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Deconstructing Dark Romance:

A Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Gender, Power, and Choice

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Abstract

In the 2010s, dark romance has become an increasingly popular and distinctive subgenre of contemporary romance. Unlike regular romance, dark romance promises a focus on more complex, ambiguous, and oftentimes taboo tropes, including stalking, violence, and emotional manipulation. This fact becomes concerning when one considers the genre's almost limitless accessibility due to the internet and its highly supportive online community. Given the persuasive effect of mainstream media, the lack of critical engagement and discussion risks the popularization and internalization of values that do not promote equality. Therefore, this research intends to evaluate the predominant mode of representing gender and the power dynamics between characters in the dark romance genre. To answer the research questions, this study conducts a discourse analysis of five prominent dark romance novels chosen by purposive sampling. The texts were identified through Goodreads, as it provides a measurable indicator for a text's cultural reach. The selection criteria prioritized high readership and positive reception to ensure the chosen novels represented the genre's mainstream appeal, including publication within the last ten years and the exclusion of novels with fantastical elements. A hybrid approach was employed to develop a thematic coding system organized into two main categories corresponding to the research questions: Gender Representation and Power Dynamics. The theoretical framework guiding this process is a postfeminist sensibility established by Rosalind Gill. The findings of this study demonstrate that these novels operate on a concerning framework that is designed to romanticize and eventually justify power imbalances. The narrative begins with the construction of an essentialist view of gender, in which femininity and masculinity are first and foremost established through an overdramatized image of the body to establish the initial power difference. Then, on this foundation, the novels build their central fantasy of eroticizing male control, reframing domination, possessiveness, and narratively justified violence as signs of passion. Finally, in dark romance, the heroine "voluntarily" accepts her subordination through her own act of "agency". Notably, dark romance is not just a simple rejection of feminist ideals, but rather the use of its language to make a patriarchal fantasy palatable. These novels also provide a revealing look into the contradictory ways of understanding contemporary love by creating a world where dominance is passion and submission is an empowered choice. This study confirms that dark romance is not merely escapist fiction, but rather an expressive contemporary space where ideas about love, consent, freedom, and power are actively redefined and constructed.

Keywords: *Dark Romance; Gender Representation; Power Dynamics; Post-Feminism; Eroticization*

Introduction

"He steps into me, and my mouth involuntarily snaps shut. His presence is powerful and invokes my will to bend to him. Whether I want it to or not."

-H. D. Carlton in *Haunting Adeline*

This passage, taken from *Haunting Adeline*, is not merely a moment of romantic tension. It encapsulates one of the building components of the dark romantic fantasy: the ambiguity between coercion and consent. Is it always "his" powerful presence and "her" inability to speak? In line with this, the research intends to evaluate the predominant mode of representing gender and the power dynamics between characters in the dark romance genre. In doing so, it aims to discover recurring themes and constructions.

Over the centuries, tales of love have taken many forms, appeared in every country, and infiltrated numerous different genres. Hence, what characterises the romance genre in itself has been the subject of lively discussion among scholars and readers as well. For example, Regis (2003; 22) defines romance novels as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines". Kamblé (2014; 15) attempts to expand this definition ideologically; in her view, 'romance' rather denotes what is "the erotic, the desirable, the pleasurable" for the reader "under modernity and postmodernity".

In the 2010s, dark romance has become an increasingly popular and distinctive subgenre of contemporary romance, primarily due to the emergence of online "bookish" spaces. At first glance, the reason for its prominence seems clear. While still adhering to some of the standards mentioned above, unlike regular romance, it promises a focus on more complex, ambiguous, and oftentimes taboo tropes within the context of a relationship. Favoured topics repeatedly include stalking, violence in and outside of the relationship, emotional manipulation, bullying, forbidden attraction, and the provocation of moral and legal bounds. However, further inspection reveals fixed and essential ideals about femininity and masculinity (both as bodily attributes and personal capacities), as well as a clear vision of who holds either physical or emotional control within and social influence outside the bond, barely covered by a shallow storyline of empowerment and passion. This fact becomes concerning when one considers the genre's almost limitless accessibility due to the internet and its highly supportive online community, which primarily caters to female audiences.

