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Crisis of Masculinity in Modern English Fiction: A Thematic Exploration of Male Identity and Emotional Alienation

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Masculinity, English Fiction, Emotional Alienation	This article investigates the crisis of masculinity in modern English fiction through a thematic analysis of male identity and emotional alienation. Drawing on a corpus of contemporary novels and short fiction, the study examines how male characters negotiate changing social, economic, and relational expectations in a post-industrial and post-feminist cultural landscape. The analysis identifies five dominant thematic patterns: fractured provider identity, emotional inarticulacy, intimacy breakdown, masculinity as surveillance and competition, and intersectional forms of shame. Together, these themes reveal masculinity as a precarious performance rather than a stable identity, sustained through emotional restraint, self-monitoring, and withdrawal from vulnerability. The findings demonstrate that emotional alienation is not merely an individual psychological condition but a culturally structured outcome of masculine norms that reward stoicism and autonomy while discouraging dependence and care. By situating literary representations alongside contemporary gender theory, the article argues that modern English fiction functions as a critical site for exposing the affective costs of hegemonic masculinity and for imagining, albeit tentatively, alternative modes of male emotional life and relational belonging.
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1.0 Introduction

Modern English fiction keeps recurring in men who are out of place in social worlds that continue to reward stoicism, but in which emotional literacy is gaining more and more importance. This pressure can be described as a crisis of masculinity: the degradation of assumed scripts on how to be a man, and the psychic price of holding on to those scripts that were no longer applicable to lived experience. The qualitative research of male help seeking of depression demonstrates that principles of control, independence, and invincibility may delay self-disclosure and increase self-vigilance mechanisms, which contemporary novels often enact using silence, avoidance, and unsuccessful intimacy (Staiger et al., 2020). To this end, there is systematic evidence indicating that masculinity-related pressures are associated with high suicide risk, alongside the fact that cultural patterns that do not encourage vulnerability lead to representation of masculinity being unstable and not merely pathological in fiction (Galvez-Sanchez et al., 2025). It is against this backdrop that this study thematically examines the idea of male identity work, emotional estrangement, and belonging as explored in the works of the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century English fiction. It approaches narrative form as a form of cultural emotion and limitation.

Early scholarship describes the discourse of crisis not so much as a single event, but as a repetitive process of explaining social change in terms of men as perceived as having lost status or coherence. Masculinity will be constantly re-produced against feminism, queer politics, and labor changes and new hierarchies and new injuries. According to a recent field review, there is growing discussion in scholarship on masculinity that balances the focus on structural privilege of men alongside investigation of how gender norms are also vulnerable of some men, as well as shame and exclusion (Anderson, 2023). In literary criticism, such recalibration encourages readings that do not see fictional men as universal subjects but as negotiating subjects, positioned with regard to race, class, sexuality and embodiment. The American Literary History review work also highlights that masculinities studies should work in line with the modern frameworks regarding gender diversity, such as trans and queer theory, to be able to regard how texts envision maleness and its boundaries (Breu, 2022). Collectively these views base the background assumption of the study: the crisis of masculinity can be best met as a changing cultural discourse that is being absorbed and challenged by fiction.

The second wave of research is concerned with social disconnection as a consequence of masculine normativity. The literature on masculinity and loneliness includes scopes of literature that outline the ways in which the social bonds of men have been constrained by ideals of autonomy and a lack of emotion, which may not allow them to express vulnerability or even to be vulnerable over time (Nordin et al., 2024). These tendencies assist to understand why modern novels tend to make male friendships practical but devoid of feeling and romantic relationships a place of misunderstanding. Psychological studies enhance the image by

developing mediating mechanisms: adjustment to norms, including emotional control and self-reliance, is connected to internalizing symptoms via alexithymia and emotion regulation problems (Mancini et al., 2025). Combined with fiction, these discoveries indicate that emotional alienation is not an idiosyncratic temperament, but a socially endorsed repertoire that attributes the ways that male characters cognize pain, seek assistance, and how they recount the self. Narratively, this repertoire is often coded in the form of restricted interior monologue, curtailed dialogue and excessive investment in success as a form of alternative affect.

