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Feminism and Roles of Women in House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski

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Abstract

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski is one of the most prominent examples of ergodic literature and post-modern work that utilizes unconventional literary tools. Despite the thorough research regarding its metafictional nature and symbolic representations, there is still a relatively small amount of research that studies the novel from a feminist perspective. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the female characters in the novel using feminist theories such as Simone de Beauvoir's Other and Judith Butler's performativity. Findings show that House of Leaves depicts its female characters in contradictory ways, both as passive objects and active agents. Despite these findings, critical analysis of the deliberation of the female characters' actions is still crucial. These instances become an example of how the novel shows a tension between its unconventional nature and gender politics. This study contributes to feminist literary critique by emphasizing the need to examine gender inequality even in experimental novels.

***Keywords**: Female Characters, Feminism, Gender Roles, House of Leaves, Literary Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

A novel is an extended work of fiction characterized by its complex narration, development of characters, and exploration of themes or ideas. According to Abrams (1988), a novel is "a fiction narrative that displays a realistic depiction of the state of a society". Novel often features an ever-evolving plot that unfolds across multiple chapters, allowing for an in-depth exploration of characters, settings, and conflicts. The narrative structure of a novel provides the author with the opportunity to develop an intricate story, multiple perspectives, and realistic character relationships. The extended format of a novel allows for the exploration of diverse themes, philosophical inquiries, or even social issues related to the current society more comprehensively, particularly when compared to short stories or even other forms of media such as movies (Fitria, 2020). One of the social issues that is often depicted in a novel is feminism and the roles of women in literature. For the most part, women in literature, similar to their real-life counterparts, are prone to becoming marginalized subjects, particularly due to the existing patriarchal system that dominates all aspects of life.

Many feminist scholars have critiqued the depiction of women in literature, particularly as objects of desire. Mulvey (1975) created the concept of the male gaze, where women are depicted through an objectified view and their roles are limited to help the development of male characters or plot progression. This is similarly argued by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), where women are seen as the "Other"; they are not defined as full subjects but rather defined in their difference or opposition to men. This is further supported by Gilbert and Gubar (1979), who observe that whether a woman's personality is an idealized one that befits the commonly accepted gendered standards or a rebellious one which disrupts those, their roles still ultimately revolve around men's narratives.

However, this notion of marginalisation is sometimes challenged by the different portrayals of women through their resistance, ambiguity, or influence on the plot, where they play a more complex and active role in forming the direction of the story. Contemporary

feminists such as Butler (1990) suggest that female characters who seem to fit the traditional roles may challenge the norms through their choice and performance in the narrative. The subtler forms of agency in a constrained environment are what allow women to reshape the social direction (hooks, 1984). Not only that, the discomfort and ambiguity shown by the female characters can even become a sign of resistance (Ahmed, 2017). House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski is a convincing example of this complex depiction of women in literature is where female characters are both relegated to plot devices and also influence the narrative.

In 2000, Danielewski made his debut as an author with his book House of Leaves. House of Leaves is presented as a metafiction told from the perspective of a man named Johnny Truant, who found an unfinished manuscript from a recently deceased man, Zampanò. When Truant decided to complete the manuscript for a posthumous publication, he found Zampanò's manuscript to consist of an academic-style narration about an extremely well-known movie called The Navidson Record. The movie itself is a documentary of a photographer named Navidson and his family who have just moved to a new house. Things begin to spiral downward when, suddenly, one day, a dark hallway appears in Navidson's house, which leads to a mysterious and labyrinthine space far larger than the house itself. While Truant claimed the movie never even existed in the first place, the manuscript began to not only influence his mind, but also his life.

House of Leaves' metafictional literary format has successfully attracted the attention of both general readers and literary scholars. The experimental nature of the novel goes against traditional notions of literature and pushes the boundaries of storytelling, making it an important piece of work within contemporary literature. A wide range of critical studies has examined the novel's plot, themes, linguistic structure, semiotics, symbolism, and superimposed narratives. Scholars have approached the text through various theoretical analyses, including postmodernism, poststructuralism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, reader-response theory, and formalism. However, there exists a prominent gap in the feminist literary analysis of the novel despite the frequent and complex depiction of female characters in the narrative itself. This thesis aims to address this gap by analysing how House of Leaves engages with feminist themes through its contradictory depiction of women as both passive objects and active agents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores the conceptualization of women as passive objects through de Beauvoir's notion of Otherness. Beauvoir (1949) in her book The Second Sex introduces the concept of woman as the "Other", a being relegated to passivity through male-centred subjectivity. In her construction of women as the "Other", Beauvoir emphasizes how women's passivity is not inherent but rather taught to them through the existing patriarchal standards in their environment, starting from as soon as their childhood. Women's agency and self-determination are often displaced by their prescribed roles about men, whether as a daughter, a wife, or a mother. Feminist scholars' response to Beauvoir's concept of Otherness and women's passivity varies.

