

A Psycho Feminist Reading of the Alpha Female and the Femme Fatale in the Selected Works of August Strindberg, Veronica Roth and Gillian Flynn

Yara Eid Abu El-Maani ⁽¹⁾ Mohammed Elsa Al-Qin ⁽²⁾ Engy Salah Tawfik ⁽³⁾

⁽¹⁾Ph Student, English Department, Faculty of Arts, Damietta University ⁽²⁾ Professor of English Literature, Faculty of Education Ein Shams University ⁽³⁾ Associate Professor of English Literature, Faculty of Arts, Damietta University

Abstract

The phenomenon of the “alpha female”, [DELETE THE COMMA] has recently developed with the unveiling of a new generation of iron-willed and tough-minded female icons in various domains. Consequently, critical studies, scholarly analyses [ADD A COMMA] and extensive researches have been conducted for observing the differences between the subordinate past and the predominant present stature of the female figures. This perception stands upon social as well as cultural variables that have affected the literary and the screening identity of the new woman. On this regard, it is recently noticed that alpha females can later take revenge by themselves and turn into killing and dangerous women “femme fatales”. Thus, the researcher’s selected texts would provide the uncompromising figure of the female character that cannot be considered powerless or weak any more, since she is capable of committing horrific acts of bloody revenge. Therefore, this study critically and psychologically reviews some notable literary as well as screen versions of the feminist revenge psychopathy, and how far they could be wild and aggressive when they are traumatized, betrayed, or abused, which have been impacting the world’s new social and cultural image of women in modern times.

Keywords: Alpha female, psychological disorders, traumas, femme fatales, identity, gender

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قراءة نفسية نسوية للأنتى والألفا والأنثى القاتلة في الأعمال
المختارة لكلٍ من أوجست إسترنديبرج، فيرونیکا روث وجيليان
فلين (في النص وعلى الشاشة)

يارا عيد أبو المعاني (1) محمد السعيد القن (2) إنجي صلاح توفيق (3)
طالبة دكتوراه - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية - كلية الآداب - جامعة دمياط، (2) أستاذ
الأدب الإنجليزي- كلية التربية - جامعة عين شمس (3) أستاذ مساعد الأدب الإنجليزي
- كلية الآداب - جامعة دمياط

المستخلص

لقد تطورت ظاهرة الأنثى الألفا مؤخرًا مع كشف النقاب عن جيل جديد من الأيقونات الأنثوية قوية الإرادة في مختلف المجالات؛ وبالتالي تم إجراء دراسات نقدية وتحليلات علمية وبحوث مستفيضة لملاحظة الفروق بين ماضي الخضوع وحاضر الغلبة والهيمنة للشخصيات النسائية. ويعتمد هذا التصور على المتغيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية التي أثرت في الهوية الأدبية والمرئية للمرأة الجديدة. وفي هذا الصدد، لوحظ مؤخرًا أن إناث الألفا يمكنهن - فيما بعد - تنفيذ انتقامهن بأنفسهن ويتحولن إلى نساء قاتلات وفي قمة الخطورة. وعلاوة على ذلك، فإن النصوص المختارة من الباحثة ستقدم رموزًا نسائية لا يمكن عداها عاجزة أو ضعيفة بعد الآن، لأنها أصبحت قادرة على ارتكاب أعمال انتقامية مروعة، وقد يرجع هذا السلوك العنيف إلى أسباب نفسية واجتماعية، لذلك، تستعرض هذه الدراسة بشكل نقدي ونفسي بعض الأعمال الأدبية المكتوبة وكذلك إصداراتها المرئية التي تعكس ظاهرتي صراع المرأة القوية مع مختلف التحديات النفسية والانتقام النسوي السايبوإثي وكيف يمكن للمرأة أن تصبح جامحة وعدوانية عندما تتعرض لصدمة نفسية أو إساءة ما سواء جسدية أو عاطفية، بالإضافة إلى تحليل مدى تأثير ذلك في الصورة الاجتماعية والثقافية الجديدة للمرأة في العصر الحديث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرأة القوية، المرأة القاتلة، الانتقام، الاضطرابات النفسية، الصدمة النفسية، الهوية الجنسية.