Media consumption is not a passive act, and the immersion in these supportive digital spaces and the narrative's focus on emotional gratification risks the popularization and internalization of values that do not promote equality. When structural inequality and coercive control are consistently framed and accepted as passion it further complicates the reader's critical distance. Therefore, the systematic analysis of five of the most widely read and recommended dark romance novels is necessary to understand the underlying narratives of this popular subgenre. During the study, the research questions were the following: Firstly, how is gender portrayed in dark romance novels? Secondly, how are power imbalances depicted and justified within the relationship of the characters?

To answer these questions and conduct the research, five prominent dark romance novels were chosen by purposive sampling. The texts were identified through the biggest global online reading platform: *Goodreads*. Not only is it the most popular site within the dark romance reading community, but it also provides a measurable indicator for a text's cultural reach. The selection criteria prioritized high readership and positive reception, as well as feedback, to ensure that the chosen novels clearly represented the genre's mainstream appeal. Specifically, books needed to be published within the last ten years, possess a high number of ratings to indicate widespread readership, and have a predominantly positive rating distribution (i.e., a high percentage of 5 or 4-star ratings on a 5-point scale). Furthermore,

novels with fantastical elements were excluded, so that the analysed power dynamics are grounded in "real-life" social constructs rather than attributed to supernatural explanations.

Based on these criteria, the following five novels were selected for analysis:

1. *Twisted Love* by Ana Huang (2021)
2. *Haunting Adeline* by H. D. Carlton (2021)
3. *Butcher & Blackbird* by Brynne Weaver (2023)
4. *Credence* by Penelope Douglas (2020)
5. *Lights Out* by Navessa Allen (2024)

The texts were then examined to identify reappearing themes using *discourse analysis*. This approach enables a critical and contextual examination of the forms in which representations of gender differences and descriptions of power relations are constructed and sustained within the genre. Specifically, the focus remained on the identification of discursive constructions and strategies used within the narratives. For example, how specific words were used to recode behaviour, how the texts consistently contrasted femininity and masculinity, or how the dual point-of-view structure was used. The theoretical framework guiding this process was *a postfeminist sensibility* established by Rosalind Gill. Before the textual analysis, a hybrid approach was employed to develop a thematic coding system. On the one hand, the initial codes were informed by prevailing concepts of postfeminist sensibility. On the other hand, this coding framework was regularly updated to account for emerging tropes. Consequently, the findings during the analysis were registered in a codebook. The codes were organized into two main categories, corresponding to the two primary research questions: **Gender Representation** and **Power Dynamics**. Under **Gender Representation**, the codes primarily captured descriptions of physical appearance, sexual attractiveness, and differences in personality traits, which were essentially used to denote a specific gender. Under **Power Dynamics**, the codes collected information about who held emotional and physical control, whether wealth, influence, or social status imbalance was presented as desirable, or whether the violence and brutality of the hero was redeemed or forgotten through the power of love or attraction. In addition to these initial codes, two prominent themes emerged. First, there were many instances where the male protagonist rescued or protected the female main character due to her own inability to do so. Second, the themes of agency and choice, or rather their illusion, were also included, and they will be reflected upon later in the paper along with the other themes. After completing the codebook, the analytical process involved several steps. First, each novel was read for the purpose of familiarization. Second, during the second closer reading, relevant passages were categorized into the coding framework. While the analysis was purely thematic and not quantitative, a little over 200 distinct passages across the five novels were coded. Once finished, the collection of codes was grouped by major themes and synthesized to outline patterns both within and across the novels. Reliability was ensured through the creation of a detailed codebook with clear definitions that are summarized in Figure 1 below.

MAIN CATEGORY	CODE	DESCRIPTION
GENDER REPRESENTATION	**Femininity as Bodily Property**	Descriptions that link the heroine's physical appearance to her identity and value.
	Masculinity as Bodily Property	Descriptions that link the hero's physical attributes to his identity and power.
	Gendered Personality Binary	Attribution of opposing personality traits based on gender.
POWER DYNAMICS	**Dominance-Submission Dynamic**	Descriptions of the hero exerting physical or emotional control and the heroine's corresponding submission.
	Eroticization of Inequality	Narrative framing of pre-existing imbalances (e.g., wealth, age, status) as desirable or sexually charged.
	Redemption through Attraction	The use of the heroine's attraction to excuse or forgive the hero's violent actions.
EMERGING THEMES	**Male Saviour and Female Victim**	Scenarios where the hero must rescue the helpless heroine from an external threat.
	The Illusion of Choice	Narrative framing of the heroine's submission as an active, empowered, and freely made choice.

