



**Feminine Echoes of Liberation and Selfhood in Olivia  
Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan  
Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012)**

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أصداء أنثوية للتححر وتحقيق الذات في "المدينة الوحيدة" لأوليفيا لاينغ  
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كلية الآداب والعلوم التربوية

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## Thesis Committee Decision

This thesis entitled “**Feminine Echoes of Liberation and Selfhood in Olivia Laing’s The Lonely City (2016) and Megan Abbott’s Dare Me (2012)**”.

By Researcher: Asteer fawaz Hijazeen.

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I, **Asteer fawaz Hijazeen**, authorize the Middle East University to provide hard and soft copies of my thesis to libraries, organizations, bodies, and institutions concerned with scientific research and studies upon request.

Name: Asteer fawaz Hijazeen.

Date: 22 / 1 / 2026.

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Asteer fawaz Hijazeen', written over a horizontal line.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my dearest and beloved family.

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Prepared by  
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**Abstract**

The current study looks at how Olivia Laing and Megan Abbott reinvented femininity, independence, and selfhood in their novels *Dare Me* (2012) and *The Lonely City* (2016), respectively. Based on feminism as a literary theory, the research investigates the emotional, psychological, and societal relationships that women have in patriarchal settings. Using a feminist analytical perspective informed by Butler, Cixous, Showalter, Woolf, and Hooks, the dissertation investigates how both writers depicted marginality, silence, alienation, and desire as deliberate locations of resistance and self-creation, rather than passive manifestations. According to Laing's hybrid narrative, the dehumanizing speed of city life leads to loneliness, which is both a political and gendered issue.

Abbott, on the other hand, uses competitive cheering in *Dare Me* to demonstrate the allegedly empowering but ultimately contradictory nature of patriarchal regimes. It demonstrated how the female gaze consists of monitoring, discipline, and performance. This study is significant because it demonstrates how modern women's writing actively fought patriarchal norms by reworking concepts of freedom, emotional authenticity, and physical identity, while still mirroring these characteristics. Laing and Abbott enhanced feminist language by depicting emancipation as an ongoing and dynamic process centered on visibility, emotion, and self-expression, as proven by their research.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Feminism, Femininity, Freedom, Selfhood.

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الملخص

تركّز هذه الدراسة على تحليل الكيفية التي يُعاد من خلالها تشكيل مفاهيم الأنوثة والحرية والهوية الذاتية في كتاب (2012) Dare Me للكاتبة ميغان أبوت (Megan Abbott) وكتاب The Lonely City (2016) للكاتبة أوليفيا لاينغ (Olivia Laing) وتتطرق الدراسة من مناهج النقد النسوي المعاصر، مستكشفة الأبعاد العاطفية والنفسية والاجتماعية-الثقافية لتجارب النساء ضمن سياقات ما بعد الحداثة وفي ظل البنى الأبوية المهيمنة.

واعتمادًا على إطار تحليلي نسوي مستند إلى أعمال جوديث بتلر، وإيلين سيكسو، وإلين شووالتر، وفرجينيا وولف، وبيل هوكس، تفحص الدراسة تمثيل الكاتبتين لمفاهيم الهامشية والصمت والاعتراض والرغبة، لا بوصفها حالات سلبية أو انفعالية، بل باعتبارها مواقع نقدية فاعلة للمقاومة وإعادة بناء الذات. وتُظهر الدراسة كيف توظف لاينغ أسلوب السرد الهجين، الذي يمزج بين السيرة الذاتية والنقد الفني والنظرية الثقافية، لإعادة تأطير تجربة الوحدة بوصفها ظاهرة سياسية وجندرية ترتبط بإيقاع الحياة الحضرية المعاصرة.

وبيّن تحليل عمل لاينغ الكيفية التي يستعيد من خلالها الأفراد المهمشون، ولا سيما النساء، أصواتهم ووكالتهم عبر التعبير العاطفي الواعي، والممارسة الفنية، والملاحظة الإنسانية المتعاطفة. وفي المقابل، يكشف كتاب Dare Me لأبوت عن الطابع الإشكالي لما يُقدّم بوصفه تمكينًا نسويًا داخل منظومات أبوية، موضحًا كيف تتشكّل «النظرة النسائية» من تداخل المراقبة والانضباط والأداء. كما يبرز النص أن الوعي المتنامي للشخصية الرئيسة آدي يفضي إلى تفكيك وهم الحرية القائم على مثاليات الكمال والسيطرة الجسدية.

وعلى الرغم من الاختلاف الواضح في الأسلوب والسياق بين العملين، تؤكد الدراسة أن كلا النصين يقدمان رؤى نقدية معمقة حول كيفية تفاوض النساء على هوياتهن الذاتية ضمن فضاءات مقيدة. وتتمثل أبرز آليات استعادة الوكالة في العزلة، والأداء، والانفعال، والمقاومة. كما تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الدور المحوري للكتابة النسوية المعاصرة في مساءلة البنى البطريركية وإعادة صياغة مفاهيم التحرر، والأصالة العاطفية، والهوية الجسدية.

وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن أعمال لاينغ وآبت تسهم بفاعلية في تطوير الخطاب النسوي من خلال تقديم التحرر بوصفه ممارسة ديناميكية مستمرة، تقوم على الظهور، والعاطفة، والتعبير عن الذات، مؤكدة أن الأدب النسوي المعاصر يشكل مساحة نقدية لإعادة التفكير في علاقات الجندر والسلطة والذات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النسوية، الأنوثة، الهوية الذاتية، الحرية، البطريركية.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In the twenty-first century, women's literature has become a powerful tool for articulating feminist awareness and overturning common patriarchal structures that control women's emotional, psychological, and social lives (Showalter, 2009). If not in ways that advance gender equality, these standards have even been integrated into urban, postmodern environments, often in forms of alienation and commodification. Modern women's literature often reinterprets agency, identity, and belonging, as well as mobilizes marginality, silence, and resistance, all while challenging dominant ideologies. According to a feminist literary study, literature reflects women's life experiences and gives them a way to rethink their identity by projecting a space of resistance (Showalter, 1999). Through their distinctive narrative techniques and thematic interests, Olivia Laing in *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott in *Dare Me* (2012) both contribute to the growing body of feminist literature that seeks to reclaim and rewrite the narratives that define modern women's selves in the face of patriarchal frameworks, as this thesis examines. In conjunction with intersectional feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and queer thought, modern women's literature moves beyond personal testimony to engage in discourse, collectively undermining patriarchal views of identity, gender, and power. Despite improvements in gender equality, patriarchal ideologies continue to have a subtle yet profound impact on women's subjectivity, causing them to feel invisible and isolated in fragmented social environments (Butler, 1990; Cixous, 1976). This study examines two well-known examples of

modern feminist writing, Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012). These writings reflect the subtle nuances of women's experiences in complicated and restrictive social environments. Laing's hybrid book, which blends memoir and art criticism, depicts loneliness as a politicized rather than an entirely subjective or emotional state, particularly for women, LGBTQ+ people, and artists whose lives are marginalized by the dehumanizing rhythms of urban capitalism (Laing, 2016). Abbott presents a nuanced and unyielding depiction of complex feminine agency, upending conventional notions of female passivity and innocence in accordance with noir sensibilities (Abbott, 2012).

Furthermore, the work portrays women as passive victims, nor does it depict their characters as solely seeking agency through visibility, autonomy, or belonging. By focusing on marginalized feminine subjectivities, Abbott and Laing create narrative spaces in which silence is commonly used as a stimulant for resistance and a forerunner to solidarity rather than a sign of submission. This study places *Dare Me* (2012) and *The Lonely City* (2016) within a larger history of feminist writing that emphasizes the reconfiguration of selfhood in the face of oppression. In doing so, it draws on feminist theorists such as Bell Hooks, who conceptualized love as a radical and possibly healing act (hooks, 2000), and Virginia Woolf, who defined autonomy through the metaphor of "a room of one's own" (Woolf, 1929).

In the modern world, Laing and Abbott use novel narrative techniques to examine the existential and emotional repercussions of patriarchy, carrying on a feminist tradition that analyzes loneliness, selfhood, and systemic oppression in nuanced and diverse ways. This book contends that literature offers a revolutionary

and rebellious environment for reevaluating the female experience outside the confines of gender, sexuality, and societal conventions. Institutional environments, urban life, and postmodern patriarchy are all explored by Abbott and Laing in terms of their contradictory promises of liberation and imposition of restrictions (Bauman, 2000). Both writers express a kind of feminism that transcends individual misery to envision collective freedom by sharing a thematic emphasis on identity, resistance, and loneliness.

Megan Abbott and Olivia Laing make a valuable contribution to the body of modern feminist literature by portraying women's battles with identity, agency, and alienation in hyper-mediated, socially restrictive, and patriarchal settings. Their pieces, which highlight silence, resistance, and visibility, and are distinguished by original formal arrangements, question conventional notions of femininity and allow for a fresh perspective on the feminine experience. Using affect theory, which highlights the embodied aspects of power, and postcolonial queer critique, which emphasizes overlapping systems of oppression, this study demonstrates the revolutionary potential of literature to not only depict oppression, but also to challenge power and imagine novel possibilities for selfhood and liberation (Spivak, 1988).