Although strong theorization of masculinity has occurred and growing evidence related to the emotional restraint of men is becoming more apparent, the literature concerning contemporary English fiction is still in a paradigmatic divide. Emotional alienation tends to be the subject of literary criticism in the contexts of existential or stylistic motif whereas a social-scientific study operationalizes masculinity as norms, which influence the functioning of the help-seeking, symptom expression, and interpersonal functioning. The issue is that, under the absence of an integrative frame fictional representations are psychologized as individual pathology or abstracted into metaphor and the gendered mechanics of alienation are under-specified. The recent scholarship on masculinities in young adult writing demonstrates that the practices of teaching relationality and vulnerability as alternative hegemonic scripts are actively taught by the narratives, which means that textual form engages in gender socialization, but it does not passively reflect it (Zabrzewska, 2025). Simultaneously, these norms of masculinity exhibit, according to the survey data, differentially correlated with depression and mental health services utilization, such that some written representations of stoicism and self-sufficiency can be indexing different risks (Sileo & Kershaw, 2020). The resulting gap in analyzing is bridged by this study connecting thematic literary analysis to empirically described masculine constraints.

The gap in the literature is the fact that thematic mapping of emotional alienation as a distinctly gendered narrative pattern in a specific corpus of contemporary English fiction is scarcely researched. There is a tendency in the current literature to focus either on macro-level arguments about masculinities as a shifting social process or readings which are focused on individual texts without systematically comparing the manner in which masculine uncertainty, shame, and withdrawal are performed in different novels. Already in literary masculinities studies, there are calls to revise the framework according to modern gender theories without corresponding corpus-based thematic syntheses to follow recurrent affective motifs across half a millennium and across authors (Breu, 2022). In the meantime, the existing evidence of masculinity and loneliness has shown that standards of self-sufficiency and emotional control restrict the social connectedness of men, yet there is no description of how the restrictions are being narratively imagined, rationalized, or challenged in fiction (Nordin et al., 2024). This

research closes that gap by examining ways of male identity work and emotional distance in various texts and defining the way in which alienation is textualized in daily work, friendship, family, and intimacy scenes, and in the position of the reader to evaluate it.

The importance of the given research is three-fold. First, it empowers the literary scholarship by providing an operationally defined thematic vocabulary where masculinity in contemporary English fiction is analyzed, which connects the narrative patterns (silence, detachment, compulsive self-reliance) with the existing masculinity constructs instead of making impressionistic assertions. It is important since emotion-regulation routes can be used to explain the mental-health expenses of masculine norm-conformity, indicating that cultural representations can either support or upset such routes (Mancini et al., 2025). Third, the research can be added to the discussion regarding whether masculinity should be viewed as crisis or transformation through placing the literary data in context with the broader shift in masculinity studies to more complex descriptions of privilege, harm, and change (Anderson, 2023). All these works contribute to the future teaching, criticism and gender-informed wellbeing conversation based on close textual evidence.

2.0 Literature Review

Modern theorization is more inclined to regard the crisis of masculinity as a recurring culture diagnosis that increases when older gender scripts (authority, breadwinning, emotional regulation) become invalid without being substituted with anything more stable. Modern English fiction is a kind of diagnostic space in this framing: it tells the story of how men vacillate between the desire to fulfil hegemonic ideals and an awareness at the same time that these ideals are socially detrimental, emotionally damaging and disregarded in public. This double bind is often referred to as toxic masculinity, which is also controversial in terms of its limitations as an analytic concept and political impact (Harrington, 2021). Recent writing holds the idea that it is still possible to make use of the concept according to which the masculine norms may be culturally rewarding and personally corrosive with the result of affective numbness, defensive posture, and relational breakdown (Zhao & Roberts, 2025).