Support for Beauvoir's theory includes the objectification theory by Fredrickson and Robert (1997), which posits that women, to varying degrees, are socialized to internalize objectification and treat themselves as objects. Women's internalized belief of themselves as objects then sustains the passive roles subjected to them by the traditional gender standards, which prevents them from pursuing self-actualization and becoming full-fledged individuals with their agency, the same way as men are. The construction of female objectification and passivity, including their effects on women, is demonstrated in a recent study by Zahara

(2023), which examines how female students who received demeaning comments regarding their appearance from their male peers developed negative self-perception. Those students blamed themselves for not living up to the traditional feminine standards and experienced feelings of helplessness and internal conflict. Their emotional responses manifested in physical passivity, where they hesitated to move their body during physical education class in fear of the male students' gazes and comments. This phenomenon aligns with Beauvoir's theory of Otherness on how women are forced into passivity through male subjectivity.

Meanwhile, criticism of Beauvoir's theory includes postmodern feminists such as Judith Butler (1990), who critiques Beauvoir's existentialist framework. Butler argues that gender is not just imposed, but also formed through performative acts, where individuals may modify the performance of passivity subjected to them. This theory places women as active agents within certain limits who can go against the fixed roles assigned to them. Unlike Beauvoir, who frames women as objects defined in opposition to men, Butler claims that both gender and subjectivity are continuously constructed and potentially reshaped within language and cultural practices. This reconceptualization allows for a more nuanced understanding of female identity, where even women's passive behaviours can be interpreted as a complex struggle of power instead of internalization of oppression; their passivity has the potential for resistance when done in a way that exposes or destabilizes the norms that created them.

An application of Butler's theory of performativity on literature is illustrated by Pujimahanani et al. (2022) on Kate Chopin's A Respectable Woman, where the female main character recognizes her attraction towards a man other than her husband. The female character's active choice to forget said attraction through self-reflection and formation of a new mindset strengthens her identity as a respectable wife in the face of obstacles. Support for Butler's arguments and critique against Beauvoir's includes Charlotte Knowles (2019), who uses Heideggerian concepts to show how women's passivity not only originates from their complicity with men but also their existential avoidance of the burden of freedom. In this context, passive Othering is not seen as an unchanging state of being but rather a self-imposed prison and choice chosen by women, which they can choose to break free from in subtler ways. Not only that, but by deliberately identifying themselves with oppressive roles, women are unconsciously participating in the status quo by perpetuating their passivity.

These interpretations of women as both passive objects and active agents provide the foundation for analyzing the roles of female characters in House of Leaves.

METHODS

This research used the qualitative descriptive research method, which analyses qualitative data such as words or behaviours that have been observed and collected from the object of study. This method differs from the quantitative descriptive research method, which analyzes quantitative data such as statistics or numbers. As such, the result of this analysis is presented in the form of descriptive texts instead of numbers. The aim of qualitative analysis is to gain insight regarding a phenomenon based on the observable qualities within the object of study, including words used and depictions shown.

The object of study of this research is a novel titled House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski, where the recurring depiction of its female characters gives way to a complex and nuanced interpretation of their roles in the narrative. This research also peruses other journals, articles, and research books as secondary sources to support the presented argument and expand on the various theoretical approaches that are used to analyze the object of study. Secondary sources were selected based on their relevance to the feminist perspective and their publication years, in order to minimize the usage of unrelated theories or outdated arguments.

Limitations of the research include the use of a general feminist framework instead of

an intersectional feminist analysis, due to a lack of related data within the study's object. Although qualities such as race, class, sexuality, and other intersecting identities are equally realized as important aspects of feminist critique, the lack of specific data or related information which is required to carry out an intersectional feminist analysis influenced the research's scope.

