



ADOLESCENCE AND AFFECTIVE STASIS: EMBODIED DESIRE, INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND POST – ETHICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN DAVID SZALAY’S FLESH

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ABSTRACT

“Flesh” is a modern psychological novel. The author presents a disquieting depiction of adolescence, sexual awakening, emotional estrangement, and moral ambiguity. The novel depicted the protagonist Istvan, illustrating how isolation and unchecked desire can lead to violence and repercussions in both personal and legal realms, devoid of ethical resolution. The study presented a multidimensional comparative analysis of Flesh, integrating psychological theory, affect theory, Foucauldian discourse on power, feminist criticism, trauma studies, and late-modern social theory. The study aimed to present the emergence of a post-ethical subject shaped by emotional deregulation, institutional silence, and narrative restraint. The novel lacks moral judgement and encapsulates a psychological theme that challenges conventional literary frameworks, compelling the reader to engage with ethical discomfort as an active interpretive duty. The novel serves as a seminal work of the 21st century, articulating a state in which desire endures devoid of profound significance, identity lacks coherence, and responsibility is devoid of moral clarity.

Key Words: Psychological realism, adolescence, sexuality, affect theory, psychoanalysis, moral ambiguity, contemporary fiction.

INTRODUCTION -

David Szalay is a contemporary British author recognized for his succinct language style and his exploration of psychological interiority, social mobility, and emotional alienation in late-modern existence. Szalay's novels have little language, emotional monotony, and a focus on corporeal experiences rather than contemplation, aligning with modern tendencies in affect-centered realism.

The character is predominantly shown via a passive lens inside a social and emotional framework that beyond their comprehension.

Modern literary analysis predominantly acknowledges the crises depicted in 21st-century fiction, which have shifted from being largely ideological and epistemological to being deeply psychological and emotive. Most studies of modern and postmodern narratives advocate for meaning, representation, and truth; contemporary literature frequently addresses



emotional deregulation, ethical fatigue, and the fragmentation of subjectivity. The novel's transformational prose challenges conventional moral frameworks, narrative comfort, and teleology. The novel's backdrop increasingly explores themes of desire, alienation, and responsibility within its unresolved storyline, offering more than just psychological insights and ethical resolutions. The concept of adolescence reflects a failure to transition into maturity, characterized by extended vulnerability, emotional isolation, and institutional silence. The Istvan is characterized as a transitional psychological region where sexual interest precedes emotional preparedness; nonetheless, this does not provide dignity, and it suggests that the character is diminished in terms of symbolic or ethical mediation. This fallacy undermines conventional narratives of sexual initiation as either formative or liberating. The notion was situated within the realm of symbolic structure in the Flesh Novel. The concept was observed in Freudian repression and guilt, with the Lacanian notions of lack and the Other; the book did not encapsulate fulfillment but addressed the want for recognition. From a current structuralist perspective, the character Istvan's role is more aligned with the attachment to an older lady than with a sexual connection, which contradicts present structuralist notions.

It has provided greater coherence, identity, and emotional allure.

The novel's psychoanalysis not only encapsulated but also created a distinctive and emotional atmosphere, resulting in thematic flatness, narrative constraint, and a conspicuous absence of introspective commentary. The theory under examination provides an introspective perspective, rather than merely addressing themes of love, humiliation, or remorse; the novel starts with a focus on physiological intensity, inertia, and numbness. This examined the profound significance of pre-cognitive experiences, indicating that emotional existence typically predates and frequently eludes conscious interpretation. Affirmative points might facilitate the examination of the ethical challenges in novels regarding the presentation and resistance of both psychiatric diagnostic and moral judgment.

The ethical significance of institutional seclusion was emphasized. The Foucauldian theory was employed in the research to elucidate the concepts of sexuality, surveillance, and discipline in the novel, highlighting the plot's focus on private desire amid broader frameworks of societal regulation. The law is articulated in the context of the character's emotional decline. The argument against the institution inadequately addressed the emotive and psychological harm. The Istvan character embodies the legal system's requirements for intentionality and clarity, creating a cyclical pattern in character and reflecting emotional ambiguity, highlighting the disparity between actual experiences and judicial interpretation.

The gender dynamics explored in the narrative intensify the ethical difficulty. The author elevates the Istvan character as a representation of masculine interiority while also destabilising normative masculinity by portraying the protagonist as dependent, submissive, and frail rather than powerful or predatory. The narrative opacity of female characters raises enquiries regarding voice, agency, and representation, which necessitates a redefinition of



feminist critique to avoid simplistic moral judgements. The novel resists a binary paradigm of victims and responsibility, emphasising the complexity of writing rather than moral certainty.

