

## **Raising Awareness of Coercive Control: The Role of Literary Representations**

Reframing Coercive Control in Carmen Maria Machado's Memoir:  
*In The Dream House* and Bernardine Evaristo's Novel: *Girl, Woman, Other*.  
Discovering Narratives of Coercive Control in the Victorian Canon.

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## **Who Said It Was Simple**

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter  
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks  
the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.

An almost white counterman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.

But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in color  
as well as sex

and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations.

**Audre Lorde 1970**

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## Abstract

It is eight years since coercive control in intimate relationships was made unlawful in England and Wales, through section 76 of the *Serious Crime Act 2015*. The relatively low prosecution rates under the Act can be linked to the lack of awareness of what the offence constitutes. A 2020 BBC Three documentary found that 70% of the participants failed to identify signs of the crime.

This thesis explores how narratives of coercive control expose the diverse mechanisms of the offence, using narrative techniques and figurative language that are not available to factual texts. Through close textual analysis, it explores how two 21st century texts and three secondary 19th century texts raise awareness of coercive control. Carmen Maria Machado's *In The Dream House* is an experimental literary memoir about domestic abuse between women, recalled and examined through the lenses of a series of genres, tropes and clichés. Bernardine's *Girl, Woman, Other* is a ground-breaking novel, in form and content, about 12 diverse black women. One of its protagonists is coercively controlled, also in a same-sex relationship. This thesis also reframes earlier readings of three canonical Victorian novels, revealing features and patterns now associated with coercive control.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to all women who are, or have been, coercively controlled in their intimate relationships.

## **Motivation**

This thesis conveys a political message to support the ongoing feminist fight against women's oppression, with the ultimate aim of ending coercive control as a form of liberty crime against women, and thereby achieving systemic change by breaking down patriarchy. I argue that the narratives of coercive control I have chosen to explore can raise awareness of how subjects are exploited and manipulated by exposing the various techniques that perpetrators apply. I explore how these texts, in their unique ways, have the power to bring about social and political change by educating readers about coercive control; breaking down taboos; highlighting women's lived experiences and giving voices to 'the other', which can help by changing conventions and subverting prejudices.

## **Limitations**

This thesis will focus its research on the relevant contexts in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), as the chosen literary texts were first published in these places. The focus of this analysis is the domestic abuse of women. I have chosen primary and secondary texts that depict women's experiences as survivors of coercive control.



## Introduction

*In The Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado is a highly experimental literary memoir depicting the author's experience of coercive control at the hands of a same-sex partner. Through close textual analysis of Machado's use of genres, tropes and clichés, which create a framework for the abuse she suffers, the diverse and often insidious tactics used in coercive control are uncovered. *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo is a groundbreaking novel in form and content, about 12 diverse black British women whose entwined histories span 120 years, with a free-flowing narrative expressed via polyphony. One of the women experiences coercive control in her relationship (also with a same-sex partner), however it differs from Machado's memoir in that her experience intersects with narratives of inequalities relating to gender, sexual identity, race and class. I explore the texts through the lenses of Sara Ahmed's affect theory, as well as coercive control theories by Evan Stark (who introduced the concept of coercive control in 2007 in his seminal book on the subject), Jess Hill and Lisa Fontes. In addition, I draw on Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and to a lesser degree on a selection of contemporary feminists' works. I critique second-wave feminism through the lens of intersectional feminism, as discussed in the article "Intersectionality Mapping the Movements of a Theory" by Carbado et al.

Although the perpetrators in these texts are women, I argue that the contexts are domestic abuse within patriarchal society, in which women are seen as subservient and are exploited by men. Machado alludes to this in the chapter '*Dream House as House in Florida*' when she meets her girlfriend's parents for the first time:

*"You never see her mother eat, not once"*, (Machado 63).

And:

*"...as you cross the kitchen together, you see her father stepping toward her mother.*

*He's holding a drink, and he's shouting about – something. She is tight against the counter. Your girlfriend keeps moving, without pause,*

*but you stop for a beat and look at them. Her mother flashes you a glance, and then tilts her chin up toward her husband and says:*

*'I need to finish dinner', before turning her back to him. The moment feels fraught, but it passes and he stalks away"*, (Machado 65).

Here Machado alludes to domestic abuse in a heterosexual relationship, which may explain her girlfriend's abusive behaviour as resulting from childhood trauma. She seems to mimic the behaviour she witnessed in her parent's marriage, as depicted in this passage. In *Girl, Woman, Other* patriarchal violence at the hands of her mother's boyfriend is included as a possible explanation for her girlfriend's coercive and controlling behaviour, ('her' and 'she' is Machado's girlfriend):

*"Her futile attempts to curtail his addictions resulted in being beaten up so often she gave up trying to change him and fell into the drug life herself"*, (Machado 77).

And:

*"eventually the inevitable happened when she reached puberty, there'd be earlier signs, inappropriate touching and comments she'd been too young to decipher and later, too vulnerable to ward off she had lost her virginity stolen while her mother and brother were out shopping and she'd stayed in to do her homework"*, (Machado 77).

I explore my secondary texts before my primary texts, in order to track thematic progress historically. The secondary texts are as follows: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë, and *Ruth* by Elizabeth Gaskell. What conditions were women living under in the Victorian age compared to women in contemporary society with regards to domestic abuse? I analyse these novels drawing on theories of coercive control to explore an alternative angle that deviates from some previous interpretations, written more than 170 years before my primary contemporary texts. The abusive tactics deployed in the primary and secondary narratives match those outlined in contemporary coercive control theories, and some of the vulnerabilities that are exploited by the perpetrators in the primary narratives are related to their status as queer women in a heteronormative society. Evan Stark explains in his first edition of *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, published in 2007, that in the context of "battering", (Stark 394, 2007), (which here is not classed as coercive control), that:

*“whether a lesbian is abused by a biological male or female or whether the victim identifies as a male or a female or both, the abuser exploits the disadvantages women experience because of their sex, the expectations associated with their gender, and discrimination based on sexual orientation”*, (Stark 394, 2007).

And:

*“when it is used as an instrument of control by another woman, lesbian battering is a facet of male dominance that affects the freedom of women everywhere as well as the community as a whole”*, (Stark 397, 2007).

In Stark’s second edition of his book, published in 2023, he has revised his stance and argues that: *“Although heterosexual relationships are the most common context for coercive control, the strategy is not sex or gender specific”*, (Stark 13, 2023). Stark’s theory of coercive control can therefore be used as a springboard to explore diverse types of relationships in which the abuse takes place.

History has shown that each movement, each feminist wave, was concerned with real burning issues of oppression that were, and in many cases are, still hurting women. Time after time, women have proved that the rights they were fighting for, including the right to be protected from domestic abuse, were rightfully theirs as human beings. Article 1 in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that:

*“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”*, (United Nations Article 1).

It is fortunate that the chosen phrase ‘all human beings’ encapsulates all genders, however the word ‘brotherhood’ can be interpreted to exclude more than half of the human race. If this declaration had been written today, hopefully a more gender-neutral word would be used - I suggest ‘humanhood’. Other key words in this first article of human rights include ‘born free’, and the rest of the Declaration sets out in more detail what this means. Stark points out:

*“By linking gender violence, intimidation, economic oppression, and limitations of speech, movement, and social connection, the human rights literature provides an excellent segue to a fully developed theory of coercive control”*, (Stark 275-276, 2023).

We will see how perpetrating the crime that is coercive control against women in intimate relationships is a direct violation of this principle of freedom.

## **Chapter 1: Definitions of Coercive Control and Expert Views**

One of the challenges of exploring coercive control is that there are multiple, and to some degree diverging, definitions of the concept, which represents a challenge to raising awareness. The definitions and views below illustrate this hindrance.

### **1.1 International Coercive Control Conference**

Recently I attended the International Coercive Control Conference. On its website coercive control is defined as:

*“A form of abuse that is rooted in power, control and gender inequality that can be found at all levels of society. On an individual level, coercive control is a form of abuse typically occurring in the context of intimate relationships, where the perpetrator aims to strip the victim of their autonomy. This gradual, often insidious abuse is largely psychological in nature, including strategies such as manipulation, gaslighting, degradation, intimidation and isolation”,*  
(International Coercive Control Conference).

## 1.2 Lisa Aronson Fontes

Lisa Aronson Fontes, a speaker at the preconference workshop at The International Coercive Control Conference, explained that:

*“In the 1980s advocates in the US tried to make the police and the courts take domestic violence seriously by saying that ‘a punch to the face in the home is as bad as a punch to the face in a bar’, and the law needs to take this seriously. In the public mind people began to equate domestic violence with physical violence”, (Fontes speech).*

She continued:

*“Coercive control is a whole different perspective and this is now how people are thinking about domestic violence: coercive control is another framework for domestic violence and that domestic violence is a universe of abusive behaviours in which physical violence is one part and coercive control covers all the other aspects”, (Fontes speech).*

She listed tactics of coercive control as being:

*“isolating, abusing sexually, intimidation, economic abuse, verbal abuse, stalking, abusing through tech, abusing physically, manipulation, controlling through children and micromanaging”, (Fontes speech).*

She emphasised that:

*“sometimes there is no physical violence, there is only coercive control, and that on this list of tactics not all need to be present, but more than one to call it coercive control, and every tactic also harms children”, (Fontes speech).*

She pointed out that the abuse also harms children, an important element that is increasingly included in discourses on coercive control. This consideration has also been added to Stark’s main dimensions in the second edition of his book.

### 1.3 Refuge

Refuge is an organisation tackling domestic abuse in the UK, and provides the following definition of coercive control:

*“First and foremost, coercive control is a form of domestic abuse. Coercive control is an act, or a pattern of acts, of assaults, threats, humiliation and intimidation that abusers use to harm, punish or frighten survivors. It doesn’t relate to a single incident – it is a purposeful pattern of behaviour. Controlling or coercive behaviour within an intimate or familial relationship is a crime and perpetrators can be prosecuted”*, (Refuge).

I assume Refuge’s use of language reflects the needs of their target audience, who are victims and survivors of coercive control, and therefore their choice of words is less complex than those used by Fontes, who is an expert in the field. However, there is a contradiction in their definition: they define it as both ‘an act’ and a ‘pattern’, which is confusing. Their definition differs from Fontes’s definition in that they define coercive control as one type of domestic abuse, in addition to psychological and emotional abuse, economic abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse and tech abuse. This misses the current prevailing argument, that the concept of coercive control is in particular framed around intimate partner abuse. This was initiated by Evan Stark in 2007 when he published his book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. Stark’s conceptualisation of the offence will be covered extensively in a later chapter of this thesis.

## 1.4 Women's Aid

Women's Aid (a domestic abuse charity in England) defines domestic abuse on their website as:

*“A pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviours, it is the misuse of power and control by one person over another”*, (Women's Aid).

This definition is similar to the Refuge's definition, with the repetition of the key phrases 'a pattern', 'power', and 'control'. The different ways of framing the abuse are a sign that there are challenges involved in capturing the exact meaning of it. In contrast, literary narratives have the capacity to create affects in readers that can lead to consciousness raising of the coercive control.

## 1.5 UK Government Home Office

The Home Office *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour Statutory Guidance Framework* states that:

*“Coercive control creates chains and a sense of fear that pervades all elements of a victim’s life. It works to limit their human rights by depriving them of their liberty and reducing their ability for action”*, (Controlling or Coercive Behaviour: Statutory Guidance Framework 7).

This is not a definition, but rather a statement of the effects of coercive control on victims, including the key words ‘chains’, ‘fear’, ‘human rights’ and ‘liberty’. This is in line with the contemporary consensus that coercive control is a liberty crime and a breach of a victim’s human rights.



## Chapter 2: Coercive Control and Legislation

Domestic abuse is an abhorrent crime and a scourge on society, however this was not always perceived to be the case. Feminists have for centuries verbalised and campaigned against the dominance of men over women; a dominance which often manifests itself as domestic abuse. Some activists in the second-wave feminist movement (which took place in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, and soon spread to the UK) recognised and campaigned against the domestic abuse suffered by women. Their work helped to advance the concept of domestic violence from a social construct to a legal paradigm. The first recognition of domestic abuse in UK legislation happened when the *Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976*, (Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976), was created. This act allowed married women to obtain court orders against abusive husbands, including the power to remove perpetrators from their homes regardless of property ownership. Other examples of this paradigm shift include the criminalisation of marital rape the UK through the *Sexual Offences Act 2003*, (Sexual Offences Act 2003), and in all US states in 1993. In addition, the formation of the *Equality Act 2010*, (Equality Act 2010) protects people from discrimination based on characteristics such as age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief and sex. More recently, work by women's rights groups such as Women's Aid and Refuge, as well as awareness raising campaigns by the media, (including the BBC and *The Guardian*), have informed the creation of the offence of "controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship" in *Section 76* of the *Serious Crime Act 2015*, (Serious Crime Act 2015). The requirement for victims to be cohabiting with their abusers was removed by the *Domestic Abuse Act 2021*, Section 68, (Domestic Abuse Act 2021), as it was recognised that the abuse often continues after separation, often in a more aggressive form. Scotland criminalised coercive and controlling behaviour in 2019, followed by Northern Ireland in 2021. Other countries that have adopted coercive control legislation include Australia, Canada, as well as the following US states: Hawaii, California, Connecticut and Washington. Manya Wakefield has created a global database that tracks coercive control legislation, which is updated continuously, (Wakefield). In the introduction she writes:

*“Coercive control legislation is a cutting-edge tool for law enforcement in domestic abuse prevention. Research has shown that coercive control (also known as intimate terrorism) is the high-risk marker for domestic homicide, specifically femicide, filicide, and familicide”,*  
(Wakefield).

## Chapter 3: Raising Awareness of Coercive Control

### 3.1 The Need for Raising Awareness

I recently watched a BBC Three documentary called: “Is This Coercive Control?”. On the BBC website the programme is introduced as follows:

*“Journalist and presenter Ellie Flynn brings together a group of 20 young people aged 18-25 for a social experiment, to see if they understand what constitutes coercive control”, (Is This Coercive Control?).*

At the end of the programme, after having watched various scenarios in a relationship and having had many group discussions, the participants were asked the question: *“Did Alex commit a criminal offence against Rachael”, (Is This Coercive Control?).* The results were as follows: *“10% Alex is guilty. 20% Not sure. 70% Alex is not guilty”, (Is This Coercive Control?).* It was then made apparent that some of the evidence had been lost, for example Alex had hidden his partner’s mobile phone which contained several damning texts that he had sent. After this was revealed, an expert informed the group that indeed some of the behaviours were criminal, although it depended on the court as to whether Alex would be prosecuted or not.

Lagdon et al. conducted the research project: “Public Understanding of Coercive Control in Northern Ireland” and found that:

*“Current study findings indicate that while some respondents are aware of the term coercive control, a significant number do not know what this means and are therefore unlikely to recognize the signs of this type of abuse beyond obvious and blatant acts of harmful behaviour”, (Lagdon et al. 48).*

And:

*“Knowing the signs of a healthy relationship is an important mediator towards identifying unhealthy and harmful behaviours”, (Lagdon et al. 48).*

These findings have established that there is a need for raising awareness of coercive control.

### 3.2 The Role of Literary Texts and Women's Obstacles to Narrate Lived Experience

Literature facilitates understanding and raises awareness of coercive control through its unique insights into a character's mindset. Readers are granted access deep into the consciousness of victims of abuse, where they divulge and discuss otherwise hidden features of the abuse and explore emotions and thoughts in ways that theorists are unable to. Furthermore, literature can help to develop a different type of language for the purposes of conceptualising coercive control.