Data collection procedures consist of the attainment of primary and secondary sources, careful reading of the sources, seeking data, analysis of the identified data with the help of secondary sources, and reporting of the analysis of data in the form of a descriptive report. Each data point is coded or selected through its bearing upon the matter of female depictions, whether by other female characters, male characters, or even the narrative itself.

RESULTS

Women as passive objects

Women as passive objects refers to a way of thinking in which women are viewed as objects to be observed or utilized, particularly for the enjoyment or advantage of their male counterparts, rather than as whole beings with their own agency. When men objectify women, they regard them as less than a human and closer to an object (Bernard et al., 2012) or even animals (Vaes et al., 2011). This idea becomes an indicator of more profound patterns of gender inequality and is closely linked to objectification, where women are more likely than men to be its recipient (Davidson et al., 2013). While this objectification pattern is common in visual media (Balraj et al., 2023), it does not lack presence in literary media such as novels and fiction.

This dynamic has been explored by many feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Laura Mulvey, and Fredrickson and Roberts. In The Second Sex (1949), Beauvoir makes the argument that women have been historically defined based on their relation to men, not as autonomous individuals but as the "Other": secondary and passive beings who are defined by males. This patriarchal treatment of women's status is consistent with Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze," where women's roles in media are limited to helping the male characters' development or becoming their source of pleasure. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) also suggest that women, to varying degrees, are socialized to internalize objectification and treat themselves as objects.

Karen

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski is an ergodic literature where the complexity of the plot constantly shifts the point of view (Medaglia, 2023). Inside the narrative, the depiction of female characters is often treated as a matter of less importance compared to the novel's symbolic and psychological layers. Still, this does not lessen the importance of their representation, especially as passive characters whose objectification serves the main male narratives. This is especially true with character Karen, who exemplifies the novel's tendency to treat women as passive objects:

Of course, Navidson's pastoral take on his family's move hardly reflects the far more complicated and significant impetus behind his project—namely, his foundering relationship with longtime companion Karen Green. While both have been perfectly content not to marry, Navidson's constant assignments abroad have led to increased alienation and untold personal difficulties. After nearly eleven years of constant departures and brief returns, Karen has made it clear that Navidson must either give up his professional habits or lose his family. Ultimately unable to make this choice, he compromises by turning reconciliation into a subject for documentation. (Danielewski, p.10, 2000)

Karen's first appearance in the story starts her treatment as a passive object, which

serves as a plot tool rather than her own subject. Although her agency and ambitions are recognized, Navidson's internal turmoil and career choices overshadow her feelings and point of view in the story. This supports de Beauvoir's theory of woman as the Other, which defines women in relation to men's struggles and progress rather than on their own ability to direct themselves. Not only that, this is consistent with the concept Tzvetan Todorov (1971) developed, where female characters can be seen as catalysts, agents of change, or reflections of societal expectations at different stages of the narrative.

Early on, Navidson gave Karen a Hi 8, which he asked her to treat like a journal. Her video entries ... reveal a thirty-seven-year-old woman who worries about leaving the city, growing old, keeping trim, and staying happy. Nevertheless, despite their purely confessional content, it is not a journal entry but rather an unguarded moment captured on one of the house Hi 8s that demonstrates Karen's almost bewildering dependence on Navidson. (Danielewski, p.11, 2000)

In this passage, Karen is described as having an "almost bewildering dependence". It not only pathologizes Karen's emotional state but also shows it entirely from Navidson's and the viewer's perspective. While Navidson's camera gift can be interpreted as a form of giving Karen her agency, the narrative quickly reasserts control over her portrayal. This erases Karen's control over her own image, exemplifying Laura Mulvey's (1975) assertion that women in media are not agents of their own representation but objects to be interpreted by and for others. Despite holding the camera, Karen is not granted narrative authority; rather, her vulnerability is seen as a sign of emotional instability and dependence, in line with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) theory of woman as the Other who is defined through the male perspective.

This pattern continues even as the story progresses; Karen is constantly framed as a passive object not only through the narration, but also through other characters' perspective of her rather than as her own agent.