Another topic highlighted in the study pertains to the broader environment of late modernity, reflecting societal conditions, unstable identities, and weak relationships. deterioration of the ethical foundation. The research also examined the perspectives of Zygmunt Bauman and Theodor Adorno, presenting a minimalist narrative that rejects formal expressiveness, cultural alienation, and ethical tiredness.

It is prevalent that there is limited discourse on moral language, although it may be communicated. The research presented a multidimensional theoretical analysis of *Flesh*, focussing on psychoanalysis, affect theory, trauma studies, feminist criticism, Foucauldian power discourse, and late-modern social theory, to reveal constructs of a post-ethical subject. The research argued that the novel "*Flesh*" acts as an anti-Bildungsroman, conveying the notion that accumulation without integration and growth results in emotional flatness rather than self-realization. The novel emphasises ethical uncertainty and interpretative conditions rather than resolving it as a narrative issue. The fundamental objective of the research is to analyse the novel *Flesh* in relation to psychological subjectivity, desire, and ethical ambiguity within the framework of late modernity. It also explores fresh studies to understand how narrative restraint, emotional opacity, and institutional isolation create the subject of ethical participation. The study examined the research concerns regarding how the novel portrays adolescence as a state of vulnerability rather than merely depicting developmental progress, sexual initiation, and functioning as a site of psychic fragmentation rather than formation. Another inquiry addressed the minimalism of the plot in relation to traditional moral judgements. Additionally, the institutional silence highlighted the exposure of the limitations within legal and ethical frameworks.

The study aimed to accomplish numerous interrelated objectives. The character was analysed through psychological theory utilising chosen Freudian and Lacanian models of desire, repression, and lack. The affect theory was examined to encapsulate the themes of numbness, physiological intensity, and narrative restraint. The Foucauldian perspective was examined in the context of the role of power, legislation, and surveillance in controlling sexuality. The tale was analysed via feminist and gender perspectives to examine narrative authority, masculinity, and ethical disparity. The last aspect examined about late modernity in the context of socio-cultural circumstances is an analysis through Bauman and Adorno to illustrate how instability, alienation, and ethical exhaustion generate new forms.

Narrative context and characterisation Trajectory - The Hungarian Housing Estate *Flesh* begins with the character Istvan. The character was situated in an economic crisis, without emotional direction and socially marginalised, which rendered them more psychologically vulnerable. Absent genuine character development, the premise of shifting his life to abruptly become a wealthy individual in London is undermined. In this subject, his internal psychological framework stays notably unchanged. At the age of fifteen, Istvan engaged in an



affair with a lady forty-two years his senior, and this narrative technique emphasised a conscious refusal to give moral clarity. It destabilised the protagonist's emotional growth. The violent incident, described by the lady, resulted in her husband's murder and ultimately led to the protagonist's placement in juvenile jail.

The work presents the issue of personal desire consistently clashing with systems of power. Isvan's participation in the Iraq War does not embody the concept of heroism in literature but rather illustrates a moral imperative. The novel does not explore soldier life, wartime duty, or ethical dilemmas; instead, it presents Istvan's prior experiences of violence as unprocessed, corporeal, and emotive. It aligned with Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which posits that trauma resists narrative integration. The Foucauldian approach aligns with Istvan's depiction of soldiering, illustrating how the state assimilates marginalised bodies and perpetuates mechanised violence. The individual decision was dismissed in favour of authority when Istvan, following juvenile incarceration, went to war. Istvan does not select conflict; he endures it, since it establishes control over power. The concept was characterised by biopolitical control, when bodies are sculpted by deprivation and deemed disposable.

The return to military duty saw Istvan working as a chauffeur, and the narrative transitioned from a crisis period to that of a very wealthy individual in London. However, opponents pointed out that physical discussions do not constitute growth in verbal articulation and indicate psychological stagnation. It was noted as too affluent, not improving the subjectivity but rather encapsulating rigidity. His second affair at his workplace exemplifies a recurring pattern of yearning, concealment, and demise. The stepson's position in the theme of antagonism against him serves as the moral counterpart, creating unresolved ethical conflict within the family structure and hindering narrative completion. Critics said that the Istvan character was trapped in youth and incapable of being open to others. The work effectively dismantles the liberal idea that wealth equates to self-realization. The narrative also established life as fundamentally physical, with Isvan's character recognised (as body) antecedent to the awareness of his consciousness. This was characterised as an epistemic hierarchy that undermines conventional psychological realism. The phrases "yeah" and "I don't know" in the text were noted by reviewers for their minimalist writing style. From a Lacanian perspective, Isvan's linguistic limitations indicate a failure of symbolisation and cannot be transformed into language. The theme was to allow connection and reveal in absence.