Figure 1 *Summary of Thematic Codes*

The following section will situate the central argument of this study within existing scholarship on romance, gender, and power.

Whither Dark Romance

Romance fiction has long been a site for critical examination. Initially, the criticism of the genre only went as far as to condemn its adherence to traditional gender norms, patriarchal ideals, and formulaic construction. However, many scholars now recognize that analysing romance novels and literature in general with greater attention is a crucial endeavour. This shift in perspective does not invalidate earlier critiques but rather supplements them by acknowledging the culture-shaping and ideological power of romance, a multi-billion-dollar publishing industry. Indeed, as Spivak (1985; 243) posits, "the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored". Consequently, to this day, there is a widespread consensus among critics that romance, on one hand, functions as an instrument for reinforcing patriarchal values by either making them seem natural, inevitable, or desirable, even when they appear to protest them (Ebert, 1988; Radway, 1991). On the other hand, Radway (1991) also establishes the act of romance reading as a way for the reader to momentarily escape the confines of everyday tradition and the usual order of being a wife or a mother. So, romance fiction becomes "compensatory" in the sense that what readers do not receive in their daily life, like nurturing, emotional stability, and satisfaction, they reclaim in reading. An additional perspective on the function of romance offered by Modleski (2008) argues that, apart from simple escapism, for many women, it provides symbolic resolutions to real-life contradictions and anxieties, especially concerning powerlessness within a patriarchal society. If romance reading is used in this way, it raises various questions. One must consider whether this resolution is truly liberating if it is through a text that is argued to be reinforcing the

very power structure that the reader tried to escape. Nonetheless, through time, the observed purpose of the romance genre and romance reading has been manifolded and continues to serve as a basis for debate. Apart from its role, another highly contested, but arguably the most widely discussed field of research, is the genre's typical way of constructing its female and male main characters.

Earlier scholarly works often defined the "traditional" heroine and hero by specific characteristics related to social standing, sexual experience, and physical attributes. In many cases, the two characters were complete opposites. For example, many researchers have found that heroines are regularly depicted as young (or at least younger than the male lead), innocent, sexually inexperienced, relatively poor, and emotional to the point of irrationality. In contrast, the hero is typically older, experienced, wealthy, powerful, rational, and always in an authoritative position (Leedy, 1985; Ebert, 1988; Modleski, 2008). These contrasting traits can be viewed within the broader tradition of the male/female or masculine/feminine dualism, which Butler (2006) argues is neither inevitable nor a reflection of reality, but rather a "regulatory fiction" maintained through cultural constraints. In this framework, the continuous separation of the hero and heroine into mutually exclusive and highly essentialized categories serves to justify what Butler (2006) terms the "heterosexual matrix". This matrix operates through a logic in which gender, biological sex, and desire must align and make perfect sense. Furthermore, Butler (2006) argues that gender, rather than being a fixed identity, is maintained through the "stylized repetition of acts". While Butler applies her concept of gender performativity to human subjects in the real world, it is also revealing when applied to literary analysis. Fictional characters, by definition, exist only through the descriptions and actions provided by the narrative of the text. Thus, they are purely performative entities. The hero is seen as strong, rational, and dominant because the narrative creates an illusion of it through the repeated performance of authoritative and controlling acts. Similarly, and in relation to that, the narrative of romance establishes the heroine as the emotional and submissive one by continuously showing her enacting this submission scene by scene. However, a performance inevitably requires an audience to interpret its success. Without the reader's complicity in accepting these gendered acts as romantic, the performativity would not be successful.