## **1.2 Statement of the Study**

The lingering effects of patriarchal frameworks have not been entirely conquered by contemporary women's literature, particularly in urban and postmodern contexts, in spite of the significant progress made by feminist movements and literary analysis. In fact, although some feminist discourses have historically focused on affective alienation, the stylization of gendered invisibility, and the consumption of female bodies, these charges are frequently confined to a discussion within the canon of political and philosophical

thought, ignoring the ways in which modern narratives adopt and expand upon these ideas by interrogating literary form and voice in order to produce acts of resistance. This study analyzes Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) in an attempt to bridge this gap. It examines how these writers portray female marginalization, silence, and isolation as subversive tactics for regaining agency and voice, rather than as indications of passivity. This study aims to show how literature has moved from merely mirroring oppressive social systems to actively dismantling them by analyzing the connection between form and subject.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The study aims:

1. To explore the presentation of the theme of liberation and selfhood in Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) through the lens of feminism.
2. To investigate the presentation of the theme of liberation and selfhood in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) through the lens of feminism.
3. To compare and contrast between the presentation of the theme of liberation and selfhood in both literary works.

### **1.4 The Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the growing field of feminist literary criticism by analyzing how Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) and Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) depict the contradictions of female subjectivity in postmodern and patriarchal settings. Literature written by and for women is a vital platform because it enables feminist motions and slogans to be created, as well as challenges to the social institutions that still oppress women in the 21st century. Although current research documents women's estrangement from systematic oppression, this study

takes a novel approach by concentrating on literary form. By questioning accepted ideologies and providing different viewpoints on identity, agency, and belonging, Laing's synthesis of autobiography, art criticism, and cultural theory, as well as Abbott's subversion of noir conventions, are examples of this method in action. It turns silence and marginalization into resistance. By illustrating that literature reflects and actively modifies feminist practice, the thesis bridges literary analysis and feminist theory. Take, for instance, Laing's study, which demonstrates how intimacy has become a commodity in neoliberal cities, particularly for 40 intelligent and LGBTQ women who are suppressed by the mechanisms of capitalism. Likewise, by redefining female rage as a legitimate response to patriarchal control rather than a departure from ideal femininity, Abbott's harsh portrayal of often adolescent violence attacks harmful girlhood societies. This ancient research is important because it broadens feminist concepts by giving agency, showing how seemingly passive conditions like silence and isolation can be changed, requesting that locations offer solidarity, and rebellion. It intersects fundamental concepts, such as Virginia Woolf's claim that one needs a space frequently one's own and Bell Hooks's radical performative in *The Lonely City* (2016) and *Dare Me* (2012), which are now at the center of a growing number of feminist discussions. Laing and Abbott are able to challenge conventional representations, often of femininity, and lead readers to a reconstructed comprehension of their female experience by using innovative storytelling techniques coupled with themes about marginalization and resistance. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that literature has the power to alter the discussion about feminism in contemporary culture, which is a crucial contribution to the

discussion. Additionally, it demonstrates that literature can portray the difficulties women encounter and see new avenues for independence and freedom.

### **1.5 Questions of the Study**

By posing the following fundamental questions, this study aims to compare and contrast how two contemporary feminist works portray and challenge patriarchal structures:

1. How is the of liberation and selfhood presented in Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) through the lens of feminism?
2. How is the theme of liberation and selfhood presented in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) through the lens of feminism?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the presentation of the theme of liberation and selfhood in both literary works?

### **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

A number of potential limitations that might affect the scope and applicability of its findings are recognized in this analysis. Their study focuses exclusively on Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012), both of which, despite providing significant insights into the female experience, may not adequately reflect the variety of modern feminist literature. Second, the results are not widely applicable to women from different geographic locations and socioeconomic backgrounds since both texts are placed in a competitive high school context and in different social and political environments in urban America. Furthermore, feminist literary analysis is primarily interpretive. Other reviewers may focus on other subjects and techniques, even though the readings in this research are not based on established theoretical frameworks. Due to the intricacy of topics like resistance, alienation, and silence, a selective emphasis is eventually required. Although this inquiry is complex, it cannot address every aspect of

these varied concepts. In the end, both works discuss social challenges that are indicative of the era in which they were created. As a result, changes in societal values may affect how the text is understood or interpreted, which will have an impact on the study's conclusions. Acknowledging the limitations of literary analysis while simultaneously recognizing these constraints enables an objective evaluation of the study's findings..

## **1.7 Definitions**

- 1. Female Subjectivity:** Female subjectivity refers to “the complex and multidimensional processes by which women shape and interpret their identities, desires, and emotional landscapes. These processes are influenced by intersecting cultural, social, and historical discourses, which represent women's varied perspectives and lived experiences within a patriarchal framework" (Weedon, 1997, p. 16).
- 2. Alienation:** A profound state of alienation characterized by a loss of connection with oneself and others, which typically manifests as feelings of loneliness and detachment. This study explores the emotional and social dissonance experienced by women, particularly in urban and competitive environments" (Mann, 2005).
- 3. Patriarchy:** A prevalent sociopolitical system that institutionalizes male supremacy and exerts control over several aspects of life, including family, politics, and economy. This hierarchical system promotes the marginalization and discrimination of women, restricting their roles and identities (Murray, 1990).
- 4. Resistance:** Individuals or groups engage in deliberate and strategic actions to challenge and disrupt hegemonic power structures and normative practices. In this context, hit refers to their techniques by which female individuals exercise their agency and oppose patriarchal boundaries (Scott, 1985).

- 5. Silence:** A politically charged lack of voice, enforced by structural erasure or intentionally utilized to avoid patriarchal supervision. This study explores the transformational potential of silence in articulating speech, allowing people to reclaim their narratives and assert their identities (MacKinnon, 1987).
- 6. Marginality:** The condition of being on the margins of social, cultural, or political life, which frequently results in a lack of acknowledgment and visibility. It highlights the experiences of those who do not fit conventional standards, leaving them feeling invisible and alone (Williams, 1977).
- 7. Feminist Literary Analysis:** This crucial approach focuses on gender depictions, power dynamics, and women's lived experiences while interpreting literary texts through the lens of feminist theory. This method shows how literature may reflect and criticize patriarchal beliefs (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).
- 8. Urban Alienation:** Their existential disconnection and isolation experienced by individuals in urban settings, where the impersonal nature of metropolitan life exacerbates feelings of estrangement from community and self. This notion is crucial to Laing's investigation of loneliness in *The Lonely City* (2016) (Harvey, 2012).
- 9. Thematic preoccupations:** Means the principal ideas, themes, or concerns with which a writer or artist is profoundly concerned and revisits frequently in their work (Harvey, 2012).
- 10. Womanhood:** "The state or status of being a woman, particularly in terms of the experiences, roles, characteristics, and attributes typically or culturally associated with women (Butler, J. ,1990).

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Review of Related Literature**

Through Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) and Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016), this research has been informed by some of the core concepts of the creation of female subjectivity through isolation, spaces of resistance, and the most prevalent, uncomplicated practice of patriarchy. In response to prevailing ideologies, modern feminist philosophy has been instrumental in promoting feminist consciousness and developing novel understandings of identity, agency, and community (Tong, 2009). Therefore, the negotiation of identity in different historical, social, and cultural settings, which we define as women's subjectivity, is still a subject of discussion. The deconstruction of identity does not necessarily lead to the demise of politics, as Butler (1990) contends in *Gender Trouble*, but rather ... When constituent categories of identity become available for re-signification, it is a method of identifying the political possibilities that arise (p. 148). With this framework, we may comprehend Laing's and Abbott's key characters.

Laing depicts the city in *The Lonely City* (2016) as a social and psychological environment that intensifies sentiments of loneliness and otherness. Her analysis of urban loneliness is gendered since it claims that the isolation of the female subject is a direct result of living in a patriarchal culture. According to Laing, loneliness is a community problem that is political and belongs in a city rather than an individual (Laing, 2016, p. 6). This is supported by Smith's (2010) research, "Alienation of Women into Urban Landscapes," which demonstrates how patriarchal organizations and urban culture cause women to feel emotionally isolated, both internally and externally, making them invisible in their neighborhoods. On the other hand, *Dare Me* (2012) focuses on female subjectivity

in a highly competitive environment, such as cheerleading, where social bonds are created through performance, power, and strict gender roles. Because they struggle with conflicting relationships and emotional detachment while attempting to satisfy secret desires like devotion, belonging, and sadness, adolescent girls experience alienation. Despite their radically different settings, both pieces use urban alienation and suburban high school rivalry to highlight their revolt against repressive social norms. Alienation is a significant issue since it may occur both within and outside a person's social circle. According to Laing, this metropolis is a landscape of fragmented intimacy (Laing, 2016, p. 42), where displacement is commonplace. But Abbott also examines the psychological difficulties women face while establishing relationships as well as the emotional impact of conformity.