1.Narrative structure and Psychological Escalation-

The novel's theme revolves around the shifting of overarching events and psychological subplots, with elements of ambiguity and moral uncertainty inadequately depicted. The novel conventionally culminates in maturity and ethical clarity, in contrast to the depiction of disintegration. The protagonist character, more representative of adolescence, does not achieve self-awareness or social integration; instead, it results in alienation, violence, and existential uncertainty. This aligns with the late modernity framework, addressing the



entrenched position within the post-moral literary tradition and the disintegration of a stable ethical framework. The novel explicitly rejects instruction, consolation, or moral judgement. The novel features a Hungarian man named Istvan, whose character lacks maturity in decision-making. The character was a socialite in London. The narrative was constructed in a linear chronology with psychological escalation. The events depicted in the novel unfold in a calm, nearly monotonous rhythm, progressing psychologically before chronologically. The emotional resonance of the theme accumulates beneath the surface. This structure defined narrative flatness. Identifiable phrase novels address social displacement and adolescent insecurity, sexual initiation through transgressive intimacy, emotional dependency and obsession, as well as rupture and rejection. The theme generates unresolved tension. The anti-climactic violence depicted in the presentation of the female character, where the husband's death serves as a contentious event, creates a melodrama. It also pertains to crime fiction due to the written pattern of spectacular consequences.

This form of narration posits that catastrophic outcomes frequently stem from emotionally trivial situations. The theme also examines alienation and the failure of social integration in Istvan's character during the period of marginal schooling. At that time, he was estranged from his mother and disengaged from peer culture. The narrative encapsulates adolescent vulnerability through a writing style that depicts social failure. The novel also conveys knowledge obtained through the body rather than through discourse. István acquires knowledge of intimacy, power, and identity through corporeal interactions rather than emotional discourse. It presents a Foucauldian perspective, arguing that the body becomes a subjective site of inscription for social meaning. Sexual acts are not emancipatory; they are perplexing, destabilising, and ethically disorienting.

The asymmetrical power dynamics in the narration of the relationship between Istvan and the older woman. That introduces a new predator-prey dichotomy. Istvan's agency reflects a persistent desire for ethical judgement. Affection manifested in the narrative through emotional projection. His failure to distinguish between sexual intimacy and emotional reciprocity signifies a wider emotional illiteracy resulting from isolation. Female rejection in the novel illustrates the asymmetry of meaning within the relationship. The novel also presents the theme of moral indeterminacy. The protagonist was not apprehended; the circumstances surrounding the husband's death were complex and ambiguous. This ambiguity reflects existentialist concepts of responsibility, wherein intention is frequently constructed in hindsight rather than being consciously developed. The police interrogation in the novel illustrates the mechanism and internal uncertainty of converting psychological ambiguity into legal suspicion. Istvan is neither a hero nor an anti-hero. The character presented was a post-moral subject, motivated by desire, fear, and emotional dependency rather than ethical reasoning. That creates a new epistemology. The woman exhibits behaviours indicative of loneliness and engages in introspective monologue. The woman was depicted subjectively, devoid of romanticisation, with loneliness navigated through secrecy and control. The secondary structure psychologically represents passive social structures.



The fixation on narrative embodiment in the context of shopping excursions, dining experiences, and sexual encounters. The closed shutter and darkness symbolise secrecy and repression. The urban environments illustrate the themes of anonymity and alienation. This composition delineated embedded realism rather than explicit allegory. The narrative was constructed. Moral clarity arises from an existential state devoid of prediction and meaning, leading to irreversible consequences. Contemporary society fails to address emotional development and sexual knowledge in literature, despite their prevalence, resulting in a lack of emotional guidance.