Unfortunately, critics have been less than sympathetic. Following the release of The Navidson Record, neither Karen nor Navidson's reputation escaped unscathed. Karen, in particular, was decimated by a vituperative stream of accusations from the tabloids, reputable reviewers, and even an estranged sister. (Danielewski, p.16, 2000)

Here, Karen is subjected to widespread, gendered critique from both the media and personal circles. This assault on her character, particularly in its emotional intensity and focus on her appearance or morality, contrasts sharply with the treatment received by Navidson, whose flaws are examined more intellectually rather than personally. In this way, Karen becomes a passive body acted upon by the narrative and its interpreters, rather than a fully empowered narrative subject. The reasons behind the scathing criticism of Karen may also be supported by the audience's perception of her, where it is often the case that sexualized women, or women who are perceived as more open to casual sex, are attributed less mental capacity and less moral status (Kellie et al., 2019).

Even as the story progression reveals more about Karen as a character, with her own personality and fears, it still holds its tendency to show her as an object of passivity: This is the first sign of Karen's chronic disability. Up until now there has never been even the slightest indication that she suffers from crippling claustrophobia. By the time Navidson and the two children are safe and sound in the living room, Karen is drenched in sweat. ... Perhaps because of Karen's evident distress, Navidson agrees to at least temporarily make this new addition to their house off limits. Whether it is the lasting flush of terror in Karen's cheeks or her absolute need for him, so markedly different from her frequently aloof posture, Navidson cradles her in his arms like a child and promises. (Danielewski, p.57, 2000)

Though House of Leaves gives its readers glimpses into Karen's internal fears, it continues to depict her primarily through the lens of others, especially Navidson. Her

claustrophobia is framed as a disability and then visualized through external and physical signs of weakness. Navidson's role as caretaker materializes in the infantilization of Karen, who is literally "cradled like a child".

The manner in which the narrative turns women's fear into a justification for dependence only emphasizes the patriarchal structures that shape them in the first place (Tomić, 2020). The socially "acceptable" fear of the dark is used to depict Karen as vulnerable, childlike, or irrational, reflecting a socially constructed emotional script. Despite Karen's very real fear, it is sidelined by Navidson's recurrent adventure into delving into the mysterious hallway of the house at the expense of her emotional and psychological health. The way Karen's claustrophobia is framed as a 'disability' only when it impacts Navidson's actions also aligns with Beauvoir's assertion that women are defined by their 'lack' or 'absence' in relation to male subjectivity (1949).

Karen knows her kids are in trouble. A clip of Hi 8 catches her telling them that as soon as their father returns, she will take them all to "grandma's." Unfortunately, when Navidson, Tom, and Reston disappear down that hallway early Saturday morning, Karen is put in an impossible situation: torn between monitoring the radios and looking after Chad and Daisy. In the end, separation from Navidson proves more painful. Karen keeps by the radio. (Danielewski, p.315, 2000)

In this passage, what we know about Karen is filtered through the camera and her emotional response. While she verbalizes her desire to protect the children, she is ultimately still placed in a circumstance beyond her control. Her choice to stay with Navidson despite her wish to keep her children safe is not an expression of her agency, but rather her emotional dependency on Navidson. Karen's inability to break free from Navidson's emotional clutch on her may be interpreted as a silencing behaviour that follows objectification in women (Saguy et al., 2010). The usage of the camera in the passage further objectifies her; the voyeuristic nature of the footage recalls Mulvey's (1975) critique of the media's tendency to prioritize male control over female representation. But the narrative's tendency to depict Karen as an object of passivity does not stop there; rather, it is done not only by one but multiple figures. From Zampanò's description of the existing theory, her estranged sister's recalling of their past, and public speculations:

... she was still incapable of entering any sort of dark or enclosed space. The reasons are not at all obvious. The leading theory now depends on a history given by Karen's estranged older sister, Linda. Earlier this year, she went on a public access "talk show" and described how they had been sexually abused by their stepfather where he forced Karen (age fourteen) down into a well and left her there while he raped Linda. Later, he forced Linda down the well and did the same to Karen. Unfortunately, when asked by various reporters to confirm her sister's claim, Karen refused to comment. (Danielewski, p.347, 2000)

Karen's trauma is delivered entirely through others' words and not herself. She becomes a passive object which others can interpret in their own ways and project with their own narration. This reflects Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze, in which women are positioned in narratives not as agents but as something to be looked at, talked about, or interpreted. Karen's refusal to comment is not only a form of avoidance but also a metaphorical representation of her lack of ability to express herself.