Hence, in Radway's understanding, the readers' point of view is imperative in establishing archetypes of femininity and masculinity, which constitute "ideal" and "failed" romances. According to Radway (1991), both the "ideal" heroine and hero balance contradictory elements. In the case of the heroine, it means being intelligent and independent, but at the same time still sexually inexperienced, nurturing, and beautiful without being aware of it. Being strong yet gentle, masculine yet caring, sexually experienced, and possessing a high social status comprised the preferred archetype for the hero. Consequently, a romance was considered to "fail" when, most notably, the hero's violence was not justifiable and rationalizable as misguided signs of passion, or when the heroine was shown on the pages as promiscuous. Similarly, Modleski (2008) also identifies that the male protagonist's violence is often reinterpreted as a sign of love or as a defence against the overwhelming passion the heroine inspires in him. In this sense, the narrative conflates aggression and passion and conceals sexual desire by the need for control. The overwhelming love and attraction, which can lead to violence and control, can be examined through the theoretical lens of the "gaze". Mulvey's (1989) still highly influential concept of the "male gaze" posits that in patriarchal visual culture, the male is the active "bearer of the look", while the female is the passive image to be looked at. Applying this idea to traditional romance narratives, the heroine is frequently described through the hero's appreciative eyes or her own surveillant one, turning her body into a source of desire and spectacle. Columpar (2002; 32) concludes that Mulvey's proposed male gaze is "one that controls; to be precise, it is one that not only objectifies women, but also aligns itself with the power to act, to move the narrative forward". However, the romance genre in general presents a contradiction to Mulvey's theory, as the writers, consumers, and main characters of the texts are most of the time women. In this sense, can a female gaze be possible? If yes, how would it function? Could it be just as objectifying? Gamman (1988) supposes that one way the female gaze operates on screen, although it is highly marginalized, is through humour, or the mockery of its sexist male

counterpart. For Columpar (2002; 41), however, a theory of any gaze, be it male, ethnographic, or colonial, cannot be inclusive until it can "accommodate the complexities of multiple identities" and the intersection of various forms of oppression. So, trying to define a single female gaze might be quite reductionist.

However, recent scholarship has noted a shift toward less stereotypical characterization. The modern romance heroine is increasingly depicted as independent, highly educated, career-focused, and resistant to male domination (Arvanitaki, 2015). Additionally, they are shown to be sexually experienced and actively pursuing pleasure for the sake of pleasure, while, at the same time, they go through a narrative "re-virginization", which means having the first truly fulfilling experience with the hero (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Arvanitaki, 2015). Concurrent with the evolution of the heroine, Arvanitaki (2015) argues that the modern hero exhibits greater emotional depth, increased sensitivity, but a stronger adherence to traditional values compared to his earlier versions.

Despite these shifts in characterization, it remains a common assertion in the scholarly literature that the heroine stands incomplete and flawed until the moment she unites with the hero. It is the ultimate fulfilment of her existence to have his love, to be married, and to be a mother (Leedy, 1985; Radway, 1991). Christian-Smith (1990) goes as far as to say that, in the romance genre, it is through the transformative power of a man's love that one "becomes" a woman who is strong, self-confident, and purposeful. In this sense, the "happy ending" is the reward the heroine receives for successfully performing the gendered script assigned to her. Therefore, the heroine's identity is ultimately tied to the patriarchal structure in which she lives. It does not make sense for her to try to break free from the hero's domination because her very existence as a woman within the text depends on her relation to his power. This aligns with Butler's (1997) concept of subjection. The subject is not merely oppressed by power but is actually formed through it and only comes into existence by submitting to the structures that name and subordinate them (Butler, 1997). In the romance novel, the heroine must submit to the hero's authority in order to be recognized as a subject worthy of love and protection.

In her recent study, Arvanitaki (2019) contends that most popular romance novels follow a distinct three-phase trajectory: the heroine moves from a pre-feminist past of male oppression, in a reaction to which she takes up popular feminist ideas, through a neoliberal present, in which she becomes self-sufficient and independent, to a post-feminist state where romantic love tramples all other ambitions, and she willingly accepts her subordination in a heterosexual relationship. In one of Arvanitaki's (2015; 167) previous studies, she also influentially claims that the universal "happy-ever-after" ending works as a form of "socialization towards heterosexuality and monogamy". Postfeminism is a crucial theory to expand here, as several of its understandings are highly contested. For the purpose of analysing the romance genre, postfeminism is not employed as a backlash against feminism or as a historical shift, but rather as a subtle approach. Gill (2007) argues that postfeminism is a complex cultural sensibility that reshapes how gender, choice, and power are represented and possibly analysed in contemporary media. While McRobbie (2009) refers to this as a "double entanglement", wherein feminist concepts are simultaneously acknowledged, taken for granted, and renounced. The romance genre adapts by shifting its focus to individual choice. The neoliberal ideology inherent in postfeminism emphasizes self-surveillance, self-discipline, and individual agency (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). The regulation of women is no longer just an outside force but is internalized by the subject herself. One example that consistently shows up in recent media is representing women not as objects to be looked at, but as active, "desiring sexual subjects" who seemingly hold the power over their own objectification (Gill, 2007). Being the object of the hero's desire is not subordination but rather validation for successful self-discipline. The framing of the heroine as a freely choosing individual relies on the assumption of a self that exists prior to the narrative. However, Davies (1991) offers a poststructuralist critique that questions this assumption. In Davies's (1991, p. 42) understanding, "existence as persons has no fundamental essence", but rather, subjects are "spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses". Hence, the romance heroine can be said to be continuously constituted and reconstituted by the conflicting

