

'Boys, too, can be objects of desire': Psychic and Erotic Domination in Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020)

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ENG Abstract: The present paper aims to analyze the psychic nature of the female protagonist in Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020), as well as her relationships with other characters. For this purpose, I will use psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity. Benjamin's intersubjectivity "reorients the conception of the psychic world from a subject's relations to its object toward a subject meeting another subject". For my analysis, I will focus on concepts such as recognition, a process of identification with the other, and destruction, a process which allows the individual to go beyond identification with the other and, consequently, to perceive them as a separate self. In Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts*, Irina is a photographer who specializes in takes explicit pictures of "interesting"-looking men. The offer of an exhibition at a gallery in London triggers a tailspin of self-destructive behavior partly centered around Irina's relationship with her best friend, Flo. The analysis of Irina's psyche and her bonds with Flo and other characters will lead us to conclude that the aforementioned theories provide us with an enriching ground for uncovering the intricacies and what lies at the core of Irina's psychic nature.

Keywords: Jessica Benjamin, Eliza Clark, contemporary fiction, domination, intersubjectivity

ES Los chicos también pueden ser objeto de deseo': dominación psíquica y erótica en *Boy Parts* de Eliza Clark (2020)

Resumen: El presente trabajo pretende analizar la naturaleza psíquica de la protagonista femenina de *Boy Parts* (2020), de Eliza Clark, así como sus relaciones con otros personajes. Para ello, utilizaré la teoría de la intersubjetividad de la psicoanalista Jessica Benjamin. La intersubjetividad de Benjamin "reorienta la concepción del mundo psíquico desde las relaciones de un sujeto con su objeto hacia un sujeto que se encuentra con otro sujeto". Para el análisis, me centraré en conceptos como reconocimiento, un proceso de identificación con el otro, y destrucción, un proceso que permite al individuo ir más allá de la identificación con el otro y, en consecuencia, percibirlo como un sujeto diferente al yo. En *Boy Parts*, Irina es una fotógrafa que se dedica a hacer fotos explícitas de hombres de aspecto "interesante". Cuando le ofrecen presentar una exposición en una galería de Londres, se desencadena en Irina una espiral de comportamiento autodestructivo centrado, en parte, en la relación con su mejor amiga, Flo. El análisis de la psique de Irina y de sus vínculos con Flo y otros personajes nos llevará a concluir que las teorías mencionadas nos proporcionan un marco esclarecedor para desvelar los entresijos y lo que subyace en la naturaleza psíquica de Irina.

Palabras clave: Jessica Benjamin, Eliza Clark, novela contemporánea, dominación, intersubjetividad

Contents: 1. Introduction; 2. Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity; 3. Domination in Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020); 4. Conclusions.

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1. Introduction

Psychologically complex female characters are currently thriving in contemporary fiction written in English. Since the beginning of the 2010s, we can notice the presence of an increasingly established trend of novels written by young female authors that explore the psychological depths of their (anti-)heroines, as well as their appetites (whether they be sexual, emotional or physical) and the psychic configuration of their relationships

with other characters. *Boy Parts* by Eliza Clark (Newcastle, 1994), published in 2020, is a challenging work that explores themes of female identity and sexuality, power relations and violence.

In this paper, I will use Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic theory of intersubjectivity, rooted in object relations theory, to examine the psychic nature of Irina, the protagonist, as well as the power dynamics underlying her relationships with the rest of the characters in the novel. For this purpose, I will focus on the concepts of *recognition* and *destruction*, developed by Benjamin in *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (1995), and in how the failure to experience mutual recognition (to recognize the other and be recognized in return) results in a dynamic of domination, which Benjamin explores in her first work *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (1988). These processes are central to *Boy Parts*, as Irina's masked desire for recognition shapes her complex sense of self and the power dynamics underlying her relationships.

I will first carry out an overview of the main points of Benjamin's theory in section 2, starting with a brief summary of its precedents and then moving on to the concepts of *recognition* and *destruction*, as well as to the aforementioned process of mutual recognition, which is essential for our psychic development from the moment we are born and has an enormous impact on our self-love and self-esteem. Benjamin's interpretation of relationships of domination will also be further explored in this section. In section 3, I will assess the novel by drawing on these concepts and processes. I will take a close look at Irina's psychic life and at her relationships with other characters (her mother, her photography models and her friend Flo), the analysis of which will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of how both Irina's sense of self and her relationships are shaped.

2. Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity

Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's theories have been widely applied in literary analysis, particularly in feminist literary criticism. Her work has been crucial in developing a psychoanalytic approach to understanding gender and power relations in literary texts, some of them as influential as Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1996) or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). One of Benjamin's key concepts is the notion of "intersubjectivity," which refers to the dynamic relationship between individuals and the ways in which they are mutually constituted through their interactions with each other. This idea has been applied in literary analysis to examine the ways in which characters and their relationships are shaped by power dynamics and social structure. Similarly, Benjamin's interpretation of the concept of "recognition," which constitutes the base for intersubjectivity, has been used to explore the ways in which literary texts represent and challenge dominant power structures, as well as the ways in which characters seek to validate their own experiences and perspectives.

Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity has its origins in the object relations theory, which had D. W. Winnicott as its most influential analyst and proposed the notion of a self constructed through social relationships which includes attributes of the objects with which it is formed (Arias 2000, 20). In the 1970s, many women theorists made psychoanalytic revisions and chose the object relations theory as a theoretical framework because of its reliance on the preoedipal period and on the bond between mother and child as crucial to personal development (Arias 2000, 25). One of them was Jessica Benjamin, who introduced the concept of intersubjectivity in her work *The Bonds of Love* (1988).

2.1. The need for mutual recognition

The intersubjective theory can be framed in what is known as the "relational turn" in psychoanalysis. This relational turn stands for a change of focus from instinctual drives to the role of the internal representation of relations (both conscious and unconscious) (Pearlman and Brandell 2010, 74). In this way, intersubjectivity regards mental life as happening between different subjects and not merely within the individual. George E. Atwood and Robert D. Stolorow (2014) define it as the "intersection of two subjectivities" (6) or the "interplay of two differently organized subjective worlds" (101). Stephen A. Mitchell (2014), who is considered one of the founders of relational psychoanalysis, defines intersubjectivity as "the development of a sense of self as a personal, agentic subject in relation to other personal, agentic subjects" (59).

Jessica Benjamin, who started writing her theories in the late 80s and continues to be active to this day, states that "the other must be recognized as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other's presence" (Benjamin 1995, 30). This is the core idea of intersubjectivity, which entails that we have both the capacity of recognizing others as subjects and the need to be recognized by them (what Benjamin refers to as mutual recognition). Recognition refers to the ways in which individuals come to understand and acknowledge the subjective experience of others and is defined by Benjamin (1988) as "to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, ...love" (20). Benjamin asserts that the process of mutual recognition is crucial from the moment we encounter the first other or "the mother".¹ Benjamin (1995) views the capacity to recognize the first other as another subject as essential in early development, for the denial of the mother's subjectivity results in an inability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects (31).

Of course, the mother and the child's experiences are consequential, for the former's independent center needs to necessarily be outside the latter in order to be able to grant them the recognition they need and

¹ When Benjamin refers to the first other as "the mother", she is not exclusively referring to the biological one. The figure of the mother might also refer to an adoptive parent, any of the biological progenitors, a sibling or a caregiver.

seek. Only by asserting her own independent identity as a self, will the mother be able to give her child the recognition they need.

The need for mutual recognition results in a paradox. Because recognition stems from a response of the other which gives meaning to the self's feelings and actions, it grants the subject a concrete sense of their own agency. However, this response can only arise from an other who we understand to be a different subject (Benjamin 1988, 16). In Deborah M. Horvitz's (2000) words, it is "impossible for one's subjectivity to be recognized without a 'recognizer'; hence independence requires intimacy" (42). As a result, there is always going to be a tension, which starts to develop during the second year of life (Benjamin 1995, 35), between recognizing the other and asserting the self.

To explain this tension, Benjamin refers to Hegel's explanation of the matter in his work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), where he portrays the process as a struggle between the dependence upon the other (i.e. the need for recognition) and the independence of the self (the desire for complete autonomy). To establish the self as a distinct entity, recognition from the other is required, and in order to receive such recognition, the other must be acknowledged as a subject in return. In this way, being capable to recognize others is an essential requirement for achieving the assertion of the self's own identity. By doing this, the self unavoidably compromises their independence and absoluteness, since by acknowledging the other's existence as a distinct subject, they are, at least, opening themselves to the idea that they are equally independent and absolute. In Benjamin's (1995) words: "Each self wants to be recognized and yet to maintain its absolute identity: the self says, I want to affect you, the self wishes to affirm its absolute independence, even though its need for the other and the other's similar wish undercut that affirmation" (36).

The paradox's ideal result, seen from an intersubjective perspective, is for it to remain a constant equilibrium between asserting oneself and recognizing the other. Nevertheless, according to Hegel (1807), any essential tension is inevitably followed by a breakdown. Although this might be viewed as negative, Benjamin (1995) asserts that that this breakdown is an inherent characteristic of intersubjectivity. What matters is how this experience is interpreted and whether or not the self is successful in reestablishing the tension of mutual recognition.

