model and friend of Jacks as he is the one who encourages him to release his emotions through crying. This scene highlights Jacks break from the patriarchal hold over his identity and thus marks the beginning of his and Tyler’s defiance against society. The quote ‘ It’s only after you’ve lost everything...that you’re

free to do anything' (Palahniuk. 1997. P70) connects strongly to Bobs character as it is only after he has lost all (his testicles, his masculinity, his wife/home/etc) that he is free from the mould of a ' typical man' and can show his emotion and be himself.

The ideology of consumerism is linked throughout the entirety of the novel through Jacks referral to and destruction of his ' IKEA furniture' and through the distribution of Tyler's homemade soap. It becomes evident that the theme of consumerism is used to represent the patriarchal society and show how consumer culture has caused men to feel emasculated. Jack states that he ' wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in their bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.' (Palahniuk. 1997. P43). This quote effectively describes the way in which humans have become obsessed with the goods they possess, and especially in Jacks' case, have begun to define themselves and their self-worth by their material goods because it has been ingrained into them by society. We find out later in the novel that it was actually Jacks other personality, who blew up the apartment. This can represent the way Jack has subconsciously removed himself from the patriarchal, capitalist society which surrounds him by removing the material goods from his life and forcing himself to start again. Later in the novel, Tyler introduces Jack to ' Paper Street Soap Co'. This is Tyler's soap business which consists of him rendering rich peoples' fat to make soap which he sells for a profit.

As he begins creating project mayhem, he involves the ' space monkeys' (Palahniuk. 1997. P130) in his business, Jack tells how ' the house is filled with strangers that Tyler has accepted...The whole first floor turns into a <https://assignbuster.com/strategies-for-challenging-the-patriarchy-critical-theory-in-fight-club-and-the-passion-of-the-new-eve/>

kitchen and a soap factory' (Palahniuk. 1997. P130). This creates a juxtaposition in terms of the fight against consumerism as Tyler has forced workers into selling his product for profit, thus positioning himself in the middle of the consumer culture by becoming a producer of goods. The quote ' we have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them' (Palahniuk. 1997. P149) accurately shows this by referring to the way in which Tyler has enslaved the men by promising freedom from their former, strict lives in return for labour. However, the use of the soap company is effective overall in defying the source of oppression as it shows Tyler acting comparatively to the heroic outlaw Robin Hood, stealing from ' the richest thighs in America' (Palahniuk, 1997. P150) to give to the poor in order for them to profit by selling back to the rich. Through the novel we are introduced to characters who defy the typical standards of beauty and heteronormativity which are associated with a patriarchal society. Through these characters we are encouraged to see the negative impact of beauty and the ways in which being a perfect depiction of a human is unattainable and damaging overall. This includes ideas of being successful, powerful, straight, and attractive which mainstream media promotes in order to persuade us into buying goods which make us feel closer to this ideal.

The plot of Fight Club is mainly set in and around the United States of America; it is emphasized how there is a lot of pressure from American society to be beautiful. It seems like who we are depends on how beautiful we are. Here we are so exposed to the mass media and images of other women. The image of what is thought of as beautiful is being pushed upon us by promotion and advertising. (Jacobson, L. 2017). One of the first non-

conforming characters we are introduced to is Chloe who Jack meets at the cancer support group. She is depicted as being an overly sexual female whose only desire was 'to get laid for the last time' (Palahniuk. 1997. P19). Jack also describes her as looking like 'a skeleton dipped in yellow wax with a silk scarf tied around her bald head' (Palahniuk. 1997. P106) By being shamelessly sexual and no longer attractive it shows the way that as Chloe moves closer to death, she is becoming free of the patriarchal hold over her identity by allowing herself to become the things society deems unfeminine. The heroine of the novel, Marla Singer, also depicts an image of an unsuccessful, depressed, sexual woman as we discover that she steals food from delivery vans, clothes from laundromats in order to sell them, and she has an overtly sexual relationship with Tyler.

In terms of Jack and Tyler, we perceive that Jack is jealous of Tyler. He states 'I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent...Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. I'm not Tyler Durden.' (Palahniuk. 1997. P174).

Through Jack's descriptions we are forced to believe that Tyler is the perfect man, however it is not until the end that we discover Tyler was never real. This forms the idea that Tyler represents everything Jack wants to be, but overall represents the unreal beauty standards forced onto us by a patriarchal society which are realistically unattainable. Also, there is an ambiguity surrounding the sexuality of Jack as there are notes of homosexuality scattered through the novel, thus defying typical patriarchal views of heteronormativity which are associated with masculinity. We initially discover this through the nudist beach section, which describes Jack

watching Tyler (for an undisclosed amount of time) building a log sculpture. Later, it becomes obvious that Jack is jealous of Tyler and Marla's relationship as he states, ' I am Joe's Broken Heart because Tyler's dumped me.' (Palahniuk. 1997. P134) however, it is never discovered why this jealousy arose and the novel ends with both Marla and Jack confirming their feelings for each other. Thus, forcing us to accept that Jack could be straight or bisexual. By looking at the novel as a depiction of homoeroticism, it connects to the previously mentioned construct of ' fragile masculinity' and could thus form the idea that the novel depicts homosexual males acting overtly masculine so to counteract feelings which society deem shameful.