I focus on how the texts raise awareness of coercive control through the lived experiences of 'the other'; of black women and women in same-sex relationships, in addition to women in the Victorian era. I explore how their risk of domestic violence may differ from that of white and heterosexual women and how they intersect. We will see how black women and women in same-sex relationships are often overlooked in the discourse on coercive control. Sometimes they are merely mentioned as footnotes, with no further elaboration. Their unique experiences need to be recorded; their voices need to be heard and included in the canon of literature that deals with the urgent issue of coercive control, to keep every woman safe whilst observing their specific needs. My analyses of my primary texts will provide answers to the following questions:

- In what ways do the texts' unique styles help them raise awareness of coercive control?
- What roles do intersectionality and feminist consciousness play in these texts?
- What role does literature play in informing legislation on coercive control?

I link the subject of coercive control in my primary texts with other narratives of domestic abuse of women in the 19th century. These are as follows: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, first published in 1847, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë, first published in 1848, and *Ruth* by Elizabeth Gaskell, first published in 1853. This allows an exploration into how coercive control was imagined and interrogated in these novels, notably before domestic abuse was conceptualised in more modern times. I also consider how the narratives may be linked to legislation concerning the rights of women. Now that coercive control has been criminalised in England and Wales, how might readers' perceptions of these novels have changed?

Stark points out that the occurrence of wife beating has been documented in various sources such as “*popular lore, legend, art, theater, legal records, and histories of marriage and families*”, (Stark 194, 2007), despite the abuse receiving little attention or support elsewhere. He contrasts this with the lack of any mention in the same sources of: “*a regime of isolation, intimidation, or regulation that approaches coercive control in intensity or scope*”, (Stark 194, 2007). He explains that:

“*This is almost certainly because men had no need for coercive control as long as women’s daily regimen of obedience was fully regulated by religion, and customs or sexism was codified in law*”, (Stark 194, 2007).

Stark argues that coercive control in contemporary society has emerged due to the narrowing gap in equality between the sexes. I argue that coercive control has always been deployed as a tactic to subjugate another person in many asymmetrical relationships, and that its lack of documentation is because women’s voices have historically not been heard. Their subjugation at home was not seen as an important issue, and since not much was written about the concept until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no language for it existed. One reason for the long time it takes for women who are controlled and coerced to realise what is happening to them (or some never realise), is that they lack the language for it and are therefore unable to verbalise their experience. They may find it difficult to speak up against the abuse or identify it for the same reason. I have encountered this anecdotally when a woman told me that her abuser became angry and shouted at her because she let her friend come to the house to use the washing machine (whilst the friend was within earshot of his violent outburst). I told the woman that her abuser used a tactic that led to her being further isolated, which she had not realised. Sadly, her friend never returned.

The absence of a language for coercive control can be related to a multitude of complex historical issues, such as the censoring and omission of women’s representation, both in historical texts and canon formation. I argue that even if it was not explicitly written about in the sources that Stark mentions, coercive control has always existed, and has to a large extent not been identified or even recognised as abuse by victims due to its hidden nature. This is due to the insidious and covert tactics that perpetrators use to coerce and control their victims, and the historic and current inadequate concern for women’s wellbeing and protection from domestic abuse.

The historical lack of focus on coercive control can also be explained by the late recognition of the damaging effects of non-physical abuse. The term 'emotional abuse' was first acknowledged in the *Children Act 1989* in the UK, and thereafter made unlawful in the *Serious Crime Act 2015* with a criminal offence called 'coercive control'. Psychology as a scientific discipline was not established until Wilhelm Wundt, who has been coined the father of psychology, opened the first experimental psychology laboratory in Germany in 1879. Hothersall and Lovett explain that:

*“For Wundt, the mind is a creative, dynamic, volitional force. It can never be understood by simply identifying its elements or its static structure. Rather, it must be understood through an analysis of its activity – its processes”*, (Hothersall and Lovett 100).

His work laid the foundations for recognising emotional abuse as a concept and its psychological consequences on victims' minds. However, today domestic abuse is still not fully understood by the public due to a lack of research, funding and sometimes willingness to tackle the problem.

Furthermore, many institutions such as the UK police force has been found to be misogynistic, as reported in an article in *The Guardian* titled: “Institutional misogyny ‘erodes women’s trust in UK police’”, written by Wolfe-Robinson and Vikram in the aftermath of the vigil for Sarah Everard, who was kidnapped, raped and killed by Wayne Couzens (an off-duty police officer) when she was walking home in South London, on 3 March 2021:

*“Officers and campaigners say progress has been made but there is still toxic masculinity in forces”*, (Wolfe-Robinson and Vikram).

And:

*“According to one former chief constable, The Metropolitan police’s handling of the vigil on Saturday night showed worrying hallmarks”*, (Wolfe-Robinson and Vikram).

These are reasons for the implementation gap after coercive control was made unlawful in England and Wales, demonstrating why it is essential to promote literary studies - with their

unique potential to capture women's experience - as a pathway to raising awareness of the mechanisms of the crime.

Stark only mentions three male Victorian authors: Charles Dickens, George Gissing and Rudyard Kipling, who "*portrayed class violence as a family affair*", (Stark 176, 2007). The abhorrent result of this meant that men brought their violence home and used their wives and children as punching bags to vent their frustrations and aggressions upon, which he argues was a consequence of tensions within class struggle and market competition brought about by industrialisation. I argue that the Victorian women authors Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Brontë also wrote about domestic abuse, which I reframe as coercive control.

In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* Gilbert and Gubar challenge the writings of male authors who represented woman as passive flat characters without agency, in addition to being portrayed either as 'angels' or 'monsters'. I contend that the reason for the relatively small numbers of literary depictions of women's experiences of coercive and controlling behaviours in their relationships in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that women did not have the resources to be able to write. Women experiencing coercive control would have found it particularly difficult to write, as the abuse would have diminished their creative ability considerably. This assertion is echoed by Virginia Woolf's incandescent arguments in her essay *A Room of One's Own*:

*"reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at",* (Woolf 51).

### **3.3 Campaigners and Importance of Survivors' Stories**

Whilst some define coercive control as a type of domestic abuse, the currently adopted understanding among experts and advocates is that coercive control is in fact the core issue in domestic abuse, in which the perpetrator uses a range of tactics to undermine the victims to obtain control over her. The tactics used are nuanced and can range from subtle questioning to dismissive or critical comments repeated over time, insidiously undermining a victim's freedom and sense of self, or even leading to more profound consequences such as murder. As previously mentioned, it can be difficult to accurately define coercive control, and this in turn makes it difficult to explain to lay people what it entails in practice. Such a multifaceted concept is experienced in unique ways by each victim due to differing contextual factors. Many victims do not realise that they are being exposed to coercive and controlling behaviour because it happens so gradually; often their self-worth is gradually eroded over multiple years or even decades. This is why it is imperative for victims and survivors to come forward with their stories; to be given the opportunity to be heard. Legislation on coercive control was passed because advocates, such as Cassandra Wiener (a coercive control researcher) and organisations such as Women's Aid and Refuge spent time with women who came to them for help and listened to their stories. There are many reasons why there is confusion around what constitutes coercive control. English law defines it in a way that is open to interpretation, whilst recorded experiences of first-hand witnesses were used to inform the legislation that is outlined below. This means that giving voice to women's stories and their lived experiences in literary texts is an essential and necessary device for raising awareness of the abuse in a way that leads to societal change.



### 3.4 Cassandra Wiener at an International Conference – University of York

The lack of recognition until recently for the damaging effects of domestic abuse of women has acted as a break on developing a language for it, exacerbated by thousands of years of suppression of women's writing about their lives. The current UK context shows that law enforcement's misplaced focus on violent assault in domestic abuse cases results in a vast number of cases of coercive control not being prosecuted or reported. At an International Conference at the University of York on 19 April 2024 titled: 'Narratives of Coercive Control' (which I attended in person), Cassandra Wiener pointed out that: "*translating coercive control into law is, it turns out, a delicate and difficult exercise*", (Wiener, unpublished abstract to her presentation). She talked about the "*mismatch between witness and legal narratives*" and emphasised the need for "*cultural recognition*", (Wiener, speech).

Machado's memoir outlines coercive control in a literary style and has the capacity to enter our cultural consciousness as a captivating and powerful 'witness statement'. Society's gender norms dictate that emotional language is inferior as it is ascribed to how women express themselves, whereas factual language stripped of emotions is seen as superior and is ascribed to male expression. I contend that these artificially constructed gender roles and how they are connected to women and emotionality have contributed to the emotional and psychological aspects of domestic abuse being disregarded.

### 3.5 Nazir Afzal at the International Coercive Control 2023

At the virtual International Coercive Control Conference on 28 October – 2 November 2023 (which I attended virtually), Nazir Afzal emphasised society’s misguided focus on physical evidence in domestic abuse cases in his keynote speech titled “Keynote: Revealing the Ties: Male Violence and Terrorism in Society”, in which he also commented on the new coercive control legislation in England and Wales as a vehicle for positive change:

*“Having the legislation in place we have been able to do a lot of communication around this, a lot of messaging on television and on radio, and in social media. To get people to understand that it is not always about a bruise or a broken arm it can be and must be, always is, about control, and that’s where it starts. It is a long journey, it’ll take longer than I’m alive, but the point is we’ve got a conversation happening, and particularly happening amongst young people, they saw that violence is the only thing they should be concerned about, but actually they now know that it is control”, (Afzal).*

Afzal recognises that to successfully shift society’s understanding of domestic abuse away from its preoccupation with physical injury is about consciousness raising. He mentions various cultural expressions that can have galvanising effects. He argues that discourse around the concept must increase and that:

*“We often work in a vacuum. We should remember the impact, it’s not what you do it’s about how you make people feel. The impact is the key here”, (Afzal).*

In other words, he argues that we need to listen to and record women’s experiences of coercive control, which emphasises the importance of incorporating missing narratives of coercive control into our cultural imagination.

### **3.6 Role of Literary Texts in General**

By showing how unique characteristics of literary texts deal with the issue of coercive control and believing that literature has the power to change people's perceptions, I believe that this thesis will help more people to understand coercive control and how it affects women. Additional aims of this thesis are to show how literature can create a space for victims to be heard and to give victims the vocabulary to describe their experiences of being coercively controlled. It also makes the point that in many cases coercive control is so subtle that it is hard to notice and realise what is happening, since a victim's sense of self and ability to act are eroded so gradually that the regression can be unnoticeable. Again, literature has the ability to raise awareness of this insidious type of domestic abuse by appealing to emotions and memories that may be suppressed, often as a trauma response, or by awakening a reader's understanding and empathy through complex character descriptions and other narrative techniques. I argue that it is because patriarchy is so ingrained; gender roles are so entrenched; and the abuse can be so insidious and ephemeral, that sometimes we have no language to describe it. Literary texts can fill this void by creating stories that expose how coercive control operates, whilst giving readers an arsenal of words to use for internalising and expressing domestic abuse. This awareness can be used to develop an armour against abusive relationships and to foster healthy relationships.

Eradicating domestic abuse is a part of the feminist fight against the oppression of women. With the chosen books I contribute to the discourse on how literary texts imagine, anticipate and help us understand the nature of coercive control.

## Chapter 4: Framing Coercive Control in Patriarchy and Feminism

In her book *See What You Made Me Do* Jess Hill states that patriarchy:

*“sets parameters around ‘acceptable’ behaviour for both genders: men should be strong, independent, unemotional, logical and confident` and women should be expressive, nurturant, weak and dependent. This artificial construct, which we mistake as natural, also renders various injustices unavoidable: the violence of men, the domestic servitude of women, the dominance of men in power, and so on. Under patriarchy, this is all unfortunate, but ‘normal’. Natural. Invisible.”*, (Hill 139).

The invisibility of the agents of women’s oppression due to contemporary ideological norms is what enables coercive control to be deployed in intimate relationships, and to keep it *“invisible in plain sight”*, (Wiener, in title of publication).

Women’s liberation has achieved voting rights, property rights, equal access to education and work, equal pay and abortion rights for women, among other important justices. These rights are enshrined in legislation, which means that, in theory, women possess these rights. However, in practice women are often discriminated against in the previously mentioned spheres, and in most cases this discrimination is invisible. In her book, *Invisible Women*, Caroline Criado Perez lays bare the ubiquitous data bias that keeps women in an inferior position from men:

*“The result of this deeply male-dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective, has come to be seen as universal, while the female experience – that of half the global population, after all – is seen as, well, niche”*, (Perez 12).

She points out an example of this bias:

*“It is why V.S. Naipaul criticizes Jane Austen’s writing as ‘narrow’, while at the same time no one is expecting *The Woolf Of Wall Street* to address the Gulf War; or Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard to write about anyone but himself (or quote more than a single female writer) to receive praise from the *New Yorker* for voicing ‘universal anxieties’ in his six-volume autobiography”*, (Perez 13).

Disturbingly, we see evidence of the regression of women's rights. For example, since the US supreme court voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, which legalised abortion in the country, some US states have banned these rights. This shows that rights of women can be withdrawn should the political climate allow it, and it is an indication that the war against patriarchy has not been won. That so many women cannot decide what happens to their own bodies; are being denied access to abortion and contraceptives; coerced and exploited as merchandise in prostitution or in the production of pornography; raped and sexually harassed at work, on the streets or in their own homes, more often than not without any consequences for the perpetrators, all serves to keep women in an inferior position with less power compared to men. The system which keeps women subordinate to men, a system that is partly upheld by perpetration of coercive control and physical violence against women, is a system which is yet to be broken down in wider society.

Why is it that so many women are still being abused in their personal relationships, and why are they often not believed when they contact the police for protection?

Farah Nazeer comments in Women's Aid article on their website:

*"It is positive that police-recorded coercive control offences are rising year on year – reaching over 43,000 in the year ending March 2023. Yet only a fraction of these offences are resulting in convictions"*, (Nazeer).

Stark made the concept of coercive control popular in his book, in which he laments that the domestic violence revolution is stalled, and that we need a new model to reignite it. He argues that:

*"Domestic violence will persist so long as sexual inequalities persist"*, (Stark 8, 2007), and that: *"The answer is coercive control, a strategy that remains officially invisible despite the fact that it has been in plain sight at least since the earliest shelter residents told us in no uncertain terms that "violence wasn't the worst part"*, (Stark 12, 2007).

This means that there has been a preoccupation with physical violence where marks on the body are the required evidence to secure convictions - a practice which ignores psychological and mental abuse. Stark's seminal academic work advocated for a new framework for domestic abuse, thereby shifting the focus onto coercive control through his ground-breaking work that is still having a huge positive impact on efforts to criminalise coercive control around the world.

In the first edition of his book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, Stark describes how his theory builds on the work of second-wave feminists Del Martin, Susan Schechter and Ann Jones, who supported a definition of the abuse of women as 'controlling behaviour'. Schechter's campaigning against domestic violence helped open a women's shelter for victims of domestic abuse in Chicago. Stark writes about how she:

*"emphasised how "violence restricts women's ability to move freely and confidently into the world and therefore hinders their full development. The fear of violence robs women of possibilities, self-confidence and self-esteem. In this sense, violence is an attack on women's dignity and freedom"*", (Stark 219, 2007).