Benjamin makes use of Winnicott's idea of destroying the object to explain this breakdown. The need to assert one's absoluteness overtakes the self at one point, and as a result, they neglect and deny everything outside their mental omnipotence. Winnicott refers to this as destruction. The act of destruction is what enables the self to go beyond recognizing the other through identification and projection so as to use them (transforming the subject into an object). However, the fantasy of destruction must inevitably collide with the other's reality (its existence as a subject). Thus, when we destroy the object, we discover whether the other does or does not survive destruction. When they do, we are able to acknowledge the other as real (and not as a mental product) and as a separate subject existing outside ourselves. Therefore, it is this process that enables us to maintain a relationship with an other who is objectively seen as an individual with independent existence (Winnicott 1971, 89-91). The process of destruction is, thus, more than just the restoring of the tension; it also provides the self with a sense of really discovering the other, allowing them to experience love (Benjamin 1995, 40). The result of this procedure encapsulates the fundamental feature of intersubjectivity: recognizing in the other the similarity of inner experience while also acknowledging the difference.

2.2 The dynamics of domination

Sometimes, after the destruction of the other, the self is unable to restore the tension. Should this occur, the "intricate dance" between recognition and assertion gives place to domination, a struggle for control and power where assertion is transformed into aggression (Schapiro 1991, 196). Domination begins with an attempt to deny the self's dependence on the first other. Nevertheless, outside the fantasy of destruction, it is practically impossible to be totally independent from the other. Two outcomes are possible if the infant is unable to let go out the fantasy of omnipotence. The first one is that the subject will understand that it is possible for them to be totally independent without recognizing the other. In this case, the child believes their mother to be a "servant", an "extension of [their] will" who "does as [they] command" (Benjamin 1988, 55). As a result, the infant is likely to be unable to understand that the other is a different subject: they are just an object which they possess and have control over. The second outcome is for the infant to perceive the mother as omnipotent and godlike, and themselves as helpless and powerless. In such cases, what seems to be an acceptance of the fact that they depend on the other is actually a disguise of the attempt to maintain control by staying connected to them. In Benjamin's (1988) words: "I am good and powerful because I am exactly like my good and powerful mother wishes me to be" (55). In this instance, the self is denying their own subjectivity because they assume they will never be acknowledged as a separate subject.

In both of the cases described above, one of the two parts of the relationship is being deprived from recognition. In the first one, where the subject is unable to accept that they are dependent on someone they cannot control, the reaction is to subjugate the other. In other words, the self obliges the other to grant them recognition without recognizing them in return. In the second case, the self is being denied recognition, so their actions and wishes become void of meaning. Consequently, they can do nothing to alter the attitude of the other, who is extremely far above them, so the only outcome that the agency of the self finds is submission. This is a description of the so-called dialectic of control: "If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist" (Benjamin 1988, 56).

As has been previously explained, the initial destruction that accompanies the original breakdown is often regarded as part of the process of assertion: the self destroys the other in order to achieve mutual

recognition. At this point, destruction is essentially innocent, as the child never intends to inflict any pain. Nevertheless, when destruction fails, the aggression (destruction) is directed towards the self and the sense of omnipotence is encouraged. When the child internalizes this aggression and takes on the masochistic position, they understand the nature of the pain they are able to inflict to the other. It is at this point of internalization where real sadism (i.e. the wish to make the other suffer as the self themselves have) emerges. In short, "aggression, internalized as masochism, reappears as sadism" (Benjamin 1988, 70).

Frequently, mutual understanding is restored and the child is able to feel the presence of the other again. However, when the infant's parents do not set boundaries to their infant's fantasy of destruction (when they allow the toddler to abuse their mother or father), they will continue to attack the other and fuel their fantasy of omnipotence. This is the typical sadistic child (Benjamin 1988, 70-71). On the contrary, the typical masochistic child has experienced not absence of limits, but retaliation (materialized as either withdrawal or punishment). The destruction of the other is carried out only at the level of the fantasy: in reality, the self will never test whether the parent will or will not survive. The absence of a viable external other has a negative impact on their capacity for self-assertion. As a consequence, the masochist comes to believe that they will never be recognized by the other as an independent entity (Benjamin 1988, 73). What underlies sadism is, consequently, the wish to successfully recognize the other. With regard to its counterpart, masochism, it is the desire to be recognized. In this sense, both the sadist's and the masochist's attitudes are ambiguous, as they simultaneously contain the reproduction of a childhood frustration and the desire to live a new experience in order to compensate it (Benjamin 1988, 12).

