



Masculinity and Femininity Portrayed in Ali Hazelwood's *Check & Mate*

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Abstract. This research analyzes the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in Ali Hazelwood's *Check & Mate*, using Connell's gender theory as the primary framework. The study focuses on how gender roles are constructed and challenged within the male-dominated environment of competitive chess. Through a qualitative descriptive method, this thesis demonstrates that the author does not only critique rigid gender expectations but also offers a narrative of resistance and transformation. Masculinity is depicted through the dominance, authority, and emotional detachment of male characters namely Nolan Sawyer illustrating complicity of masculinity, Malte Koch, and Bob illustrating concept of subordination of masculinity. Conversely, femininity is expressed through the emotional sensitivity, modesty, and self-sacrifice embodied by the female protagonist, Mallory Greenleaf, in line with Connell's theory of hegemony femininity. This research reveals that in literary works, women are not only depicted as support for men but are also depicted as dominant women. The writer concludes that this literary work illustrates how women can reject and break through social boundaries to forge their own identity and power amidst the dominance of masculinity.

Keywords: complicity of masculinity, femininity, hegemony femininity, subordination of masculinity

INTRODUCTION

In society, masculinity and femininity are shaped by rigid norms and expectations that define who fits into specific gender roles and often discourage deviation from traditional binaries. For example, sports remain highly gender-segregated, where men typically dominate leadership positions while women are relegated to subordinate roles. Fletcher (2024) observed that in The Hundred cricket competition, although women made up half of the participants, they held less than 10% of coaching or officiating roles. These disparities reflect the persistence of hegemonic masculinity a concept introduced by Connell (2005) that explains how certain forms of masculinity dominate over others and are upheld through institutions, media, and culture. This form of masculinity, associated with control, emotional restraint, and authority, not only marginalizes women but also subordinates alternative masculinities. Such themes are exemplified in political discourse, such as Donald Trump's 2024 campaign, which drew heavily on traditional masculine traits like dominance and emotional detachment (White, 2025).

Check & Mate offers a relevant literary exploration of these dynamics through its portrayal of masculinity and femininity within the world of competitive chess a field

historically dominated by men. The male characters embody traits of complicity masculinity and subordination masculinity, while the female protagonist, Mallory Greenleaf, struggles under the burden of hegemony femininity, which demands politeness, modesty, and self-sacrifice. Through literary criticism and the application of Connell's gender theory, this study investigates how gender roles are constructed, enforced, and challenged in the novel. While previous studies have discussed gender discrimination, toxic masculinity, and identity struggles, this research focuses specifically on the interplay between masculinity and femininity within a competitive space, filling a notable gap in literary analysis. This research aims to (1) explain how masculinity are expressed in *Check & Mate*, (2) identify the types of masculinity expressed by characters Nolan Sawyer, Malte Koch, and Bob, (3) explain how femininity are expressed in *Check & Mate*, and (4) identify the types of masculinity expressed by characters Mallory Greenleaf. In conclusion, this study reveals that in literary works, women are not only depicted as support for men but are also depicted as dominant women.

LITERATURE REVIEW/ TINJAUAN PUSTAKA

Connell's gender theory (2005) is the central theoretical foundation of this study. Connell rejects the idea of a single, universal masculinity and instead introduces the concept of multiple masculinities arranged in a hierarchy. At the top is hegemonic masculinity, which legitimizes male dominance and upholds patriarchy through traits such as authority, aggression, control, and emotional restriction. Supporting this hierarchy are complicit masculinities men who do not fully embody hegemonic traits but still benefit from the patriarchal dividend. Below them are subordinated masculinities, often associated with traits culturally deemed feminine such as sensitivity, passivity, or homosexuality, which are marginalized within the male hierarchy. On the other side of the gender spectrum, Connell introduces the concept of hegemonic femininity that is organized around compliance with male dominance and oriented toward accommodating the desires and interests of men. This type of femininity idealizes submission, nurturance, modesty, emotional restraint, and heterosexual desirability, which supports and legitimizes the hegemonic structure.

This research offers a novel contribution by applying Connell's theory of gender as a relational structure to explore how masculinity and femininity are simultaneously constructed, reinforced, and resisted in *Check & Mate*. The novel presents characters who embody various forms of masculinity Nolan Sawyer as complicit masculinity, Malte Koch as subordination of masculinity, and Bob as subordination of masculinity. Likewise, Mallory Greenleaf, the female protagonist, represents hegemony femininity, facing institutional and emotional pressure to remain compliant, passive, and emotionally composed even when outperforming male counterparts. Thus, this literature review not only outlines the core gender theories relevant to this study but also critiques existing research for its limited integration of relational gender dynamics in literature. By focusing on Connell's three categories as complicity masculinity, subordination masculinity, and hegemony femininity this study fills a gap in literary gender analysis and offers a more holistic examination of gendered power in a male-dominated intellectual field.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, specifically using literary criticism to analyze gender representation in Ali Hazelwood's *Check & Mate* (2023). The approach is grounded in Connell's gender theory, particularly the concepts of complicity masculinity, subordination masculinity, and hegemonic femininity. The research focuses on interpreting the narrative structure, character development, and dialogues in the novel to understand how masculinity and femininity are constructed and represented in a competitive, male-dominated setting. The selected sample was obtained through purposive sampling, where *Check & Mate* was chosen due to its rich depiction of gendered power dynamics in the intellectual field of chess. The data were collected using close reading and textual analysis, where the researcher identified key passages that illustrate gender performance and social hierarchies. The researcher served as the main instrument, supported by note-taking and coding techniques to organize findings in accordance with Connell's framework.