In both books, there is a recurring theme of resistance, but the writing styles vary. Laing's protagonist in *The Lonely City* defies it via introspection, queer imagination, and the fabrication of a same-sex identity. Resistance. Conversely, *Dare Me* (2012) portrays revolution, resistance, and empowerment strategies against a male-dominated culture, such as striking, sneaking, and manipulation. Butler argued in 1990 that gender is a performance with obvious punitive repercussions (p. 139) and that subversion is conceivable when the performance exposes its own manufactured character. This forceful expression of identity is consistent with that argument.

Both writers address the restrictions of silence and sight. Silence, according to Laing, is not absence but rather presence noisy with what we don't know and can't acknowledge (Laing, 2016, p. 172) and it acts as a symbol for the erasure of LGBTQ people and the internal struggle of the othered subject. However, Abbott's characters are especially

exposed in the hyperfeminized cheerleading industry, where notoriety may be a mixed bag. A distorted self-perception and inner misery are often hidden by public approval. Woolf (1929) makes this argument in *A Room of One's Own*, emphasizing the financial and physical conditions that give women freedom by stating that they need both a room of their own and money in order to write fiction.

Hooks (2000) presents more convincing arguments in *All About*. Love is defined as an activity rather than a feeling, and radical restoration practices include emotional authenticity and community engagement (p. 13).

The primary protagonists of *The Lonely City* (2016) and *Dare Me* (2012) are innately restless, bewildered, and reject the patriarchal structures that have been imposed on them. Both stories include female characters who use introspection, performance, and resistance to build a sense of self in settings where their emotional and social options are limited. According to Judith Butler (1990), gender is the recurrent stylization of the body, a series of behaviors performed under a highly constrained regulatory structure (p. 33). Both volumes show the psychological effects of these behaviors. In the hyper-feminized society of *Dare Me* (2012), rigid adherence is a method for attaining power, yet the women quietly resist by seizing authority over their bodies and the connections that bind them.

Cixous (1976) believed that the female body serves as both a form of self-expression and a defence against symbolic annihilation, as seen by their constant physical and mental vigilance. According to Laing, the city serves as both an external and internal psychological landscape, with isolation emerging as a distinctly political and gendered state. Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity, characterized by unstable connections, weak identities, and a continually shifting sense of self, is analogous to her

reality. In these perilous conditions, both Abbott and Laing's characters use emotional agency and affective resistance to mend their fractured identities.

Laing investigates love in relation to creative solidarity and queer desire, following Bell Hooks' (2000) claim that love is the practice of liberation (p. 237). However, Abbott's girls discover warped forms of love in subversion, fidelity, and competitiveness. Regardless of the uncertainties, their search of emotional truth remains a radical feminist intervention. Woolf (1929) emphasizes the importance of physical and psychological space in identity building, suggesting that a woman must have both money and her own space in order to write fiction (p. 6). Liberty can be discovered in the modest yet powerful shows of transformation that question the social standards imposed on people, not in spectacular action, but in occasions of oppositional alignment and inner awareness. A comparison of these two writings frequently reveals similar issues about the self's vulnerability in repressive regimes, while also emphasising different techniques for this pursuit of denial and liberation. Abbott's characters intentionally shape their identities by public performance and rebellion, whereas Laing's protagonist battles oblivion through introspection, seclusion, and the examination of often unusual histories. Hooks (2000) asserts that love is an action, not merely a feeling, and describes emotional authenticity as a radical feminist practice (p. 13) . Both works are built on this idea: for Laing, love is depicted as queer desire and intellectual companionship with marginalised artists; for Abbott, love remains a critical aspect for revolution, even if it is expressed as skewed power relationships. Even though their genres, narrative voices, and settings differ, both novels emphasize the complicated connection between female subjectivity and the mechanisms of surveillance, exclusion, and persistent yearning. In both circumstances, freedom is acquired or resolved indirectly through fragmentation, quiet, desire, and

resistance. Despite its variations, both *The Lonely City* (2016) and *Dare Me* (2012) investigate the complex relationship between female subjectivity and the mechanisms of surveillance, exclusion, and persistent desire. The protagonists' autonomous, self-directed, and unique experiences with feminist negotiations highlight the complexities of freedom. The social and spatial contexts in which these discussions occur, as well as the performative roles that they must accept or reject, have a tremendous impact on them. These works demonstrate that feminist identity is an active, political, and physical activity that frequently includes survival, agency, and ongoing reinvention that extends beyond reflection.

There is a lack of literature in studies that address both of the aforementioned works, which is where the current thesis contributes. The researcher attempts to emphasize modern feminist texts that actively challenge patriarchal effects by rethinking conceptions of freedom, emotional authenticity, and bodily identity, as well as illustrating how they represent these characteristics.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Method

Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) are both about self-identity and freedom. Both works are examined through the viewpoint of feminism. Feminist critique emphasizes feminine subjectivity, agency, and resistance as critical components of how literature reflects, constructs, and confronts patriarchal discourse.

This study investigates how performers negotiate or reject traditional female roles when performing gender, with a focus on Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). The theory allows for a thorough investigation of how the two main characters in Laing's and Abbott's works navigate their identities through exposure, disobedience, silence, and conformity.

Hélène Cixous's (1976) *The Laugh of the Medusa* provides a more comprehensive framework for this investigation, which advocates for the use of *deureine* as a radical reappropriation of body and voice in women's writing. Cixous' emphasis on female expressiveness informs a close reading of *Dare Me*, in which voice and language serve as battlefields and locations of self-fashioning.

Scholarly Elaine Showalter's research on women and madness in literature provides a grassroots viewpoint on how women are depicted through psychological collapse, solitary surroundings, and overwhelming emotion, as evidenced in her book *Female Malady* (1985). It is crucial to understand Abbott's studies of

adolescent hysterias and suppression, as well as Laing's research on women's solitary moods.

Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic* gives context for this study's interpretation of women's insurrection through cultural feminine ideals and subtext, or emotional excess. This is especially useful in *Dare Me*, when the girl shows anxiety and resentment through her overwhelming femininity.

The argument also uses feminist Bell Hooks' utopian ideal of emotional justice and love as a counterpoint, namely *All About Love: New Visions* (2000). The reading of the two stories broadens Hooks' conceptions of care and connection, as characters deal with the emotional isolation of patriarchal forms by seeking comfort in intimacy or reflexivity.

To investigate how freedom is routinely hindered or delayed, the approach draws on Catharine MacKinnon's (1987) notion that power and gender are inextricably linked in all parts of life. Her analysis of the notion of legal or individual liberty in patriarchy emphasizes the heroines' limited levels of agency.

Chris Weedon (1997) created feminist poststructuralist philosophy, which can be used to investigate how power and discourse influence identity and meaning. This allows us to see the heroes as dynamic, flawed beings who are constantly acting in accordance with current beliefs.

Finally, Rosemarie Tong's (2009, 2018) critiques of feminist theory provide a broader context for current research on critical topics such as the importance of the body, voice, space, and love in forming a feminist view of freedom and identity.

The primary method used in this study is close textual analysis, with an emphasis on narrative voice, characterization, metaphor, and topic organization. This strategy aims to demonstrate how each novel's language, tone, and mood transmit feminist issues, as well as how female characters assert and reclaim agency in patriarchal settings.

### **3.2 Study Procedures**

However, this study employs a systematic analytical approach to ensure a thorough and comprehensive examination of Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012).

- 1. Conducting a Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of existing scholarship was undertaken to identify and critically evaluate prior research on female subjectivity, alienation, and resistance in contemporary feminist literature. Both primary and secondary sources were systematically examined to establish a strong theoretical foundation for the present study.
- 2. Conducting Textual Analysis:** A detailed textual analysis was conducted of Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012). This analysis focused on narrative structures, character development, and key thematic elements, with particular attention to their relationship to the overarching themes of female subjectivity, alienation, and resistance.
- 3. Identifying Key Themes:** The primary themes in both texts were identified and analyzed through close textual reading. These included the challenges of negotiating female identity, the characters' experiences of emotional and social alienation, and the various strategies of resistance they employed.
- 4. Conducting Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis was conducted to examine similarities and differences in the two works' themes, narrative

strategies, and character portrayals. This analysis explored how Laing and Abbott addressed related issues within distinct contexts urban loneliness versus adolescent rivalry while engaging with broader questions of female agency and empowerment.