Even within a relationship of domination, the tension between recognition and assertion need to be sustained. Since this can only be achieved by maintaining a contradiction, and in a relationship of domination each of the subjects can only embody one side of the tension and not the two of them as one, in psychoanalytic terms we consider that there is a split. The two sides are only available to the subject as mutually exclusive alternatives, and by embracing one they are projecting the opposite option into the other (Benjamin 1988, 65). Thus, in the mind of the subject, self and other are depicted as split into two halves rather than as independent wholes in their own right.

The fact that each of the partners represents only one side of the tension makes it difficult for it not to break. According to Georges Bataille (1976), the primary issue in this form of relationship is that "the slave by accepting defeat has lost the quality without which he is unable to recognize the conqueror so as to satisfy him. The slave is unable to give the master the satisfaction without which the master can no longer rest" (12). Because the slave has been entirely dehumanized due to the master's neglect of their subjectivity, the latter becomes progressively isolated. At the same time, the slave worries that the master will abandon them because they will eventually grow tired of being with a non-person (Benjamin 1988, 66).

The tension between subjugation and resistance will therefore finally vanish once the slave's unreality takes hold, with death or abandonment emerging as the process' unavoidable conclusion. According to Benjamin (1988), "this ambiguity is appropriate because for the masochist the intolerable end is abandonment, while for the sadist it is the death (or murder) of the other, whom he destroys" (67).

We could say, then, that whatever the outcome, the sadomasochistic relationship tends to culminate in numbness, which is, indeed, rather ironic taking into account that such a type of relation is precisely introduced in order to restore a tension that had previously been broken. Although it happens frequently, this outcome is not inescapable because it results from the struggle to maintain the tension between assertion and recognition rather than from the subjects' tendency toward zero tension (the people in sadomasochistic relationships do not actually want the tension to dissolve; instead, they find satisfaction in risking its balance). In a similar manner to the original breakdown, the result depends on whether the other survives or not after being destroyed.

In a way, if the sadist succeeds in turning the masochist into a non-person, he "defeats his own purpose" (Horvitz 2000, 59), as what he is truly searching is for an other who survives destruction. However, it is still important to note that this search is conditioned by the disappointment of an other who did not survive in the original breakdown. As for the adult masochist, they find a surviving other just like they did in infancy. Nevertheless, once again, the self is lost in the process. When the masochist endures the destruction of the sadist while remaining intact, the first and most important condition for freedom is established for the sadist, who interprets this as love. In a similar way, the masochist experiences love in the action of submitting to pain in the presence of the sadist, an other who they trust and who fully understands their suffering because they themselves are in charge of inflicting it (Benjamin 1988, 70). Thus, relationships of domination must be understood in terms of two subjects who both desire to be absolute, and they are not the result of the repression of the desire for recognition, but rather its transposition. It has its origin in the first breakdown of the tension between the assertion of the self and the recognition of the original other. The person then either identifies with or submits to an all-powerful other who embodies the fantasy of omnipotence. For the person who takes the role of the master, there is a void where the other is supposed to be (since, after the process of destruction, said other has not survived). This is compensated by a fantasy in which the other appears as either extremely dangerous or extremely weak (or both), so the self feels threatened and feels the urge to control them.

This gives place to the development of a vicious circle, in which the more the master subjugates the slave, the less the latter is recognized as a subject and the more pain the former must inflict upon them. With regard to the role of the slave, their acts and identity are never recognized. Nevertheless, they usually remain in love with the ideal of independence that they have been neglected to experience (Benjamin 1988, 215). The vicious circle can only be broken through the successful survival to destruction of the other. Such an event

would help sustain the tension between assertion and recognition, which accounts for the point where it all started: the need for mutual recognition.

3. Domination in Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020)

Eliza Clark was born in Newcastle and currently lives in London. Having previously published short horror fiction with *Tales to Terrify*, her debut novel *Boy Parts* was released by Influx Press in 2020 (Munchetty 2023). Eliza Clark is part of a revitalized anglophone literary scene where young women authors are becoming more and more concerned with female (anti-)heroines and their psychological nature and appetites, some examples being British authors Emma Jane Unsworth (*Animals*, 2019) and Lara Williams (*Supper Club*, 2019) or Americans Stephanie Danler (*Sweetbitter*, 2016) and Ottessa Moshfegh (*My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 2018). Clark has been included in the Granta 2023 Best of British Novelists list (Manley 2023), and *Boy Parts* was selected by the Women's Prize for Fiction association as one of the 10 aspirants for The Women's Prize x Good Housekeeping Futures Award (Women's 2023).

