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Portraying the Male Abuser in Contemporary Women's Fiction

ABSTRACT

Newspaper headlines show that awareness of intimate partner violence is a complicated issue that needs further examination. Works of fiction narrated by women trapped in abusive relationships are useful sites for the exploration of what intimate partner violence usually includes, and the identification of subtle behaviours that can be defined as violent and abusive but usually go unnoticed. This article submits two contemporary works of fiction, *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series, for a study of the covert mechanisms of emotional abuse. To understand such mechanisms, the article engages with feminist as well as postfeminist contemporary thinking on intimate partner violence. The analysis shifts the focus back to the male abuser by carefully depicting how he uses under-recognized, gendered forms of power to abuse his partner. The aim is to elucidate the capacity of first-person narratives to allow access to the abused woman's mind, while simultaneously provoking questions about the abusers' behaviours, making them a more powerful tool for understanding intimate partner violence than a newspaper report.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, contemporary fiction, feminist theory, covert emotional abuse

Lik nasilneža v prozi sodobnih pisateljic

POVZETEK

Naslovi v časopisih pričajo o tem, da je poznavanje problematike nasilja v intimnih partnerskih odnosih kompleksno področje, ki ga je nujno poglabljati in razvijati. Prozne pripovedi žensk, ujetih v nasilnih partnerskih odnosih, so zelo uporabne za seznanjanje s temeljnimi značilnostmi partnerskega nasilja in za prepoznavanje vedenj, ki jih lahko označimo za nasilje in zlorabo, a se jih praviloma niti ne opazi. V tem članku na podlagi romanov v seriji Petdeset odtenkov sive in First Love preučujem prikrite mehanizme čustvenega nasilja. Kot osnovo za razlago teh mehanizmov se v članku nanašam na sodobna feministična in postfeministična spoznanja s področja nasilja v intimnih partnerskih zvezah. V analizi pozornost preusmerjam z žrtve na nasilneža in natančno prikažem načine, na katere nasilni partner uporablja manj opazne oblike vzpostavljanja premoči za zlorabo partnerice. Moj namen je osvetliti pomen prvoosebnih leposlovnih pripovedi za vpogled v psiho zlorabljenih žensk in problematizacijo vedenja nasilnežev.

Ključne besede: intimno partnersko nasilje, sodobna proza, feministična teorija, prikrito čustveno nasilje

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1 Introduction

Intimate partner violence has long been one of the main focuses of feminist studies. These studies have significantly expanded through the addition and refinement of historical, sociological, psychological, political, and cross-cultural perspectives. Today, we have reached a period referred to as "post-awareness", defined as "our conviction that we have progressed beyond our past denial, that we are now not only savvy about but roundly condemn this form of violence and its perpetrators, and that we are sympathetic to and supportive of abused women" (Shoos 2017, 7). Yet, we still see headlines like the following in newspapers: "A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide" (Taub 2020) and "Harrowing Domestic Violence- PSA Reminds Us Abuse Is Still Happening Behind Closed Doors" (Spary 2020). "Post-awareness", then, is too ambitious a term to describe the complexity of intimate partner violence today, a complexity that stems from three issues related to this post-awareness attitude. Firstly, implicit in the term "post-awareness" is the idea that the job is done, and women are now aware enough and empowered enough to protect themselves, although the headlines reveal that this is not the case.

Secondly, the term "post-awareness" is misleading because it shifts the focus, from discussing patterns of abuse in relationships and how they are related to the inequality between men and women in society, to blaming "aware" victims for not owning up to the responsibility for their choices. Understanding intimate partner violence through the concepts of choice and responsibility, the finger is pointed back at the victim, the woman, and men are let off the hook. Cynthia Gendrich and Angela Hattery observe that discussing domestic violence as a woman's issue "can be dangerous since […] it can take the spotlight off of the perpetrators' actions and put it on the victims" (2004, 296). In discussions of intimate partner violence, the focus needs to be directed at both sides of the relationship.