His theory is also inspired by David Adams, who also construed "battering" as "controlling behaviour" and defined any act as violence:

*"that causes the victim to do something she does not want to do, prevents her from doing something she wants to do, or causes her to be afraid "regardless of whether assault was involved"*", (Stark 201, 2007).

Furthermore, Stark sets out how Adams researched the effects of men's violent and controlling behaviour deployed on their female victims' autonomy by asking perpetrators to keep logs of their violent and controlling behaviours. Using this approach, Adams concluded that domestic abuse perpetrated by men is not a result of their intrinsic masculinity, but rather a product of "abuse as work", (Stark 202, 2007). Stark furthers this argument by contending that:

*"The appearance of coercive control in the modern context has less to do with the immutability of male dominance than with the choice made by a large subset of men to defend their traditional prerogatives against the perceived threats posed by women's increasing economic independence, cultural autonomy, and political/legal equality. The choice is not an immanent*

*feature of masculinity and certainly not the by-product of psychiatric disease”, (Stark 196, 2007).*

These arguments support the idea that the driving force behind coercive control in intimate relationships is to exert dominance and control over the victim, and that the abusive tactics deployed to achieve these ends are intentional. Furthermore, domestic abuse is now understood as a crime of liberty by prominent coercive control experts, as opposed to the historic understanding of domestic abuse as an incident, assault-based crime.

## Chapter 5: Theories of Coercive Control

### 5.1 Evan Stark

The tactics deployed by perpetrators to coerce and control their victims are tailored to suit the specific contexts of their victims, which fits in with the intentionality of the crime. Their overall aim is to establish domination over their victims in order to feel powerful and draw benefits at the expense of their victims. The offence's two separate elements, coercion and control, can, according to Stark, be differentiated by perpetrators' chosen tools or tactics:

*“Coercion entails the use of force or threats to compel or dispel a particular response. In addition to causing immediate pain, injury, fear, or death, coercion can have long-term physical, behavioural, or psychological consequences”*, (Stark 228-229, 2007).

Examples of coercion are physical assaults or threat of such assaults, or the use of certain words or actions by the perpetrator that only the victim understands as threats with the aim to coerce her into actions that are against her will. Stark explains that control:

*“is comprised of structural forms of deprivation, exploitation and command that compel obedience indirectly by monopolizing vital resources, dictating preferred choices, microregulating a partner's behaviour, limiting her options, and depriving her of support needed to exercise independent judgment”*, (Stark 229, 2007).

Stark points out that what distinguishes these two types of tactics further is that the effect of coercion is more immediate (but can affect the victim long-term) and therefore easier to detect, whereas control has a larger scope, but is more difficult to pinpoint because the effects take longer to be felt or realised. Furthermore, Stark divides coercive control into four categories: *“violence, intimidation, isolation and control”*, (Stark 241, 2007). In his examples (also from his 2007 edition) of what constitutes coercive control, Stark elaborates on “partner violence”, and “violence and jealousy”, (Stark 248). He gives examples of intimidation: “threats”, (Stark 250), “child abuse”, (Stark 251), “surveillance”, (Stark 255) and “degradation”, (Stark 258) and “shaming”, (Stark 260); different types of isolation: “isolation



from family”, (Stark 263), “isolation from friends”, (Stark 266), and “isolation from help”, (Stark 271); and sets out tactics that are present in control:

*“exploiting a partner’s capacities and resources for personal gain and gratification, depriving her of the means needed for autonomy or escape, and regulating her behaviour to conform with stereotypical gender roles”*, (Stark 271, 2007). Stark states that his motive for drawing up his theory is: *“to help us organize its tactical elements into a coherent picture that can provide a foundation for the analyses and management of coercive control”*, (Stark 241, 2007).

With the aforementioned historic backdrop of the statement: ‘violence wasn’t the worst part’, meaning that the sustained psychological abuse was the worst, it may be confusing to have ‘violence’ as a main category, as in Stark’s theory. This statement suggests that the women were not believed when they talked about the psychological abuse they reported. This argument is an important one, as domestic abuse is frequently misunderstood as incidents of physical assault, whilst the essence of the offence is the damage it causes to a victim’s psyche.

## 5.2 Jess Hill

Stark calls the strategy used by perpetrators of coercive control: “its technology”, (Stark 228, 2007), and Hill uses the terms “the abuser’s blueprint”, (Hill 25) and “basic techniques”, (Hill 25). The difference in register of these terms suggests that Hill’s text is more accessible to the lay person, whilst Stark’s text may appeal more to a more scholarly audience.

In her chapter “*The Perpetrator’s Handbook*”, Jess Hill writes: “*Using Biderman’s Chart of Coercion as a guide, I will now outline the basic techniques used to varying extents by all abusers, regardless of culture or creed*”, (Hill 25). The techniques she writes about are: “Establish love and trust”, (Hill 25-26), “Isolate”, (Hill 26-28), “Monopolise perception”, (Hill 28-30), “Induce debility and exhaustion”, (Hill 30-32), “Enforce trivial demands”, (Hill 32-33), “Demonstrate omnipotence”, (Hill 33-35), “Alternate punishments with rewards”, (Hill 35-38), “Threats”, (Hill 38-39), and “Degradation”, (Hill 39-42). The main difference in their classifications is that Hill’s moves away from including ‘physical violence’ as a major tactic. This is connected to her use of Biderman’s Chart of Coercion, which “*is originally a tool designed to demonstrate and explain coercive methods used to torture prisoners of war*”, (Salford Government Safeguarding Children).

Hill points out that:

*“in Biderman’s chart, there was no category for physical abuse. Though it was frequently used, actual violence wasn’t necessary nor particularly effective method to gain compliance, and the more skilled and experienced interrogators avoided it”*, (Hill 16).

Stark’s text is useful because it sets out in a clear theoretical way the main features of coercive control that he found by studying real-life cases, and has enjoyed immense popularity with experts in coercive control. Readers who are not academically inclined, or who prefer to read literary journalism, may find Hill’s text more accessible, which is a mixture of factual prose and storytelling. However, both utilise case studies to explain how the tools used work in practice, and have through their writing contributed to developing a language for coercive control and domestic abuse. Stark’s was published in 2007, and since then the language used to discuss coercive control has significantly changed. The words ‘battered’, ‘battering’ or ‘batter’ are not commonly used in the UK anymore to refer to domestic abuse, due to their

connotations with physical violence. The phrase 'domestic abuse' is now widely adopted by websites such as Women's Aid and Refuge. Refuge classifies coercive control as a type of domestic abuse, along with other categories such as emotional and economic abuse, whereas Women's Aid uses the terms 'domestic abuse' and 'coercive control' interchangeably on their website.

### **5.3 Move away from Physical Violence to Emotional and Psychological Abuse**

The move away from physical violence to emotional and psychological abuse produces new challenges for interpretation and evidencing. Physical acts of violence or assaults have been codified legally for hundreds of years, demonstrating omnipotence that is by its very nature difficult to challenge. As previously discussed, coercive control is often 'invisible' due to its lack of language resulting from neglect of recorded experience. Literary texts can identify the insidious techniques of coercive control that are applied by controlling agents, as well as highlight how readers and victims are duped and misguided, and thereby expose the mechanisms that the abuse is contingent upon. When people start using the language of coercive control, the abusive acts may be prevented. My secondary texts, which underscore the struggles of their Victorian female protagonists, were at the time not read as narratives of domestic abuse as that concept did not exist until after the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the criminalisation of coercive control in England and Wales in 2015, these narratives can now be read through the lenses of theories of coercive control and the law itself.

## 5.4 Lisa Aronson Fontes

At the virtual International Coercive Control Conference held on 28 October and 2-4 November 2023, Dr Lisa A. Fontes, author of *Invisible Chains*, which she describes, (after mentioning Stark's 2007 book on coercive control), as a book that: "*is more easily accessible to survivors, to victims, to advocates, to absolutely everyone in a simpler language in more of a how-to guide*", in the introduction to her talk on: *Invisible Chains: From Domestic Violence to Coercive Control*. In her talk she argued for an alternative, more nuanced view of coercive control tactics and stated that:

*"This is now how people are thinking about domestic violence, that coercive control is another framework for domestic violence. Domestic violence is a universe of abusive behaviours of which the episodes of physical violence is just one part and we use the term coercive control to cover all the other aspects of that violence. Coercive control is not just bossiness, it's domination"* (Fontes).

She explained that the abuse is: "*not a cycle more a tactic*", and she displayed a list of tactics used by the abuser: "*isolation, abusing sexually, intimidating, economic abuse, verbal abuse, stalking, abusing through tech, abusing physically, manipulation, controlling through children and micromanaging*", (Fontes). She said that: "*This list of tactics, not all have to be present, but more than one present, to call it coercive control*", (Fontes). She explained later that the type of physical violence that she refers to in her list of tactics is: "*Often "mild", but frequent – pushing, slaps, grabbing, shaking, pulling hair, rough sex and accidentally hurting*", (Fontes). I assume the 'physical violence' she refers to when explaining what domestic violence is, is the more extreme kind of physical violence.

## **5.5 Many Definitions Can be Confusing**

It can be confusing for readers to be faced with divergent explanations of categories of coercive control, especially if looking for definite answers, for example, as to what extent physical violence plays a role in coercive control. These theories cannot be said to be right or wrong, and there are often gaps between theory and practice, particularly since the instruments that abusers use to coerce and control their victims are extensive, individualised, and often covert in nature. It is a topic that requires more research, and signs are that the discourse around coercive control is attracting increasingly more attention.

However, these above classifications can be applied critically when examining literary texts to investigate how writers may have identified, explored and challenged coercive control before it became a recognised concept in more recent discourse about domestic abuse. Using these “new” theories as lenses to examine possible expressions of coercive control can offer alternative readings of canonical texts and contribute to deepening existing understandings of coercive control in both legal and sociological texts.

## Chapter 6: Secondary Texts as Intertexts

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore three 19<sup>th</sup> century novels written by women, that I read as narratives of coercive control. I challenge the view that since women were already subjugated by societal patriarchy, coercive control was not perpetrated in intimate relationships in the Victorian age. I argue that when reinterpreting classic literary texts written by women using the “new” theories of coercive control as set out by Stark, Hill and Fontes, traces and evidence of expressions of coercive control will come to light. I argue that some texts belonging to the ‘Female Gothic’ genre can be understood as feminist literature highlighting coercive control. My reinterpretation of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë through the lens of coercive control is a feminist reading of this text. Women like Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell were able to publish novels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often under pseudonyms to avoid being censored. They wrote about women’s entrapment in society as a whole and in the context of intimate relationships. My aim is to discover which tactics were deployed from the coercive control ‘toolbox’, as they are numerous, varied and chosen by the perpetrator to fit the specific vulnerabilities and contexts of their victim.

My primary novels build on texts written in the past, and by exploring Victorian realist and romantic novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *The Tenant at Wildfell Hall* and *Ruth*, it is possible to discover corresponding themes, in this case coercive control in intimate relationships, which bolsters my argument that narratives of this type of abuse existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were authored by women. The protagonists in all three Victorian novels are marginalised by their identities as women and orphans. All narratives focus on the marriage plot; all three are wronged by their first romantic partners, although Jane marries hers despite his abusive behaviour. Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* marries a kind second husband, while Ruth is abandoned by her lover, has an illegitimate son with him, and is later happily married to another man. All three protagonists are constrained by society’s gender conventions and legislation that benefitted men, which they to some extent manage to rebel against, whilst not fully becoming realised as independent women. I regard Helen as the most rebellious as she manages to leave her first husband to protect her son Leonard, even though she goes back to him to nurse him on his death bed. She also starts working as an artist. All three women are portrayed in binaries as monster/angel or fallen women/Madonna, and they are centred in the narratives in ways that

make the reader feel empathy for their difficult situations, as marginalised, abused women. However, the binaries flatten the characters, in contrast to the more complex and diverse protagonists in my primary texts.



## 6.2 Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre*, a story about a woman's experience of growing up oppressed in England in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lacking in connections, not having much education and few choices in life apart from being a governess or wife. There is a mystery; a ghost-like, hidden and nocturnal presence that lurks around Rochester's gothic ancestral home, Thornfield Hall (the main setting of the novel). The existence of this concealed, animal-like 'creature' is kept secret by Rochester, and the truth behind it is revealed at the very end of the novel by the 'ghost' itself. The novel is also very much about what is not explicitly told, what is hidden, namely Bertha's perspective, who is the wife of the antagonist Mr Edward Rochester. The novel was published in 1847, at a time when wives were by law the property of their husbands and were thereby not seen as separate legal beings. This was 35 years before married women were allowed to own and control property in their own right. The *Married Women's Property Act* was passed in 1882, (Married Women's Property Act 1882), after campaigns by women's rights groups led by the first-wave feminist activist Barbara Bodichon. Before this, husbands automatically had ownership of any money their wives made or received including inheritance. An exception to this rule was any dowry that the bride received from her father, which was meant to support her throughout her life, and single and widowed women were seen as legal beings who could inherit and own property. Women were banned from entering professions and they were unable to vote. Married women were not protected in law from domestic abuse, which was suffered by wives in homes on a large scale. The novel was first published under Charlotte Brontë's pen name Currer Bell. She did this to keep her sex secret in a sexist world that did not take women authors seriously, and this practice is an example of the obstacles that female writers were facing in their struggle to be recognised and published.

It was in this climate of total patriarchal control of women that the life of the orphan Jane Eyre was depicted in the form of a Victorian realist novel, with elements of gothic romance. The gothic element is emphasised by the long journey to get there: "*the roads were heavy, the night misty; my conductor let his horse walk all the way, and the hour and a half extended, I verily believe, to two hours*", (C Brontë 93), and mentions of unoccupied rooms and ghosts: "*no one ever sleeps here: one would almost say that, if there were a ghost at Thornfield Hall, this would be its haunt*", (C Brontë 104). The novel was well received by some contemporary critics due to its first-person, coming-of-age narrative of an unconventionally

'plain' woman, (in Victorian literature heroines were usually depicted as beautiful), who has a strong sense of her individual self. However, other critics disliked the book for Jane's self-reliance, which was for them an unacceptable denunciation of God. Jane has had a miserable childhood being looked after by her cruel aunt until she was ten years old, and then sent an orphanage where she was also abused. At the age 18 she takes up a post of governess at Thornfield Hall, which is owned by Mr Rochester. In this analysis I will focus on how I believe Jane Eyre and Bertha were abused by Mr Rochester; his abuse containing many of the tactics set out by the theories of coercive control. In this way the novel will be read very differently from when it was first published. Reading it in line with more current coercive control theory has the potential to reveal unexpected interpretations. Some readers today even regard the novel as a romance: a story in which the heroine Jane, plain but pure with high morals, almost angel-like, meets a strange and mysterious man with a murky history, who seems to have lost his way. With the help of Jane's nourishing love, he is reformed, and they end up happily married.