Although it has not yet received academic attention, Clark's debut novel has been acclaimed by critics. Jessica Andrews has labeled *Boy Parts* as "hallucinogenic, electric and sharp" (Andrews 2021). Masie Scott (2021), from *The Mancunion*, described it as "a talented piece of writing by a novelist who is set to be one to watch" and Chloë Ashby (2020) from *The Guardian* said about it that it "will make most readers howl with laughter and/or shut their eyes in horror". Similarly, Naga Munchetty (2023), from the Women's Prize for Fiction organization, stated that she is "very excited about more writing from Eliza" and that "[t]he bravery of writing a woman who readers are allowed to not like should be applauded". It is because of the novel's in-depth exploration of the relationship between female sexuality, power and violence, that I have chosen *Boy Parts* as an object of analysis for Benjamin's psychoanalytic theories.

Irina, a "survivor of sexual violence" and "less than casual drug user" (Lanigan 2020) works as a photographer who takes erotic pictures of young men, often in demeaning situation or engaging in an erotic master-slave roleplay, her being the master and the model being the slave. In order to understand her relationships with her models, friends and sexual partners, I am first going to briefly explore her relationship with her parents and, more particularly, with her mother.

Irina is known to have had absent parents who did not offer any kind of emotional support while she was growing up. She reminisces about when she was at school and had some trouble with Kevin, one of her classmates, and recalls that he was hiding while his father screamed at her, while her parents were not there to defend her. She also received no support from them when it came to pursuing a career in the Arts. As a result, Irina learns to do everything on her own and therefore internalizes that she cannot depend on the other, since in her original breakdown, there existed no feasible other to put a limit to her fantasy of destruction. She also constantly suffers from retaliation on the part of her mother, who we even see blaming her from getting hit while working in a bar:

'What on *earth* have you done to your face?' she glares. 'You are *far* too old to be getting in fights, Irina.' 'A drunk woman got me at work. I was trying to throw her out.' 'What, yourself?' I try to walk a few paces ahead of her, but she always catches up, even with her daft little legs. 'That was *stupid* of you, Irina. You're not a bouncer!' (Clark 2020, 18).

In her relationship with her mother, unlike in most of her other relationships, Irina takes the role of the slave and is never able to assert herself when her mother attacks her. The fact that she suffers from retaliation on the part of her mother results in the incapacity of Irina to carry on destruction beyond the fantasy level, as in such cases the infant does not dare to really test if the parent will survive (Benjamin, 1988, 73). In her adult life, Irina's mother's denial of her subjectivity will result in the inability to perceive other subjects as equal. Although the two described experiences may seem contradictory, they are not, as they are both marked by the absence of another who recognizes the self and they both result in the incapacity of the self to accept their dependence upon the other. As Benjamin (1988) notes, it is precisely with the attempt to deny said dependency that domination begins (54).

The mother and daughter's experiences are consequential, and we can see that the former is unable to recognize not only her daughter, but any subject. When she is having lunch with Irina, she "complains about everything in front of her. The salad is too oily, her lemonade is too sugary, *her friend has cancer and keeps posting about it on Facebook* [emphasis added]" (Clark 2020, 20). It does not come as a surprise that a woman who does not experience mutual recognition herself (as recognition can only stem from a subject whom we recognize as equal to ourselves) is unable to tune in empathically with her daughter's joys or failures.

Irina's first sexual and "romantic" relationship is with one of the teachers in her high school, Lesley. In this relationship, she seems to be replicating the pattern underlying the relationship with her mother, as she seems to be searching for the recognition that she was never granted. Her therapist at the time had indeed pointed out that "the shit with Lesley absolutely would not have happened if [she] had a little bit more encouragement at home" (Clark 2020, 21). Although it may seem that by subjecting herself to the other, Irina is accepting her dependence upon them, adopting such role is nothing but an attempt to remain in control by not abandoning the fantasy of destruction.

However, after one boy she was having sex with asked her to slap him, she took a dominant role, sexually speaking, for the first time, and finally carried on destruction beyond the fantasy level. From that moment on,

her role changes, and her denial of the dependence upon the other stops manifesting itself as the denial of her own subjectivity. Instead, she starts obliging others to grant her recognition without recognizing them in return:

The transition from being hurt to hurting was natural. Even though I didn't really know why he'd started crying – it felt like something I did. It felt like being a great big black widow and realizing that all the male spiders were tiny and *weak* and covered in soft vulnerable bits, whereas I had this hard, shiny thorax and great big teeth. (Clark 2020, 141)

Benjamin (1988) notes that domination is essentially asymmetrical and it can be reversed (63), and this is precisely what happens to Irina, who, unable to accept her dependence upon another whom she cannot control, starts subjugating them. In this way, the other becomes an object over which she has all the power.