Thirdly, despite the wide discourse today about different issues related to intimate partner violence, it is still discussed under general phrases like "domestic abuse" and "domestic violence", and defined widely as "behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors" (WHO 2021). In their efforts to theorize intimate partner violence and its relationship to masculinities, Lucas Gottzen, Margunn Bjornholt, and Floretta Boonzaier find this definition problematic because "it obscures the gendered nature of violence" (2021, 3). Abuse in intimate relations, they believe, "needs to be contextualized as an expression of inequality and gender power" (2021, 3). Not only that, but similar to definitions of "domestic abuse" and "domestic violence", that of intimate partner violence is both too broad and too vague. Heather Humann (2014, 9) describes these phrases as:

> catch-all phrases that describe any number of problematic behaviors that range from emotional abuse like mocking, insults, and other types of putdowns, to various types of physical abuse such as punching, pinching, and kicking, but these terms can also refer to even grayer offenses such as rape, maiming, attempted murder, and murder.

She finds this vagueness worrying because it minimizes the impact of domestic abuse against women. The use of two phrases to refer to "a wide range of abusive behaviors points to

an inadequacy in both the way our society expresses and deals with an entire catalog of problems associated with abuse perpetrated against women" (Humann 2014, 9). A reason for the difficulty in finding a functional definition for intimate partner violence is that part of its mechanisms, while being covert and hard to detect, carry harmful effects similar to those of overt mechanisms. Compared to overt mechanisms of abuse that are easier to spot, there is far too little discussion of covert mechanisms.

Acknowledging that the topic of intimate partner violence in general needs further study and noting the gap in studies covering mechanisms of abuse, this article focuses on covert mechanisms of emotional abuse that are part of a larger pattern of gender-based power and control, used by men against women in intimate relationships. This study is timely because, as Gottzen, Bjornholt, and Boonzaier note, "intimate partner violence is part of the gendered consequences of the COVID-19 crisis" (2021, 4). However, what makes the study of covert mechanisms of emotional abuse challenging is that they are rarely recognized by their victims. As Marti Loring points out in her study of emotional abuse, while overt emotional abuse is "openly demeaning," covert emotional abuse "is more subtle but no less devastating to victims" (1994, 2–3). Because the woman cannot put her finger on it, covert emotional abuse can be more harmful than the overt version. Besides the potential psychological damage to her, the woman would take the blame for it; she might be described as oversensitive, delusional, or emotional.

An important space where thorough discussions of covert emotional abuse are found is novels depicting abusive relationships. Because of their length and detailed examination of the characters' development throughout the stages of a relationship, these novels provide a magnifying glass through which we can observe a range of covert emotionally abusive behaviours and their consequences. Further, both texts analysed in this article use a first-person narrative, which provides access to the abused woman's mind and reveals how most of the time she fails to read the covert mechanisms of emotional abuse as harmful. Viewing the repetitive pattern of these mechanisms as narrated by the victim, who does not recognize their harmful effects, gives readers moments of recognition in which they feel they know more than the character herself while sympathizing with her. In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski (2008, 23) describes these moments of recognition as follows:

> Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an affinity or an attunement is brought to light. […] I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading. Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something I did not see before.

What happens in first-person narratives of abuse is that in these moments of recognition, the reader lives the experience of being abused, and what it is like not to be able to be consciously aware of the terms of abuse. However, because, unlike the female protagonist, readers are not involved emotionally with the abuser, they can eventually see the abuse for what it is. As Spiers notes, "first-person narrative fiction challenges the reader to assess, or reassess, their own interior processes, generating room for the accommodation and also exercise of critique" (2018, 45). This capacity of first-person narratives to allow access to the abused woman's

mind while simultaneously provoking questions about the abuser's behaviours is what makes them a more powerful tool for understanding intimate partner violence than newspaper reports. Johnson emphasizes the political importance of the first-person narrative, "individual women's stories, narrow in scope and deep in reflection, aid in advancing the complexity of feminist social theory" (2002, 5). Gwynne also notes, "first-person narratives have long been central to feminist consciousness-raising" (2013, 7). Therefore, this article employs two contemporary works of fiction narrated by female protagonists in its investigation of covert mechanisms of emotional abuse, complementing the extant body of critical work devoted to the evaluation of fiction's representation of gendered violence against women in intimate relationships.