2.Freud and Lacan: Psychoanalytic Perspective –

This perspective also illustrates Istvan's adolescent phase, characterised by heightened libidinal energy and fragile moral regulation. The lack of paternal authority and isolation weaken the superego and the instinctual urge for dominance. Freud's concept of repression is essential for understanding the novel. The confidentiality in a relationship denotes a socially forbidden longing, marked by both suppression and amplification. Lacan's theory also elucidated Istvan's psychological disintegration. The flesh plot was not biological but rather symbolically constructed. The protagonist's expression of love demonstrates emotional immaturity and indicates a pursuit of symbolic affirmation. The woman's rejection signified the distressing incident that resulted in the motif of psychological disintegration. Lacan asserts that desire represents a perpetual impossibility, facing the inaccessibility of fulfilment and manifesting fragmentation. The concept was applied to the act of aggression.

3.Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality -

The study was employed to understand the structure of Flesh and individual psychology. In the work *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that sexuality is not simply a personal impulse or a controlled doctrine, but is instead shaped and regulated by discourse and power dynamics. The illicit relationship outside the power structure is regulated by its creators. The power dynamics between the protagonist and the female character are evident in the social norms, legal discourse, and moral surveillance. The theme of policing outlined the limitations of legal rationality within the framework of interrogation. The novel criticised both overt injustice and the inadequacy of systems intended to regulate emotionally inscrutable subjects.

4. Affect Theory and Emotional Flatness

The sole psychoanalytic theme in the novel necessitates examination within the framework of emotional neutrality, thereby warranting a critical analysis of the theory involved. Utilising Brian Massumi's concept of pre-cognitive intensity instead of narratable emotions. The character flow of Istvan is also characterised by themes of bodily states such as fatigue, arousal, inertia, and numbness. The effect was obscured and not broadly recognised by readers or critics.



The emotional theme of the novel also examines Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's support theory to elucidate affective texture, characterised by subdued monotony, repetition, and muted intensity rather than passion or despair. The novel's central mode of meaning conveys moralised or psychologised experiences, positioning affect as a mode of meaning.

Trauma encapsulated within the novel framework of Testimony

The novel *Flesh* repudiated the concept of testimonial structure. The writing lacks flashbacks, confessions, retrospective information, and interpretation. The trauma was addressed in latent form within the novel. And not referred to as memory. Concluding the more contextual "unclaimed experiences" of Cathy Caruth, irrespective of the moment of occurrence. Dominick Lacapra's distinction between acting out and working through is instructive. Istvan was declining and failing to comprehend the patterns in his experiences. He perpetually exhibits trauma and becomes emotionally detached without learning to rectify his character. The violence in the novel is presented devoid of emotional emphasis, illustrating dissociation rather than remorse.

The portrayal of trauma in the novel is conveyed through bold actions rather than through verbal expression.

5. Feminist and gender perspective-

The lens prompts essential enquiries regarding gender representation in the novel. The narrative exhibited an imbalance in the feminine perspective. The novel rejects simplistic moral binaries and predominantly privileges the male subject. The woman is predominantly characterised by her inaccessible interiority. Her motivations, emotional dilemmas, and ethical considerations are perceived through István's perspective. From a feminist perspective, this narrative silence threatens to perpetuate a patriarchal framework. The portrayal of the female as subjectivity is obscured, while the psychological depth of the male is emphasised. The feminist critique addressed the stereotype of the predatory woman. The character portrayal in the novel depicts the woman as emotionally repressed, socially alienated, and ensnared in an unloving marriage.

The female character exhibited dominance stemming from solitude and a yearning for autonomy. The theme of asymmetry in storytelling was criticised by feminist theorists for marginalising women. The Istvan character is characterised by fragile masculinity, emotional dependence, and a tendency towards dominance. It proposes feminist interpretations and advocates for a comprehensive critique of gender roles in late modernity.

6. Contemporary Social Theory: Bauman and Adorno -

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity aims to elucidate the broader social context of the novel. The relationship was tenuous, identity was deficient, and the emotional bond lacked resilience. The protagonist is characterised by uncertainties and emotional instability in this phrase. Adorno's aesthetic theory encapsulated the emerging minimalist style. Critics



have asserted that the theme resists commodification and narrative gratification. The *Flesh* thematically explores formal alienation.

The Adorno concept was pragmatic in this manner—non-identity resistance and conceptual assimilation. The ethical framework lacks moral resolution; the narrative context emphasises ethical silence. It is referred to as a radical feature. The *flesh* was a rejection of the reader's thoughts. There is an evasion of the context of condemnation, absolution, and moral instruction. The responsibility in the novel depicts coerced states lacking codified values.

The ethical judgement in the novel was ambiguous and inconsistent, contrasting with contemporary theories, and it emphasised exposure over instruction in ethics.