Irina takes on the role of the master in all the areas of her life (except in her relationship with her mother, in which she remains enslaved) and feels as if she were above everyone else (and according to her perception, she is, as everybody else is just an object): "I mean, of course they want me – who else would they get?" (Clark 2020, 18). Her inability to abandon the fantasy of omnipotence goes as far as lying to her friends or inventing stories when something that she considers embarrassing happens to her, or when she thinks she might be seen as weak. As her friend Flo writes in her blog, "she'd tell this story about how some chavvy girl had shoved her in a club, and that's why her knees were bruised, but she'd just fallen over – shit like that all the time" (Clark 2020, 64). She also states, at the beginning of the novel, that she used to have a car but has gotten rid of it because she does not need it anymore. However, we later learn that in reality she was caught drunk driving and her father had made her give it back. Feeling or being perceived as weak and not almighty poses a threat to her absoluteness and she does everything in her power to avoid it.

In her relationship with Flo, her alleged best friend and ex-lover who is still in love with her, the dynamics of domination are particularly exacerbated. For Irina, Flo seems to exist as a one-dimensional other who will make her omnipotence real. Irina orders her around all the time and treats her like a mere object, almost as if Flo were her maid:

'Get my pyjamas and a makeup wipe.' Flo does. 'I've cleaned the kitchen,' she calls from upstairs. 'And I've scraped all the coke off your coffee table. I managed to salvage at least a bump, so I put it in a baggy for you.' (Clark 2020, 12)

As illustrated by this quote, Flo acts as Irina's servant and takes on the role of the masochist. She is only able to carry out the destruction of the other at a fantasy level and consequently submits herself to an all-powerful subject who embodies the fantasy of omnipotence and through whose power she gains her identity (Benjamin 1988, 64). In this process, her own self is frequently lost. This is reflected in the fact that she seems to have no personal taste or opinions. Instead, she just copies everything people do and like, especially what Irina does and likes: "She's always trying to match me. I never tell her what I'm wearing" (Clark 2020, 40). Even regarding her sexual partners, Irina claims that Flo likes the boys "she thinks she's supposed to like. Her boyfriend has a big beard and an undercut, because when they got together that was the *in* thing. [...] and now she likes that white-bread, absolute fucking baguette of a lad from *Call Me by Your Name*" (Clark 2020, 14).

Similarly to Irina in her early years, Flo's apparent acceptance of her dependence upon the other is really a disguise of the attempt to stay in control by remaining connected to someone who she perceives as an almighty subject (Benjamin 1988, 55). She is constantly jealous of everyone Irina likes or befriends, and tries to control everything about the relationship in order not to lose her, as if she does, she would be reduced to nothing. Flo's actions are, however, somewhat ambiguous, as she constantly beats herself up for the submissive role she takes on with Irina, which means that her attitude simultaneously contains the reproduction of a frustration that stems from infancy and the desire to live a new experience in order to compensate it.

Irina's ruthless attitudes are equally ambiguous, as what she is subconsciously looking for is a surviving other (and, consequently, for recognition as well). For the sadist, there is a void where the other is supposed to be (Benjamin 1988, 215): as they do not survive her destruction, she is unable to recognize them. Consequently, when the other recognizes her, it is not actually a valid recognition experience for her, as said recognition does not stem from an other whom she recognizes as another subject in their own right. She does not sense this recognition as love or affection and does not even seem to be able to understand that somebody might be able to see her as a subject and not an object, as she herself is not capable to do so with anybody, not even with her alleged friends. As illustrated by the following quote, she seems unable to understand that Flo simply loves her and does not see her as an object she can use:

All these years, and I've never really questioned *why* she loved me. Or why she thinks she does. [...] But Flo has known me for such a long time. She's watched me putrefy, and twist, and get thinner and meaner, and stranger. But here she is. 'What do you want from me, Flo?' I ask. 'Like, what do you think I can give you?' 'What do you mean? I just want you to be happy,' she says. She's quiet for a moment, thinking, frowning. 'I'm sorry I'm not *it*.' 'It?' (Clark 2020, 171)

Irina's role as a master goes beyond the psychic and psychological, she is a sadist in the more literal sense of the word, as she admits to finding pleasure in seeing other people cry (although, at the same time, she is disgusted by the vulnerability that it entails): "It's so gross, it's almost captivating" (Clark 2020, 81); and throughout the novel, we can observe how she constantly rejoices in the suffering of other subjects. When the person who is hurting is a man she is attracted to, she is sexually aroused, as we can see in her reaction

when Eddie from Tesco, her main sexual interest in the novel, tells her a somewhat traumatic story from his adolescence:

Intellectually, I know this is a sad story. But as I imagine him – fifteen, drunk, half hard, humiliated, sobbing – my skin prickles. My nipples grow tight against the fabric of the towel I've wrapped around my chest, and I lick my lips. I imagine his tears on my tongue. (Clark 2020, 125)

As Benjamin argues in *Bonds* (1988), in adult life, it is in sadomasochistic relationships and fantasies that we can most clearly see the dynamics of domination, since erotic domination, where enslavement reveals itself as a transgression of the other's physical boundaries, is one of the purest forms of replication of the master-slave relationship. Irina constantly fantasizes about inflicting pains to the boys she likes, and Eddie from Tesco, whom she imagines strangling, is no exception: "I imagine my hands around his neck [...]. His neck flexes beneath my palms in the daydream, and my insides flex along with it" (Clark 2020, 85).

Irina takes on a master role in all of her sexual relations with men, and although she does not always have sex with the young men that she persuades to work for her, she exclusively photographs boys she is attracted to, and only those who "will gaze down the barrel of [her] camera and do *anything* for [her]" comply (Clark 2020, 28). In her own words, "I try to stick with men I imagine I could physically overpower if push came to shove" (Clark 2020, 48). In the photographs, she depicts her models as "interchangeable, disposable objects" (Clark 2020, 109) that she can use for her own pleasure, therefore disregarding them as subjects and never engaging in a mutual recognition process.

According to Jessica Benjamin, the participants of the sadomasochistic relationships do not actually want the tension to dissolve, but they rather find satisfaction in the thrill of risking its balance: "Whether I'm in control or losing it, I've always had a power thing, I think" (Clark 2020, 91). What is interesting about Irina is that she seems to only find such thrill in sexual relations with men (although she is attracted to both men and women): "I never do things like this [sadomasochistic sexual relations] with women. I never did anything like this with Frank" (Clark 2020, 91). In fact, she describes sexual one-night stands with women as "low risk" because the women she hooks up with are "too nice" (Clark 2020, 116).

The explanation behind this is Irina's internalized sexism, instilled by society and reinforced by her mother's belief that women who are victims of violence or weak in any way are "sad" (Clark 2020, 19). In this fashion, she sees the world as a place where women are objects of men's subjectivities, and there is no thrill in engaging with an object: it is not that the tension is diluted, it is not even there to begin with. There are many instances of Irina's sexism throughout the novel, one of them being her double standards regarding body weight. She has a troubled relationship with food (she either does not eat, only eats salad or vomits when she feels bad about eating more than she should have) and seems disgusted by girls who are not skinny. However, she does not seem to care about men's weight, and a boy being fat is not an obstacle for her to be attracted to him.

This internalized sexism results in Irina's denial of everything that makes her feel weak in her role as a woman in society, and only seems to accept her role as a woman, or her femininity, when she can use it as a power strategy (e.g. dressing provocatively in order to get what she wants from men). For instance, she feels threatened when Will asks her about whether she had been hit by a man when he sees a bruise on her face:

I don't know what the fuck he thinks he'd do about it, if a bloke had hit me. Beat him up for me? Console me? Will is soft. I do press-ups every morning, and advanced yoga and Pilates twice a week. (Clark 2020, 27)

To accept her place as a woman in a patriarchal society is to accept her dependency of the other. As she is unable to do so, she assumes a traditionally masculine role (strong, independent, dominant): Irina fears becoming like the object she controls, which does not have the capacity to recognize her. In fact, she is only attracted to men with traditionally feminine attributes (soft factions, with fat on their thighs, etc.). As she embodies a "masculine" role, she feels superior to them, and, evidently, she enjoys emasculating them.

Her friend Flo seems to be aware of Irina's incapacity to accept her role as a woman in a men-dominated society, and says the following to her after she had been raped at a party:

You know, you want to think you're... You want to think you're not like other women, but you are, you know. You're still... that's still how the rest of the world, how *men* are going to see you. Like, I know you hate *labels*, but like... You live in a woman's body. You're vulnerable. No matter what you think, you're vulnerable, and sometimes you'll need other people. Friends. Me. (Clark 2020, 63).

Nevertheless, Irina is still unable to see herself as the victim of the rape and reverses the situation. She uses it as a weapon to threaten Will (the boy who has raped her) so that the power dynamic is flipped and she is no longer the object to a man's subjectivity. In her mind, the rape is another opportunity for her to assert control over the other.