As Cathy Caruth (1997) emphasizes, trauma often resists direct representation, and the traumatized subject often cannot tell their story because trauma shows up as absence, silence, or repetition. It is common for victims of child sexual abuse to have a dilemma in deciding whether to hide or reveal their trauma (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Just like Foucault's (1990) argument that the "self" is not a pre-existing entity but rather a product of discourse, Karen becomes a site of meaning-making by the discussion and theory that revolves around her, instead of being a meaning-maker with her own agency.

Women in Johnny Truant's Narratives

While Karen is the most fully developed female character in House of Leaves, her portrayal as a passive object leads to a wider narrative pattern. The novel's treatment of women consistently depicts them as symbols of absence, trauma, or pleasure. Women are largely positioned as emotional triggers, treated as erotic fantasies, or dismissed without psychological depth. Seen in this context, House of Leaves' metafictional nature also becomes a commentary, whether intentional or unintentional, on the constant objectification and marginalization of female characters in experimental literature.

When it comes to the narrative perspective and voice or who dominates the narration of a story, it also affects the way the characters in it are perceived, including the female characters. A female narrative voice has different judgments, priorities, and insights compared to a male narrative voice, especially regarding how the women in the characters are depicted. With House of Leaves having a male protagonist as the narrator of the story, this phenomenon becomes a recurring thing. Even from the start of the novel, Johnny Truant's description of the women he interacts with frames them as either sexual objects or plot triggers.

Amber, it turns out, was quite a number; a quarter French and a quarter Native American with naturally black hair, dark blue eyes and a beautiful belly, long and flat and thin, with a slender twine of silver piercing her navel. A barbed wire tattoo in blue and red encircled her ankle. Whether Zampanò knew it or not, she was a sight I'm sure he was sorry to miss. (Danielewski, p.35, 2000)

Johnny Truant's search for people who can give him a clue regarding Zampanò's manuscript starts with Amber, who answered his call. While Johnny's main intention is to get information out of Amber, his immediate focus on her appearance, her later fling with him, and her lack of personalization beyond her experience with Zampanò reduces her to passivity as a plot tool and sexual object. Beyond this, she never appears in the narrative again. This sort of treatment towards the female characters in Johnny's narrative is very common. And even though there is one prominent character that actually makes multiple appearances in his life, her real name remains unknown from the beginning until the end, except for a nickname he gave her.

She still drives me nuts. Just thinking of her and now I'm lost, lost in the smell of her, the way her and everything she conjures up inside me ... her hair reminding me of a shiny gold desert wind brazed in a hot August sun, hips curving like coastal norths, tits rising and falling beneath her blue sweatshirt the way an ocean will do long after the storm has passed. One glance at her and, even now in the glass of my mind, and I want to take off, travel with her, ... And there I go again. She does that to me. Like I already said, it drives me nuts. (Danielewski, p.52, 2000)

Mulvey's idea of women as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975) is best illustrated by Johnny's obsession with physical characteristics. This emphasizes the point that sexual objectification directed toward women by men occurs in everyday interactions through body gazes and appearance commentary (Kozee et al., 2007). While his description of her appearance elevates her body and turns her into something to be admired, it also turns her into something to be consumed visually. The metaphors and descriptions mostly serve to emphasize her physical appearance, making her an object to be gazed upon and admired for her beauty rather than an individual with her own subjectivity and experiences.

As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) writes in The Second Sex, through the visual inspection of a woman's body, a man or in this case, Johnny, is already giving his own evaluation to her and objectifying her.

As for her real name, I still don't know it. She's a stripper at some place near the airport. She has a dozen names. The first time she came into the Shop, she wanted one of her

tattoos retouched. ... Suffice to say, the second I saw that rabbit, the second I started calling her Thumper. (Danielewski, p.53, 2000)

This passage becomes a prime example of Mulvey's (1975) concept of male gaze because it instantly frames Thumper as a passive object from Johnny's confession that he does not know her real name. Though this passage can be attributed as a plot point or something that characterizes Johnny's descent into madness, it still emphasizes Johnny's disregard for her subjectivity as a person. The lack of importance he puts into finding out Thumper's real name becomes a form of epistemic violence, where she is only known through his perception and not on her own terms. Not only that, but Thumper's anonymity and job as a stripper reflect hooks' critique of how capitalism and patriarchy intersect to exploit women's bodies as commodities (1984).

The logic of Johnny's male gaze towards Thumper extends disturbingly into his dream life, where Thumper reappears in scenes that fully erase her as an active agent.