5. **Synthesizing Findings:** The findings of the textual and comparative analyses were synthesized to establish connections between the two works and the broader feminist literary discourse. This synthesis aimed to generate critical insights into how contemporary literature both reflects and challenges prevailing norms of gender and identity.
6. **Composing the Study:** The study was organized into a coherent written work comprising an introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis, and conclusion. Drawing on the synthesized findings, the thesis examined how the writings of Laing and Abbott contribute to contemporary feminist literary studies and illuminate the complexities of women's lived experiences.
7. **Revision and Peer Review:** Prior to final submission, the completed study was revised in response to feedback from advisors and peers to ensure academic rigor, coherence, and clarity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Analysis

Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) and Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) both depict women, worries, and self-rehabilitation via the lens of self and liberty. They examine women's emotional and psychological experiences as they battle to survive in challenging and self-discovery environments in modern society. Abbott recognizes the link between women's power and violence in patriarchal situations, whereas Laing's interpretation concentrates on the loneliness of city life, which developed her own distinct method of self-interrogation and emancipation through the arts. The chapter looks at how the two writers express women's emancipation, touch, and independence through feminist theories such as Butler's (1990), Cixous' (1976), Woolf's (1929), Hooks' (2000), and Showalter's (1999). The debate of 'creation of self and liberty' will continue with Laing's *The Lonely City*, then Abbott's *Dare Me*, and lastly with 'feminist perspectives, overlapping and diverging in both works'.

#### **4.1 Women's Representation in the Context of Liberation and Selfhood in Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016)**

The everyday manifestation of urban landscape serves as a mirror, reflecting the splintered identities of its inhabitants. Olivia in *The Lonely City* (2016) uses the mirror as a feminist trope to rethink loneliness, yearning, and selfhood. Laing redefines loneliness as a gendered and social state by effortlessly transitioning between memoir, biography, and cultural criticism, opposing patriarchal ideologies that limit women to the home or their relationships. By taking us through the city, its sites, and its lonely characters, she transforms the urban environment into an active participant in the development and disintegration of modern subjectivity,

rather than just a background. While *Into These, Their Capital City* is lonely. It develops into a space where vulnerability, alienation, and creative potential intersect, allowing Laing to investigate how loneliness exposes and reshapes one's inner self. Within the strains of modern life, Laing articulates her personal feeling of loneliness while travelling through New York, situating the lives and artistic activities of David Wojnarowicz, Andy Warhol, and Valerie Solanas within a larger landscape of political opposition. According to Laing's interpretation, these individuals represent marginalized people who exert their power through visibility, artistic exposure, and discursive involvement. Laing's writing act is consistent with Hélène Cixous's (1976) concept of *l'écriture féminine*, a writing style that emphasizes feminine subjectivity while challenging patriarchal linguistic conventions. Their urban isolation also recalls Virginia Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that intellectual freedom for women necessitates both psychological and material space. As a result, their city is portrayed in *The Lonely City* as a contradictory "room" that is both busy and empty, alienating but creatively productive. Prior to self-recognition and relational openness, solitary was characterized by misery, which included these possibilities. This dynamic is similar to bell hooks' (2000) concept of love and connection as radical political activities that challenge capitalist and patriarchal authority.

Additionally, Butler's (1990) theory could be used to Judith Laing's self-portraits. Laing demonstrates this by immersing herself in their experience, which is typically that of a woman passing through urban anonymity, asking gender questions performatively. Her experiences in the city highlight how public space continues to prioritize male power by displaying and concealing female bodies.

Rather than being paralyzed by this, Laing turns it into a possible opportunity. Women in *The Lonely City* experience liberation via artistic expression, emotional honesty, and reflection. She reconstructs her identity by writing about herself alongside previously quiet characters, using empathy and art. For Laing, loneliness is not an indication of being frequently broken, but rather a deeply human experience in which recounting one's narrative serves as both a source of suffering and self-emancipation.

The female inhabitants of *The Lonely City* live in a world with both freedoms and limits. Their city promotes exposure while yet encouraging concealment. Laing frames women's loneliness in a hybrid way that asks about a private matter while also providing a shared historical experience. Simone's individuality is portrayed here, which contradicts Beauvoir's (1949) claim that women are commonly characterized as the "Other." Laing confronts this by shifting seclusion into self-examination and assertiveness, and she frequently shares her story.

This archaic feminist method encourages self-inscription and regularly confronts the silences that focus primarily on women's emotional experiences. Laing's candor attacked the masculine commodification of women's emotions, desires, and pathologies. Her observations, which are only consistent with Elaine Showalter's (1999) "gyno criticism" approach, in which women's writing is frequently viewed as an expression of women's experiences rather than an imitation of men's work, are compatible with isolation and creativity. In this approach, Laing's writing does more than merely convey loneliness; it transforms it into a space for individual creativity. She was able to illustrate that artistic and emotional autonomy are connected types of liberation by situating solitude within a feminist perspective.

Furthermore, by focusing on other people's solitude, Laing reclaims a common sense of shared identity. She focuses on artists who have been marginalized due to gender, sexuality, or disease, and whose stories demonstrate that marginalization may lead to creativity rather than despair. Laing's empathy for marginalized artists is political because it humanizes those who have been silenced, criticizing patriarchal and economic systems that emphasize productivity and conformity over originality and variety. Laing's empathy is aligned with Bell Hooks' (2000) concept of "love as political resistance," in which love serves not as sentimentality but as a means of challenging commonly dominated structures. These metropolitan settings are incorporated into *The Loneliest City*. The city exemplifies this feminist mindset. The city, by simultaneously erasing and exposing, allows women to escape traditional household responsibilities while maintaining societal institutions that exclude them. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performance is particularly pertinent here. Laing's anonymous travel across their city exemplifies how gender is continually enacted in public, through exposure and vulnerability. The city evolves into a space where their performances, which frequently combine gender and politics, are visible. Her solitary journeys across New York are typically about self-discovery, survival, and ceremonies held in locations where physical presence is generally prohibited.

Laing avoids rigid literary categories by combining memoir, criticism, and biography, much as the current composite female identity resists formal categorization. By emphasizing both creative and emotional expression, analysis, and confession, she articulates what traditional critical language frequently overlooks: embodied loneliness, emotional experience, and the spiritual desire for connection, as reflected in Hélène Cixous' (1976) concept of *écriture féminine*. This hybrid structure enables Laing to create

a book that is both a study of loneliness and a new type of feminist literature, in which art and autobiography serve as mutually constitutive acts of self-creation (Guardian, 2016).

Laing's study of performers like Andy Warhol and David Wojnarowicz explores how alienation connects with sexuality, sickness, and power, proving that marginalized persons can recover agency via artistic and emotional expression (Caplan-Bricker, 2016). She seeks to empathize with others who are hurting, producing a sense of shared experience that elevates loneliness from a merely individual state to a cultural and collective reality (Smith, 2016).

In this framework, emancipation is attained not by avoiding solitude, but by confronting it and changing it into empathy and connection. Laing's literature depicts the ego as changing rather than remaining static, transforming absence into expression and isolation into belonging. By embracing vulnerability in her narratives, she asserts ownership of both her body and her storytelling, defying society standards that frequently mask women's pain. In doing so, she displays what Hooks (2000) calls radical self-recovery, in which voice, agency, and emotional truth are restored (Bricker, 2016).

In contrast to classic patriarchal narratives that associate women with emotional reliance and sentimentality, Laing presents a new perspective on loneliness. *The Lonely City* reframes loneliness as a critical rather than a defective state (Highmore, 2017), describing it as a deliberate retreat that exposes weaknesses in social standards and serves as a form of intellectual opposition. According to feminist cultural criticisms, loneliness in cities is a structural issue rather than a personal choice (Ahmed, 2010).

Laing's experiences with silence and invisibility in New York echo Virginia Woolf's assertion that a woman must claim "a room of one's own" in order to think and create freely (Woolf, 1929). However, Laing complicates Woolf's ideal by

noting that modern women's "rooms" are more likely to be psychological, digital, or ephemeral than physically secure, reflecting the fragility of modern female autonomy under late capitalism (Smith, 2018).

Within the peaceful anonymity of her rented apartment, Laing's seclusion epitomizes the contrasts of modern womanhood: present but disregarded, visible but emotionally inaccessible. She incorporates silence into the city's frantic rhythms and contemporary desires for sincerity and connection, which both sustain and break the self, transforming it into a meditative investigation of feminine loneliness (Highmore, 2017). Laing does this by reestablishing emotion as a genuine means of knowledge, challenging patriarchal epistemologies that have traditionally characterized affect as feminine excess rather than knowledge (Bordo, 1986).

Her writing embodies what H el ene Cixous (1976) refers to as * criture f eminine*, a mode of communication based on the body, sensation, and the often-unspoken parts of women's life. Laing blurs the line between emotional revelation and intellectual authority by combining narrative with cultural critique, arguing that emotion is a feminist mode of study (Cixous, 1976; Showalter, 1999). She weaves a web of shared vulnerability that transforms personal sorrow into social understanding by analyzing each artist's pain, particularly that of Andy Warhol and David Wojnarowicz (Laing, 2016).

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity adds depth to Laing's examination of urban environment. Butler (1990) defines gender as a recurring performance governed by societal expectations, visibility, and surveillance, rather than an intrinsic identity. Laing expresses her gender in *The Lonely City* by disclosing and concealing herself as she wanders around museums and city streets, playing the roles of spectator and spectacle. These public areas demonstrate how gender is taught to female bodies through desire and

exposure, reinforcing the notion that gender is a continuous and fluid performance rather than a fixed essence (Butler, 1990).