Similarly, through Angela Carters ' The Passion Of New Eve' (1977) we are introduced to a dystopian world where a god-like figure named ' Mother' is trying to completely eradicate the male species by forcing men to have gender-reassignment surgery. This is depicted as a way of saving the world by completely removing the dominant species which are the cause of patriarchy and female repression. Evelyn is found in the desert and taken to Beulah, this is where she is told that Mother is ' going to castrate you, Evelyn, and then excavate what we call the " fructifying female space" inside you and make you a perfect specimen of womanhood. Then...she's going to impregnate you with your own sperm' (Carter. 1977. P65). This shows the way in which it has been decided that males are unnecessary as women can be self-sufficient and create their own new species. However, this act is not necessarily effective in the novel as even though Evelyn has been changed into the biologically female Eve, she still has the mind of a male. Therefore, the act teaches the males a lesson by taking away their biological identity

but overall wouldn't fix the oppression caused by a patriarchal society as the dominant male mindset still exists. Through gender studies the theorist Judith Butler created the term 'Performativity'. She defines this by stating that: 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.' (Gender Trouble, p. 25). In other words, gender is a performance; it's what you do at particular times, rather than a universal who you are' (Gauntlett, D. 1998). This construct connects to Eve's character as now she has been placed in the body of a woman, so she is forced to perform her gender even though she knows its not really who she is internally. The mother figure here could be depicted as hypocritical as she is eradicating the male gender in order to readjust society and remove the patriarchy, but by taking away the freedom of the male species and forcing them to conform to a different gender, it could be said that she is duplicating the negative characteristics evident in a patriarchal society, thus creating a matriarchy.

As in Fight Club, there are characters throughout the novel who don't conform to the patriarchal characteristics associated with male and female, they associate more with the construct of fluid identities as they cannot be defined by a particular gender label. One of the key characters here is actress Tristessa, who we discover at the end is really a transgender female. In the first chapter of the novel we discover Evelyn's awe for Tristessa and how 'the sculptural flare of her nostrils haunted my pubescent dreams' (Carter. 1977. P2) and how she had been billed 'the most beautiful woman in the world' (Carter. 1977. P1). This creates the idea that her physical appearance is the most important thing about her, thus illustrating the way

in which the female gender is defined by appearance over other character traits. However, after revealing Tristessa's male genitalia the descriptions given completely change and her pronoun is changed to 'him' in the novel. I would argue that by doing this it effectively helps us look at the construct of fluid identities and helps challenge the patriarchal norms surrounding masculinity and femininity as we are confronted with the idea that someone can be both a 'beautiful woman' but a biological male. We are also told that Tristessa's 'speciality had been suffering' (Carter. 1977. P4), thus making us believe that she effectively portrays the idea of female oppression in the media; however, after finding out she was born male this quote creates more impact as we realise she will have experienced real suffering through her life by being a symbol of shame in a patriarchal world.

A character who is described as having a fluid identity is the cult leader; Zero. We learn this through the animalistic language used which creates the idea that Zero has no human identity such as male or female, as he no longer defines himself as human at all. When we are first brought in to 'the church of Zero' (Carter. 1977. P84) we learn how he has become so hateful towards humans that he now only speaks through a 'bestial locution of grunts and barks' (Carter. 1977. P83). We also discover that he has seven wives who have 'dedicated themselves, body, heart and soul, to the church of zero' (Carter. 1977. P96) as they believe that he produces 'sacred fluid' (Carter. 1977. P89) which will keep them alive. This creates the idea that Zero has used his authority over the women to force them to believe that he is no longer male; he is a deity with magical powers. Similarly, the last character who depicts an image of a deity/god is that of Mother. We discover

this through the postmodernist ideology of grotesque realism which is used to describe Mother's body modifications. When Evelyn meets Mother, she refers to her as ' a sacred monster...she was breasted like a sow - she possessed two tiers of nipples...And how gigantic her limbs were!...her skin, wrinkled like the skin of a black olive.' (Carter. 1977. P56-57). By giving Mother the matriarchal role and showing her to be large, it subverts the typical roles of a female in a patriarchal world as they would normally be portrayed as small and subservient.

Both novels included look at the theme of patriarchy in very different ways. ' Fight club' mainly looks at the male gender and the ways in which men who are of a lower social class, are fighting to stand up to patriarchy in a capitalist society. I would argue that in using the idea of men fighting patriarchy (men in power) it is more effective overall as it creates the idea the patriarchy is an oppressive construct which all genders are struggling to fight, thus creating a stronger sense of equality between males and females overall. However, through ' The Passion Of New Eve' it isn't necessarily as effective overall as we can distinguish themes of fluid identities and castration which show a defiance towards patriarchy, but through the evident matriarchy of Beulah it shows that even though they are fighting to remove the dominant male roles, the ideologies of control and a dominant power figure are still evident. Lastly, through each novel it is evident that an effective ' strategy' is that of non-conforming characters who defy typical patriarchal norms surrounding femininity and masculinity, thus reiterating the point that typical ideas and norms surrounding gender are slowly diminishing due to the ever-expanding knowledge of gender itself.