Data analysis included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This analysis aimed to categorize and interpret expressions of masculinity and femininity reflected through the behavior and relationships between characters. Because this was a text-based literary analysis, no external informants were involved; however, the researcher ensured credibility and validity by conducting multiple readings of the novel and cross-referencing interpretations with relevant scholarly literature. This study was conducted with full involvement in reading and analyzing the text. The research process ensured that the data and findings were supported by strong textual evidence. As a qualitative literary study, this research offers an in-depth and theory-based perspective on how gender norms are maintained and challenged.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze how masculinity and femininity are constructed in Ali Hazelwood's (2023) novel *Check & Mate* using Connell's (2005) gender theory, specifically the concepts of complicity masculinity, subordination masculinity, and hegemonic femininity. Based on the analysis, the researcher found that each main character in the novel represents socially constructed gender forms, which interact with each other in the context of the male-dominated chess world.

Masculinity in the Male Characters

Masculinity in the novel is portrayed through the characters of Nolan Sawyer, Malte Koch, and Bob, each of whom represents a different type of masculinity according to Connell's gender hierarchy. Nolan Sawyer exhibits a form of complicit masculinity, he is not explicitly dominant or aggressive, but still enjoys patriarchal benefits through his status and influence as a chess grandmaster. Although he appears gentle and caring, this character still supports the masculine system by maintaining a power structure that benefits men. In contrast, Malte Koch displays a form of subordinate masculinity that is abusive and manipulative. He rigs matches and harasses female players, demonstrating how dominant masculinity maintains power through symbolic and institutional violence. Meanwhile, Bob represents subordinate masculinity, a form of masculinity that is considered weak, uncompetitive, and often ridiculed or belittled in masculine environments.

Femininity in the Female Protagonist

The main female character, Mallory Greenleaf, embodies hegemonic femininity. Mallory is portrayed as a figure who must always be polite, unemotional, and self-sacrificing for the sake of her family. Despite her exceptional chess skills, she is still forced to maintain a low profile and not threaten male dominance. This reflects how the patriarchal system requires women to conform to gender expectations that place them in a subordinate position. However, throughout the story, Mallory gradually demonstrates resistance to this role by returning to competition and defeating male players, including Nolan, symbolically dismantling masculine dominance in the chess world.

The findings of this study indicate that gender in *Check & Mate* is not merely a personal attribute, but a social relation that is constantly negotiated (Connell, 2005). Masculinity and femininity are not fixed, but are constructed through social interactions, institutional roles, and cultural expectations. The results support that Hazelwood consciously presents a critique of traditional gender structures through the characters and narrative in *Check & Mate*. This novel not only depicts gender inequality but also offers opportunities for resistance, where women like Mallory can challenge the system through their abilities and determination. Thus, these findings not only strengthen Connell's theory but also modify its application in the context of literary works, particularly in areas like chess, which have traditionally been considered masculine.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis conducted by the writer, the main characters in *Check & Mate* reveal a complex depiction of masculinity and femininity in a highly competitive and male-dominated space. The story revolves around Mallory Greenleaf, an eighteen-year-old chess prodigy, who re-enters the chess world after years of absence and unexpectedly defeats Nolan Sawyer, the world's top-ranked player. As the novel progresses, Mallory is forced to navigate a space filled with gender bias, emotional challenges, and societal expectations about how women and men should behave. Her journey becomes a lens through which the author critiques rigid gender roles.

From the problems examined in this study, one can see how gender roles continue to operate in modern literature. Female characters are still expected to sacrifice personal ambition for the sake of family or emotional harmony, while male characters are often excused for harmful behaviors as long as they deliver results. Mallory's journey demonstrates both resistance and transformation. Despite being shaped by societal pressures, she ultimately refuses to be defined by them, carving out her own path and rejecting the need for male approval. Therefore, this study concludes that the novel *Check & Mate* is not only about chess and romance, but also a critique of the unequal gender system. The writer concludes that this literary work illustrates how women can reject and break through social boundaries to forge their own identity and power amidst the dominance of masculinity.

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