discourses (such as romantic love, submission, independence, and desire) of the text. What power could be afforded to her if this understanding is a clear step away from that form of agency that is conceived of as the capacity to resist and subvert norms? Davies (1991; 46) suggests that power can be located in her capacity as a "speaking/writing subject", who has the ability to "move within and between discourses", seeing how they subject her, and using "the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse or go beyond the other". Strictly speaking, a literary character is an object written by an author, not a subject who writes themselves. However, particularly in the first-person narratives common to the genre, the heroine and the hero can be said to function as the speaking subjects constructing their reality through their narration. The capability for speech is further complicated if one considers the heroine as occupying a subaltern position. Spivak (1988) argues, mainly referring to the colonial subject, that the female subaltern is subjected to epistemic violence, which is a form of silencing enacted by the patriarchal structure she inhabits. The subaltern is deprived of any discursive tools to represent themselves, and any attempt to speak is inevitably translated into the language of the dominant power structure (Spivak, 1988).

The existing scholarship shows that there has been a persistent interest in the portrayal of women, men, and their relationships. Critiques observed a definite effort to move towards less archetypal and more complex characters in mainstream publishing. However, this seemingly almost linear progress in some respects is complicated, if not outright contradicted by the immense popularity of the subgenre of dark romance, which pushes these modern tropes into extremely transgressive directions. Additionally, it also situates coercion and the aggression of the hero, already present in some of the traditional cases, within contemporary settings. While scholars have extensively analysed traditional and contemporary romance, a significant gap remains in the critical examination of dark romance. Scholarly literature has yet to address how this relatively new subgenre takes the very elements that would define a "failed" romance in Radway's framework (promiscuity, unjustified brutality, violence, and coercion) and turns them into the central force of its romantic fantasy. Alternatively, how an act like stalking can be read as an extreme and violent form of the male gaze. It is, in many ways, several steps backward from the recent findings' positive outlook on progress. Yet, it reveals a persistent, if perhaps unconscious, desire within the readers to engage with the topic of domination and the fantasy of absolute male control. All of it considered, this study will address this gap by systematically analysing how dark romance novels construct, justify, eroticize, and essentialize power imbalances.

Naturalizing Inequality, Eroticizing Control, And Choosing Subordination

This section presents the findings of the discourse analysis of five popular dark romance novels. The process was guided by the two research questions concerning the portrayal of gender and the mechanisms through which power imbalances are justified. Three major themes emerged from the novels, which will be presented in turn: the construction of an ideal femininity and masculinity, the eroticization of male control, and the illusion of choice.

The Construction of an Ideal Femininity and Masculinity

"The softness of my body molding against the hard ridges of his."
-H. D. Carlton in *Haunting Adeline*

In dark romance novels, femininity and masculinity are first and foremost established through an overdramatized image of the body. It is the most rigorously repeated difference. However, apart from the physicality, there is a stark difference between the personality traits and occupations of the characters.

In the case of the female protagonists, it is clear that their appearance is their primary attribute that leads to the hero's attraction and obsession. The narrative often draws attention to their incomparable beauty, lithe frames, but still having curves in all the right places, along with long hair, soft skin, lusty eyes, and perfectly shaped mouths. In contrast, the male main characters are depicted as physically strong, muscular, exceptionally tall, with broad shoulders, sharp jawlines, and calloused hands from hard labour. Additionally, many of them have scars from traumatic pasts that explain much of their motivation during the story. In almost all cases, these already sharp bodily differences were further dramatized to an unbelievable level during sexual scenes. For instance, in *Haunting Adeline*, this is evident through examples such as: "He's so much bigger, his body enveloping me until all I can see, feel, and smell is him" and "You are ten times larger than me…" (Carlton, 2021, Chapter 15 & Chapter 26). Similarly, in *Lights Out*, at the beginning of the main characters' intimate scene, the heroine thinks: "He was so much bigger than me, so much stronger" and that "This man could do serious harm to me" (Allen, 2024, Chapter 11). There are an almost tangible fear and a possibility for violent escalation that accompanies, or arguably indicates desire, in all of these excerpts. The blurring of the line between terror and passion is a recurring trend in all five novels and a well-known component of the genre. While there are always multiple points of view, meaning the reader experiences scenes from both the heroine and the hero, this uncertainty and anxiety are consistently shown through the female character's lens. On the contrary, it is only the hero who can feel confident and physically aroused safely.