I woke up having had an almost wet-dream about Thumper. She was doing this crazy Margaretha Geertruida Zelle dance, veil after colored veil thrown aside ... even as she removes more and more of them, allowing me only momentary glimpses of her body, her smooth skin, her mouth, her waist, her—ah, yes, I get a glimpse of that too. (Danielewski, p.69, 2000)

Johnny's dream passage renders Thumper as both a fantasy and an object of desire who is simultaneously passive and available for Johnny's pleasure. She has no autonomy or voice but rather only exists as a malleable figure inside Johnny's unconscious narrative. Thumper's nickname and lack of real name symbolizes her erasure as an individual, which reflects Beauvoir's (1949) argument that women are 'defined not on their own terms, but in relation to man'. Another nameable female character who receives similar treatment to Thumper is Kyrie, who, once again, is described through her appearance in the first instance in which she appears in the novel.

Actually, Lude had a German friend named Kyrie, a tall blonde-haired beauty who spoke Chinese, Japanese and French, drank beer by the quart, trained for triathlons when she wasn't playing competitive squash, made six figures a year as a corporate consultant and loved to fuck. Lude took heed when I told him I needed a German translation and introduced us. (Danielewski, p.87, 2000)

While this passage does not completely reduce Kyrie to a passive object, her introduction is undeniably framed through Johnny's objectifying and bragging voice. From the beginning, Kyrie is introduced through her physical appearance, which frames her as an object of visual appeal. Her hobbies, abilities, and successful career do add some character and personalization to her, which counterbalances her objectified frame. Later depiction of Kyrie in the story, however, emphasizes her passivity more strongly:

At the time, I thought it was kind of cute, but I guess "man-eater" did cross my mind. Then, as I opened the door, she burst into tears. All she was in that $85,000 car could not exclude the little girl. She said something about Gdansk Man's disinterest in her, in fucking her, in even touching her, running away to Poland, and then she apologized, blamed the drugs still roaming around in her veins and told me to get out. (Danielewski, p.89, 2000)

This passage in the novel shows the difference between masculine-coded rationality and feminine-coded emotional fragility. After a moment of sexual agency, Kyrie breaks down emotionally and shows her vulnerability. The expensive car here functions as a symbolism of success, adulthood, and independence; but when Johnny mentions the image of a "little girl" and Kyrie's complaint about another man, the car loses its symbolic power as the independence she possesses. Despite her professional success, the fact that Kyrie's breakdown stems from her unrequited love makes her appear as a "feminine-coded" emotionally unstable passive object (Mulvey, 1975), in contrast to men who are detached and active subjects.

Moreover, Johnny's infantilizing description of Kyrie may stem from his initial but subconscious desire to "challenge" a woman who seems to have everything better than he is, as most men do when an outside element, in this case unspoken social norms and patriarchal standards, dictate a man is not supposed to be able to get with a woman unless he fulfills certain quality (Syarifa et al., 2023).

Yet another female character that plays an important part in Johnny's narrative but has a complex and fragmented representation would be Johnny's mother, Pelafina Heather Lievre. Throughout much of the text, she remains mostly absent at the beginning; she is only recalled through what Johnny remembers about her, and even then, in a manner that often expresses his distrust towards her trauma narrative, which is a common treatment towards female asylum dwellers (Määttä et al., 2021).

I often thought about the locket, dangling from her neck. Sometimes it made me hurt. Often it made me angry. She once told me it was valuable. That thought never crossed my mind. Even today, I won't consider its monetary worth. ... When my mother died, the locket was the only thing she left me. For a long time, I didn't flip the latch. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was afraid of what I'd find inside. When I finally did crack the hinge, I discovered the carefully folded love letter disguised as a thank-you letter, scrawled in the hand of an eleven-year-old boy. It's a letter I wrote. The very first one my mother ever received from the son she left when he was only seven. It's also the only one she saved. (Danielewski, p.350-351, 2000)

Within this passage, Pelafina is "absent" in the sense that Johnny rarely speaks about her directly, and when he does, it's often through blurry memories or in an emotional manner. Johnny's fixation on the locket and his feelings towards it symbolize Pelafina's reduction into a passive object that triggers his emotional response; her identity is synonymous with something he cannot understand or confront. This particularly reflects Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) concept of the woman as Other once again. Pelafina is not Othered because she lacks meaning, but rather because her meaning is created entirely through Johnny's needs, emotions, and memories.