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Introduction

This study delves deep into one of the most contemporary and controversial fields under study: The feminist superiority on paper and its relation to the rise of the feminist film adaptations based on literary texts. The researcher follows a psycho analytical approach to investigate the social stress, the cultural restrains or the psychological borders that each of the alpha females, in the selected works, had to cross and surpass so as to prove her exquisite supremacy and sharp abilities. Also, the researcher traces the motives and the traumas beyond the femme fatal phenomenon and what could turn an alpha female to a vengeful psychopathic femme fatal. Thus, this research is trying to build a psycho-critical bridge that ties these two worlds: the modern studies of the new woman (alpha female or femme fatale) in literature and the screen adaptations of the female-leading literary texts. In addition, this thesis sheds light on the screen adaptation theory and its influence on literature and cinema, beside the feminist psychoanalysis of the alpha females and the femme fatales' challenges in the selected masterpieces on paper and screen as well.

The Objectives of the Research:

1. What are the psychological characteristics of the selected alpha females and femme fatales?
2. What are the psychological borders / disorders crossed by the female leading ladies on paper and screen?
3. What are the differences between the portrayed leading figures on paper and screen?
4. How does the screen adaptation affect the written literary text?
5. How far are the feminist studies supported by the revolutionary screen adaptations?

Methodology

The researcher tackles the psychological backgrounds of the selected alpha females and femme fatales using the analytical psycho-feminist approach to trace the psychological disorders under study such as (Hysteria, Defense Mechanism, Neurotic Anxiety, Post traumatic Stress,

and borderline personality disorder) in addition to the characters' self-search for identity and their struggle due to egotistical conflicts. The study indicates the relationship between the rise of the screen adaptation theory and the trending phenomena of the alpha female and the femme fatal on paper and screen as well.

The Research

The phenomenon of the alpha female, the empowered female protagonist, has recently developed with the unveiling of a new generation of iron-willed and tough-minded female icons in various domains. Consequently, critical studies, scholarly analyses and extensive researches have been conducted for observing the differences between the subordinate past and the predominant present stature of the female figures. This perception stands upon social as well as cultural variables that have affected the literary and the screening identity of the new woman. Furthermore, the term "alpha" has always been an associated synonym to leadership and supremacy in both of the animal and human realms. Traits such as dominance and aggression were usually used to describe the alpha male in particular, but later it is discovered that some animal kingdoms and insect species have matriarchal leaders where the females are the ones in charge such as spotted hyenas, chimps, bees, etc. They are the ones to lead, hunt and fight, when males seem to be in a subordinate position.

Therefore, issues such as power, gender and sexuality are being pursued and examined as the main focal points in the trendy psycho-feminist studies. Those progressive versions of literary works and films seem to reject the monotonic uncomfortable roles that had unfairly imprisoned women for decades. This promoted shift in the new women's literary interpretations has been reflected through the lenses of not only male/female writers but also film directors. This obviously proves that women definitely have equal standards as men, in relation to power and intelligence, which later enables the alpha females to redefine the depicted portrayal of women in written works and their adaptations as well. Thus,

the subject matter is tracing how the alpha females' pursuit to self-discovery is quite related to thorny predicaments such as egotistical conflicts, hysteria, childhood trauma and sexual confusion, from a psycho-feminist approach.

Moreover, those females who exercise influence over others, survive complicated predicaments and play a leading role are recently referred to as "alpha females". Thus, some females are born with such formidable characteristics due to inherited genes, while others had to go through multiple challenging life experiences, so as to go through that kind of a character rebirth or metamorphosis. Unlike a third type of women who are not meant to act that role ever since they cannot easily acquire the alpha qualities. Meanwhile,

dominant women (high-dominance feeling) [are] rarely embarrassed, self-conscious, shy, or fearful compared to women who were not dominant (low-dominance feeling). According to Maslow, dominant women have more self-confidence, higher poise, prefer to be treated like a "person" and not like a "woman", prefer independence and "standing on their own feet", lack feelings of inferiority, and generally do not care for concessions that imply they are inferior, weak or that they need special attention and cannot take care of themselves. (Monika Sumra 4)