The description of personality traits and subsequently the career paths of the protagonists are other dimensions through which additional dissimilarities were demonstrated. The consistent attributes of women are being naive, sassy, emotional, and naturally nurturing. At the same time, men are often perceived as being smart, cold, calculated, but irrationally hot-headed and violent when it comes to the "safety" of their loved ones. Innocence was only a defining trait for two heroines: the then seventeen-year-old Tiernan in *Credence*, and Ava in *Twisted Love*, who is, using the words of the main male character, "Innocent, doe-eyed, and so sweet I could throw up" (Huang, 2021, Chapter 2). Following these descriptors, the fact that there is a tendency for female characters to be in careers that require more creativity and interpersonal skills (i.e., writer, photographer, and ER nurse) and male characters to be in positions of power (i.e., chief operating officer, head of an underground organization, and restaurant owner) might not come as a surprise. This division of labour clearly associates masculinity with public power and economic authority while linking femininity to the emotional and care-giving spheres.

The findings here remained consistent with earlier theories, which construct the two main characters as complete opposites in terms of physical attributes, wealth, social standing, and influence. The dark romance female protagonist also borrowed elements from Gill & Herdieckerhoff's (2006) modern heroine, meaning that, except for one case (Tiernan in *Credence*), all of them were sexually experienced and yet still underwent the narrative "re-virginization" upon their first sexual encounter with the hero.

Moreover, this relentless and continuous construction of the hero and the heroine not only as mutually exclusive opposites, but as two halves that are structurally required to create a whole together, coincides with Butler's (2006) previously discussed concept of the heterosexual matrix. By presenting these binaries as natural and complementary, the gendered subjects, in this case, the main characters, become "intelligible" only in relation to each other and their hierarchy. It further suggests that for a relationship to be successful, the characters must remain on their respective sides of the dualism.

The constitution of an ideal femininity and masculinity also includes what Gill (2007) viewed as "*femininity as a bodily property*" and "*sexualization of culture*", wherein women's bodies are essential for understanding their power and spirit, and their bodies are overtly presented erotically in media. The findings, however, suggest a similar trend for the treatment of men's bodies as well, which was not a substantial part of Gill's argument.

In the genre of dark romance, breaking out of what is idealized femininity and masculinity poses an unsolvable challenge, insofar as much of its charm and sexual appeal rests on these differentiated and biologically driven ideas.

The Eroticization of Male Control

> "*I'd just have to find some way to make her think it happened organically, and she wasn't falling for my dastardly plan to brainwash her into loving me by spoiling her rotten and playing into every desire she'd ever had."*
>
> -Navessa Allen in *Lights Out*

Central to the romantic fantasy is the dominance of the male protagonist over the heroine. This domination is shown through narratively justified violence and possessiveness, manipulation, and the passivity of the female protagonist.

Across the novels, there is a tendency to already introduce the characters in a manner that suggests a distinguishable power imbalance even before they officially meet or get to know each other better. Firstly, one way this dynamic is evident is through the contrasting levels of wealth and influence. An example of this can be found in *Twisted Love*, where the male protagonist is a multimillionaire and the chief operating officer of a successful company, while the heroine is still in college and simultaneously juggling two jobs. Secondly, another way the imbalance is made explicit is through a clear and sometimes concerning age gap. In *Credence*, the female main character is still in high school, starting out as a seventeen-year-old, then turning eighteen during the book. In contrast, her three love interests are all in their late thirties or early forties, followed by a twenty-two-year-old and a twenty-year-old. Thirdly, in two out of the five novels, the male love interests stalked and left anonymous letters or texts for the female main characters before meeting them in person. Stalking, in and of itself, is already a serious and highly violating crime, and in *Haunting Adeline*, it is taken to even greater extremes. The male protagonist, Zade, does not stop at watching through windows and writing ambiguous letters, but also mutilates and kills the men who come in contact with Adeline, all in the name of protection and jealousy. Here continues the narrative eroticization of control by framing this criminal violation as a symptom of overwhelming love. This obsessive surveillance can be interpreted as a literal manifestation of the male gaze. While the hero actively watches and follows, without consent, the heroine is his passive object of desire. The simple act of looking is transformed into a pre-emptive assertion of ownership.