Women as active agents

Despite House of Leaves' constant portrayal of its female characters as passive objects, it does not completely lack instances where women in the story take control of the narrative and affect the plot based on their own wants and wishes. The constraint and limitation of the narrative prevent the female characters from exploring the possibility of more, but within this constraint, as well, they still manage to reassert their agency and go against the established feminine standards using subtler acts of resistance. Judith Butler (1990), in particular, rejects the idea that passivity is innate; instead, it is a tactic women may use to navigate oppressive systems. For example, one could interpret the previously mentioned portrayal of Karen's refusal to discuss her trauma or the tabloid criticisms as her performative retreat or her refusal to engage in conversations that reduce her to the status of a helpless victim. As Gunduz et al. (2023) argue, the latency of trauma disrupts linear narrative; Karen's silence is not necessarily passive but rather an expression of her agency. Her desire to move out of the house despite her love for Navidson may be interpreted as a form of feminist resistance towards objectifying relationships to claim personhood (Sáez et. al, 2019). Not only that, while Karen initially appears as a passive object framed through a camera's voyeuristic gaze, later changes in the narrative, where she uses a camera to conduct interviews about the house, a form of performative agency, which lines up with Butler's theory:

My mother keeps telling me to get rid of him and sell the house. I keep thinking about it, but in the meantime, I've been working on the film. There was so much of it that I decided

to cut it down to thirteen minutes to find out what people thought of it. And I showed it to everyone I could think of, too ... Without further ado, this is what everyone had to say about the house. (Danielewski, p.353-354, 2000)

Here, Karen demonstrates what Judith Butler (1990) refers to as performative resistance or the deliberate appropriation of oppressive roles to take control of one's representation. Instead of using the camera for surveillance, Karen uses it as a tool to express herself. By transforming the tool of objectification into a tool of self-authority, her act of filmmaking subverts the male gaze. Furthermore, this contradicts Laura Mulvey's (1975) claim that women are essentially "to-be-looked-at." Karen transitions from spectacle to spectator, from object to subject, by using the camera herself. When Karen goes on to create another short film regarding Navidson, it also becomes a turning point in the narrative.

There are only 8,160 frames in Karen's film, and yet they serve as the perfect counterpoint to that infinite stretch of hallways, rooms and stairs. The house is empty, her piece is full.

The house is dark, her film glows. A growl haunts that place, her place is blessed by Charlie Parker. On Ash Tree Lane stands a house of darkness, cold, and emptiness. In 16mm stands a house of light, love, and colour. (Danielewski, p.368, 2000)

The points used to describe Karen's film, like light and colour, can be seen as a metaphor for Karen's transformation, as in the case with other literature which earlier on emphasizes its gloominess and despair (Hasan et al., 2024). The adjectives show as a symbol of Karen's confrontation with her own fear and her reclaiming of her own agency. Karen's return to the house later on is a sign of her re-engagement or her confrontation with her fear on her own terms, rather than necessarily a sign of relapse. Since gender and identity are created via repeated performances, as Judith Butler (1990) remarks, Karen's return can be interpreted as a performative decision to recreate her relationship with the house or the symbol of her fear rather than continue to be its victim. This interpretation is further strengthened when she steps into the void of the house and reclaims Navidson.

As everyone knows, Karen stands there on the brink for several minutes, pointing her flashlight into the darkness and calling out for Navidson. When she finally does step inside, she takes no deep breath and makes no announcement. She just steps forward and disappears behind the black curtain. ... Whatever ultimately allows Karen to overcome her fears, there is little doubt her love for Navidson is the primary catalyst. Her desire to embrace him as she has never done before defeats the memories of that dark well, the molestations carried out by a stepfather or whatever shadows her childhood truly conceals. (Danielewski, p.522, 2000)

Even though Karen is portrayed as a passive object throughout House of Leaves, her act of entering the hallway without hesitation represents a rare but important display of agency. In stark contrast to the previous portrayals of Karen as emotionally reliant, infantilized, and monitored, this calm, determined step is taken. Her trauma and her marginalization within the story itself is confronted symbolically here in addition to physically.

Although the narrative attributes her bravery to "her love for Navidson," this explanation should not overshadow the importance of her decision. Karen performs agency, according to Judith Butler (1990), by acting out a version of herself that defies passivity, even if that performance is influenced by patriarchal norms of feminine sacrifice. Similar to this, Karen's activity might be interpreted as a confrontation with trauma rather than as a resolution of it, as according to Cathy Caruth (1997).