One of the most significant through lines in 2020 2025 studies is the fact that the creation of male identity is deeply connected to emotion regulation regimes, in particular, stoicism, self-reliance, and fear of being considered weak, which allows the production of emotional alienation not as an accidental issue but as a structural one. Empirical research on male accounts of suicide attempts explains that emotional constraint is acquired and reinforced by family and peer cultures and displacement of distress into silence, anger, or risk is imposed (River & Flood, 2021). Drawing broader evidence together, scoping studies of masculinity norms and loneliness also discover that the traditional masculine imperatives can suppress help-seeking and limit males in maintaining emotionally supportive relationships, thus, making isolation a masculine accomplishment, rather than a social harm (Nordin et al., 2024). Compare to modern fiction, and

these results begin to make sense that so many of the male characters seem socially connective and inner city alienated: the interior of the novel can often reveal the price of living as invulnerable.

In literary criticism, the emotional alienation of the male is being studied more and more in terms of visibility/invisibility: what men can confess, what they cannot confess, and how narrative structure manages to mask that non-confession as plot line and moral dilemma. The vulnerability and mental distress perceived by *Gagneret* in the reading of *Ian McEwan* is how the boundary between masculine selfhood of rationality and the affective dependencies that it rejects becomes destabilized; the text dramatizes masculinity as a performance that cracks under the pressure of being seen (Gagneret, 2021). Added to it, institutionalized masculinity is underlined by research on how to make the vulnerability of the man socially non-present even where it is statistically evident, since gender-neutral or technocratic discourse replaces masculinity as the subject of criticism (Ericson, 2021). A contemporary English novel of fiction often reflects this displacement: male narrators can be clear about events taking place in a procedural way, but the affective undertones of the story reveal a sense of estrangement, fear or shame that the protagonist is unable to clearly describe.

One major current trend focuses on the postfeminist or neoliberal spaces in which intimacy is now discussed as the choice, and gendered power still exists, only in different ways of producing masculine anxiety and emotionlessness. Criticism of Sally Rooney, *Normal People*, is interpreted as a conflictual pursuit of normality where male identity and desire are negotiated over and over through the prism of class, sexuality, and the body; the affectless emotional withdrawal and self-denial of Connell can be viewed as the adherence to male scripts that do not allow the expression of gender weakness even when in love (Yang, 2024). Scholarship on masculinity related to Rooney focuses on male homosocial pressures of status, rivalry, and peer surveillance, as factors, which constrain the relational styles of men and inhibit their expressiveness of emotions, to contextualize why, in situations of intimacy, the male characters of Rooney tend to revert to silence, irony, or disappearance (Yilmaz, 2025). Collectively, these works endorse a thematic interpretation of contemporary English fiction where emotional alienation is not simply the psychological one but the social patterned one.

Lastly, intersectional methods, in particular, the notions of class and queerness have been taken to the forefront of the narration of the crisis in the fiction of the past few years, the abstract male malaise giving way to vulnerability that is materialized. The discussion of *Shuggie Bain* by Class preemptively describes the ways in which the working-class masculinity is subject to police, the shame they experience in the face of softness, and the rejection of the soft; the character of the queer child clearly indicates that masculinity is a disciplinary regime that leads to the alienation of the self as well as the communities of care (Class, 2023). More broadly, postfeminist masculinity studies hold that modern culture is reiterating a narrative that seeks to portray men as having no strong homogeneous identity once the patriarchal right is disrupted;

in most cases, replacing spectacle with spectacle or overperformance with emotional competence (Cornea, 2024). To conduct a literature review of contemporary English fiction, this is a mixed lens: male characters are at the place of articulation, in fact they are surrounded by new vocabularies of gender and emotion, but they are incapable of expressing themselves emotionally because the social rewards of being a man still run with the logic of restraint, dominance, and disconnection..