Accordingly, Vanessa Van Edwards considers female alphas' confidence and ambitious/extrovert behavior are quite contagious. They often impact and inspire other women to believe in their abilities and join the pack. This is because "Researchers also found that alpha females have extremely high emotional intelligence...[which] is our ability to: recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions-recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others-be aware that emotions can drive our behavior and impact people (positively and negatively) (1)". This means that each lady's response to variable imposed situations depends on her subjective perspectives of power, gender and sexuality. Clearly, alpha females usually work on their internal satisfaction whether mentally, physically or emotionally. This is due to their exceptional sense of identity and

empowerment, since “an alpha girl is an assertive, decisive and a confident female cognizant of her life choices; a person ready to take risks and willing to "transcend the barriers of race and class" (Dan Kindlon xvii). However, “alpha femaleness is more of a spectrum. Some women have a high tendency to be alpha. They enjoy social conducting: being the leader and/or the center of attention. Some women only like being alpha females in their home, not in their business environment. Some women are only social alphas around certain groups of friends” (Edwards 3). Still, sometimes the tables are turned once these ladies are exposed to certain types of psychological and social challenges. Some are lucky enough to win those provocative battles, while others die trying. For instance, the selected females’ behavior is correlated with suffering a childhood trauma or witnessing a patriarchal oppression. One can make it to freedom like Ibsen’s Nora, while another loses everything in this battle like Strindberg’s Miss Julie.

In this perspective, the psychological persona and the supremacy aspects endorsed by the alpha females are brought to light within the selected texts. According to Zakin, she clarifies how, “any properly psychoanalytic theory must at the least offer an account of the unconscious and its bond with sexuality and, arguably, death” (1). and she also added that, “Freud’s reflections and hypotheses concerning hysteria, the Oedipal Complex, female sexuality and femininity, and women's role in civilization, among other ideas, have provided the volatile grounds, the sites of contention, for feminist re-articulation” (1). Moreover, the psychoanalytic feminism gives importance to the psychoanalytic formula of any woman and requires a recalling of her past deviant behavior, fantasies, or trauma. Then, it is important to interpret these hidden as well as apparent individual factors whether on paper or screen. Besides, Freud's psychoanalytic studies of the female unconsciousness are deeply associated with other studies of female sexuality. This is because he draws attention to the traumatic and hysteric cases and tries to relate them to the

women's position in patriarchal societies. That is why Psychoanalytic criticism traces the psychological behavior and traumas experienced by the main female characters in a literary text while they are reacting to certain dilemmas and conflicts.

For Dan Kindlon, he elaborates how an alpha female should have that kind of charismatic and avant-garde visage that acquires her so many advantages in her daily life and enables her to surpass her male peers. So, he defines the alpha girl as:

A young woman, who is destined to be a leader. She is talented, highly motivated, and self-confident. The alpha girl doesn't feel limited by her sex; she is a person first and then a woman. Issues of sex and gender, dependence and independence, and dominance and subordination are largely irrelevant to how she sees herself in the world. (Xiv-xv)

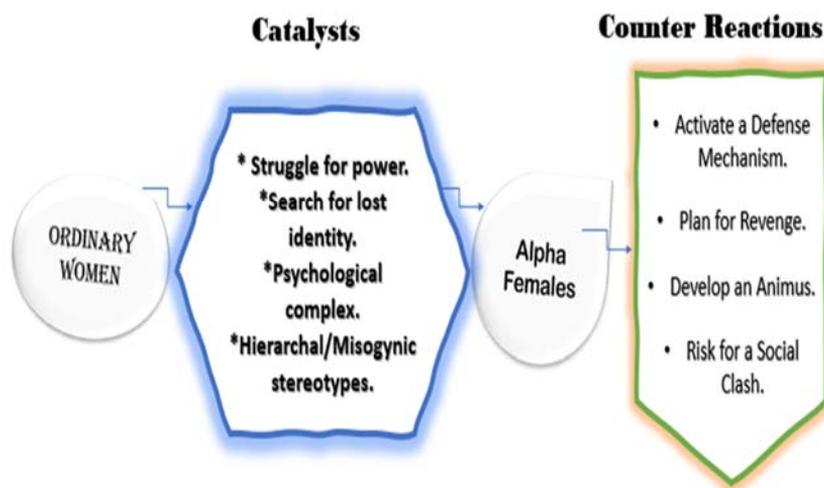
Likewise, Ward et al. demonstrate how the social/literary situation has evolved “as the gender landscape changes, women are embracing more leadership positions and characteristics” (2). It has also been clarified how the recent studies assure the increase of the number of women in all the dominating positions in various fields, even in cinema and fiction. Therefore, the presentation of the female self has been explicated through a process of overwhelming mutation which offers a visionary social/psychological thinking in both literature and cinema. Because it seems that those strong women, along with the multiple struggles they usually face, develop their force to become an alpha female since:

The female's inability to cope with the physically more powerful male obliges her, from an early age, to develop traits that will enable her to secure her ends by other means. Being forced to sharpen her wits upon the whetstone of the male's obduracy, the female develops a sharper intelligence. From their earliest years, girls find it necessary to pay attention to nuances and small signs of which the male rarely recognizes the existence. Such small signs and

signals tell the girl what she wants to know, and she is usually ready with her plan for action before the male has begun to think. (Ashley Montagu 3)

Furthermore, Montagu adds more scientific facts and studies that prove the natural power and physical superiority of women, since they have greater stamina and higher mental abilities. Apparently, the laws of nature take women's side. Thus, supported by evidence, women are definitely physically and psychologically different but not inferior at all.

The utter displacement of the old fragile image of the female heroine would be marked throughout the lines of this chapter to mirror how the recent sexual and mental balance between males and females, in literary texts, is being mimicked recently in a very expressive way. On this regard, the selected literary works uncover how alpha females can take revenge by themselves and turn into killing and dangerous women "femme fatales". Such texts as well as their movies have been chosen because they notably provide the uncompromising figure of the female character that cannot be considered powerless or weak any more, since she is capable of committing horrific acts of bloody revenge. Therefore, this study critically and psychologically reviews some notable literary as well as screen versions of the feminist revenge psychopathy, which have been impacting the world's new social and cultural image of women and how far they could be wild and aggressive when they are traumatized, betrayed, abused, etc. (Diagram 1)



On one hand, a broken woman who acquires power through violence is not regularly depicted in literary works. This is because the aggressive one was always the man who used to be super qualified to do the abuse and harm women in cold-blooded attitude. Thus, the stereotypical plots used to refer to women as the victims, despite revenge is mostly sought by the powerless underdogs whether they happen to be women or even men. Consequently, some women went after vengeance for the sake of regaining their happiness and relief after being traumatized in one way or another. Moreover, revenge literature revolves around obsession and how we cling to those who have wronged us, even when it may be better to push them away. It doesn't shy away from how much hurt can become a hallowed memory, something we return to for reasons we can't fully name. These stories are also inherently moral—they mine the limits of vigilante justice and question if it's strength or weakness that makes us want to strike back. (Kassandra Montag 1)

This means that some women choose to respond to injustice in an irrational and impulsive way while paying back whether morally or physically. Other women take time to execute their

plans, since revenge is a dish best served cold. It is also noticeable that revenge and love are mostly intertwined because many avengers are either lacking love or getting hurt from their lovers. Nevertheless, when they carry out their schemes and become equal, they sometimes get themselves into an infinite cycle of constant rage and dissatisfaction, which highlights the Chinese proverb, “When you begin a journey of revenge, you start by digging two graves: one for your enemy, and one for yourself”. That is why some psychiatrists recommend forgiveness and letting go so as to contain anger and feel free again.

On the other hand, in spite of the literary and cinematic support for female avengers to get their rights, some writers believe that a woman/ man who plans for her/his revenge is so haunted by the idea, that s/he is completely psychologically changed during being inside the fiery circle during the preparation for the attack as well as after getting even. In other words, revenge could be an infinite cycle of how a victim may start acting like her/ his enemy without being aware of this. This distress and hostility could lead to a severe mental / behavioral disorder or a self- damaging –paranoia. Thus, Amanda Perez manifests how revenge begins as merely a thought and can remain as recurrent voice in one’s mind for many years and may not die out until it is fulfilled.