One major category of coercive control is 'isolation', designed to make the victim completely dependent upon the abuser. An isolated person is less able to get help and to benefit from any positive influence or information from the outside world. In an isolated world, it is the perspective of the abuser which prevails, resulting in the victim's own perspective - who she really is - being broken down. When Jane meets Rochester, she is already isolated by her circumstance as an orphan and being friendless, and she remains isolated as a governess in a remote, imposing mansion:

*"I climbed the three staircases, raised the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked out far over sequestered field and hill, and along dim skyline: that then I longed for power of vision which might overpass that limit, which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never see: that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with a variety of characters, than was here within my reach", (C Brontë 107).*

This passage describes Jane's isolation, which makes her feel lonely and alienated. It also emphasises how inexperienced and vulnerable she is. She is portrayed as a servant who has to follow the orders of Rochester and is completely dependent on him for her basic needs. At the start of her employment, he interrogates her with questions such as:

“*Who are your parents*”, to which she answers: “*I have none*”, (C Brontë 119,) “*Where do your brothers and sisters live?*” She answers: “*I have no brothers or sisters*”, (C Brontë 120), and “*Have you seen much society?*”, “*None but the pupils and teachers of Lowood; and now the inmates of Thornfield*”, she answers, (C Brontë 120).

The whole evening Rochester asks Jane humiliating questions and orders her about and tests her skills. He has discovered all her vulnerabilities, and thereby her dependence on him (something he can exploit to his advantage by choosing tactics that can entrap Jane). He does give her a little credit for her drawings. This little praise fits in with the tactic ‘alternate punishments with rewards’ advocated by Hill. Disturbingly he blames Jane for his sprain when he fell off his horse, consistent with ‘shaming’ - a feature under Stark’s category of ‘intimidation’. He also admonishes her for not putting Adèle to bed on time, even if he’s been in control of the evening’s events: “*It is nine o’clock: what are you about, Miss Eyre, to let Adèle sit up so long? Take her to bed*”, (C Brontë 124). This illogical blame incorrectly aimed at Jane creates an insecure working environment, in which rules she must follow can change at any time at Rochester’s whim, instilling fear in Jane. Hill explains that ‘fear’ is always present in female victims of coercive control and elaborates: “*This is the lynchpin of coercive control - it is what robs the victim of their sense of self*”, (Hill 206).

Rochester ignores Jane at their first meeting in the woods where he has fallen off his horse and Jane helps him mount it:

“*I cannot think of leaving you, sir, at so late and hour, in this solitary lane, till I see you are fit to mount your horse. He looked at me when I said this: he had hardly turned his eyes in my direction before*”, (C Brontë 111).

It is strange that Rochester does not tell Jane that he is her employer at this first meeting, even though she tells him that she is the new governess to his ward Adèle Varens. This keeps Jane in the dark and it comes across as controlling, and is in line with Rochester’s later pattern of keeping secrets from Jane. He also neglects Adèle by ignoring her:

“*Adele was not easy to teach that day; she could not apply; she kept running to the door and looking over the bannisters to see if she could get a glimpse of Mr. Rochester; then*

*she coined pretexts to go downstairs, as I shrewdly suspected, to visit the library, where I knew she was not wanted*", (C Brontë 116).

There are numerous instances in the novel where Rochester is described as moody, peculiar, and as explained by Mrs Fairfax, (who lives at Thornfield and is Rochester's relative), "*his visits here are rare, they are always sudden and unexpected*", (C Brontë 102), and:

*"you feel it when he speaks to you: you cannot be always sure whether he is in jest or earnest, whether he is pleased or the contrary; you don't thoroughly understand him, I short – at least, I don't"*, (C Brontë 103).

He disrespects them:

*"Mr. Rochester must have been aware of the entrance of Mrs. Fairfax and myself; but it appeared he was not in the mood to notice us, for he never lifted his head as we approached"*, (C Brontë 117).

Throughout the novel Rochester disappears at regular intervals for days and weeks without telling anyone where he is or when he is returning. This tactic of ignoring someone as if they do not exist, or disappearing without notice, is called 'the silent treatment'. Later I explore how Helen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* also experiences this treatment by her husband. Interestingly, Stark describes a case where: "*...the ex had supported his unreflective narcissism by using "the silent treatment" to freeze the woman out in vital areas of their joint finances, social life and childcare responsibilities*", (Stark 285, 2023).

Rochester keeps the truth of his wife's Bertha's imprisonment on the third floor of house hidden from Jane and often talks about himself as a bachelor until he is forced to admit the abominable truth about Bertha's incarceration when Jane tells him of the incidence when she saw: "*a reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass*", (C Brontë 275). Even when Jane has proof of her seeing Bertha in her wedding veil that Bertha had torn, Rochester insists:

*"Now, Jane, I'll explain to you all about it. It was half dream, half reality: a woman did, I doubt not, enter your room; and that woman was – must have been – Grace Poole"*, (C Brontë 277).

This is a gaslighting technique used in coercive control to make Jane doubt her own reality, and thereby give the perpetrator control of her life. Gaslighting is a manipulation tool, as mentioned in Fontes's framework, and comes under Hill's 'monopolise perception' technique, and Stark's category of 'control', (the concept of gaslighting is explained in section 7.3 of this thesis).

Despite this, or maybe because of Rochester's coercive and controlling behaviours, a relationship evolves between him and Jane, albeit an asymmetrical one, as he is 20 years older than Jane, as well as her employer on whom she is dependent for her sustenance. It is a positive sign that Jane does speak her mind more forcefully and more frequently than other contemporary women, and the following passage from the text can be said to be a daring feminist statement, considering it was written in an age where women's main function was to marry and have children:

*“Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex”, (C Brontë 107).*

This shift towards a didactic register, together with the connection between the teaching of the passage and Brontë's own biography, suggests that the novel endorses these concerns. This speaks to the limitations of Stark's perspectives in identifying novels concerning domestic abuse solely written by men; that this abuse was limited to physical assault and does not fully encapsulate the psychological elements of coercive control. Charlotte Brontë, drawing on her own lived experiences, sees things differently, and interrogates the entrapment, isolation and limited opportunities of women of her time. In this forceful statement the narrator emphasises that women are so controlled and entrapped that they suffer and stagnate, which is exactly what happens to victims of coercive control. Notably, she was unable to explicitly express such feminist opinions in the narrative, as maybe such a book would have been unpublishable at the time.

When Jane tells Rochester that she cannot marry him as he is already married to Bertha, he becomes violent and gaslights her into feeling responsible for his happiness:

*“One instant Jane. Give one glance to my horrible life when you are gone. All happiness will be torn away with you. What then is left? For a wife I have but the maniac upstairs: as well might you refer me. To some corpse in yonder churchyard. What shall I do, Jane? Where turn for a companion, and for some hope?”*, (C Brontë 308).

This gaslighting, trying to make Jane stay with him by making her feel sorry for him and appeal to her kindness, is all about his needs and desires, and he does not seem to care about her feelings. He seems to have implanted an affect in Jane, which leads to her returning to him as she hears his voice later. He also turns to violence to frighten her into staying:

*“He crossed the floor and seized my arm, and grasped my waist”* and: *“A mere reed she feels in my hand! (And he shook me with the force of his hold.) I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?”*, (C Brontë 309).

This sudden violence is consistent with Moncton Smith's 8 stages of coercive control; often a victim is most at risk of violence and murder at the time of separation. Will Jane be at risk in her marriage to Rochester? This is a genuine concern having demonstrated that he is capable of monstrous cruelty. However, she ends up marrying him; an ending which was possibly required by her contemporary readers, and her publisher. It is a shame that she abandoned her wish to be a teacher and ended up as a carer for her husband. Brontë did give Jane a voice to some extent, however she was unable to free herself from the traditional dichotomy of portraying women either as angels or monsters. Jane is the perfect angel in the house: caring, innocent, quiet, sexually inexperienced, and a good person. Bertha, who is imprisoned by Rochester, is portrayed in the book as a monster, or as Gilbert and Gubar refers to her: 'The Madwoman in the Attic'. Shockingly, historic readers of the text were also gaslighted by Rochester and many accepted that Bertha was mad and imprisoned upstairs. She is reduced to a tool to create a gothic mystery; a ghost that makes you question reality. What is Rochester? I will give him a label: 'The abuser in the home'. I contend that in contrast with other readings of Jane Eyre that insist that she has become Rochester's equal after she inherits money and marries him, she has been gaslighted into an abusive relationship, and I fear for her

safety. Gilbert and Gubar write: “*That he and Jane are now, in reality, equals, is the thesis of the Ferndean section*”, (Gilbert and Gubar 368). They debate the ambiguity in Jane and Rochester’s union; is it equal? This is exemplified in this assertion:

“*Nevertheless, despite the optimistic portrait of an egalitarian relationship that Brontë seems to be drawing here, there is a “quiet autumnal quality” about the scenes at Ferndean, as Robert Bernard Martin Points out*”, (Gilbert and Gubar 369).

They suggest that they cannot be equal despite that Charlotte Brontë: “*appears here to have imagined a world in which the prince and Cinderella are democratically equal, Pamela is just as good as Mr. B., master and servant are profoundly alike*”, (Gilbert and Gubar 354). It does not make sense that Jane, who was so outspoken after declining St. John’s proposal: “*I am not formed for love, it follows that I am not formed for marriage. Would it not be strange, Die, to be chained to life to a man who regarded one but as a useful tool?*”, (C Brontë 404), and had plans to become a teacher, instead ends up becoming a housewife, mother and a carer for Rochester, and chained to him instead. I argue that Jane cannot be Rochester’s equal because he does not treat her as his equal.

### 6.3 The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published in 1848 under the pseudonym Acton Bell, one year after the publication of her sister's novel *Jane Eyre*. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* depicts the middle-class orphan, (and therefore vulnerable and marginalised like Jane Eyre), Helen Graham's difficult marriage to her cruel and debauched husband, Arthur Huntingdon. His abuse, I argue, matches the tactics of coercive control set out in the theories above. Gilbert and Gubar write in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* that the novel:

*“is generally considered conservative in its espousal of Christian values, but tells what is in fact a story of a woman's liberation. Specifically, it describes a woman's escape from the prisonhouse of a bad marriage, and her subsequent attempts to achieve independence by establishing herself in a career as an artist”,* (Gilbert and Gubar 80).

They do not, as I do, describe Helen's marriage as domestic abuse, for them it is just 'bad'. Maybe if Arthur had been physically violent they would have described it as abusive? Helen's abuse is exposed through her diary entries, which acts as a witness statement. Interestingly, diary entries can be used as evidence in today's prosecutions against perpetrators of coercive control, and I believe Helen's testimony would have been valid in court today. In the UK Government's *Controlling and coercive behaviour: statutory guidance framework 2023*, there is a list of what can be used as evidence in court in addition to witness statements. The list includes such evidence as: “phone records”, “text messages”, “device logs”, “evidence of abuse over the internet”, “copies of emails” and “photographs of injuries”, (*Controlling or coercive behaviour: statutory guidance framework 26*).

The text has previously been read as a feminist novel centering a female protagonist who speaks her mind. For example, when Arthur tells her that she is “too religious” (A Brontë 213), and “*To my thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord*”, (A Brontë 213), Helen stands up for her religious beliefs: “*I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can, I answered, and not one atom more of it to you than He allows*”, (A Brontë 214). I argue that Arthur's desire to deny Helen her religious freedom and thereby not honouring one of her innermost values is emotionally abusive. After finding out about her husband's affair with Lady Annabella Lowborough and suffering due to his many



long absences and heavy drinking, gambling and affairs with other women, she escapes with her son (also called Arthur) who she wants to rescue from her husband's bad influences, such as encouraging him to drink and swear at a young age. Her escape while married was seen as daring and shocking at the time. Later, Helen returns and nurses her unrepenting husband, trying unsuccessfully to save his soul, before he dies from a serious illness. Helen, who is not wealthy, marries Gilbert, to whom she gave her diaries and who is also the narrator of the novel.

At the time of writing married women were entrapped at home with their children, as they had no right to get a divorce and husbands could abuse them with impunity. They were further 'incarcerated' by a father's legal right to custody of his children. The novel can be read as highlighting the need for reform in this area, as in 1839, the *Custody of Infants Act* gave mothers the right to ask the courts for the custody of their children under seven years of age. Before Helen arrived at the point of asking her husband for a divorce and being allowed take their son with her, she suffered many years of coercive control.

Doubt around Arthur's character is implanted as soon as the theme of a marriage plot materialises in the novel. When Helen's aunt (her guardian) asks her: "*Is he a good man*", (A Brontë 153), to which she replies: "*Yes – in some respects. He has a good disposition*", (A Brontë 153). Her aunt also asks her: "*Is he a man of principle?*", (A Brontë 153), to which she replies: "*Perhaps not exactly ; but it is only for want of thought: if he had someone to advise him, and remind him of what is right -*", (A Brontë 153).

In a disturbing 'incident', which is extremely upsetting to Helen, Arthur deliberately gives all his attention to Annabella whilst ignoring Helen: "*I knew Annabella's musical talents were superior to mine, but that was no reason why I should be treated as a perfect nonentity*", (A Brontë 171). Distraught, Helen escapes to the library, and is followed by Arthur who asks her:

*"Helen, what is the matter?*

*I could not answer at the moment.*

*You must and shall tell me, was added more vehemently, and  
The speaker threw himself on his knees, beside me on the rug,  
and forcibly possessed himself on my hand; but I hastily caught it  
away, and replied –*

*It is nothing to you, Mr Huntingdon.*

*Are you sure it is nothing to me? he returned, can you swear  
that you were not thinking of me while you wept?*

*This was unendurable. I made an effort to rise, but he was kneeling on my dress”, (A Brontë 174).*

And later, on the same page, Arthur continues his forceful speech:

*“Silence again?*

*That means yes. – Then let me add, that I cannot live without you, and if you answer, No, to this last question, you will drive me mad. – Will you bestow yourself upon me? – you will! he cried, nearly squeezing me to death in his arms.*

*No, no! I exclaimed, struggling to free myself from him – you must ask my uncle and aunt”, (A Brontë 174-175).*

This violent proposal, both verbally and physically, is an example of gaslighting. I argue that it is planned and intentional, thus consistent with the intentionality of coercive control. First, Arthur purposely upsets Helen by giving Annabella all his attention, and when he witnesses Helen’s suffering he uses her vulnerability to force her to accept his proposal. The phrases ‘I cannot live without you’ and ‘you will drive me mad’, are like threats, and signal that she is responsible for his detriment if she denies him. In addition, only his needs are centered, similarly to when Rochester tries to gaslight Jane into staying with him when she wants to leave Thornhill after discovering he is married to Bertha and has hidden her in the attic. Helen and Arthur get married, and Helen’s life as a wife is a miserable one, as Arthur exerts his complete dominance over her from the start. Helen sees herself as a wife whose task it is to save her husband from eternal damnation by changing his unhealthy habits, such as his heavy drinking. The topic of how he is abusing her is never discussed, and Helen sees his relationship with God as the problem to solve. As contemporary conventions dictated, she is positioned as his carer and saviour – as a wife whose duty it is to be at his service, waiting for him at home:

*“Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home –*

*to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way,*

*while he chooses to stay with her; and when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return; no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime”*, (A Brontë 256).

In this passage we learn that whilst her husband is free to go wherever he pleases, Helen must stay at home, where she is isolated from public life as well as her only relatives, her aunt and uncle, who he permits her to go and visit on one occasion. Societal patriarchy supported Victorian women's subjugation and domestic abuse. Even though women's rights campaigns have since then achieved progress in society, there are similarities between the tactics Helen is exposed to and what women currently experience in domestic abuse. These tactics align with the current concept of coercive control as a liberty crime. Helen and Arthur's only visitors are his friends, and they socialise on his terms, which involves heavy drinking and the chance for him to conduct an affair with Annabella. Arthur's cruelty and lack of empathy for Helen is portrayed in a pattern of coercive control.