The first novel is Gwendoline Riley's *First Love*, which tells the story of thirty-three-year-old Neve, a woman who is trapped in a toxic marriage. The novel depicts how her husband, Edwyn, uses under-recognized, gendered forms of power to abuse his wife. His behaviours range from belittling and taunting, to threatening and manipulating. By portraying this range of offenses, *First Love* identifies many subtle behaviours that can be defined as abusive but sometimes go unnoticed. Further, *First Love* represents the complex situation of the female protagonist: while she is aware of overt mechanisms of emotional abuse and their harmful effects – she witnesses the abusive relationship of her parents – she does not seem to be aware of covert mechanisms of such abuse. Neve feels destroyed and weakened, but because she cannot quite define the problem, she does not leave her toxic marriage.

Another contemporary work of fiction by a female author that can be studied for the detection of covert mechanisms of emotional abuse is the *Fifty Shades* series by E. L. James. The *Fifty Shades* series was on the best-seller lists for a long time, and collectively sold about 34.9 million copies. It depicts the romantic relationship between the young, recently graduated Anastasia Steele and the twenty-eight-year-old billionaire Christian Grey. Their story involves a central tension between BDSM practices and romance: Christian is into BDSM and Ana tries to heal him of past trauma. Initially, Christian and Ana's relationship seems harmless since the BDSM part of the story involves both sides signing a consent contract; however, many scholars have declared that the series contains intimate partner violence beyond the BDSM practices. Bonomi, Altenburger, and Walton, for example, note that beyond BDSM, the *Fifty Shades* series is based on the "power imbalance in Christian and Anastasia's relationship, including behaviors consistent with those observed in chronically violent couples and the significant adverse impacts of the abuse for Anastasia as experienced by abused women" (2013, 734). Even before they become a couple and discuss the consent contract, behaviours such as stalking, intimidation, and humiliation are present in the relationship. "Within Christian and Anastasia's relationship", Bonomi, Altenburger, and Walton note, "consent and egalitarian negotiation processes are not formally decided, and Christian uses a range of coercive strategies to control multiple aspects of Anastasia's behavior" (2013, 736). Like Neve in *First Love*, Anastasia reflects the "post-awareness" complexities of teetering between feeling empowered by awareness – she signs the consent contract detailing most aspects of this relationship – and feeling controlled by the abusive behaviours of the man she is in a relationship with (Boyd 2015, 103). The paradoxes found in the *Fifty Shades* books, Boyd (2015, 103–4) notes,

> metaphorically represent the ones facing women – particularly young women – in our culture today. […], the conflicts Anastasia feels and the critics' competing/contradictory responses to the book highlight the complicated choices that women now make as they navigate a terrain where even various types of feminists are conflicted and quite often opposed to one another.

The examination of the detailed portrayal of covert mechanisms of emotional abuse in *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series acknowledges the difficulty of understanding and dealing with intimate partner violence, and the complex situation of women trapped in such relationships.

Both first-person female narrators in the books exhibit an acceptable degree of awareness, yet they still do not leave their abusive relationships – which raises the question of "why?" While the answer to this is complex and multi-faceted, this article explores one part of the issue, namely that since these women are oblivious to the repetitive patterns of covert abuse they are subjected to by their partners, they cannot really identify the problem and so decide to leave them. As the analysis will reveal, a great part of covert emotional abuse works by blaming the victim for her abuse, which further clouds her judgment over who is at fault for the relationship turning harmful. This article shifts the focus back to the abuser by tracing and analysing the covert mechanisms of emotional abuse used by men in an intimate relationship. For this, the article refers to Marti Loring's identification of six practices in an intimate relationship that can be distinguished as abusive. A careful examination of the behaviours of the male protagonists in both works examined in this study reveals that they use all six covert mechanisms of abuse in their interactions with their partners. Examining covert mechanisms of emotional abuse as part of gender-based power and control, the following section discusses feminist and postfeminist concepts related to the study of intimate partner violence and its depiction in fiction.