Laing's narrative style is self-aware, and she uses it to dismantle power structures. When someone speaks openly about their loneliness, it becomes a form of rebellion, transforming what is conventionally portrayed as feminine frailty into a source of power. Instead, confessional writing historically associated with weakness becomes a feminist strategy for obtaining visibility and self-definition (Showalter, 1999). Laing reintroduces herself to the public domain on her own terms, voluntarily exposing herself.

Finally, *The Lonely City* portrays freedom as a creative and emotional experience, rather than a liberation from one's material surroundings. Laing alters the city with her words, and she never leaves. Loneliness evolves into compassion, silence into testimony, and marginalization into creativity (Laing, 2016). This redefinition reflects Simone de Beauvoir's thesis (de Beauvoir, 1949), which states that women can only be free if they identify themselves independently of patriarchy. As a result, Laing displays what Bell Hooks (2000) refers to as extreme self-healing, in which seclusion serves as a location to reclaim one's voice, agency, and emotional reality.

Laing's *The Lonely City* portrays art as a process that transforms solitary into liberation rather than loss or inadequacy. Instead of defining isolation as a human failing, Laing reimagines it as an emotive and artistic resource that permits suppressed experiences to emerge, particularly those marginalized by patriarchal culture. The artists she works with, including Andy Warhol, David Wojnarowicz, and Valerie Solanas, are portrayed as figures of resistance whose creative activities transform exclusion into presence, visibility, and political expression (Crimp, 2002; Finkelstein, 2015). via these meetings, Laing develops her own feminist self-recovery narrative, proving that women's

autonomy can arise via the bravery to speak, create, and live differently than traditional norms (Pollock, 2013).

Laing's involvement with visual art is strongly related to Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*, which encourages women to write about their bodies, desires, and experiences outside of masculine symbolic systems (Cixous, 1976). By shifting from visual observation to poetic description, Laing converts stillness into meaning and absence into voice, allowing the fractured stories of solitary artists to reflect her own fragmented subjectivity. This repetition of loneliness throughout life results in a shared testimony that transforms isolation from private sorrow to collective witness (Smith & Watson, 2010). In this way, Laing's work recalls bell hooks' assertion that art functions as "a practice of freedom," where creative expression becomes a political space in which emotion, memory, and gender defy dominance (hooks, 2000).

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity might also be extended to Laing's concept of art as identity construction. Butler (1990) contends that identity is formed through repeated behaviors rather than a fixed essence, a process shown by Laing's enthusiasm for artists who defy heteronormative and capitalist expectations. Painting, photography, and writing are examples of performative acts that reveal the manufactured character of gender and selfhood (Jones, 2012). Laing identifies with these marginalized persons not as a detached critic, but as a participant who curates alternative identities and documents lives erased by prevailing cultural narratives (Pollock, 2013).

Laing's perspective also challenges capitalist assumptions that equate productivity with visibility and worth. By reclaiming solitude as a space of autonomy and ethical creation, she reframes loneliness as a source of insight and empathy rather than social

failure (Berlant, 2011). This reimagining of isolation resonates with Virginia Woolf's notion of "a room of one's own," which Laing reconfigures as a psychological and imaginative space produced through language rather than physical security (Woolf, 1929Deutsche, 1996). Her self-portraiture is therefore both personal and political: by writing loneliness into visibility, she dismantles the stigma surrounding female solitude and reclaims it as a legitimate mode of knowledge and creative empowerment (Ahmed, 2014).

#### **4.1.3 Emotional Liberation and Selfhood in the Urban Space**

In *The Lonely City*, Laing portrays art as a tool that converts isolation into freedom rather than seeing it as a deprivation or a loss. Rather than portray isolation as a personal failing, Laing redefines it as an affective and artistic resource that enables repressed experiences to come to the surface, especially those marginalized by patriarchal culture (Laing, 2016; Highmore, 2017). The artists she works with, such as Andy Warhol, David Wojnarowicz, and Valerie Solanas, are portrayed as symbols of resistance whose artistic methods transform exclusion into presence, visibility, and political expression (Crimp, 2002Finkelstein, 2015). By having these encounters, Laing creates her own story of feminist self-recovery, showing that women's autonomy may arise not from adhering to societal standards but from having the bravery to speak, create, and live differently (Pollock, 2013).

Laing's interaction with visual art is consistent with H el ene Cixous's notion of * criture f eminine*, which encourages women to express their bodies, desires, and experiences outside of male symbolic systems (Cixous, 1976). Laing turns silence into meaning and absence into voice by switching from visual observation to lyrical description, allowing her own fragmented subjectivity to be reflected in the broken tales of lone artists. This recurrence of loneliness in different people's lives generates a shared

testimony that transforms isolation from personal anguish to a community witness (Smith & Watson, 2010). Laing's work, in this way, reflects bell hooks's assertion that art is "a practice of freedom," where creative expression transforms into a political arena in which emotion, memory, and gender oppose domination (hooks, 2000).

Laing's conception of art as a process of identity creation is further illuminated by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Laing's admiration for artists who live outside heteronormative and capitalist norms is a clear example of Butler's (1990) assertion that identity is made up of repeated actions rather than a set essence. Artistic practices like painting, photography, and writing serve as performative acts that reveal the artificial construction of gender and self (Jones, 2012). Not as a detached observer, but as a participant who organizes alternative identities and records lives that have been erased by mainstream cultural discourses, Laing identifies with these marginalized individuals (Pollock, 2013).

Additionally, Laing's viewpoint contradicts the capitalist notion that productivity is equivalent to visibility and value. She reconceptualizes loneliness as a source of insight and empathy rather than social failure by reclaiming solitude as a space of autonomy and ethical creation (Berlant, 2011). Laing's conception of solitude as a psychological and imaginative space created via language, as opposed to physical safety, aligns with Virginia Woolf's idea of "a room of one's own" (Woolf, 1929; Deutsche, 1996). Her self-portraiture is, as a result, both personal and political: by making loneliness visible, she breaks down the stigma around female solitude and reclaims it as a legitimate form of knowledge and creative empowerment (Ahmed, 2014).

In the end, *The Lonely City* depicts freedom as an ongoing practice rather than a final state. By writing about the city, Laing changes it rather than fleeing it. Her fusion of

emotional language and critical thought challenges academic models that prioritize distance over emotion, arguing instead that intuition, vulnerability, and personal truth are legitimate ways of knowing (Showalter, 1999). According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), liberation necessitates that women define themselves outside of patriarchal dependency. As such, Laing's loneliness is transformed into a feminist act of resistance that turns silence into speech, misery into creation, and isolation into shared human connection.

#### **4.2 Power, Performance, and the Female Body in Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012)**

The concept of gender performativity, as put forth by Judith Butler (1990), helps to explain what Abbott's vision implies. The cheer routines demonstrate how femininity is socially manufactured with their precise timing and fake smiles. Every motion reiterates subordination, even as it masks fatigue, discomfort, and desire. Language is formed by the body, and the grammar of gesture addresses these accepted social expectations. The recurring action, however, provides the chance for rebellion, which is seen when performances go awry, exposing what they are meant to conceal (Butler, 1990).

These young women in Abbott's play navigate the very restrictions that bind them, performing in front of others as well as themselves. Using her physical form as a symbol of power and control, Colette exemplifies the mature aspect of this dynamic and upholds the appearance of perfection despite inner turmoil. De Beauvoir (1949) illustrates the dual nature of women's power by highlighting how societal standards necessitate both emotional control and the presentation of empowerment. By demonstrating that cheerleaders' physical effort is treated as an object but seldom acknowledged as valuable, Abbott challenges the commodification of women's labor (Hooks, 2000).

The notion of *écriture féminine*, put forth by Hélène Cixous in 1976, is another interpretive perspective that urges women to write via their bodies and express what patriarchal discourse silences. Using this notion, Abbott transforms muscle tension, regulated breathing, and choreographed movement into prose that reflects the body's intensity. The cheerleading practice is a literal and figurative writing, accurate yet dangerous, that captures the threat that comes with living in a female body that is subject to societal inspection (Cixous, 1976).

As shown by the tension between performance and selfhood, which Abbott dramatizes in Bell hooks (2000), the desire for bodily autonomy can be a sign of internalized oppression. While Abbott's characters demonstrate defiance through embodiment (Hooks, 2000), their obsession with physical perfection, beauty, and correctness reflects the greater social expectation that women should be submissive.

The concept of double consciousness from Elaine Showalter's book *The Cheerleaders* (1999) is especially pertinent since it acknowledges the artificiality of the cheerleaders' position, even as they outwardly behave in accordance with it. The body, in this sense, is both the instrument and the location of resistance, a place where dominance and empowerment coexist. In her book, Showalter (1999) shows that true freedom starts with living in one's own body and not conforming to societal norms or striving for physical flawlessness.