Most of the female protagonists, in the selected literary works, challenge not only the crippling conditions of being abused, cheated on or bullied, but also the outdated gender orientation of the male superiority. Hence, the researcher investigates these femme fatales’ silenced struggle, hate and trauma that are suddenly turned in the ugly faces of their oppressors. In this sense, this study is reflecting how modern authors, directors as well as the female actresses of the adapted screen works are participating in cultivating the ascendancy of the femme fatal on both paper and screen. This frequent evolution has consequently raised the awareness about how the patriarchal ideology has maltreated and grinded women for years, on a literary and visual basis, and it is time to clarify how gender is nothing but a biological/culturally

based matter, that shall have no further significance. Thus, the theme of the brainy revengeful femme fatal has become so persistent in literary works that it has been adapted into high-grossing films, since it also stands as an important social argument. Hence, women, too, can lean towards the villain side, which ruins the gender expectation of violence. Therefore, this liberated presentation of the new leading female desolates the typical helpless image that was commonly portrayed in the male-led works.

Furthermore, Bethany Wood highlights the value of tackling the phenomenon of the feminist psychopathic revenge as it mimics the real societies we live in, where women face infinite threats of physical abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment or trafficking on a daily basis. Therefore, from a literary perspective “it's not often that you have a strong heroine as the central protagonist in this type of book in this genre. And it's also a fascinating story... it's also strength of the novel in that it really does make people realize the extent of the violence that some women face and the terror that some women live with in their lives” (Stephanie Pappas 2). So, this kind of writing could stand as a reaction towards such disturbing and awful acts of violation against women as it raises the public awareness about such a humane issue, “because even women who have not experienced any violence or coercion in their lives know that it is a possibility” (2). This assures how issues such as gender, identity and sexuality are being pursued and examined as focal points in the trendy feminist writings and their screen adaptations. Those enlightened versions of literary works and films seem to reject the monotonous uncomfortable roles that imprisoned females for decades. Consequently, women have recently wielded a huge metamorphosis from a merely male-authored literary/cinematic movement to an equal co-operated cultural universe.

The selected femme fatales whose revenge is going to be psychologically analyzed are Gillian Flynn's Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* (2012) and Amma Crellin in *Sharp Objects* (2006). The first is driven by her husband's infidelity,

multiple psychological disorders and childhood trauma, while the other's cathartic aggression and her psychopathic mother are the main reasons behind her crimes. In addition to Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2008). This killing diva manages to destroy anyone who makes her suffer; whether it is her father or a legal guardian. However, she still has her own egotistical conflicts and psychological turmoils. By the same token, a group of women succeed together to avenge their safety and emotions in Thomas Cullinan's *The Beguiled* (1966). They decide to get rid of the one man who tried to separate and manipulate them for the sake of his own survival. Unlike Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), whose source of strength was nothing but her supernatural powers, that helped her to take down her abusive mother and horrifying bullies at school. Each of these femme fatales refused to be the victims of the story, so they rose up, in spite of their psychological borders, to finish their enemies, no matter how vicious they could be.

Problematically, the path to revenge has definitely consumed the psyches of previously mentioned females, morals and even changed their interpretations of power and gender. It is a kind of a troubled life experience that guaranteed them temporary justice and psychological comfort, but awfully ruins their innocence. Those ladies might have enjoyed the triumph. However, they kept on losing bits and pieces of their true identities, while seeking for the privilege of being femme fatales. Accordingly, each woman pursues her target, in a different way, depending on her motivations. Meanwhile, hatred grows so increasingly that the alpha female rebels against her peaceful nature and demands witnessing offender suffering. So, abuse and cruelty bring up trauma and pain deep inside the preys' subconscious. Which later could turn into misery, regret and probably discontent as well. Thereby, some women tend to develop and extend their vengeful acts towards strangers, as if it becomes some sort of addiction to feel joy in harming others. Hence, the destruction causing revenge is not at all slighter than the one following it. To this end, revenge does not guarantee a

full recovery of the trauma or a settled salvation. (Diagram 2)



Then, this study tackles the differences between the selected works on paper and their visual adaptations, and how each has discussed the main themes and the psychological characterization of the characters. Furthermore, the last chapter highlights each genre's technique to achieve more success and influence. This is beside shedding light on the result of this correlation between what is written on paper and what is watched on screen.

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