## 6.4 Ruth

Another novel that can be read as a narrative of coercive control is Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Ruth*, which was published in 1853. Ruth, a working-class orphan is seduced by the much older Henry Bellingham, and he intentionally contributes to her losing her job and makes her dependent upon him for shelter and sustenance. Henry's mother: "*was anxious for him to marry Miss Duncombe*", (Gaskell 30). However, Henry is more interested in:

*"dawdling through some months of his life – sometimes flirting with the nothing-loth Miss Duncombe, sometimes plaguing, and sometimes delighting his mother, at all times taking care to please himself"*, (Gaskell 31).

This dismissive portrayal of him has the effect of alerting readers to possible danger ahead. Furthermore, this ominous sign is strengthened by the reaction of Ruth's friend Old Thomas, when he observes: "*the dissatisfied expression of Mr Bellingham's countenance visible to the old man's keen eye*", (Gaskell 44-45). Later, Old Thomas tries to warn Ruth about Henry, but only manages to give her some words from the Bible: "*My dear, remember, the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; remember that Ruth*", (Gaskell 45). Ruth and Henry go on many walks, and on one such occasion they are spotted by Ruth's employer Mrs Mason, who promptly tells Ruth; "*Don't attempt to show your face at my house again after this conduct. I was you, and your spark too*", (Gaskell 48). Ruth is now without a home and a job, and it her that predicament is exploited by Henry, who, with his manipulation, manages to force her to come with him to London. This is contrary to her wishes to stay with her only friends at Milham Grange, however Henry ignores her. Suddenly Henry announces that he is going to London and Ruth and says:

*"I can hardly bear the idea of leaving you, my own Ruth. In such distress too, for where you can go I do not know at all.*

*From all you have told me of Mrs Mason, I don't think she is likely to mitigate her severity on your case"*, (Gaskell 49).

Henry is using Ruth's marginal situation to manipulate her into going with him, which at the time as a woman would have been seen as unseemly, and as living in sin. He puts her in

danger, worsens her situation and even takes her away from her familiar surroundings and therefore further isolates her from the only people who can help her. He then proceeds to gaslight her into giving in by appealing to her kindness and love for him, (just as Rochester and Arthur did in *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant at Wildfell Hall* did, respectively):

*“Will you not come with me? Do you not love me enough to trust me? Oh Ruth (reproachfully), can you not trust me?”*, (Gaskell 50).

Ruth goes with him, and as soon as she is trapped in London and later in Wales in an affair with him, he treats her with cruelty and contempt, criticising her constantly and calling her stupid. Today these are recognised tactics of coercive control designed to degrade and minimise a victim. Furthermore, Henry attempts to benefit from the unequal union by making her dependent on her him, and thereby cutting her off from support and stopping her from leaving. When Henry falls ill, his mother comes to see him. She disapproves of Ruth, which she makes clear to Henry. Henry agrees to leave Ruth, who is pregnant with his child, and gives his mother the task to tell her. Thus, he abandons her, and it is evident that Henry was exploiting Ruth for his own needs, with no regard for the harm he caused her and their child.

Here are some examples of his coercive and controlling behaviour:

*“But if she had complained of the changeable climate, she would have pleased Mr Bellingham more; her admiration and her content made him angry, until her pretty motions and loving eyes soothed down his impatience”*, (Gaskell 57).

*“But Ruth was stupid, not so good as a dummy, he said; and it was no fun betting against himself. So the cards were flung across the table - on the floor – anywhere”*, (Gaskell 57).

*“Ruth, what is the matter this morning? You really are very provoking. Yesterday, when everything was gloomy, and you might have been Aware that I was out of spirits, I heard nothing but expressions of delight; To-day, when every creature under heaven is rejoicing, you look most deplorable and woe-begone. You really should learn to have a little*

*sympathy*”, (Gaskell 63).

*“She knew that he was pleased from his manner, which had the joyousness of a toy playing with a new toy”*, (Gaskell 64)

*“She knew that she was beautiful; but that seem abstract, and removed from herself. Her existence was in feeling, and thinking, and loving”*, (Gaskell 64).

*“Her beauty was all that Mr Bellingham cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognised her for, and he was proud of it”*, (Gaskell 64).

These excerpts show that Henry does not recognise Ruth as a person with her own needs and desires, which is emotionally abusive. He belittles her for lacking knowledge of the rules of games, and at the same time exploits her innocence and youth for his own gratification. Her perspectives are ignored, and he instead sees her as an object for him to admire. He disregards her feelings and thoughts, and thereby he is isolating and silencing her. Isolation is a main tactic in coercive control, and Stark explains its effect on a victim: *“One of the most devastating psychological effects of isolation is the abuse-related incapacity to “know what you know”, a condition called “perspecticide”*, (Stark 338, 2023).

She expresses a need for being acknowledged as a person in her own right, as demonstrated by the sentence - ‘existence was in feeling, thinking and loving’ - which are the sides of herself that Henry ignores, as he comes across as self-obsessed and entitled. It is painful to read about her suffering as the writing is emotionally charged, which has the effect of exposing tactics of coercive control. At the time the novel was published, it was being read as a narrative that was centred upon Ruth as a fallen woman, who, by proving herself worthy, could be redeemed, thereby challenging readers to look at women like her with a forgiving eye. Today’s reader will find it striking that Henry’s role in the sad events is largely unaddressed in the novel, and at most portrayed as a side issue, not worthy of full discussion, which reflects a culture of victim blaming against women.

Reading these three Victorian novels through the lens of coercive control theory has exposed perpetrators’ tactics that have historically been interpreted as expressions of passionate romantic love, and that the potential for abuse within intimate relationships has varied little over time. This reinterpretation of literature therefore serves to raise awareness of previously concealed methods of control, demonstrating how easily readers can be misled, and how these

realisations can help educate today's readers about how to identify coercive control and abuse in relationships.

## Chapter 7: Introduction to Primary Texts

### 7.1 Affect Theory

In my analyses of *In The Dream House* and *Girl, Woman, Other* I use the lens of Sara Ahmed's affect theory. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Ahmed argues that:

*"I suggest that it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such. My arguments still explore how emotions can move through the movement or circulation of objects. Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect as sites of personal or social tension"*, (Ahmed 10-11),

and:

*"What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitation, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others"*, (Ahmed 11).

According to Ahmed, feelings are crucial to making sense of the world, and they are expressed or evoked in literature through the circulation of objects of emotion. For Ahmed these objects of emotions are culturally determined and not psychological states.



## 7.2 Shame

The coercive control legislation for England and Wales and the “*technology of coercive control*”, (Stark 228-288, 2007) formulated by Evan Stark that contributed to this legislation have both established essential frameworks for the offence. Despite this, their use of literal and factual language limits their ability to describe how the offence is perpetrated in practice, and what effects it has on a victim. This makes it harder for victims to realise that they are being coercively controlled when referring to these texts alone. It is the individual contexts of the perpetrators and victims that determine how the categories of coercive control manifest themselves in practice. The move away from physical injury as the essential evidence needed to identify domestic abuse puts increasing emphasis on the psychological and emotional aspects of coercive control. Victims of coercive control report, most often when they have managed to separate themselves from the perpetrator, that they did not understand what was happening to them while the abuse took place. This is due to the insidious nature of the abuse, as well as the covert tactics that are used to gain control and dominance over victims. The abusive acts are difficult to identify as such, and victims are often blamed for being too sensitive and too emotional, which condition them to doubt their own reality as a result of perpetrators’ use of a manipulation technique called ‘gaslighting’. Not validating someone’s feelings and needs is emotional abuse, and is another tactic used by perpetrators of coercive control. Numerous kinds of feelings manifest themselves in the context of coercive control, including the following: feelings of desire, love, hatred, gratitude, happiness, sadness, joy, empathy, contempt, fear, shame. In contrast with academic and legal texts, literary texts are more capable of evoking such emotions, which can contribute to a reader gaining a richer insight into the workings and experience of coercive control.

On the affect ‘shame’, which is very strongly connected to coercive control, Ahmed explains:

*“The way in which the pain of shame is felt upon the skin surface, at the same time as it overwhelms and consumes the subject, is crucial. Shame involves the intensification not only of the bodily surface, but also of the subject’s relation to itself or its sense of itself as self”,* (Ahmed 104).

When we feel shame, we feel that we are bad people in the eyes of others. Hill explains how shame functions in abuse:

*“victims of domestic abuse often keep their abuse a secret, and victims of child sexual abuse can take decades to tell anybody – the fear that they will be devalued in the eyes of their community is so great that they feel a need to bury what was done to them”, (Hill 119).*

Many of the tactics in coercive control that are designed to degrade a victim, for example by being *“forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments”*, (Hill 41), will make her feel shame. Here is an example of how Dominique feels shame about what happened to her:

*“It took years for Dominique to stop beating herself up for staying with Nzinga for as long as she did – nearly three years, three years how could she have been so weak when she’d been so strong, and was again after she left her? grateful to go back to the self she had lost”, (Evaristo 107)*

In the chapter *Dream House as Inventory*, her girlfriend shames her by making *“you tell her what is wrong with you”*, (Machado 126). The includes just normal behaviour, as if she is gaslighted into being ashamed for being human: *“You have an ego: you believe you are good at what you do”*, (Machado 126), and: *“You’ve cheated at boardgames”*, (126).

Hill explains that:

*“Male shame, on the other hand, is built around one unbreakable rule: do not be weak. To be a man is to be strong, powerful and in control”, (Hill 120).*

And furthermore:

*“.. when abusive people are confronted with feelings of shame, they take the path of least resistance. Instead of acknowledging their own sense of powerlessness and sitting with the discomfort, they blame others and, like the schoolyard bully ....Women and children suffer horrific abuse – and sometimes death – at the hands of men who refuse to deal with the true source of their own pain and frustration”, (Hill 120).*

It is society's gender roles enforced by patriarchy that lead to the abuse of women, where women are seen as inferior to men, and men feel entitled to exert power and control over women.

In the UK and in the wider Western World, where the books are likely to be read, many readers will react with feelings such as shock and disgust at the treatment of the protagonists. This is because, as Ahmed contends, the effects of shock and disgust are not within the text itself, but are generated by the linguistic features of the text to effect change. Another important consideration is that how readers react to texts are contingent on their cultural circumstances. In this context 'effect change' means to raise awareness of coercive control. The passage's poetic form and its oral language create expressions that are suited to evoking emotions. Line breaks speed up the reading by creating a fluidity that draws in the reader in, as do the lack of capital letters and full stops. Writing about such a serious matter that causes so much suffering for Dominique using matter-of-fact descriptive language mixed with a poetic narrative style makes the abusive acts stand out for what they are: coercive and controlling behaviour, which furthermore adds to the effects of shock and disgust effects. Interestingly, they are committed against a person who is a citizen of a country, the UK, where the behaviour is a criminal offence, in a country, the US, where it is not. A reader who is aware of this disparity, may find this fact particularly poignant. This brings to mind Machado's very effective one-sentence chapter "Dream House as Epiphany": "*Most types of domestic abuse are completely legal*", (Machado 129).

### 7.3 Gaslighting

In my exploration of the thesis's primary and secondary texts, I will expose how the technology of gaslighting is used extensively by perpetrators to coerce and control their victims. Kate Abramson explains the mechanisms and effects of gaslighting as:

*“The accusations are about the target’s basic rational competence, her ability to get facts right, to deliberate, her basic evaluative competences and ability to react appropriately, her independent standing as deliberator and moral agent. When gaslighting succeeds, it drives its targets crazy in the sense of deeply undermining just these aspects of one’s independent standing”, (Abramson 8).*

Furthermore, she argues that:

*“Gaslighted women have not only their wills, but their effective dispositions and even sometimes their character turned against them for their own destruction”, (Abramson 16).*

This is why women who are coercively controlled find it so difficult to leave; gaslighting strips them of agency and their identity.

## Chapter 8: In The Dream House

### 8.1 Introduction

Carmen Maria Machado won the 2021 Rathbones Folio Prize for her memoir *In The Dream House*. In this chapter I explore approaches to how power is exercised over the 'archive', and I compare the wording of the coercive control legislation in England and Wales with Stark's theory of coercive control, together with an excerpt from Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In The Dream House*, with the aim of showing how literary texts on the topic can raise awareness of it in a more holistic and effective way than through factual texts. I explain why there is a preoccupation in society with the physical aspect of domestic abuse, and how this impedes the effective enactment of coercive control legislation. I include Nazir Afzal's views on these issues (a former prosecutor within the Crown Prosecution Service) and apply parts of Sara Ahmed's affect theory. I then analyse how *In The Dream House's* innovative form enhances its content; how this highly literary memoir subverts tradition in order to raise awareness of coercive control, and how intersectional feminism plays a role in connecting people through shared experiences of coercive control. The memoir is a polyphonic text using a multiplicity of existing narrative genres and tropes as lenses or voices to make sense of Machado's experience of coercive control. This contrasts with the narrative style of *Girl, Woman, Other*, where polyphony is mainly realised through the characterisation of multiple protagonists, although this novel also makes use of tropes to a lesser extent. In addition, Machado inserts into her memoir sections with relevant history and theories, which are written in an essayistic persuasive style, as opposed to the poetics of the chapters that recall the abuse. Machado's use of pastiche and references to factual and theoretical discourses are types of intertextuality, and Hutcheon explains the usefulness of this device:

*“intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between the reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses than any text derives meaning and significance”*, (Hutcheon 126).

However, Hutcheon seems to prefer the term 'parody' to the term 'pastiche':

*“The collective weight of the parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity”, (Hutcheon 26). She contests the view that including irony and play is “necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose in postmodern art”, (Hutcheon 27).*

## 8.2 Awakening the Archival Silence

Creating spaces for all women to tell their stories of domestic abuse and be understood faces the challenge of the missing archive of similar stories. Mbembe acknowledges the power of the archive when he characterises the archive as the:

*“product of a judgment, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded”*, (Mbembe 20).

Thus, exercising such power over the archive becomes an act of suppressing unwanted voices, or gaslighting, (denying that it happened), and in this context the voices of women coercively controlled in intimate relationships. In her memoir's chapter 'Dream House as Prologue' Machado discusses the etymology of the word 'archive', which comes from the ancient Greek word 'arkheion' which means: “the house of the ruler”, (Machado 2). She writes:

*“...it is the power, the authority, that is the most telling element”*, (Machado 2),

and:

*“Sometimes the proof is never committed to the archive – it is not considered important enough to record, or if it is, not important enough to preserve. Sometimes there is a deliberate act of destruction”*, (Machado 2-3).

The feminist Hélène Cixous who wrote *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1975, advocated that women should write themselves out of the world that men construct for women. This silencing of women in a phallogocentric world is linked to what Machado identifies as the silencing of queer narratives in a heteronormative world. She quotes the words of the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz:

*“When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present”*, (Machado 3).