Megan Abbott in *Dare Me* present different ideologies, which are frequently ingrained in contemporary femininity. Abbott's harsh, reductionist picture of high school cheerleaders turns into a microcosm of patriarchal culture, a restricted space where empowerment manifests through internalized desire and is indistinguishable from performance and domination. The girls, Addy, Beth, and Coach Colette. French women

are integrated into modern society, and their identities are influenced by expectations that they be perfect, obedient, and constantly monitor themselves.

Abbott therefore creates a narrative that is partially a thriller and partly a feminist critique, showing how women's bodies and feelings are turned into battlegrounds of will and control. The cheerleading industry mirrors the broader field of feminine performance in its choreographies, hierarchies, and fixation on perfection, all of which mimic the ways that patriarchy controls and creates femininity itself. Gender is "performative," as Judith Butler maintains, meaning that it is carried out via recurrent actions until it seems spontaneous. This performativity, which lowers gender to a polished spectacle, is reflected in the cheerleaders' physical discipline, accuracy, composure, and necessary smiles that are always ready for the camera. However, this spectacle conceals moments of subtle rebellion: every competition, every autumn, every whispered bit of gossip reveals a break in this facade. Abbott exposes through these fissures that living in a system where authenticity is consistently denied comes at a psychological cost.

The hazy line between manipulation and mentorship is further clarified by Abbott's depiction of Coach Colette French. Colette embodies a contemporary paradox: a woman who seems empowered yet whose power is frequently regulated by patriarchal norms and masculine forms. Her power comes from her control over the wants, loyalties, and bodies of the girls under her sway, reflecting how women's empowerment in patriarchal societies frequently relies on embracing the mechanisms of male domination. Abbott uses Colette to portray what Cixous (1976) refers to as "these logic offer opposition," in which women internalize and recreate the very beliefs that limit them. Colette's appeal and destructiveness stem from her persistent attempts to maintain her dominance in a world where true equality is unattainable. In this way, her power becomes an act that is

maintained by force, seduction, and fear, exposing these shaky foundations that provide empowerment into a society that is still influenced by patriarchal dominance. However, into contrast told Colette and through her narrative voice, Beth presents an emerging feminist awareness. One can infer from her interactions with both characters that she is becoming increasingly aware of the mechanisms of manipulation, allegiance, and coercive intimacy that govern their world. Addy's inner voice, which is introspective, poetic, and sensitive to the body, reflects the principles of *écriture féminine* that Cixous promotes. Through this voice, Abbott breaks down many of the rigid dichotomies between innocence and corruption. Addy, who is both drawn to and disturbed by Colette's alluring power, slowly comes to realize how her own desires are being used against her. In addition to providing feminist criticism at this level, Abbott also focuses on how these aesthetics provide their own unique perspective. Abbott's characters perfectly illustrate this inherent tension, which is frequently seen in adolescence: the tension between the pressure to conform and the impulse to rebel. Her writing, which is thick with inherent tension but lacks sensuality and emotional depth, reflects this. Their violence is woven throughout the story it is neither arbitrary nor decorative but rather symbolic, revealing the underlying brutality embedded in cultural expectations of femininity. As bell hooks (2000) argues, "patriarchy has no gender," and Abbott's characters are a perfect example of this in that they enforce, inhabit, and occasionally resist the very structures that bind them.

Patriarchal violence into *Dare Me*. The female protagonists of me his performed and maintained by Abbott's demonstrated how socialization leads to injustice by telling individuals to become perpetrators. Their cheerleaders' competitiveness and mutual scrutiny mirror their internalization of the patriarchal gaze, ask they monitor one another's

bodies, performances, and conduct with nearly ritualistic accuracy. Similarly, the relationship between Addy and Beth represents a struggle between oneness and individuality. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) claim that society has not traditionally encouraged women to compete against one another in order to destroy their collective power is reflected in the way Their connection oscillates between complete allegiance and its competition. Beth's strength comes from her ability to dominate others, while Addy's liberation starts when she recognizes this dynamic and decides to break free. Despite these torments, the termination offer their friendship represents Addy's first real act of self-formation, as she now begins to live and practice feminist practices that are solely focused on giving meaning to her own life rather than being in Beth's shadow.

The high school setting, which serves as a microcosm for the outside world, exacerbates these conflicts. A company that supports hierarchy, obedience, and uniformity while criticizing freedom and disobedience. This conventional framework is subverted by Abbott, who argues that neoliberal feminism equates empowerment with competition rather than community. For cheerleaders, this pursuit of perfection becomes inextricably linked to capitalism's commodification of empowerment: they may have achieved it all, but frequently at the expense of their own self-erasure.

*Dare Me*, in the end, depicts liberation as both a request and a reality. In contrast, butter was a gradual progression. Addy's story as it progresses, her voice becomes more reflective, subdued, and self-aware. She confronts their hollowness, which is frequently a type of empowerment that is built exclusively on imitation of dominance. Into Abbott's vision, emancipation emerges through recognizing one's complicity into oppressive systems and choosing truth over their seductive illusions. Through her town emerging was empowerment, Addy enacts what Judith Butler (1990) terms "resignification," which

is these process often reassessing and rearticulating one's position within structures often language and power. Through its dramatization of frequently ambition, envy, and desire, the novel charts the psychological landscape of modern femininity. Abbott's narrative ultimately advances the argument that the self is a site of constant, unstable performance. As a result, liberation does not require the rejection for transcendence often performance but rather an conscious understanding of its mechanisms and a deliberate rewriting was of its terms. The book's sad conclusion emphasizes the feminist notion that liberation begins with self-awareness itself.

*Dare Me* by Megan Abbott Emotional regulation is depicted by me as both a wound and a threat. She reveals how society expects young women to maintain their composure, keep quiet, and remain self-sufficient, and how these expectations are internalized despite the systematic denial of their freedom (Hooks, 2000). In the cheerleading world, feelings are deemed hazardous and must be controlled, suppressed, or redirected (Blackman, 2012). This dynamic highlights a central contradiction in the book: emotional suppression is equated with empowerment, and emotional absence is seen as evidence of it.

Colette, the coach, establishes her identity to exert power. Her controlled tone, perfect demeanor, and measured grace embody what Simone de Beauvoir (1949) defined as self-objectification: learning to perceive oneself through the eyes of others and modifying one's emotional life to fit externally imposed ideals (De Beauvoir, 1949Fraser, 1997). Her eventual breakdown reveals the psychological costs of feigning invulnerability in a system that punishes even the slightest departure from the norm (Abbott, 2012). Beneath this carefully crafted façade lurk anxiety, uncertainty, and remorse.

The cheerleaders' capacity to manage their emotions serves both as a means of survival and as a cause of alienation. The connection between Addy and Beth shows how

patriarchy pervades women's emotional lives, transforming intimacy into a battleground where love and power are intertwined (Hooks, 2000; McRobbie, 2013). The way in which patriarchy uses and controls women's wants is reflected in the way that Abbott examines the entanglement of desire and control: the attraction to Colette undermines the boundaries between adoration, desire, and rebellion (Butler, 1990).

In 1976, Hélène Cixous stressed that women's liberation must entail a "return to the body" and language, as well as the regaining of the ability to express desire in an unrestricted manner. Through Addy's changing inner life, Abbott implements this necessity. Addy's thoughts are initially fragmented and hesitant, but as she deals with betrayal, moral ambiguity, and desire, they become clearer and more powerful (Abbott, 2012). Emotional literacy is a way to fight the numbing effects of patriarchal discipline (Ahmed, 2017).

The limits of performative empowerment are also discussed by Abbott. Reflecting Nancy Fraser's (1997) critique of recognition without redistribution, the seeming freedom of cheerleaders is just found inside the boundaries approved by the male gaze. In contrast to a simple performance that is based on victory, Addy's story showcases a nuanced form of freedom that is based on consciousness and prioritizes survival and resistance (Fraser, 1997).

### **4.3 Comparative Feminist Analysis of *The Lonely City* and *Dare Me***

Olivia Laing in *The Lonely City* and Megan Abbott in *Dare Me* by both explore themes of freedom and identity from very different angles, with distinct styles and viewpoints. While Abbott views emancipation via the lens of performance, control, and surveillance (Butler, 1990; Blackman, 2012), Laing's interaction with identity is marked by introspection, creativity, and compassionate observation. These writings, which each

map different dimensions of female experience, engage in an unspoken conversation between solitude and performativity (Hooks, 2000; McRobbie, 2013).

Laing's reinvention of loneliness as a feminist area is demonstrated in *The Lonely City*. Her feminism stems from her own subjectivity—her feelings, creative sensibilities, and rejection of patriarchal narratives about isolation and failure (Laing, 2016; Showalter, 1999). According to Laing, liberation is expressed through conscious reflection, artistic involvement, and the demonstration of vulnerability and empathy. Solitude turns into a place for innovation and self-expression, turning isolation into a productive and self-conscious activity (Cixous, 1976; Ahmed, 2017). Her feminist viewpoint, which is based on personal awareness and emotional experience, shows how attentiveness and introspection can lead to both empowerment and insight.