3.0 Methodology

The qualitative research study incorporated an interpretive research design based on thematic literature analysis that was deemed suitable in exploring abstract concepts of masculinity identity and emotional alienation in contemporary English fiction. The research was not empirical and based on close reading and critical interpretation instead of numerical data. Masculinity has been addressed as a socially and culturally produced phenomenon, which enabled the analysis to leave the concept of biological definitions behind and concentrate on how the male identity was discursively created, contested and rendered unstable in fictional writings. This interpretive strategy has facilitated a detailed study of characters, narrative voice, symbolism, and repetitions that have pointed to the trends of masculine crisis in the chosen literature.

The main data of this research was a group of purposely chosen contemporary English novels where the main character of the story is a man whereas he undergoes some psychological conflict, emotional or identity breakdown. The sampling method was not random but theoretical, and it was determined by the topicalness of the texts to the area of interest of the research and their critical reputation in the modern English literature. The canonical and modern works were examined in order to provide depth and comparison thematically. The data were created by means of re-reading the texts several times, which was undertaken to collect the principal passages being associated with masculinity, emotional alienation, power and vulnerability and code them manually. Those codes were then systematized into larger thematic groups that represented hegemonic patterns and conflicts in the portraying of male identity.

The ethical issues were taken care of by making sure that academic integrity and responsible scholarly practice were followed. The main and secondary sources were credited in a proper manner to prevent any cases of plagiarism and interpretations were made in a faithful manner to the original sources without distortion or being selective. Since the research did not include human subjects, the problem of consent and confidentiality did not arise; nevertheless, the ethical responsibility was observed by approaching sensitive topics of mental distress, emotional variables, and gender norms generated by society critically and respectfully. The critique was analytical and not judgmental so that the results were highly based on the textual evidence and proven critical discourse.

4.0 Findings Results

4.1 Theme 1: Fractured Provider Identity and Economic Displacement

Throughout the readings, male identity is monitored time and again around an inherited provider script - financial competence, occupational stability, and apparent usefulness to others. Nonetheless, the modern plots always disrupt this script by precarious work, stagnated social mobility, and class enforcement. Male heroes take these pressures not as the change in the structure but as their own failure and turn them to self-blame, irritation, and seclusion. Consequently, the masculine selfhood is conveyed as contingent: in the event of the role of providers being jeopardized, the legitimacy of the character in the family and romantic arenas fails.

The result of this displacement is a specific emotional register: anxiety is seldom called anxiety, but is instead commonly converted into the desire to be in control, over-rational planning or industry. Stories depict men playing work or busyness as a way of putting off intimacy, and at the same time, they are angry at the distance that their avoidance has caused them. The thematic outcome is a circle: economic instability leads to identity insecurity, which leads to emotional inarticulation and this leads to the destruction of the very relationships and support systems that might cushion economic stress.

4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Inarticulacy and the Performance of Stoicism

The most powerful cross-text pattern is emotional restriction expressed as a learned competency and central injury. Male characters always consider any emotional expression a risky thing, which can bring ridicule, loss of power, rejection, etc., so they fall to weak disclosure, jokes, sarcasm, or non-existence. Even in first person or close third person narration, there is usually interiority in which the feelings never reach the dialogue. This disjuncture of inner affections and external speech turns out to be the heart of alienation: the man is on the stage but not an emotionally active character.

The stoicism is not represented as a solid strength but as a threat of fragile acting upheld by interference and replacement. The vulnerability turns inevitable, as the loss of a loved one, rejection, illness, humiliation, and characters tend to channel the emotion into anger, compulsive sexuality, drugs, or vanishing without warning into the realms of relationships. The thematic analysis suggests that in the contemporary English fiction, stoicism is often discussed as a manly technology which ensures short-term social respect but generates long-term psychological dismemberment and interpersonal damage.