As established, there is a widespread lack of understanding of coercive control. The legislation needs to be interpreted for it to be enacted as intended, and for this purpose the

Home Office has in 2023 published *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour: Statutory Guidance Framework*, aiming to provide:

*“Clear information on what constitutes controlling or coercive behaviour and how to identify the offence. This guidance aims to support agencies in understanding controlling or coercive behaviour and how to identify the offence, including the types of behaviours that are within the range of the offence, and the impact that these behaviours can have on victims, including children and young people”, (Controlling or Coercive Behaviour: Statutory Guidance Framework 5).*

Government guidelines and scholarly papers have a role to play in raising awareness, however they are restricted by language in how far they can explain what coercive control signifies. This language excludes the general public to a large extent, and it contains no words that can connect readers to the emotional side of coercive control. The examples listed in the Home Office *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour: Statutory Guidance Framework 2023* of what records can be gathered by a victim of coercive control to use to support investigations include: *“A diary of events (ideally in a bound book, or by keeping an electronic record to record dates/times)”, (Controlling or Coercive Behaviour: Statutory Guidance Framework 28).*

That the guidance provides that it is important for a victim to keep a diary of the abuse, emphasises the importance of recording the stories of a victim’s experience.

That it can be hard to prove is linked to the failure of recognising domestic abuse without physical violence, which means that victims do not come forward because they have no way of internalising and explaining what is happening to them. Sarah Ahmed in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* explains how:

*“According to Judy Butler, performativity relates to the way in which a signifier, rather than simply naming something that already exists, works to generate that which it apparently names. Performativity is hence about the ‘power of the discourse to produce effects through reiteration””, (Ahmed 92).*

This can be applied to how domestic abuse has been understood as physical abuse, and how this concept and its connotations have been repeated so many times in discourse about domestic



abuse that it has become synonymous with it. Legal narratives on coercive control uses the language of reason and rationality and are unable to adequately convey the complexities and psychological dimensions of coercive control. In contrast, literary texts can describe it in ways that create affects that are felt intuitively and strongly. Consequently, this important aspect and new meaning of the concept of coercive control will be reinforced through repetition and increased awareness, facilitating a shift in focus to incorporate the psychological and emotional aspects of abuse. This is where narratives of coercive control have important roles to play by revealing how perpetrators justify and covertly carry out their intentional deceitful acts.

### 8.3 Comparison of Excerpt from *In The Dream House* with Factual Texts

In this chapter I juxtapose the wording of the coercive control legislation for England and Wales (that sets out what the offence constitutes) with Stark's explanation of the tactics present in control, and an excerpt describing controlling behaviour in Machado's memoir *In The Dream House*.

The offence of controlling or coercive behaviour states that:

- *“An offence is committed by A if:*
- *A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person, B, that is controlling or coercive;*
- *At the time of the behaviour, A and B are personally connected;*
- *The behaviour has a serious effect on B; and*
- *A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B”*,  
(Serious Crime Act 2015, section 76).

The wording of the legislation does not give any detail information about what sort of controlling and coercive behaviours the legislation encompasses. It is therefore difficult for a victim to recognise if their experience fulfils this definition of abuse, particularly when the abuse often makes the victim question their own reality and takes away their self-determination.

Stark's explanation of control is as follows:

*“exploiting a partner's capacities and resources for personal gain and gratification, depriving her of the means needed for autonomy or escape, and regulating her behaviour to conform with stereotypical gender roles”*, (Stark 271, 2007).

Similar semantic obstacles may also be evident for readers of Stark's theoretical discourse, particularly for the lay person, although he does also include case studies based on real-life cases in his book. These do contribute to some extent to the understanding of coercive control. However, readers looking for examples of coercive control in the context of queer women will struggle as he himself had not encountered any in his practice at the time writing.

In a chapter called 'Dream House as Omen' Machado narrates one episode of being controlled by her ex-girlfriend. Both individuals worked as standardised test-scorers at Pearson in Iowa City. In one scenario Machado goes to the bathroom and overhears a woman sobbing. She then goes outside with the woman to help her during a "traumatic episode", (italicised in the text, Machado 46). Machado has listened to the woman for a long time when she pulls out her phone:

*"When you finally do, you discover two things: You've been out there for almost two hours, and your girlfriend has called and texted you half a dozen times. Where are you, where are you, where are you, she asks, and just as you lift your phone to your ear to call her, the front door of the building opens and a herd of scorers begins to pour out, including her. You give the woman you've been talking to your phone number, tell her to call you if she needs anything, and then dart across the lawn.*

*Your girlfriend is glowering. Your new friend is running next to her, looking a little anxious and breathless, and gets to you first. "She was just worried about you", your new friend says, with such pre-emptive anxiety that you are taken aback. The three of you get in the car and your girlfriend is radiating fury", (Machado 46).*

After they drop off her new friend, Machado's girlfriend says:

*"Where the fuck were you?"*

*You explain about the woman in the bathroom, what she said to you, how you couldn't text because she was talking and you didn't want to interrupt her. You fully expect this explanation to deflate her rage – you even expect her to apologize – but somehow she gets even angrier. She continues to pound the dashboard. "You are the most inconsiderate fucking person I've ever met, and how fucking dare you just walk out of the building with not explanation like that". Every time you bring up the woman she starts yelling again. A few blocks from your house, you pull over.*

*"Don't talk to me like that", you say. Then, horrifyingly, you start to cry. "I had to make a decision, and I feel confident that I made the right decision."*

*She unbuckles her seat belt, and leans very close to your ear. "You're not allowed to write about this. Do you fucking understand me?"*

*You don't know if she means the woman or her, but you nod.*

*Fear makes liars of us all", (Machado 46-47).*

This shocking episode shows how literature can, by describing the details of the episode in context, shine a light on coercive control, and make the reader feel the horrors of the abusive behaviour on their bodies. The reader is able to see how kind Machado is when she listens to the woman for hours, and how her empathy then contrasts with the unfair and selfish treatment of her ex-girlfriend afterwards. We also see how Machado does not have a voice; she is silenced by her ex-girlfriend's rage. Furthermore, she is shouted at and verbally abused. As previously discussed, these familiar tactics are designed to instil fear in her so that she becomes obedient. The contrast of registers between the narrator and her girlfriend, combined with the second person narrative and the extensive use of dialogue in this passage, sparks the reader's imagination, and may remind them of their own history; and striking verisimilitude into the story. Machado's choice of words, such as 'anxiety', 'fury', 'fear', 'rage', and 'allowed', belong to the lexicon of coercive control. These comparisons exemplify how literature can deepen and strengthen people's understanding of how the perpetrator may operate in practice, illustrated using Machado's lived experience in a queer relationship. This makes it authentic and more relatable. Readers get to know a real person that this has happened to, allowing them to identify with her and draw parallels with their experiences of their own similar experience of domestic abuse. Readers who have not themselves been subject to abuse can benefit by learning about what it means and may even use the knowledge in their own work, or to help a friend or relative to escape an abusive relationship (in all types of family relationships).

I argue that the incandescent memoir *In The Dream House* can help raise awareness of coercive control in a way that is not available through academic discourse and legislation, which are bound by the norms of concise academic and legal language. By writing her memoir mainly in a highly literary style, interspersed with academic and factual writing to add historic and legal context, she uses a number of literary devices and techniques to write about her personal experience of being the victim of coercive control in a same-sex relationship. The experimental form compliments the subversive content, which rejects heteronormativity and phallogocentrism in narratives and in society as a whole. She critiques the focus on 'shame' around sexuality, perpetuated by the church she attended as a young girl, and the lack of information available to her about her sexual orientation whilst growing up.

## 8.4 Silencing of the Other

The historic silencing of women can be argued as having contributed to the domestic abuse of women. Machado challenges this historic lack of recognition of the abused woman as a concept to be concerned about:

*“...she did not exist until about fifty years ago. The conversation about domestic abuse within queer communities is even newer, and even more shadowed”, (Machado 3).*

This text can be read as an intersectional feminist political statement highlighting the suffering of queer women who experience coercive control in same-sex relationships, with a focus on non-violent abuse, and therefore similar to the centering of black women in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Second-wave feminism that started in the early 1960s focused on domestic abuse as physical assaults and rape, and has been criticised for only including white, heterosexual women, and thereby ignoring the struggles of LGBTQ+ women and women of colour. Intersectionality, which is a theory that recognises that systems of inequality intersect, was introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, and has continued as a work-in-progress, as explained by Carbado et al.:

*“According to Roberts and Jesudason, identifying categorical differences can enhance the potential to build coalitions between movements by acknowledging differences while promoting commonalities. They argue that an intersectional lens can reveal, on a given issue and between separate identity groups, perspectives of both privilege and victimhood, and thereby create a connection around shared experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and privilege”, (Carbado et al. 306).*

There are contrasting views in academic circles regarding whether the concept of coercive control should be defined as a gendered offence, or whether it should be gender neutral. Coercive control legislation in England and Wales is gender neutral, and encompasses all types of family relationships, which contrasts with Stark’s argument that coercive control has a gendered nature. Stark instead asserts that in general it is men who are the perpetrators and that women are the victims. Barlow et al. state that there is an

*“empirical investigation of the problems and possibilities associated with the translation of this offence into practice in one police force area in England”, and that their findings “supports the view that the current gender-neutral version of the legislation requires revision”, (Barlow et al.).*

When looking at statistics for police-recorded crimes of domestic abuse, they found that *“perpetrators are for the most part men and victims are predominantly women”, (Barlow et al.)* Their statistics also showed that from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2017, 18,978 domestic abuse crimes were recorded, of which 156 were recorded as coercive control. In 96% of these recorded as coercive control the victims were women, and 95% of the perpetrators were men.

Starks states that *“I have never had a case that involved a female perpetrator of coercive control, and no such cases are documented in the literature” (Stark 377, 2007).*

Machado’s answer to that can be found at the end of the chapter ‘*Dream House as Prologue*’ she writes:

*“I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partner who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and it can look something like this. I speak into the silence, I toss the stone of my story into the vast crevice; measure the emptiness by its small sound”, (Machado 4).*

Many of the chapters deal with queer visibility, for example in the chapter: ‘*Dream House as Equivocation*’, (Machado 229-231), in which she discusses queer theory. In addition, in the chapter named ‘*Dream House as Public Relations*’, (Machado 260-263) she writes: *“I have spent years struggling to find examples of my own experience in history’s queer woman”, and “But haven’t we been trying to say, this whole time, that we are just like you?”*, (Machado 261). She points out that not much has been written about his topic before and that it therefore requires creativity as it has no palimpsest to build on. Interestingly, the meaning is strengthened by its innovative gender-busting form, which is in itself a statement that shouts: ‘I am a queer woman. I do not need to copy others. I am pushing the boundaries of what is previously understood about domestic abuse.

Readers of Machado's memoir can learn about her experience as a queer woman tackling unique types of oppressions which she attributes to her living in a heteronormative society, and as a woman of colour of Cuban descent living in the US - a white-centric country: "*Everything is darker on you, she says*", (Machado 44). Other vulnerabilities are linked to being marginalised as a woman in a phallogentric society, for example being labelled as less desirable as a girlfriend because of her size in the chapter '*Dream House as Luck of the Draw*':

*"Part of the problem was, as a weird fat girl, you felt lucky. She did what you'd wished a million others had done – looked past arbitrary markers of social currency and seen your brain and ferocious talent and quick wit and pugnacious approach to assholes. When you started writing about fatness – a long time ago, in your LiveJournal – a commenter said to you that you were pretty and smart and charming, but as long as you were zaftig you'd never have a choice of lovers. You remember feeling outrage, and then processing the reality, the practicality, of what he'd said. You were so angry at the world"*, (Machado 26).

This can be read as a feminist comment highlighting how women's bodies, more often than men's, are scrutinised and judged by society, which leads to women wasting time on obsessing about their bodies and going on endless diets to fit into society's norm of being thin in order to be successful. The memoir is unique in the way that it situates the coercive relationship in the context of the broader challenges facing women in patriarchy. In Machado's case it was partly the reason why she was so quickly seduced by her ex-girlfriend who physically was the opposite of her in many ways, as described in the chapter '*Dream House as Confession*':

*"She was short and pale and rail-thin and androgenous, with fine blond hair about which she was inordinately vain. Blue eyes, an easy smile. You are embarrassed now to say that you were impressed by her in a very strange, old-fashioned way. Despite being from Florida, she had a distinctly upper-class, New England Air. She had gone to Harvard, looked dapper in a blazer, and carried a leather-encased hip flask preppier than any accessory you had ever seen"*, (Machado 24).

During '*Dream House as Road Trip to Everywhere*', when they travel to visit friends and both sets of parents, the intentional coercive and controlling behaviour starts:

*"Every step of the trip is sweet and sour"*, (53). *While you drive you slip your hand between your legs, jerk her off as you zip past cornfields and stopped traffic. (She is hot; you*

*are stupid). When she kisses you in a McDonald's parking lot in Indiana, you both look up to see a group of men – a risk of men, a murder of men – standing there watching, laughing, pointing....You fly out of there as fast as you can, (Machado 55).*

This extract points to Machado's feeling of unease and inferiority, and an exaggerated willingness to please, which can be interpreted as being unsafe - an overarching feeling in relationships defined by coercive control as fear. It exemplifies both queer and female visibility in the expression of their sexualities, however there is also an undertone of risk in the dangerous driving, alongside a description of how heteronormativity excludes queer women from public spaces.



## 8.5 Narrative Perspectives and Narrator Reliability

At the beginning of the memoir, where you are not sure what to expect; there are already early warning signs in the first chapter, named *'Dream House as Not a Metaphor'*:

*"I bring you this up because it is important to remember that the Dream House is real. It is a real as the book you are holding in your hands, though significantly less terrifying. If I cared to, I could give you the address, and you could drive there in your own car and sit in front of that Dream House and try to imagine the things that have happened inside. I wouldn't recommend it. But you could. No one would stop you"*, (Machado 7).

The warning, or the promise of danger, acts as an enticement making it irresistible to enter. But you have been warned, so you enter at your own risk, feeling apprehensive. This creates an affect; a premonition of what is to come; seduction infused with trepidation. It also can be seen as an allusion to gothic genre, similar to *Jane Eyre*, which is concerned with isolation and domestic entrapment. This links to Machado's use of the *'haunted house trope'*. Here she tries to establish herself as a reliable narrator in the chapter *'Dream House as Not A Metaphor'*:

*"After all, the landlord is not a man but an entire university"*, (Machado 7), and: *"I bring this up because it is important to remember that the Dream House is real"*, (Machado 7).

In *'Dream House as Picaresque'*, (Machado 8-9), the reader learns about Machado's previous life which comes across as a happy student life with many caring friends:

*"Like a picara, I have spent my adulthood bopping from city to city, acquiring kindred spirits at every stop; a group of guardians who have taken good care of me"*, (Machado 9).

This introduction to the memoir makes the reader empathise with the narrator as a normal, friendly and sociable character. Importantly, it also acts as a powerful contrast to the harrowing tale that is to come and situates the narrator as a victim of *'the woman from the Dream House'*, who is never named. These nebulous features make the narration less reliable. This *'not-naming'* functions as the narrator's rejection of her tormentor and her actions. *'The woman in the house'* becomes a symbol of her abusive actions to be repeated as a trope in similar

narratives. In literature, there are similar tropes, for example 'an angel in the house' and 'the madwoman in the attic'.

Another literary device adopted in this memoir is the switching between first person perspective used by the narrator as she tells the story in the present, and the second person perspective used to tell the story of the abuse that happened in the past. On the first page of the memoir these words are written:

*"If you need this book, it is for you", (Machado, unnumbered page).*

With these words you are immediately drawn in by the second person narrative. She is talking directly at you in present tense, and you are subsequently forced to experience the abuse with her, here and now, as if you are the protagonist in the story. These narrative techniques add intimacy and urgency to the action, and further enhances the effect. The second person narrative also acts as a way of framing what happened in the 'Dream House' as separate from the narrator, who speaks in first person. Machado writes the memoir seven years after the events, looking at it from different angles. You are invited along with her. The narrator's split self and her fragmented narrative bear witness to the trauma, confusion and memory loss she experiences as a consequence of her ex-girlfriend's coercive and controlling behaviour, that lasted for two years.