In contrast, Abbott's *Dare Me* places a woman's sense of self in the domains of power and discipline. Her characters, who are trapped by the ideals of beauty and competition, represent a generation that was taught to believe that liberation may be achieved via control (Abbott, 2012; Fraser, 1997). In Abbott's story, liberation is social and frequently deceptive. Her feminism explores how empowerment is commodified and how young women turn into their own surveillants. Abbott's *Dare Me* novel is a story of performance, whereas Laing's *The Lonely City* is a story of loneliness. Even if the texts use different approaches, they all convey the same basic message: women's selves are not given or innate, but rather they are created, acted out, and reclaimed (Butler, 1990; Cixous, 1976). Every work portrays women's identities as both the outcome of their environment and influenced by it.

In Laing's , the conflict takes place in the domains of art and emotion, while in Abbott's suburban environment, it manifests itself via the politics of women's bodies and

desires (Laing, 2016; Abbott, 2012). Whether via hypervisibility or invisibility, each setting reveals the processes by which women are confined. Both texts share thematic themes with feminist theorists like bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Hélène Cixous, who contend that liberation necessitates both self-expression and identity reconstruction (Butler, 1990; Cixous, 1976; Hooks, 2000). Laing and Abbott demonstrate this recreation through different ways reflection and rebellion while highlighting the significance of expressing one's creativity and personal truth.

Both works focus on vulnerability. In Laing, it symbolizes the seed of strength, and in Abbott, it is the fracture via which consciousness arises (Hooks, 2000; Blackman, 2012). In both works, liberation entails shattering illusions: the illusion of connection in Laing's metropolis and the illusion of power in Abbott's gymnasium. Autonomy is attained via knowledge rather than flight in either scenario. Together, Laing and Abbott's writings provide complementary perspectives: feminism as both internal and external, private and public, silent and expressive. They paint a complicated picture of contemporary womanhood, in which one woman is subjected to suffering while another asserts power, and one is restricted while the other is constantly reborn. In both writings, feminism is portrayed as a continuous, ongoing process of liberation (Abbott, 2012; Laing, 2016).

## Chapter FIVE

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### 5.1 Conclusion

This research has examined how topics like freedom and the lack of selfhood are expressed from a feminist viewpoint in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) and Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016). Although the two texts differ in terms of genre, location, and narrative voice, they both concentrate on examining women's identities within patriarchal structures. In this chapter, the authors synthesize these discoveries and offer recommendations for future studies that build upon this knowledge. The authors illuminate the loneliness, emotional fragility, performativity, want, and agency that women must negotiate in environments that frequently limit their development as independent subjects.

The comparative analysis reveals that in both Laing and Abbott, womanhood is not represented rather, it is a continuous negotiation between inner truth and external pressures, with loneliness holding a key place in the feminist awakening within Laing's positioning. New York is a city that Laing reimagines within its vibrant urban environment, and it also asks for a thoughtful mode of solitude. These are conducive to the development of self-awareness, which is often what happens. She posits loneliness as a crucial place where emotional authenticity, creativity, and empathy are mutually formed, rather than seeing it as a weakness or a cause for failure. Laing shows that meaningful communication is not based on shared vulnerability by interacting with these lives and works that are frequently ignored and isolated artists. The forty feminist theorists, such as H el ene Cixous and bell hooks, sought freedom by grounding their

pursuit in the acknowledgement and expression of personal truth, a principle that Laing's work fully realizes.

In contrast, Megan Abbott frames women's liberation within these structures, which provide institutional regulation, performative competition, and surveillance. Cheerleading, which is a potent metaphor for the performance of femininity within patriarchal structures, is the subject of the novel *Dare Me*. The relentless pursuit of perfection through bodily discipline, emotional control, and adherence to a coach's directives constitutes these novel's most compelling tension. Although these veneers provide accuracy and control, there is a significant psychological battle underneath them. Abbott's paradox was that modern empowerment—being struck by systems that punish diversity and reward conformity—was frequently co-opted. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, in which identity is constructed via repeated social acts rather than genuine self-expression, is exemplified by the trajectory of these protagonists, Addy and Beth, who experience transient power that frequently succumbs to this weight and internalizes manipulation and authority. Notwithstanding differences in style and setting, both Abbott and Laing deliver the same feminist argument: selfhood must be actively reclaimed rather than passively acquired.

Systems designed to restrict women's bodies and minds cannot produce true independence, as Abbott demonstrates in his social construction of empowerment. Her story highlights how important it is for women to identify, fight, and bargain for these frameworks that define female worth in terms of physical beauty, emotional self-control, and relationship dependence. The reality that liberation is a multifaceted experience born of context, emotion, and awareness is attested to by the combination of these two writings. This also demonstrates how urban and institutional space play a symbolic role in the

development of women's identities. In Laing's narrative, the city is both the source of loneliness and the impetus for change. In Abbott's book, the institutional environment of school and sports simultaneously served as the site of performance and the cause of captivity. Each protagonist's thoughts about her worth and her resistance are systematically mediated by each context. These physical and social environments were the foundation of his consistent identity and integral relationship between environment and within feminist spatial theory. They also influenced women's inner lives and sense of self. The study also highlights vulnerability as a recurring theme throughout both works. For Laing, vulnerability serves as a channel for connection, insight, and self-knowledge for Abbott, it exposes the psychological cost of performing strength within oppressive social systems. In both stories, vulnerability signifies a threshold and an opening through which change becomes possible. It marks the moment when their protagonist discovers the structural forces that are influencing her life and the illusions that are clouding her freedom. This realization is consistent with bell hooks' thesis that emotional awareness and self-recovery are frequently the basis of feminist liberation.

Additionally, the study reveals that relationships have a significant impact on how women define themselves in both texts. Laing's relationships in *The Lonely City* are distant her connections to artists are mediated by their work and careful observation, not by shared emotional vulnerability. This kind of relationality is calm and reflective, proving that genuine ties and unity can result from recognition rather than just physical closeness (Laing, 2016; Highmore, 2017). In comparison, Abbott has a different dynamic. Dare's Relationships Competition, stress, and interdependence define us. Addy's relationship with Beth and Coach Colette demonstrates how manipulation and competitive hierarchies warp friendships between young women and influence their sense

of self. Abbott demonstrates how patriarchal forces permeate even the most intimate relationships via these interactions (Abbott, 2012; Butler, 1990).

In order to advance toward liberation, Addy must first break free from harmful relational patterns and acknowledge her own agency outside of these limiting dynamics. This analysis, when viewed in a comparative framework, demonstrates that modern feminist literature highlights a larger cultural truth: the restoration of narrative voice is essential to the emancipation of women. As evidenced by the works of Laing and Abbott, identity is influenced by both the stories that women tell about themselves and the tales that society imposes on them (Cixous, 1976; Hooks, 2000).

Laing reframes loneliness as a meaningful experience, highlighting introspection, empathy, and the creative connection with others, even from a distance. Empowerment is shown by Abbott to be a shaky concept that is easily eroded by social monitoring and systems of control. Their works together refute simplistic cultural narratives that limit women's lives to rigid stereotypes. They, on the other hand, depict selfhood as fluid, complex, and firmly anchored in emotion, physicality, and artistic expression.

These analyses imply that modern feminist literature's themes of liberation and selfhood are attained via subtle, progressive acts of consciousness, emotional bravery, and self-definition rather than via spectacular displays of revolt. This process is expressed by Laing and Abbott in complementary ways: Laing's method is based on introspection, whereas Abbott's approach is based on social bargaining and confrontation. One discovers freedom inside vulnerability, while the other discovers reality through the disintegration of deception. Their stories together shed light on the challenges women encounter as they seek identity in a society that constantly changes the female experience.

The intricate web of societal expectations placed on women is brought to light in both novels. The pressures put on Laing in *The Lonely City* are insidious but all-encompassing, mirroring societal messages that equate female solitude with inadequacy, especially in a culture where women's identities have historically been defined by their relationships to others. By portraying isolation as an active, intentional state—not as an indication of a failed relationship—Laing challenges this narrative: it's a practice of purposefully paying attention to one's own feelings. By reframing it in this way, self-reflection questions the masculinist notion that a woman's satisfaction is found through relational dependency. Laing's story is a noteworthy intervention in modern feminist thinking since it acknowledges emotional depth, introspection, and even suffering as legitimate locations of self-formation (Laing, 2016; Cixous, 1976).