Extreme possessiveness is a defining and universal trait of the male protagonists across all five novels. They were not only controlling but also unbelievably jealous and willing to use physical force to "protect" the heroine. Often, the hero refers to the heroine as his girl, his love, and his property. These instances, while portrayed as simply words of endearment, lose their intended meaning through the dangerous undercurrent of dark romance. In this genre, it is possible that the female protagonist may not be able to leave the hero even if she wanted to, after he calls her "mine". In this sense, love is equated with ownership, because as soon as the male main character "claims" the heroine, she is deprived of any further decisions regarding their relationship. Indeed, apart from the mental manipulation, this fact is also ensured by the already discussed physical superiority of the men of these novels. As Adeline in *Haunting Adeline* reflects, "this man could easily kill" her (Carlton, 2021, Chapter 21).

In the end, no matter how many deranged and nonsensical steps the hero takes (even going as far in some cases as physically hurting the heroine), all is well and forgotten. After the final conflict between the protagonist, a swift redemptive arc follows, wherein either due to the description of past trauma (presented in a way that inspires shock and understanding in the heroine and the reader), intense attraction, or an excessive confession of love, reconciliation happens. The reasons for justifying the hero's violence and control vary throughout the novels, although attraction plays a role in all. For example, in *Butcher & Blackbird*, Sloane expresses that leaving the hero would be a clever idea after being held by

the throat but ultimately decides to stay because she "still trusted him" (Weaver, 2023, Chapter 18). Another example is found in *Haunting Adeline*, where the heroine tries to rationalize Zade's brutality because he is "saving children and women from evil people" and "he's only ever turned into a psycho" for her (Carlton, 2021, Chapter 23). To even further illustrate, in *Credence*, it is reason enough that "dogs love him most, don't they?" (Douglas, 2020, Chapter 23). The narrative's simplistic resolution of trauma and abuse serves as a tool to minimize the severity of the hero's actions and falsely portray the heroine's forgiveness, not as a product of manipulation, but as her own redemptive love.

The narrative logic of this theme, meaning that extreme transgression is consistently resolved and romanticized, represents a significant departure from its predecessors. As established in the literature review, Radway (1991) defined a "failed" romance as one where the hero's violence was not justifiable. The findings here demonstrate that dark romance explicitly transforms this definition of failure, taking unjustifiable brutality, violence, and coercion and turning them into its most desirable and erotic element. While Arvanitaki's (2019) three-phase trajectory of the romance narrative is insightful, dark romance represents a radical extension of this model, where the final "post-feminist state" is not just subordination, but an embrace of an abusive dynamic. Therefore, the dark romance is not just a more modern version of the romance novel, but a definitive regression that elevates the elements of troubling ideas into a seemingly popular romantic fantasy.

The Illusion of Choice

> "*You can always tell me to stop," he said.*
> *No, I couldn't. Because then he would win. He'd had almost all the power in our dynamic from the start, and I couldn't bring myself to give him any more by tapping out."*
> -Navessa Allen in *Lights Out*

This quote from *Lights Out* highlights the paradox that lies almost hidden beneath the narratives of dark romance. The novels present the heroine with a choice, which ultimately leads her to willingly embrace her subordination, which is portrayed as an act of empowerment rather than defeat.

In the first few chapters of most of these novels, the reader meets a single, independent woman who follows her passions and successfully navigates her job. For instance, Adeline is an indie writer hosting her own book signing event, and Aly is an ER nurse dedicating much of her time to caring for people. In these initial parts, there was also some resistance to the predicament the heroine finds herself in because of the hero. This resistance is essential, as it creates the illusion that the female protagonist is not a passive victim, but an equal partner in the narrative.

However, as established in the first two themes, this vision is functionally powerless due to the overwhelming physical, situational, and social dominance of the hero. His actions often deny her consent altogether, rendering her protests ineffective in turn. The heroine can no longer say 'stop' or 'enough' and achieve her intentions. The only choice after this is between rationalizing the dominance of the male protagonist or taking blame for her inaction. This is exemplified when, after Zade forces himself on her, Adeline thinks, "I did this to myself. I know I did. I instigated him—pushed against him when he warned me what would happen" (Carlton, 2021, Chapter 18). Similarly, Tiernan concludes that she is "the only one who hurts" herself (Douglas, 2020, Chapter 27). The only "power", then, that the heroine is afforded is the power to consent to her own subordination. This narrative resolution is the genre's perhaps most insidious move. In the world of dark romance, the heroine "wins" love by accepting that she was always destined to lose.