2 Intimate Partner Violence, Feminism, and Fiction

The last decade has witnessed a surge in the public and political debate about intimate partner violence. With social media movements, such as #metoo, and celebrity gossip, (e.g., the case of Rihanna and Chris Brown), a wide and colliding discourse about intimate partner violence has been generated across many academic and social platforms (Burke 2020; Murphy 2019; Regulska 2018). The exploration of these discussions reveals a clash between two feminist perspectives on the issue of intimate partner violence. The first strand of opinions, dating back to second-wave feminism, focuses on intimate partner violence in relation to patriarchal values. As Donald Dutton notes, this strand acknowledges "the powerful and complex role of social factors in creating the context in which violence [against wives] occurs" (2007, 37). Laurie Maguire (2002, 155), for example, believes that many aspects of patriarchal culture itself facilitate violence against women:

> obviously, any culture that views women legally as objects owned and traded by men, that views women spiritually as evil and in need of subjugation and physical correction, that views women intellectually as inferior and institutionalizes this view in education, politics, and law, that views women physically as substandard versions of men, and that views marriage as a hierarchy rather than a partnership is likely to lead to abuse.

Identifying patriarchal values as reasons behind intimate partner violence, this view calls for making the personal political, breaking the silence around the issue, and increasing awareness of patriarchal beliefs and practices that can be mobilized and used to abuse women.

While not rejecting social inequalities related to gender as reasons behind intimate partner violence, the second strand of opinions, representing postfeminist perspectives deeply individualizing and neoliberal in form, refocuses the attention on the woman herself by discussing notions of choice, empowerment, and personal improvement (McRobbie 2007, 721). In this way domestic violence, Patterson and Sears note, "has come to be aligned with notions of choice – a concept that is very popular within the idea of the neoliberal and postfeminist subject" (2011, 6). This shift is an important part of the postfeminists' rejection of the traditional view of self-sacrifice as a feminine ideal (see Rodier and Meagher 2014). Neoliberal and postfeminist studies, Rodier and Meagher note, "position women as free from gender oppression; they individualize and depoliticize domestic violence with the effect of making women who remain in abusive relationships responsible for their abuse" (2014, 183). Victim-blaming, then, is a strong undercurrent in postfeminists' notions of choice and responsibility, especially when applied to intimate partner violence. The burden is placed on the abused woman's failure to exercise her free choice and leave the relationship. Feminist values of solidarity and support, as Angela McRobbie notes, are thus displaced by discourses of agency and "condemnation of those who remain unable or unwilling to help themselves" (2009, 73). Rodier and Meagher also emphasize that rather than adopt "transformative political perspectives on gendered violence", postfeminism asks us to "use our freedom to successfully navigate sexist waters" (2014, 186). These perspectives which demand that women individually free themselves from intimate partner violence are grounded in fantasies of freedom, power, and agency. The "can-do" girl functions as a "powerful ideal", suggesting that all young women enjoy this power now (Harris 2004, 8), while the reality of many young women is nowhere near this image.

To adequately address the complexity of intimate partner violence, the examination of individual experiences needs to be connected to an analysis of the larger pattern of gender-based power and control in society. What women in violent relationships need, Rodier and Meagher (2014, 191) believe, is,

> feminist analysis not only of individual acts of violence between men and women, but also of the social frameworks described by feminist scholars as rape culture, and, moreover, of the symbolic violence that ensues in environments that perpetuate the discourses of post-feminism and neoliberalism.

Individualization of violence against women removes men and culture from the picture and frames "personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal-as-political on its head" (Gill 2007, 153). Karen Boyle states, by individualizing cases of abuse, "men's violence becomes reframed as an issue of women's mental health and the perpetrators remain virtually invisible" (2005, 174). Thus, while we need to acknowledge women's increased awareness of intimate partner violence, we should not deal with this issue solely as a woman's problem.

The exploration of the similar and recurring patterns of emotional abuse depicted in contemporary fiction by women, such as *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series, puts the male abuser and the larger pattern of gender-based power and control squarely back in the picture. Patterns of intimate partner violence represented in contemporary fiction by women are documented by many researchers. Their studies have focused, for example, on popular series such as *Twilight* and its representation of a controlling and abusive male partner (Collins and Carmody 2011; Borgia 2014; Brody 2014). Likewise, the *Fifty Shades* series caused much public controversy over its representation of the central romantic relationship. The controversy resulted from the tension between supporting concepts of choice and worrying about the normalization of the patterns of abuse found in the narrative. On the one hand, the *Fifty Shades* series is praised for liberating the main female character, Ana (Wright 2012; Harrison and Holm 2013; Hutcherson 2012; Midori 2012). On the other hand, it is considered an instruction manual for intimate partner violence (Flood 2012; Alibhai-Brown 2012; Armentrout 2012). Despite the claim of liberating Ana, the discussion of liberation within a story narrating a conventional love plot, in which the relationship between the man and woman is emotionally and economically unequal, undermines any potential for female liberation and empowerment. Likewise, Riley's depiction of intimate partner violence in *First Love* is the subject of continuing inspection, examination, and reviews from readers. It is seen to reveal patterns of abusive practices by some men in heterosexual relationships (Adams 2017; Wade 2017). Through her detailed description of the development of the relationship between Edwyn and Neve in *First Love*, Riley is able to illuminate otherwise underestimated patterns of intimate partner violence.