In *Dare Me*, in contrast, patriarchal pressure is blatant and punitive for me. The criteria for Beth and Addy are their physical beauty, social presence, and adherence to the team's organizational structure. In the cheerleading squad, femininity is strictly monitored in a micro-political setting, not just by authority figures but also by the girls themselves. Young women in search of empowerment internalize and replicate patriarchal norms, as Abbott demonstrates, thereby perpetuating the very institutions that hold them back (Abbott, 2012; Butler, 1990). Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary authority, which is reinterpreted in a feminist framework, is reflected in this dynamic: women serve as both subjects of regulation and actors in their own surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Despite their different genres and audiences, Laing and Abbott expose the complex ways in which patriarchy functions across emotional, social, and psychological registers. Abbott explores the social dynamics of competition and desire, on the other hand, Laing delves into the emotional landscape of loneliness.

Both works highlight the fact that women's emancipation starts with challenging the institutions that influence their awareness. These illusions may be about power, as in *Dare Me*, or about belonging, as in *The Lonely City*. For me, awareness is the initial step toward freedom. Their significance in providing narrative voice in the creation of feminist selfhood is highlighted by another essential discovery. The deliberate blurring of traditional genre boundaries in Laing's hybrid style—which combines elements of autobiography, biography, cultural criticism, and art history—is intended to disrupt established norms. The splitting and reassembly of the self that her narrative portrays is reflected in this formal flexibility. Her refusal to separate the emotional from the intellectual echoes Helene Cixous's plea for women to "write themselves" in opposition to the restrictions of patriarchal discourse (Cixous, 1976; Showalter, 1999), insisting that personal experience cannot be separated from cultural criticism.

Abbott, in contrast, uses a lyrical, direct first-person voice that cuts through the turbulence of adolescence. Addy's voice expresses the complex intermingling of loyalty, confusion, desire, and growing consciousness. The reader sees the progressive demolition of illusions about power and control via changes in point of view. The intersection of narrative voice and feminist expression in both pieces highlights the revolutionary power of literature: Abbott transforms vulnerability into epistemological insight, while Laing reveals the fragility behind superficial assurance and turns it into psychological reality. Together, these writings highlight the frequently suppressed emotional realities of women that patriarchal societies have historically minimized, rejected, or pathologized (Hooks, 2000; Blackman, 2012).

Additionally, the protagonists' quest for authenticity reveals a striking parallel. For Laing, authenticity develops through creative expression and emotional openness for

Addy, it results from the painful destruction of illusions brought about by Colette's manipulations, Beth's betrayals, and eventually the empty promises ingrained in competitive performance. Addy's liberation is external and social, requiring her to break free from the relationships and identities that have shaped her, while Laing's is generated from within through introspection and interaction with lone artists. Although they follow different paths, both narratives arrive at the same feminist conclusion: in order to be authentic, one must have the fortitude to face reality, even when that reality is unsettling, unsettling, or isolating.

These writings taken together demonstrate that feminist liberation is a continuous and iterative process of reclaiming one's voice within institutions that frequently attempt to silence women and negotiating between emotion and social constraints. Their research highlights that liberation and selfhood are not static conclusions but rather ongoing processes. Rather than providing complete clarity, Laing's story ends with an open attitude and acceptance of solitude as an inherent aspect of the human condition. In his book, Abbott acknowledges that awareness is a kind of power in and of itself, and it concludes with introspection rather than triumph (Laing, 2016; Abbott, 2012; Butler, 1990; Hooks). The significance of emotional literacy in feminist discourse is emphasized by this study. Both Abbott and Laing illustrate that emotions, which are often seen in patriarchal societies as irrational, excessive, or evidence of weakness, are actually at the heart of both oppression and liberation. In many cases, women are taught to hide, downplay, or feel ashamed of their emotions, as if affective expression were a flaw. Both writings dispute this entrenched cultural devaluing by emphasizing emotion as a location of knowledge, agency, and change, and they also reaffirm the crucial role that affect plays in the development of a feminist sense of self (Laing, 2016; Abbott, 2012; Hooks, 2000).

By recognizing solitude, sadness, yearning, and vulnerability as real—and even vital—aspects of the human experience, Laing challenges prevailing cultural norms. Her tale illustrates how emotional openness can pave the way for increased self-awareness and long-lasting resilience. In contrast, Abbott highlights the harmful repercussions of emotional repression. Honesty is less valued than concealment and rigorous self-discipline, resulting in a stressful environment where repressed feelings build up until they break out in jealousy, obsession, betrayal, and aggression. Abbott demonstrates how such repression is perceived as strength, when in fact it undermines psychological stability and twists interpersonal relationships. She challenges the cultural notion that equates female strength with silence by depicting the repercussions of emotional suppression, instead offering a model of strength based on identifying and expressing one's feelings (Abbott, 2012; Butler, 1990).

In addition, both writings highlight the close relationship between authority and exposure. The absence of an outside gaze contributes to Laing's isolation she is mostly unnoticed and ignored. Nonetheless, this lack allows for real emotional investigation, releasing her from the performative expectations that frequently go hand in hand with societal observation. The young women in Abbott's narrative, on the other hand, live under continuous supervision: their actions are governed by the authority of their coach, the competitive attentiveness of their peers, and general social norms. This ongoing monitoring promotes increased self-policing and internalized discipline, demonstrating how patriarchal standards are upheld not just through overt authority but also through internalized watchfulness (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1977).

Their sense of self is influenced by how others see them, whether they are admired or envied. By demonstrating how the gaze serves as a tool for control and strengthens hi

from developing stable identities, Abbott employs this technique to reveal how it works. Additionally, these analyses show that, in both authors' writing, the body serves as a key location for meaning.

### **1. How is the theme of liberation and selfhood presented in Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016) through the lens of feminism?**

Laing's investigation of loneliness as a limiting and transforming factor in women's lives is used in *The Lonely City* to explore the themes of freedom and selfhood. The text, viewed from a feminist lens, shows that even though emotional isolation is frequently seen as passive or incapacitating, it can be a place for introspection, creative discovery, and defiance. Laing emphasizes how the alienation of urban life reveals patriarchal systems that marginalize women while also giving them the opportunity to reclaim control over the stories of their inner lives. The text outlines a route to self-knowledge and emotional independence by highlighting female vulnerability, questioning social invisibility, and reinterpreting solitude as a source of meaning.

### **2. How is the theme of liberation and selfhood presented in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) through the lens of feminism?**

In *Dare Me*, the themes of liberation and selfhood are explored within the highly competitive and disciplined world of adolescent cheerleading, where young women are subjected to constant surveillance and social pressure. Through a feminist lens, Abbott illuminates how patriarchal expectations shape female desire, ambition, and embodiment. In this context, liberation emerges as a complex and ongoing process, enacted through acts of resistance, negotiation of power, and assertion of agency within oppressive social hierarchies. Female selfhood is constructed through the characters' navigation of manipulation, rivalry, and performative identity, demonstrating how young women actively resist, challenge, and redefine the societal structures that seek to constrain them

### **3. What are the similarities and differences between the presentation of the theme of liberation and selfhood in both literary works?**

Both *The Lonely City* and *Dare Me* foreground liberation and selfhood as processes shaped by the emotional, psychological, and social constraints imposed by patriarchal systems. Both texts trace women navigating marginality, internal conflict, and societal expectations in their pursuit of personal freedom. Yet, the works diverge in context and modes of resistance: Laing emphasizes emotional and intellectual liberation through self-reflection, reframing loneliness as a source of empowerment, whereas Abbott depicts liberation entangled with secrecy, risk, and negotiation within oppressive power structures. While Laing situates selfhood in solitude and introspection, Abbott locates it within high-stakes interpersonal dynamics that expose the fragility of female authority. Despite these differences, both texts reveal how women actively reconstruct their identities within and against restrictive cultural frameworks, offering complementary insights into contemporary feminist experience.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

1. Based solely on their findings, this study makes the following recommendations to researchers interested in feminist literary scholarship and the reconstruction of women's identities in contemporary narratives, with a focus on Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*. These proposals are meant to provide assistance and expansion. For future research that addresses the challenges raised in this thesis.
2. As a result, the researcher advises that future research focus on how women develop their identities in metropolitan settings, with a particular emphasis on situations that emphasize the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of loneliness. Because loneliness is portrayed as a complex state created by cultural

and social variables in these lonely city conceptions, additional research is needed to investigate how urban isolation links to women's identities in other works of literature.

3. The researcher also suggests that future studies focus solely on women's interactions in modern fiction, with a special emphasis on the dynamics that give friendship, rivalry, and solidarity. *Dare Me* shows how young women balance power, competitiveness, and desire in closely controlled social contexts. Further research may look into how female characters in various adolescent or postmodern cultures negotiate authority, agency, and interpersonal complexity.
4. Future studies should investigate the female body as a location of surveillance, performance, and resistance. Both *The Lonely City* and *Dare Me* show how women's bodies are constantly observed and managed by social expectations. Extending such analyses to other genres, such as visual arts, life writing, and internet culture, may provide more insight into how bodily identity is produced, negotiated, and challenged.
5. These researchers propose using intersectional feminist frameworks in future studies. Since the current study focuses solely on gender, future research should include additional variables such as class, sexuality, race, and psychological factors. This would provide a more nuanced view of women's identities and the numerous issues they face across a variety of social and cultural situations.

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