Similar reinterpretation of women from passive objects to active agents can also be seen in the female characters in Johnny's narratives. Just like how Butler (1990) highlights that gender performances are never completely stable since they have the power to both uphold and undermine norms, several instances in the story show how ambivalence or dual

roles are used by female characters to exercise agency. The idea of total passivity is disrupted by Thumper's repeated appearance in Johnny's dreams and daily life, even as his narration objectifies her by reducing her to a nickname and sexual fantasy as previously demonstrated. She haunts him, representing a force that endures despite his efforts to exert control. Besides that, Kyrie also resists patriarchal dichotomies by exhibiting both hyper-femininity (sexual availability) and hyper-competence (professionalism). Her strong reaction to her lover's ignorance may be interpreted as an embrace of the emotional aspect of herself and a sign of how long she has been holding on to herself; she shows a feminine resistance through the manner in which her autonomy lies in her everyday resilience and moral clarity (Singh, 2023).

Last but not least, Pelafina's letters to Johnny at the end of the novel complicate her readings as a passive object. Her writings show great intelligence, emotion, and clarity. In order to have an impact on her son's life, she actively fights against being erased by writing, reflecting, remembering, and performing sanity. Pelafina's fragmented responses to trauma align with feminist theories of trans-generational affect and ethical remembrance as termed by Schmukalla (2024). Although it is limited, her letter is a form of agency. She attempts to use speech to exert authority despite being physically and symbolically imprisoned, much like how Judith Butler (1990) contends that language, not only biology or social standing, is how identity is performed.

DISCUSSION

This research of House of Leaves supports the main hypothesis that the book addresses feminist issues through its depiction of women in conflicting ways, as both passive objects and active agents. The research compiles ideas from Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir: Butler thought gender is something to "perform" by subtly resisting oppressive systems, while Beauvoir argued women are often treated as the "Other," defined in relation to men. This clash plays out in how female characters act in the story. The research shows that even though these women are usually seen through a male perspective, such as being reduced to trauma symbols or side characters, they sometimes reclaim power through small acts of defiance, just like Butler's idea of turning restrictive roles into something empowering.

On a theoretical level, this research connects Beauvoir and Butler's ideas about fighting male-dominated narratives, and it sees Danielewski's multilayered writing style as a feminist tool. On a practical level, it gives readers suggestions to think about how unconventional storytelling tricks might hide sexism, and it warns writers not to turn women into passive symbols, especially in complex stories where their agency can get lost.

Limitations of the research persist. Due to the unreliable narrator of the book, the results are rather subjective, and they do not yet touch on how race, class, or sexuality might overlap with gender issues. Future studies could compare House of Leaves to other postmodern books to see if they treat women the same way, dig into intersectional feminism, or ask readers how they interpret the female characters' resistance. This research's improvisation of feminist literary criticism shows how patriarchal norms still influence how women are portrayed even in experimental literature. The research turns into a reminder of how experimental storytelling cannot excuse regressive gender politics in the story. More attention is needed to make sure that literary style does not cover up or justify the oppression of women's voices. Future research should keep examining how narrative structures may support gender inequality, even with artistic expression.

CONCLUSION

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski gives us a complex and nuanced view of women: they are often treated as passive figures shaped by male perspectives, but sometimes they also act out subtle moments of power and resistance. This research explored how the

novel reflects feminist ideas using its contradictory portrayals of female characters. Using Simone de Beauvoir's idea of women as "the Other" and Judith Butler's theory of gender as something we "perform", the analysis shows that women in the story are both trapped by patriarchal roles and silently push back against them. The novel's chaotic structures also emphasize the complexity of this portrayal. While the format at first may erase the female character's perspective, it also invites the reader to question who gets to tell the story and how the narrative shapes it.

The research acknowledges its flaws in the novel's reliance on a male narrator and its lack of discussion on how race, class, and sexuality connect with gender. Ultimately, House of Leaves reflects real-world gender issues. It demonstrates how, even in experimental storytelling, women's roles can be both restricted and empowered. The research invites writers and readers alike to consider how stories support or challenge prejudices. Future research could explore how other postmodern works address similar topics, as well as how readers understand the female characters' subtle acts of resistance. This work aims to contribute to the collective recognition that women's voices can be heard even in the darkest, most confusing narratives, sometimes in surprising ways.

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