What these discussions of intimate partner violence in fiction are missing is a focus on covert mechanisms of emotional abuse which are hard to recognize when they are subtle, insidious, delivered in a calm voice, or camouflaged as a joke. As noted above, this article focuses on analysing the representation of covert mechanisms of emotional abuse in contemporary fiction by women in an attempt to further understand the complexity of intimate partner violence. The following analysis traces the depiction of covert emotional abuse in *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series.

3 Analysis

In *Emotional Abuse*, Loring (1994, 5) identifies six mechanisms of covert emotional abuse:

1. Discounting,
2. Negation,
3. Projection/accusation,
4. Denial (of abuse by the abuser),
5. Negative labelling,
6. Subtle threats of physical and/or emotional abandonment, or actual physical and/or emotional abandonment.

These six mechanisms can be detected in the way *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series carefully portray the verbal, physical and emotional interactions between men and women in abusive

relationships. The first mechanism of covert emotional abuse noted in these interactions is the expression of *subtle threats of abandonment (or violence)*. The male abuser's use of *subtle threats of abandonment* is detected in *First Love* when Edwyn tells Neve: "what makes you think you can treat me like this, hm? When *I'm* making the money, *I'm* paying the bills, *I'm* making your life possible" (Riley 2017, 128). Though not explicit, the message is: if you don't follow my orders, I'll leave you and your life will be impossible. When she complains about his lack of affection, he replies: "I won't be anyone's *carer*. Do you get that?" (Riley 2017, 116). The message gets clearer when Neve "saw that [her] suitcase was out, in the living room, open, and with all of [her] clothes thrown in, hangers and all" (Riley 2017, 113). Edwyn, as it seems, does not allow Neve to feel safe in the relationship. She is always under the threat of him leaving her or kicking her out of the house. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian's *subtle threats* are warnings of physical violence and punishment concealed as jokes. On a flight to visit her mother, Ana receives the following message on her phone from Christian: "I know what you're trying to do – and trust me, you've succeeded. Next time you'll be in the cargo hold, bound and gagged in a crate" (James 2011, 392). *He reminds her: "You need to learn to manage my expectations. I am not a patient man"* (James 2011, 304). Verbal threats are dangerous acts of covert emotional abuse because they reflect the abuser's aim of intimidating and controlling his partner. So, even if they are not carried out, these subtle threats should not be accepted lightly as a joke. Further, Christian is directing the blame for his use of threats onto Ana's inability to meet his expectations, making her responsible for her own abuse.

Subtle threats of violence can also be expressed through the display of violent body language around the partner. The male protagonists in *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* books use violent body language around their female partners. When Edwyn talks to Neve, he "slam[s] his hand against the side of the cupboard" (Riley 2017, 110). Another time, "he smack[s] his hand onto the table" (Riley 2017, 106). He sits "feet apart, fists clenched, glaring at [Neve] over on the settee" (Riley 2017, 4). In *Fifty Shades Freed*, violent body language can be seen when Ana reveals to Christian that she is pregnant and he "bangs his fist on the table, making [her] jump, and stands so abruptly he almost knocks the dining chair over" (James 2012b, 80). Also earlier in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, when Ana eagerly greets a male colleague in front of Christian, he "watches [her] like a hawk, his eyes hooded, his mouth a hard impassive line. His tone becomes clipped and cool" (James 2011, 30). The display of violent body language is dangerous because it is registered in the victim's mind and drives her to unconsciously picture herself in the place of the table or the door.