4.3 Theme 3: Intimacy Breakdown, Fear of Dependence, and Relational Exit

Romantic relationships, as well as family relationships are continuously depicted as the field in which masculinity is more likely to be challenged than to develop. Male characters tend to view care as a threat to independence both providing and receiving, and they view attachment as dependence. This creates an effect of patterned dynamics: men want to be close,

feel that it is exposed and take control back by withdrawing, becoming silent, or presenting the relationship as transactional (duty, fairness, efficiency). The family members and partners are burdened with the task of meaning-making as the male character is evasive.

Relational exit is a signature behavior: to walk out of the room, to discontinue the conversation, to dissolve the relationship or to walk out emotionally but physically remain. These exits are not depicted in the fiction as mere cruelty at all, but as a measure of defense, taught under peer scrutiny and gender policing. The outcome is the performance of intimacy as a paradox desirable as confirmation but dwelling on a location where masculine incompetence will be revealed, creating enduring emotional alienation even in supposedly loving relationships.

4.4 Theme 4: Masculinity as Surveillance, Competition, and Controlled Violence

Constant evaluation is what shapes male social worlds in the texts, other men and institutions, and the internalized judge within the character. Status is negotiated in terms of competence displays, stories of sexual conquest, physicality and emotional invulnerability. Although explicit alpha posturing is not present, self-monitoring and intractable self-presentation are motivation by the pressure of the assessment. Characters who do not pass such tests are either mocked, ostracized, or self-punished, which helps to further the notion that masculinity is something that must be achieved over and over again.

Violence is presented thematically both literally and symbolically as grammar. There is also direct aggression in some stories, although violence is more often removed into what has been described as controlled harm: acute words and reckless action, self-cutting, and emotional sadism in the name of doing right or being strong. This has a pessimistic thematic effect: masculinity is formulated as a regime that conditions men to deal with threat through domination, yet since most threats are internal (shame, fear, grief) domination becomes internalized through self-erasure, manic control or suicidal ideation.

Theme 5: Intersectional Masculinities, Shame, and the Limits of Available Selves

This crisis is not evenly distributed; it is more strongly concentrated where a set of acceptable male selves are constrained by class, sexuality, ethnicity, and disability, or community expectations. Masculinity in working-class environments is often represented as a survival code that is enforced by toughness, whereas in environments indicating middle classes, masculinity follows more frequently as a credibility project that is enforced by achievement and restraint of emotions. The queer or gender-nonconformity male characters are often put in the hyper-visibility of being judged, and masculinity is presented as a boundary-making practice that creates shame as its intended by-product. In intersections, the role of the shame is the feeling that the inner life of a person cannot be put in the social role that they are supposed to play.

These limitations result in unique narrative conclusions. There are some texts, which enact partial repair of text, as a men acquires a restricted range of emotional vocabulary, or the

renegotiation of care, or the acceptance of relational interdependence, but even the arcs that are positive are tentative and partial. Other texts have continued drift as the character attains social success and is emotionally stuck, or back to familiar masculine scripts even after realizing the cost. The paradigmatic finding is that the contemporary fiction on English language promises repeatedly that such a phenomenon as male identity is the improvisation under the conditions of constraints: men do not just reject intimacy, they frequently cannot obtain it without losing their social validity, and the ensuing alienation is depicted as personal tragedy and cultural oppression.

5.0 Discussion

The thematic findings suggest that the crisis of masculinity in contemporary English fiction can be best understood as a representational problem generated by conflicting gender logics; older hegemonic scripts (provider authority, emotional control, dominance) are still socially acceptable, but newer moral economies are problematising the same scripts. The fiction under analysis repeatedly enacts male identity as a precarious accomplishment instead of an established identity with the characters alternating between defensive performances and periods of self-identification. This is consistent with the recent masculinity scholarship which does not merely equate the idea of toxic masculinity as an insult or a personality trait, but as a debatable notion to be used in describing patterned harms created by hegemonic masculine norm and its institutionalization (Harrington, 2021; Zhao & Roberts, 2025). The implication informed by this literacy is that modern fiction can be regarded as a cultural audit: it is a dramatization of how masculinity continues to be a status project despite the fact that its traditional payoffs (respect, certainty, relational control) are no longer guaranteed.