The resolution where submission is framed as victory is deeply postfeminist. It illustrates the postfeminist subject's belief that they are "autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities

or power imbalances whatsoever" (Gill, 2007, p. 260). The modern dark romance heroine is no longer a passive victim of patriarchal structures, but she actively "chooses" her own fate. If she enters an unequal or even abusive relationship with the hero, the narrative frames this not as a loss of power, but as an exercise of her "agency". It is precisely within this imagined freedom that the dark romance heroine finds herself and so willingly walks into her "cage", which reformulates her subordination as a choice. So, when the heroine's initial resistance is overwritten by desire, when finally, she speaks the word of love, and when she consents to the happily-ever-after, Spivak's (1988) theory compels the reader to question the authenticity behind this speech. Here, Spivak's (1988) framework is employed as an analogous tool to explore another layer of the dark romance heroine's situation. The heroine exists within a quite closed narrative system where the normalization and rationalization of the hero's logic, wealth, and violence constitute reality. Using Spivak's (1988) ideas is not an attempt to equate the fictional, often white, heroine's experience with the real-world trauma of the subaltern subject, but rather to use her concept of epistemic violence. This allowed for an interrogation of how a dominant patriarchal discourse can "speak for" a marginalized subject. So, is the heroine speaking, or has the narrative effectively silenced her desires and replaced them with a preconceived notion of what she "needs"? The dark romance heroine is silenced because the narrative provides no vocabulary other than the language if her pursuer. The final "choice", then, is not an expression of her agency, but perhaps the ultimate sign of her successful assimilation into the viciously obvious patriarchal logic of dark romance.

Conclusion

This research conducted a discourse analysis of the portrayal of gender and the eroticization of power and control by critically examining the content of five popular dark romance novels. The findings of this study demonstrate that these novels operate on a concerning framework that is designed to romanticize and eventually justify power imbalances within a romantic context. The narrative begins with the construction of an essentialist view of gender, in which femininity and masculinity serve to establish the initial power difference before the plot even begins. Then, on this foundation, the novels build their central fantasy of eroticizing male control and reframing domination and coercion as signs of passion. Finally, dark romance concludes with a defining paradox, an illusion of a choice, in which the heroine voluntarily accepts her subordination through her own act of "agency".

These novels provide a revealing look into the contradictory ways of understanding contemporary love by creating a world where dominance is passion and submission is an empowered choice. The popularity of the novels suggests a yearning for unlimited and unquestionably possessive devotion in the current times, but they depict that passion in a strongly unequal and controlling dynamic.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the findings are based on a small, purposive sample of five popular novels, and while those were selected for their popularity to capture the genre's mainstream appeal, the findings are not generalizable to the entire subgenre of dark romance. A different selection, perhaps focusing on more niche works, might have revealed slightly different themes. Secondly, this research is a textual analysis, so it cannot make claims about how readers interpret these novels. Readers may question or even resist the ideology identified in this analysis. Thirdly, as with all qualitative research, a degree of subjectivity is inherent in the interpretation. Additionally, another theoretical framework might have resulted in different insights. These limitations could also inspire the future possibilities of this research. The next logical step would be to move beyond textual analysis and conduct interviews with readers of dark romance. Such research could explore how readers interpret and internalize the message of the genre, providing a valuable counterpart to this study. Another area for future research could be the examination of the political economy and cultural factors that contributed to the immense popularity of dark romance among women.

While the interpretation of the audience and the long-term cultural impact of these novels remain unknown, this study confirms that dark romance is not merely escapist fiction, but rather an expressive contemporary space where ideas about love, consent, freedom, and power are actively redefined and constructed. Accordingly, viewed through a postfeminist lens, dark romance is not just a simple rejection of feminist ideals, but rather the use of its language to make a deeply patriarchal fantasy palatable.

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Compliance with ethical standards
This article does not contain any studies with human participants. The research consists of a critical analysis of published literary texts. All quotations from the primary sources are used for the purpose of criticism and review, in accordance with guidelines and the copyright permissions stated within the analysed works.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions
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