The second mechanism of covert emotional abuse identified in the novels is *negative labelling*. This is detected, for example, in the male abuser's description of his female partner as "disgusting". When Neve vomits on herself one night, Edwyn tells her: "you enjoy being sick on yourself, don't you? I've never known anyone else who enjoys being sick on themselves. […] Is that something you find *acceptable*, or *civilized*, or *fun*?" (Riley 2017, 111). He not only makes her feel ashamed and guilty for being sick, but also exaggerates and accuses her of enjoying it. As Francesca Wade notes, "[Edwyn] is obsessed with a single occasion, which took place years ago, when Neve was sick from drinking too much. His memory seems exaggerated, yet he overrides hers furiously, eroding her sense of identity as well as her voice" (2017). He tells Neve: "Your breath stinks. You smell like rotten vegetables" (Riley 2017, 129).

These expressions of disgust get into Neve's head, and she feels "shame" (Riley 2017, 63) and "self-disgust" (Riley 2017, 116). In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian's feelings of disgust towards Ana's body can be detected in the conditions he includes in his submissive contract. He includes mandatory exercise, a personal trainer four times a week, and personal hygiene: "The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of the Dominant's choosing [...] and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit" (James 2011, 172–73). These conditions suggest that there is something wrong with Ana's body requiring it to go through regular grooming for Christian to accept it. Ana expresses her annoyance with this regime of "grooming" that she considers "time-consuming, humiliating and painful" (James 2011, 85). Ana does not perform these rituals of cleaning for herself, which is why she considers them a burden.

The expression of disgust towards vomit and body hair mentioned above could be related to Julia Kristeva's philosophy of the abject, things that signify an unstable boundary between the inside and outside of the body and therefore often evoke a bodily reaction of nausea. The feeling of disgust is a reaction to aspects in life that threaten the sense of boundaries between ourselves and the world, or between ourselves and others – to what "disturbs identity, what does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, 4). In patriarchal societies, this threat of uncontrollability and lack of boundaries is associated with the woman's body more than the man's. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, a woman's "volatile" body is shamed in the West and has been viewed "as a formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting [...] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order" (1994, 203). Male fluidity, on the other hand, is not only viewed as controlled but also as powerful and productive, with a specific purpose and an outcome. These contradictory views "enabled men to associate women with infection, with disease, with the idea of festering putrefaction" (Grosz 1994, 206). Associating women's bodies with uncontrollability and formlessness undermines any challenges to the social power of men. Demanding women to regularly shave, diet, wear makeup and beautify themselves results in "the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough" (Bordo 2003, 166). What happens is that "through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity [...] female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'" (Bordo 2003, 166). Viewing a woman's body as formless, disgusting, or lacking, then, is a form of objectification and control. It suggests that there is something inherently wrong with the woman's body, and therefore it should be regularly observed and regulated. Labelling their female partner's bodies as "disgusting" in *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series, the male protagonists mobilize gender-based stereotypes and use them to covertly abuse the woman. It represents their continuous attempts to undermine the woman's ability to act as an independent subject.

Discounting, which is to deny or dismiss that the victim of abuse has any right to his or her thoughts or feelings, is also detected in both novels. In *First Love*, Edwyn repeatedly criticizes the way Neve presents herself. When she tries to be intimate with him, "holding on to his shoulder in the morning, wiggling about," he tells her, "that's what you think is sexy, is it? That's what passes for sexy in your world, does it? Why would you think that was attractive? What is it about that that you think *anyone* would find appealing?" (Riley 2017, 129). As Matthew

Adams notes, "[Edwyn] routinely subjects Neve to remorseless attacks on her character" (2017). Similarly, in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Ana is constantly criticized for her behaviours. Christian, for example, expresses his dislike of her rolling her eyes and her eating habits: "Eat what's on your plate. If you'd eaten properly yesterday, you wouldn't be here" (James 2011, 75). Being on the offensive side is most comfortable for Edwyn and Christian, as that is the position of power and control. Further, in this way they can place the blame for any abuse on the victims.