## 8.6 Tropes and Genres

I read Machado's memoir as a pattern of coercive control, whilst relating the text to theory and current discourse around the issue. The memoir describes coercive control as mainly non-physical abuse, which is rarely written about, particularly in the context of same-sex relationships. It frames the abuse as using the tactics of isolation and silencing, which has the effect of making victims captive and demeaned. The abuser feels entitled to exert dominance over their victim in a society plagued by power dynamics and gender roles where marginalised groups become the targets of control. Her genius device of using a litany of well-known, (although not all readers will necessarily understand all references and allusions), literary genres and tropes as lenses to contextualise important incidents of coercive control, serves to increase understanding and enriches the reader experience. Furthermore, it has the effect of 'implanting' her versions of events the reader's consciousness. Being able to relate to the abuse through shared cultural lenses enables readers to feel that they are themselves the victims of the abuse. At a virtual question and answer session at the Narratives of Coercive Control International Conference at the University of York on 19 April 2024, (which I attended in person), Machado explained that using multiple genres may be therapeutic for survivors as they "*may represent their experiences in flashes*", and that "*if one genre does not suit you, you can find another genre to suit*", (Machado Q & A). This repetitive multi-genre device also has the effect of inserting her own story of coercive control into well-known genres and cultural expressions, and by doing that she rewrites cultural narratives. This polyphony adds power and intensity to the narrative, and the fragmented narrative bears witness to the breakdown of the narrator caused by gaslighting, confusion and forgetting. There is a nerve running through the episodes of abuse, or a barbed wire, that bears witness to her prolonged suffering. Through mimesis she retells the stories that have ignored queer women's perspectives and inserts missing women's stories that they were not able to write, that were ignored or censored out of the archive.

To recall the events of the abuse and to understand and explain what happened to her, she uses a well-known 'haunted mansion' trope. She became a shell of herself due to the abuse, and although she did not die in the literal sense, she describes feeling like a ghost as described in the chapter '*Dream House as a Haunted Mansion*':

*“What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly? You know the formula instinctually: a place is steeped in tragedy. Death, at the very least, but so many terrible things can precede death, and it stands to reason that some of them might accomplish something similar. You spend so much time trembling between the walls of the Dream House, (Machado 146). And then it occurs to you one day, standing in the living room, that you are this house’s ghost: you are the one wandering from room to room with no purpose”, (Machado 147).*

Using and rewriting a shared cultural trope by inserting her own experience has a chilling effect and evokes affects such as dread, fear and anxiety, which are felt by readers as bodily responses, or movements that, as argued by Ahmed:

*“connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others”, (Ahmed 11), and in that way the text contributes to raising awareness of coercive control by appealing to emotions felt by the unnatural. It is disturbing to know that a victim of coercive control feels like a ‘living dead’ person or a zombie, a phenomenon that Freud refers to as the “uncanny”, (Freud 799-816):*

*“... if psycho-analytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening thing there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs”, (Freud 808).*

He continues:

*“Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts”. As we have seen in some language in use to-day we can only render the German expression ‘an unheimlich house’ by ‘a haunted house’”, (Freud 808).*

Literary texts such as Machado’s memoir open up the possibility of creating affects that convey a victim’s feeling of their home being ‘unhomely’; feeling unsafe, silenced, isolated degraded and trapped.

At the beginning of their relationship, the woman in the house is charming and loving. Contemporary representations tend to call this stage 'love-bombing' - designed to trap the victim:

*“Your female crushes were always floating past you, out of reach, but she touches your arm and looks directly at you and you feel like a child buying something with her own money for the first time, (Machado 13).*

Only literary language can express the intimate, tender feeling expressed here, helped by the simile which hints at innocence and vulnerability. The intense acts of ensnaring masked as love continues for some time. Their relationship quickly moves on to a sexual one, which adds to the intensity, seen in the chapter '*Dream House as Déjà Vu*':

*“She loves you. She sees your subtle, ineffable qualities. You are the only one for her in the world. She trusts you. She wants to keep you safe. She wants to grow old with you. She thinks you're beautiful. She thinks you are sexy. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something stunningly filthy, and there is a kick of want between your legs. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the luckiest person in the whole world”, (Machado 31).*

This intensity early on in a relationship makes it very difficult for Machado to leave her abuser as it creates a trauma bond, which is a psychological state where a victim believes that the relationship can be repaired to how it was at the start. Having experienced such intense feelings of love and sexual connection, a victim will typically experience a state of confusion and disorientation at the belief that one is loved and abused at the same time, which is often referred to as cognitive dissonance. This chapter reads like a narrative of facts, but we learn that these 'truths' are confused in two more chapters, also titled '*Dream House as Déjà vu*', capturing a pattern of coercive control and gaslighting. In the second chapter, the first half of the passage is repeated verbatim, but the wording in the second half has changed, which means that the promise of a loving relationship is being questioned:

*“Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something weirdly ambiguous, and there is a kick of anxiety between your lungs. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the most scrutinized person in the world”, (Machado 112).*

This can be compared to the text in the third chapter named 'Dream House as Déjà Vu', where the abuse is escalating along with the gaslighting, emphasising how the perpetrator uses this controlling tactic to obfuscate and undermine:

*“She says she loves you, sometimes. She sees your qualities, and you should be ashamed of them. If only you were the only one for her. She’d keep you safe, she’d grow old with you, if she could trust you. You’re not sexy, but she’ll have sex with you. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something stunningly cruel, and there is a kick of fear between your shoulder blades. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like she’s determining the best way to take you apart”*, (Machado 208).

Coercive control is recognised as a 'pattern of abuse'. The repetitive narrative structure in these chapters exemplifies this by changing the wording to show two primary emotional effects of coercive control, namely fear and shame. Machado thinks that the woman in the house wants to and is capable of destroying her. One of the main aims of a perpetrator of coercive control is to instil fear in their victim to be able to control them. The way that Machado has structured these interconnected chapters, together with how the wording changes from 'kick of want' to 'kick of anxiety' to 'kick of fear', has the capacity to create the affects that move from text to readers that Ahmad advocates in her theory, and thereby raising awareness of coercive control.

All theories of coercive control have 'isolation' as one of their main categories. The trope of 'dislocation' is extensively used in literature. In the chapter 'Dream House as World Building', Machado points out that it is a: *“common feature of domestic abuse”*, (Machado 81), and that: *“She is made vulnerable by her circumstance, her isolation”*, (Machado 81). Machado's figurative language intensifies this effect when she, in the same chapter, describes the Dream House as: *“a convent of promise”*, *“a den of debauchery”*, *“a haunted house”* and *“dungeon of memory”*, (Machado 82). She explains that conditions for dislocation and isolation are often created having moved to a new place, as well as being separated from support from family and friends. These circumstances means that *“her only ally is her abuser, which is to say she has no ally at all”*, (Machado 81). This shows how literary use texts relatable tropes and allusions to other narratives to create affects, which is particularly evident in *In The Dream House*, as a postmodern text.

Machado's situation when she stayed with her abuser, was that of isolation and dislocation, which is mirrored by Jane's position when she moves to the isolated and aptly named

Thornfield Hall. Here she was separated from the few friends and family she had - an experience very similar to how Helen and Ruth were coercively controlled by their husband and partner, respectively, by ways of isolation and silencing.

In the chapter *'Dream House as House in Iowa'*, Machado uses a trope of popular culture to describe an episode when her girlfriend: "*decides to be a Dalek for Halloween*", (Machado 94). There is situational comedy in the narrative, which contrast with its seriousness, and create the effect of intensifying both the serious and the comical. People at the Halloween party fail to identify that she is a Dalek:

*"'What is she?' someone asks, pointing to your girlfriend.*

*'A Dalek.'*

*'What's that?'*

*'The most evil aliens in the entire Doctor Who universe. They committed genocide against the Time Lords, and the Time Lords against them. They basically destroyed each other.*

*You are definitely the most uncool person ever to attend this MFA program.*

*The woman from the Dream House, as a Dalek, can barely move through the crowd. People knocking into her costume. You want to tell her a joke - 'Start yelling 'Exterminate!'' People will move – but she wouldn't get it. You watch her down one drink, then another", (Machado 95-96).*

This passage is both funny and sad at the same time, which makes the portrayal of the sad part, the horrific abuse, even more powerful. The reader can visualise the comedy in the episode, however it is at the same heart-breaking that Machado is unable to tell her girlfriend a joke. The episode is not funny for long: when they get home, Machado is emotionally and verbally abused: "*You fucked everything up, this whole night you fucked up*", (Machado 96).

## 8.7 Legislation and Evidence

Machado does not use the term 'coercive control' to describe the abuse, however I recognise the abuse perpetrated by her ex-girlfriend as constituting a pattern of tactics designed to control and coerce her; a systematic and intentional campaign to gain control over her. Her memoir was written and published in US state where coercive control was not unlawful in 2019 when her memoir was published. One of her chapters is called '*Dream House as Epiphany*', and it contains one single sentence:

*"Most types of domestic abuse are completely legal"*, (Machado 129).

This is still true in the US in most states. In the chapter '*Dream House as Proof*' near the end of the book Machado writes:

*"I think a lot about what evidence, had it been measured or recorded or kept, would help make my case. Not in a court of law, exactly, because there are many things that happen to us that are beyond the purview of even a perfectly executed legal system. But the court of other people, the court of the body, the court of queer history"*, (Machado 258).

Later in the chapter she writes about the "concept of ephemera" as:

*"The recorded sound waves of her speech on one axis and a precise measurement of the flood of adrenaline and cortisol in my body and the other. Witness statements from the strangers who anxiously looked at us sideways in public spaces. A photograph of her grip on my arm in Florida, with measurements of the shadows to indicate depth of indentation; an equation to represent the likely pressure. A wire looped through my hair, ready to record her hiss. The rancid smell of anger. The metal tang of fear in the back of my throat. None of these things exist. You have no reason to believe me"*, (Machado 259).

The reader is inclined to believe her as the instances of abuse she is referring to in this extract have been conveyed with intensity and authenticity earlier in the memoir. With this memoir she has created a new memoir genre, into which she has inserted, academic persuasion. I believe what she writes.

With her memoir Machado has, in essence, created a new genre: a hybrid of memoir and literary prose, using a mixture of techniques from fiction and non-fiction. The multitude of narrative lenses allow her to recall, explore and convey the trauma of being a victim and



survivor of coercive control at the hands of an ex-girlfriend, who was supposed to love her. The experimental form of the text helps to connect with the reader and generates a deeper understanding of her experience. It also functions as a form of therapy as well as a way of processing the abuse experience by giving it a name or form. These lenses strengthen the argument that the world exists in multiplicities with nuance (not in binaries), with different genders and sexualities. The narrator herself is as a complex and strong human being - neither angel nor monster - despite the perpetrator's attempts to frame her as a bad person using gaslighting as a deliberate undermining tactic. In this way she breaks away from this binary trope, whilst simultaneously focusing on emotional and psychological abuse in intimate relationships. I argue that most victims or survivors of coercive control, no matter their sexual orientations, will recognise the effects of the abuse and many of the tactics used by the perpetrator, as portrayed in *In The Dream House*. Similarly, it is important to recognise the instances where Machado as a queer woman, experiences coercive control in her unique way. It is a strength that her memoir is so highly personal, whilst also capable of being applied universally to raise awareness of the concept of coercive control.

## Chapter 9: Girl, Woman, Other

### 9.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will examine how the novel *Girl, Woman, Other* raises awareness of coercive control. This novel was published in May 2019 and its author, Bernardine Evaristo, is the first black woman to have won the Booker Prize, which she shared with Margaret Atwood in 2019. It is a highly experimental and radical novel that, with the help of winning the prize, has been embraced by middle England and the Establishment. It may herald a paradigm shift in literature, as an increasing number of people now realise how underrepresented black British woman writers have been. Using affect theory, developed by Sara Ahmed, as an analytical lens, I will focus on affects or feelings that are represented in the texts by the narrators, as well as readers' possible emotional responses to the texts, and how the texts' literary devices and narrative techniques convey or elicit these emotional responses. I assert that *Girl, Woman, Other* with its use of polyphony, a non-linear fusion style narrative and figurative language, can contribute to raising awareness of coercive control. In contrast, the literal language of legislation and theory is less effective in raising awareness of the crime as it struggles to represent or elicit feelings. Its depiction of coercive control in an intimate queer relationship, with Dominique as the victim, focuses attention on the importance of writing stories about its nature and the devastating effects of this type of abuse. The existence of the abuse is thus contingent on the wider societal creation and oppression of 'the other'.

I argue that patriarchy excludes women and minorities from positions of influence, which creates power imbalances, both in society as a whole and in intimate relationships. These imbalances, which force vulnerabilities onto victims of domestic abuse, are exploited by abusers in intimate relationships. This novel contains representations of societal patriarchal violence; for example the gender pay gap that disadvantages women; inadequate childcare provisions and gender roles that see women predominantly as housewives and main carers of children, particularly in the older generations. In the younger generations there is evidence of improved equality, supported by the protagonists' fulfilling jobs and their supportive husbands' and equal participation in housework and childcare. Two of the protagonists get raped, another gets pregnant at 14 and gives birth to a baby girl, who her controlling father forces her to give up for adoption. Two other protagonists are victims of domestic abuse, which display features of coercive control tactics. One chapter describes how, over the course of a three-year relationship, Dominique is the victim of coercive control perpetrated by her girlfriend Nzinga,

using many of the tactics of coercive control as theorised by Stark, Hill and Fontes mentioned previously.

## 9.2 Centering the Other

In a heterocentric, white-centric and androcentric society, subjects who do not identify with these normative sexual, ethnic and gender categories are seen as the subordinate 'others'. Hélène Cixous argued that: "The oppressions come from the same place: the phallogocentric culture built on the Symbolic Order", (Cixous 19). *Girl, Woman, Other* challenges the concepts of 'centering' and 'othering' by firmly positioning its twelve diverse protagonists within past and current contexts of British society using an intersectional approach. Decentering is a feature of postmodern literature, and connected to the Derridean idea of deconstruction, which subverts binary oppositions such as man/woman, white/black and heterosexual/homosexual. It is a political novel, and its activism is realised through the storytelling of marginalised people in Britain spanning a century and including characters from the ages of 19 to 93. Prevailing racist attitudes result in one of the novel's protagonists, Amma, a black lesbian playwright, having to spend decades on the fringes before being accepted at the National Theatre in London. Another character LaTisha is disadvantaged by her colour, poverty and gender. She is a single mother of three by different men. Tragically, one of them rapes her before she is twenty, however she later gets a job at a supermarket and is promoted to supervisor. The writing is a political act because their stories defy the resistance to black women's literature; a resistance that has lasted for hundreds of years. Their stories have the power to enter our cultural consciousness: what it has meant and what it means to be an abused woman in Britain. Furthermore, when women's stories are published, read and discussed, their experiences are being recognised and entered into the 'archive' that Machado writes about. In her interview at the Oxford Union, Evaristo also pointed out that she wrote *Girl, Women, Other* for that reason, that Black women have for so long been excluded from the literary world, and this novel is one of her acts to rectify this discrimination, this 'othering'. An example of this is when one of the novel's protagonists Megan, who later becomes Morgan, and who identifies as non-binary, is told by their friend Bibi, who is a transgender woman:

*"you see Megan, I learnt first-hand how women are discriminated against, which is why I became a feminist after I'd transitioned, an intersectional feminist, because it's not just about gender but race, sexuality, class and other intersections which we mostly unthinkingly live anyway"* (Evaristo 323)

The portrayals of coercive control in *Girl, Women, Other* and in *In The Dream House* subvert the oppressive system of binary oppositions that determine that women must experience physical violence for it to be deemed as domestic abuse, and that coercive control only happens in heterosexual relationships. In her memoir *In the Dream House*, (which was published six months after *Girl, Woman, Other*), Machado points out that:

*“the abused woman .... as a generally understood concept it - and she – did not exist until about fifty years ago. The conversation about domestic abuse within queer communities is even newer, and even more shadowed”*, (Machado 3).