Gender Performativity and the Formation of Masculinity

Judith Butler's theory addresses the concept of gender performativity in relation to innate or stable identity. The masculinity not manifested in self-identity but associated with behaviours of silence, compliance, emotional suppression, and physical involvement lacking expression. The thematic responses such as "okay" or "sure" were characterised as performative expressions of normative masculine passivity. It is formulated that masculinity is a social expectation. The societal demand for Isavan character identity is constructed as contrasting to autonomy. The gender expression in emotional language has become a tool, characterised by a perceived absence of emotional tone in its theme.

Butlar's assertions described the articulation, leaving unspoken meaning in the concept that absolves much in action, exposing masculinity as a discipline of silence in writing.

Body and fragmented identity - Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, elucidated in her studies, offers a compelling framework for interpreting *Flesh*. The title itself highlights corporeality, underscoring the body as the principal locus of experience and disruption. The protagonist experiences sex, violence, and trauma, which are not merely events but indicative of an unstable character. The abjection was associated with elements rejecting experiences and assimilated into a coherent selfhood. Istvan's numbness, suffering, and silence epitomised the state's abjection. The body bore the profound disturbance and experience of languages, resisting the burden of instability. The focus of Kristeva's argument is confined to identity itself. The formal writing, devoid of emotional perspective, portrays the character Istvan as existing in a psychological limbo, neither fully autonomous nor completely dissolved. The novel portrays identity not as a cohesive entity but as a continuous disjunction.

7. *Flesh* as Anti-Bildungsroman

The corporeal framework of writing deconstructs this structure. The experience of character was characterised by emotional flattery. Time progressed without transformation, and the condition of memory fails to integrate identity. Istvan characterised a figure who endures, rather than a post-heroic, rebellious, or moral agent. The shift in contemporary



fiction is demonstrating a transition from form to a crisis of meaning and emotional deregulation.

RESEARCH FINDING -

Flesh serves as a conscious rejection of the conventional Bildungsroman and moral-psychological narrative. The study employed a qualitative, interpretive textual methodology to comprehend close text and conduct multidisciplinary theoretical analysis. Psychoanalytic theory, Foucauldian power discourse, feminist criticism, and late modern social theory are utilised.

"Flesh" resists moral resolution and psychological transparency, essential for a framework capable of encapsulating unconscious desire, embodied affect, institutional control, and ethical indeterminacy. The research indicates that the protagonist's actions are motivated by conscious ethical considerations arising from accumulated emotional pressure, active deregulation, and the failure of symbolic mediation. The study identified innovative strategies in writing characterised by flatness and minimalism, which serve aesthetic functions while preventing moral closure and providing psychological explanations. The interaction between power and dominant masculine characteristics reveals a disparity between lived experiences and judicial rationality. The feminist perspective advocating for the narrative technique in protagonist characterisation. The novel is more structured in its post-ethical subject, reflecting the conditions of late modernity, where concepts and desires persist devoid of meaning, and responsibility exists without moral clarity. The theory was examined to elucidate themes and gaps in the writing context.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH SCOPE-

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology based on meticulous textual analysis. The research utilises an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, incorporating psychoanalytic theory, affect studies, Foucauldian power discourse, feminist criticism, and late modern social theory. It has encapsulated the discovery of literary writing's subjectivity, desire, and ethical ambiguity. The theoretical approach, rather than a rigid framework, is employed to provide analytical perspectives that elucidate the narrative structure, emotional depth, and thematic intricacies of the novel. The application arose because the flesh resists empirical measurement, moral resolution, and psychological transparency, necessitating interpretive depth rather than quantitative analysis. Secondly, a psychoanalytic analysis utilising the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva to explore repression, absence, corporeal memory, and the construction of subjectivity. The perspectives are enhanced by feminist theory, especially Judith Butler's concept of performativity, critical theory as defined by Theodor Adorno, and sociological insights from Zygmunt Bauman, enabling the novel to be interpreted as both a psychological narrative and a cultural analysis of late modernity.

FUTURE RESEARCH SCOPE



The current study opens several avenues for further research. The study may expand the comparative frameworks by examining analogous representations of affective deregulation, masculinity, and ethical ambiguity in contemporary European fiction. Future research will also integrate trauma studies, disability studies, and reader-response theory, while thoroughly examining how narrative constraints influence ethical interpretation. An interdisciplinary approach benefits future explorations of cultural studies and political theory, enhancing the examination of institutional power and global conflict within the context of late-modern narratives. Such an additional dimension would enhance broader critical discourse on post-ethical fiction in the 21st century.

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