Examining the verbal, physical, and emotional interactions between the couples in *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series, one can also note that the male protagonists *accuse* their female partners and *project* their own issues and insecurities onto them. In *First Love*, Edwyn *projects* his feelings of hate and anger onto Neve when he says things like: "I can see it. I can see the *resentment*, and the rage boiling over" (Riley 2017, 132). He also *accuses* her of acting childishly, while he is "lying like a baby in a cot and throwing humdingers of tantrums" (Butter 2017). When they argue, he tells Neve "*Listen* to yourself [...]. You sound like a twelve-year-old. A twelve-year-old trying to win an argument. This isn't an argument. You don't *get* that, do you?" (Riley 2017, 134). Like Edwyn, Christian *projects* his lack of communication onto Ana. When Ana tells him she would be more relaxed around him if he did not intimidate her, he informs her that the problem is not his intimidation, but her lack of communication, making himself the victim. Throughout the story, however, Ana communicates her feelings to Christian very clearly, telling him that she cannot be someone she is not and that she does not want to be his submissive. He, on the other hand, does not listen. He replies with things like: "As long as you follow the rules [...] Then perhaps we can find a way forward" (James 2011, 436), or "Do the vanilla thing and then maybe, once you trust me more and I trust you to be honest and communicate more, we could move on and do some of the things I like to do" (James 2012a, 35). Christian not only turns a deaf ear to what Ana is trying to tell him, but also refuses to communicate his feelings to her: "you cannot begin to understand the depths of my depravity, Anastasia. And it is not something I want to share with you" (James 2012a, 180). The problem then is not Ana's refusal to communicate, but Christian's inability to listen or communicate. *Projection and accusations* are defence tactics covertly used by abusers to distort reality and preserve their egos. Further, they give abusers a green light to control their partners and treat them badly.

When confronted, the covert abuser in these novels *negates or denies* his actions and blames the woman, making her feel responsible and guilty. In *First Love*, when Neve confronts Edwyn for belittling her, he *negates* it and blames her for misinterpreting his speech: "When did I call you a child? You hear what you want to hear, don't you?" (Riley 2017, 133). For Edwyn, Neve is responsible for his own violent reactions too: "Why bring it up, then, hm? You're very fond of "just saying", aren't you? And then you expect me not to react" (Riley 2017, 106). *Negating and denying* his actions, the covert abuser portrays himself as the victim. Edwyn tries to convince Neve that her past, not himself, is the reason behind their disagreement: "I don't know if you're confusing me with your *father*, but I'm not joining in with that, *OK*?" (Riley 2017, 133). He thus makes her look in the wrong direction for the source of her problems, to her relationship with her father. As Lundy Bancroft notes, "in one important way, an abusive man works like a magician: His tricks largely rely on getting you to look off in the wrong direction, distracting your attention so that you won't notice where the real action is"

(2002, Part I). Edwyn insists: "Your *father*. You hated him, he was cruel to you, that's the only relationship you understand. A man being horrible to you and you being vicious back. So that's what you're recreating here. I am not your *father*. You don't have to go on being vicious" (Riley 2017, 160). Wade (2017) notes:

> undermining any sense that she is free to determine the course of her own existence, Edwyn plays on Neve's fear of inheriting her mother's misery. He accuses her, audaciously, of somehow forcing him into the role of abuser, replaying the scripts that are hard-wired from her childhood.

Edwyn tries to discredit Neve's perspective and manipulates her into thinking that, because she is the child of an abusive man, she is turning her partner into an abuser. According to Edwyn, Neve is deluded and exaggerating: "I'm making *perfectly* ordinary, *perfectly* reasonable, *perfectly* ordinary human requests, why do you take it as such a threat to you, an attack on your "*self-respect*"?" (Riley 2017, 160). What Edwyn is displaying here is what Bancroft describes as the main trait of the abuser, which is to "twists things into their opposites" (2002, Part I). He is "perfectly" in the right, and Neve is just deluded because of her past. As Bancroft notes, "the lens of entitlement the abuser holds over his eyes stands everything on its head, like a reflection in a spoon" (2002, Part I). This reasoning manifests itself in Edwyn's interpretation of violence in other relationships, too. When Neve tells him about her father's violence against her mother, Edwyn blames her mother and, as Adams notes, "regards the series of assaults that Neve's tyrannical father inflicted on her mother as merely "incidents".