The second point of discussion relates to affect regulation where it is the main medium through which identity crisis is transformed into emotional alienation. In stories, men fail to express emotions simply because they are impoverished in emotion, but it is expressed in disciplined and rigorous emotional restraint, in irritability, obsessive mastery, and exit in relationships. This trend is similar to the results in the literature on the health of men since emotional suppression and striving towards dominant masculine ideologies have been associated with an increased psychological risk, such as suicidal distress (River & Flood, 2021). Simultaneously, the current review literature on masculinity norms and social connectedness indicates that the ideals of stoic self-reliance can suppress the urge to seek help and lower the ability of men to maintain supportive relationships, thereby, normalizing the unintended outcome of the so-called successful masculinity, loneliness (Nordin et al., 2024). Going backward into the fiction, emotional alienation is not a personal psychopathology but a process learnt in a culture and with predictable relationship costs.

A third consequence is institutional mediation: modern fiction in the English language often places male characters within systems, or at work places, or at classed milieus or in schools

or peer groups, wherein machismo is constantly tested and remedialized. This can be used to understand why structural pressures (precarity, deindustrialization echoes, status competition) are viewed by male characters as personal inadequacy and reacted to with withdrawal that is fueled by shame. These images echo studies on the processes of making male vulnerability both visible (in outcomes) and invisible (in discourse), keeping gender-neutral frames up, with masculinity as an active social process obscured (Ericson, 2021). The frequent moments of silence, avoidance, and restrained aggression in the fiction are readable as practiced emotional measures of institutes and not individual flaw in characters when the scenes are coupled with evidence that emotional restriction is one of the active aspects of how the ideals of masculinity are sought and avoided when men are pressed (River & Flood, 2021).

Lastly, intersectionality explains how the crisis is not evenly distributed among masculinities, whereby both classes and sexuality define the threat domain, as well as the avenues to belongingness. The working-class masculinity is often represented as regulated by toughness and embarrassment and the rhetoric of middle-income masculinity is more frequently based on the credibility of achievement and the ability to stay calm; in each instance, the deviation is disciplined by means of derision or ostracism. Contemporary fiction is the subject of literary criticism that emphasizes role of classed and queer positionalities to increase risk of masculine performance and unveil masculinity as a system of boundary-making, but not a category of identity (Class, 2023). Equally, postfeminist gender identity studies of English-language fiction in the present day highlight the dependence of intimacy as reputational risk to men, creating intimacy-seeking-and-withdrawal cycles that reinforce alienation (Yang, 2024). These convergences imply that the crisis of masculinity can best be thought of as a crisis of relational capacity in the circumstance of social surveillance and not only as a crisis of self-concept.

5.1 Conclusion

The thematic analysis in this study demonstrates that contemporary English fiction often builds masculinity as a fragile performance whose authenticity is continually challenged by the unpredictable nature of the economy, institutional monitoring, as well as the changing gender discourse. The ensuing state of crisis is narratively portrayed with disjointed provider identity, emotional inarticulateness, breakdown of intimacy, and self-monitoring with status. In the corpus, emotional alienation is described as the result and process: men retreat due to the fear of being revealed and that withdrawal strengthens the isolation that increases shame and instability.

The results also show that the crisis is not unified. Queer and classified masculinities expose the tightening or loosening of constraints according to social location and the uneven distribution of the availability of acceptable male selves. In general, contemporary English fiction makes male identity a constrained improvisation, men bargain between scripts of power

and scripts of vulnerability, not always having sufficient emotional vocabularies or relational cover, and alienation is a culturally structured situation and not a strictly personal weakness..

Contributions

Fizza Batool: Problem Identification, Literature search

Maryam Adil: Methodology

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