On one occasion, the eagerness to subject men in the form of erotic enslavement goes so far that she accidentally kills her sexual partner. What the adult sadist is subconsciously searching is an other who survives destruction, and not even in a situation as extreme as this one does Irina find it, as she gets away with manslaughter with absolutely no consequences. The fact that she does not receive any kind of punishment after the ultimate destruction of the other traumatizes her, as she does not find any glimpse of recognition (and thus, she has no proof of her own subjectivity).

As the novel progresses and she starts acting out on her trauma, Irina starts to feel more and more desperate for recognition from a surviving other. As a consequence, her actions become more aggressive by the

hour (e.g. her sexual practices with men start to border on torture) and she even explicitly asks for the other to endure her destruction: she hopelessly asks her sexual partners to resist her subjection, as exemplified by this quote from when she has sex with a boy she meets at an exhibition who says nothing when she basically tortures her: "I actually make a few attempts at a reply: I literally wanted to kill you? I almost cut your nipples off? You went purple? What about any of that read as safe, sane or consensual?" (Clark 2020, 191).

As she gets no response, not to her extreme sexual practices and not to having killed someone, she starts doing "bad" things (like leaving a café without paying, crushing a glass to her date's head or even confessing to her crime), all trying to get some retaliation, or a response to any kind, a glimpse of recognition (especially from men) that serves as proof that the people that surround her are also subjects and not just objects to her subjectivity (and, therefore, that they are a potential source of recognition).

She hopelessly longs for a surviving other (and thus, for mutual recognition):

Like, do I have to snap the wine bottle inside him to get him to stop sending me sad emails? Do I have to cut his nipple off for him to realise he should probably ring the police? Do I have to cave his head in with my camera, rather than hit him the once? Do I have to crash his car? Do I have to smash a glass over the head of every single man I come into contact with, just so I leave a fucking mark? (Clark 2020, 192)

As she is not able to find any surviving other and, therefore, to experience mutual recognition, everyone she destroys becomes an object for her, and she becomes deranged to the point where she is no longer able to differentiate them (after all, they are not subjects and they never were).

With no capacity to recognize, and therefore, no capacity to experience recognition in return, she ends up doubting whether she actually committed her crime and whether anyone, including herself, actually exist as subjects without recognition:

His skin is freckled, and brown and white and red and wet. His hair is dark and curly, and blond and straight. I run my bloody knuckles down his cheek, which is soft and peachy. [...] I explain to him that nothing matters, and nothing lasts. Everyone forgets, and everything disappears. The things you do, the things you are: it's all nothing. Would anyone miss you, if you went away? Would anyone look for you? Would anyone listen, or even care, if I hurt you? If I put my hands around your neck and crushed your windpipe and chopped you up, would anyone find you? And if it's a no to any of these, did you even exist in the first place? (Clark 2020, 199-200).

Without recognition, all of her potential surviving others become non-humans and she starts mixing them all in her mind (hence the title, which although in its more literal meaning refers to the way she gets rid of the body of the boy she kills, also represents the destruction of the self of those men Irina objectifies). As there exists no other subject who can grant herself the recognition she subconsciously looks for so desperately, Irina's own subjectivity symbolically dies at the end of the novel, when she takes off her clothes and gets in the pond of a park. She expects to feel cleansed but only feels cold, and where she thinks she is seeing the reflection of the boy she killed, there is in reality only a knot of plastic bags and weed and that definitely "isn't him. It never is" (Clark 2020, 200).

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the selected novel through the lens of Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity offers a deep insight into the psychological complexity of the protagonist, Irina, and the domination dynamics at play in her relationships with other characters. In examining Irina's psychic nature from the perspective of Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic theories, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex web of emotions and motivations that drive her actions. By exploring the processes of recognition and destruction and the dynamics of domination, we can better understand the power dynamics at play in her relationships with other characters and the ways in which her desire for recognition influences her identity and behavior.

Irina's longing for recognition, often masked by her aggressive and manipulative behavior and stemming mainly from her troubled relationship with her mother and her social context (a patriarchal society), marks the action and rhythm of the novel. This wish for recognition manifests itself in the ways in which she seeks to establish power and control over others (e.g. her models or Flo), who serve as objects of desire and validation for her. Furthermore, the failure to maintain the mutual recognition tension shapes Irina's complex sense of self (as well as her sexual desire), simultaneously confident and insecure, intelligent and manipulative, creative and destructive.

Overall, Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* is a challenging work that explores themes of female identity and sexuality, power relations, and violence; and Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity provides us with an enlightening framework for the study of its complex protagonist and her relationships. Ultimately, this analysis offers an insight into the current trend of contemporary fiction in English which explores the psychological depths of female identity, sexuality, relationships and desires.

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