Christian also *negates* his covert mechanisms of abuse by blaming Ana. When she refuses the painful aspects of BDSM, he makes her feel guilty by telling her that he is unworthy of love. Feeling guilty, Ana immediately reassures him that she loves him and would never leave him whatever he does (James 2012a, 181). But he insists: "I know you'll leave," he says sadly […] "You left me once – I don't want to go there again" (James 2012a, 181). While Edwyn blames his disagreements with Neve on her past, Christian blames his with Ana on her overthinking everything and blindly following the moral codes of society. For example, when he brings her an expensive gift, she refuses it because she understands that these gifts are his way of making her submit to him. However, as James (2011, 252) then writes:

> You're overthinking it, Anastasia. Don't place some vague moral judgment on yourself based on what others might think. Don't waste your energy. It's only because you have reservations about our arrangements, that's perfectly natural. You don't know what you're getting yourself into.

Christian advises Ana to ignore her reasoning and accept his expensive gifts because her point of view reflects society's moral judgments and not hers. Ana's agency does not exist for Christian – she submits either to his judgment or that of society.

Discounting, negation, projection/accusation, denial, negative labelling, and subtle threats of physical or emotional violence all have their roots in gender-based stereotypes in society, and as discussed above, they are mobilized and covertly used by the male abuser to maintain his position of power in the relationship. "Whenever power imbalance exists, such as between

men and women, or adults and children, or between rich and poor", Bancroft notes, "some people will take advantage of these circumstances for their own purposes" (2002, Part II). The male protagonists in the texts analysed here exploit the power imbalance between men and women in society and commit a range of covert emotional abuse against their female partners.

Covert mechanisms of emotional abuse not only protect the male protagonist's dominant status in the relationship, but also result in damaging the victims' sense of autonomy and identity. The female protagonists in *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series feel intimidated, but they cannot quite identify why. As mentioned above, while covert emotional abuse could easily go unnoticed, its effects are undeniable. Despite its subtlety, it is as harmful as overt abuse. It could even be more damaging because it is harder to detect and react to. What is happening to Neve and Ana is what Loring describes as follows: "over time these covert mechanisms of labeling, discounting, and negation lead to a diminution and destruction of the self" (1994, 5). Despite her awareness of her father's overt violence against her mother, Neve is unable to identify Edwyn's behaviours as violent. Further, she is not even aware of the damage his actions are causing, such that she finds it difficult to leave this destructive relationship. As Loring notes, "even when victims acknowledge the undermining insults and name-calling that occur in their intimate relationships, the depth of the inner bruises, emotional pain, and eroded sense of self often remain hidden from conscious awareness" (1994, 1). Neve describes Edwyn as "tall, over six feet, and these rooms do sometimes look too small for him" (Riley 2017, 5). This description reveals her feeling that Edwyn's presence in the relationship is bigger than hers. As Evers notes, Edwyn's "putrid rage and self-pity dominate the page, just as his ego dominates their living spaces" (2017). Neve reveals her feelings when she says that she feels like "a machine that was running down, while he seemed only to gain energy" (Riley 2017, 111). In the *Fifty Shades* books, too, Ana is blinded by the consent agreement which gives her an illusion of control over the relationship, while it is Christian who is in fact controlling her with his covert emotional abuse. She experiences an altered identity and describes herself as a "pale, haunted ghost" (James 2011, 511). Because she cannot clearly see the covert mechanisms of emotional abuse Christian is using against her, Ana's only solution is to manage the relationship by withholding information to avoid his anger and hope for things to improve.

4 Conclusion

In their portrayal of intimate partner violence, *First Love* and the *Fifty Shades* series engage with the contemporary complex and contradictory attitude of "post-awareness". In both works, the female protagonist is trapped in a relationship where she feels intimated and powerless, yet she does not identify it as a violent relationship. The female protagonists' inability to describe their relationships as violent is because their male partners are using covert mechanisms of emotional abuse that are hard to detect and react to. Tracing these mechanisms as depicted in first-person narratives by women, this article finds the same patterns of covert emotional abuse depicted in both works. This similarity emphasizes the social aspect of these mechanisms, and how using them cannot be treated as individual cases. It reveals how the male protagonists are mobilizing and utilizing a larger pattern of gender-based power and control to abuse their partners. This finding is crucial, because it undermines the idea of "post-awareness" and emphasizes the importance of bringing men back into the picture when discussing intimate partner violence. Doing so helps in understanding intimate

partner violence in its broader canvas and the complexity of the position of women who find themselves in a covertly abusive relationship.

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