Victims of coercive control are, in this context, ‘others’. In addition to having no personal freedom and being subordinate to their perpetrators, their stories have been silenced. Despite the introduction of coercive control legislation in England and Wales in 2015, women are not fully protected from domestic abuse, particularly victims who experience coercive control with no physical violence.

The humanity and complexity of the women in the novel are often relayed through stories that are linked by their experience of racism, poverty, misogyny and different types of abuse. On the positive side, they overcome these difficulties through determination and hard work. The power of love, healthy relationships and equal unions are also central themes. Their stories alternate between being told in the present and in the past, and this non-linear narrative adds to the polyphonic affect by emphasising that people are complex and their circumstances and voices change over time. Often a woman’s story begins in the present tense to then changes to past tense to describe how she is now compared to struggles she experienced in the past. The story of how Nzinga abused Dominique took place thirty years before the reunion at the party, and now in the present time of the novel, Dominique is happily married to Laverne with adopted twins. As mentioned, the non-linear narrative is realised by switching most of the characters’ storylines between the present tense and the past tense, however it is striking that the whole of Dominique’s chapter is written in past tense apart from the last sentence:

*“Dominique moved to America nearly thirty years ago  
she considers it her home”*, (Evaristo 112)

Writing about Dominique's life mainly in past tense indicates that her past life, when she lost her sense of self, is still affecting her. Even though she escaped coercive control, it has changed her.

The novel's multiplicity of voices that have never been told this way before supports the idea that an egalitarian society can only be realised when the voices of all 'others' are no longer silenced. The theory of intersectionality supports this idea, and it was first developed to emphasise how the extra layer of marginalisation suffered by black women was ignored during the second wave of feminism. It can now be applied to pinpoint how patriarchy affects women negatively in additional ways, such as according to their identities. Machado's marginalised identity as a queer woman of colour was exploited by her perpetrator in a coercive and controlling relationship. In *Girl, Woman, Other* class, gender and sexuality are added markers of oppression, and there is a strong queer element in the novel. However, Evaristo's writing style is non-didactic: her writing makes queer people visible, and at the same time she gives voices to characters who do not understand the concept of being non-binary. Morgan's great-grandmother GG for example does not understand what being non-binary is, however, she accepts Morgan as they are. Machado's memoir tells the story of a relationship shaped by coercive control in the US, with an emphasis on individual experience, whereas Evaristo's polyphonic novel situates coercive control within the context of other women's interconnected experiences in the UK.

### 9.3 Literary Devices and Narrative Techniques

The artistry of *Girl, Woman, Other* contributes to raising awareness of abuses suffered by women in the UK, including coercive and controlling behaviour. It also highlights how its protagonists, eleven women and one non-binary person, manage to overcome hardships, and how strong and creative they are despite the traumatic events that they endure. (This feature interrogates traditional neo-slave narratives that mainly focus on the suffering of slaves and the negative consequences of slavery.) Dominique is portrayed in the novel as a survivor of coercive control. She manages to escape the abuse perpetrated by her girlfriend Nzinga with the help of friends. Sadly, the reality is that many victims are trapped in these relationships forever, but we mostly only hear stories and other cultural representations where the victim escapes, is killed, or even kills her perpetrator. Maybe narratives of living in perpetual coercive control would be impossible to publish? Dominique's story is told in one chapter that contains thirty-seven pages, which cover her three-year relationship with Nzinga. In addition, the main protagonist, Amma, offers her perspective on Dominique at the beginning of the novel. This relatively short account of coercive control, (compared to Machado's 281-page memoir), is condensed and rich in detail. In one chapter Dominique is exposed to numerous tactics that are described in coercive control theory and is therefore consistent with adopted understandings of the offence. Including all tactics such as love-bombing, isolating, gaslighting, micromanaging, surveilling, criticising, humiliating and silencing in such a relatively small section of the novel functions to add intensity to the narrative, and it is shocking to read about the incessant acts of abuse. The impact is immediate and strong, as it makes me as a reader empathise with Dominique, and I feel disgusted and horrified by her perpetrator's behaviour. On the other hand, the overtness of the portrayal of the coercive and controlling behaviour, that seem to happen over a short space of time, (although readers are told that the abuse happens over three years), comes across as somewhat unrealistic, which to some extent compromises the understanding of coercive control as a covert pattern of abuse over time. Nevertheless, the detailed incidents are line with the theories of coercive control on the whole, and I argue that a reader would be able to identify what Dominique experiences as such, and much of that is achieved by the text's ability to induce affects.

The term 'coercive control' is not used to describe the abuse in the text, and describing it as such would not necessarily help to raise awareness of it by itself. Literary texts tend to 'show and not tell', and it is the text's ability to produce affective reactions that will cause a

reader to shift their perceptions of what domestic abuse is. One feature of the text that makes the writing so powerful that it produces 'affects' is what Evaristo calls her use of "fusion fiction", (Evaristo). As a narrative technique, as she explained in an interview with Waterstones:

*"Because of the way the stories fuse into each other, but also in terms of the form of the novel whereby I don't use many full stops, I have lots of commas, it's a kind of poetic patterning on the page, but it's not poetry, so it is a very free flowing reading experience",* (Evaristo).

This fusion style amplifies its numerous individual voices and simultaneously harmonises them into a coherent narrative by allowing for varying degrees of connections between the characters. The overarching structure of the novel, its multiplicity of individual narratives detailing diverse backgrounds and identities, matches the reality of the diverse contexts in which coercive control is perpetrated. As explained by Stark:

*"...the proximate means and motives by which these strategies are implemented are a function of individual personalities, preferences, and situational variables as well as of their perceived efficacy, and the tactics selected tend to be spatially diffuse and highly individualized",* (Stark 231).

Evaristo also uses characterisation to give voice to her numerous protagonists, and their voices are amplified by a writing style that is intimate and poetic. Her stories come alive as if they are spoken by actors on stage in a play. This 'oral' polyphony helps raise awareness of coercive control, as the spoken word comes across as more natural. The first chapter tells the stories of Amma, a playwright, who had to spend decades on the fringe before being accepted at the National Theatre in London, while her daughter Jazz studies English Literature at university and has a diverse set of friends. They both come across as strong and resourceful women. My focus will be on the third protagonist in the first chapter, Dominique, who experiences coercive control at the hands of her girlfriend Nzinga. Evaristo has chosen to give voice to many women who have been abused. I will also include in my analyses in a later section the stories of Carole, Penelope and LaTisha who suffer various types of abuses. Dominique a long-term friend of Amma, who at the beginning of the book is on her way the premier of her latest play:



*“Amma  
is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her  
city, a few early morning barges cruise slowly by  
Amma’s play, The Last Amazon of Dahomey, opens at the National  
Tonight”, (Evaristo 1)*

Amma jumps off the page in a vivid optimistic description, walking “along the promenade of the waterway”, (Evaristo 1) to the premier of her play: “*The Last Amazon of Dahomey*”:

*“she feels the sun begin to rise, the air still breezy before the city  
clogs up with heat and fumes  
a violinist plays something suitably uplifting further along the  
promenade  
Amma’s play, The Last Amazon of Dahomey, opens at the National  
tonight”, (Evaristo 1).*

The poetic language flows seamlessly, which gives the reader a feeling of ‘not reading’. The stories are somehow transported or teleported effortlessly off the page into the reader’s consciousness. This light and airy style emphasises the truth about the characters; that they have always been there. They just had to be made visible by breaking down barriers that held them back, and be brought to the fore in Evaristo’s lively, witty, poetic style unconstrained by the lack of punctuation. It is a technique that enables these stories to go on, as they inspire other marginalised voices to be recorded and heard. As if to say: we hear all voices, and in that political act we break down traditional forms in order to reform and progress.

## 9.4 Comparison of Excerpt from *Girl, Women, Other* with Factual Texts

Here I juxtapose the wordings of the coercive control legislation for England and Wales that sets out what the offence constitutes; Stark's explanation of the tactics present in coercive control; a part of a story of one of his clients and an excerpt describing controlling behaviour in *Girl, Woman, Other*:

The offence of controlling or coercive behaviour states that:

- *“An offence is committed by A if:*
- *A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person, B, that is controlling or coercive;*
- *At the time of the behaviour, A and B are personally connected;*
- *The behaviour has a serious effect on B; and*
- *A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B”*,  
(Serious Crime Act 2015, section 76).

Here is a part of Stark's explanation of 'control':

*“exploiting a partner's capacities and resources for personal gain and gratification, depriving her of the means needed for autonomy or escape, and regulating her behaviour to conform with stereotypical gender roles”*, (Stark 271).

Here is how he writes about one of his clients, Laura, to show how 'control' works in practice:

*“Fearing Laura would meet men at work or discuss her domestic situation, Nick called her office repeatedly during the day and prohibited her from going out to lunch with co-workers. When several clients who worked at our local telephone company told them their boyfriends kept them from socializing with co-workers by picking them up at lunch time, the line of cars outside the building at noon took on new meaning. So she wouldn't inadvertently attract co-workers at a local gym, Laura was to cut her hair and was forbidden to wear makeup and hair spray to work. Several times a week, she met co-workers at a local gym, “the only place I went besides work that was mine. I had friends there. And he knew it.” Then, one day, she told me, “He simply said, “no more gym””, (Stark 270, 2007).*

Compare this to how 'control' is textualised in this extract from *Girl, Woman, Other*. In Chapter One of *Girl, Woman, Other*, three characters: Amma, Dominique and Jazz are portrayed in one section each. This is an excerpt from the narration of Dominique's experience of coercive control:

*“Dominique began to regret allowing Nzinga to do everything and make decisions for her*  
*she started to yearn to do the housework herself, yearn to cook, to clean, to do a job that was intellectually demanding*  
*her life was becoming empty of purpose other than to love Nzinga unconditionally, and, increasingly, obey her*  
*even the simplest things became a source of difficulty*  
*was it really her fault men ogled her in town when she wore (knee-length) shorts and a (sleeveless) baggy tee-shirt*  
*should she really have to cover up instead of being provocatively dressed as Nzinga accused her*  
*why should she wear her hair (usually a thick, wavy mixture of Afro and Indo) almost shaved to her scalp, cut by Nzinga herself with the barber's clippers she bought for this very purpose?*  
*why shouldn't she have a chat with the gentle community baker, Tilley, when she went to collect bread in the mornings?*  
*because women who appear the nicest are the most passive aggressive, and ultimately the most dangerous because they will come between us, don't you realize that people want to sabotage our great love affair?*  
*and why shouldn't she read books by men that she'd picked up in the library in town?*  
*you can't live a womanist life and have male voices in your head,*  
*Sojourner*  
*that doesn't make sense, it's taking things too far*  
*why don't you shut your goddam mouth “, (Evaristo 97-98)*

What distinguishes this literary text from the factual texts of Stark and the UK Government is that it portrays and explores feelings or affects through characterisation, which contribute to making the text more impactful, whilst also to creating empathy for Dominique.

That does not mean that these factual texts do not have any capacity to elicit any feelings at all. The sentence: “*The behaviour has a serious effect on B*” in The Serious Crime Act 2015, and particularly the phrase ‘serious effect’, is likely to elicit feelings of dread or worry when read and reflected upon, (the degree of the intensity of the feelings may depend on the reader’s relationship or experience of the offence). Note that the victim is labelled as the impersonally as ‘B’, whereas in the passage from the novel, the victim is portrayed as a complex character with a history, feelings and thoughts, which contributes to making the story more real and intense. Stark describes how one of his clients was controlled:

“*So she wouldn’t inadvertently attract co-workers at a local gym, Laura was to cut her hair and was forbidden to wear makeup and hair spray to work*”, (Stark 270, 2007).

Evaristo writes:

“*why should she wear her hair (usually a thick, wavy mixture of Afro and Indo) almost shaved to her scalp, cut by Nzinga herself with the barber’s clippers she bought for this very purpose?*”, (Evaristo 78).

What makes Evaristo’s description of Dominique being forced to cut her hair by her intimate partner more powerful than Stark’s account, is that the story is part of a narrative that has created a connection between the reader and the character, that the character is named, and that the reader witnesses how her personality changes after moving in with her perpetrator. Its close third person narrative gives it a very intimate personal feel, similar to a stream of consciousness. This gives the impression of reading the stories in first person; giving readers access into the inner lives of the various protagonists. Women from all sections of society are represented here; from different classes, sexualities and ages. Readers are not being fed opinions, on the contrary, often the viewpoints of different characters are given on the same subject. This postmodern non-didactic narrative style allows for readers to make their own interpretations. It also allows for readers to empathise with the characters, and is conducive to the educative powers of storytelling.

Readers learn that after living with Nzinga for a while, Dominique starts to develop feelings of regret, meaninglessness, being trapped and controlled, and these affects are expressed very clearly. The passage comes across as a lament for her current life and an elegy for her previous life, or the loss of self, effects that are created by the repetition of the questions

'why should she?', and 'why shouldn't she?'. In her essay *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf argued that:

*"...what state of mind is most propitious for creative work, because the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent", (Woolf 58).*

The word 'incandescent' means: 'full of emotion' and 'passionate'. In contrast, the extracts above show that legal language is concise and avoid the use of figures of speech for the purpose of clarity. I contend that Evaristo did have the "*state of mind for propitious work*", (Woolf 58), when she wrote this.

## 9.5 Heteroglossia, Polyphony and Intertextuality

Evaristo does not simply enable missing voices to be heard. In the act of doing so she also comments on how literature can be used to both suppress and amplify voices. By writing a polyphonic text she emphasises that society is made up of diverse perspectives, and by making the choices to tell the stories of these particular protagonists, she is saying that their stories are important and that their voices are representative of Britain. The effect of this type of explicit polyphony on a reader could be manifold: readers recognise themselves in the characters; their experiences of oppression and struggles are validated; the readers empathise with characters who are different from them, maybe some they have until reading this text perceived as 'others'. The reader may come to think: 'If I had had exactly the same background and experiences as these characters, I would be like them'. Maybe they will come to understand gender and sexuality as performative. Maybe readers would think more deeply about the suffering of victims of coercive control, or maybe some readers will realise they are victims of coercive control themselves. Maybe the text will even help them see how it is connected to the wider oppression of women underpinned by power structures within patriarchy. Evaristo's choice of third person narrative enables the assertion of all these voices. Writing them as nearly first-person points of view, makes them more authentic and believable. In general, the novel's complex and contradictory voices result in more questions being raised than answered, which invites readers to make up their own minds about some of the issues raised. However, I think the passages detailing the different abuses suffered by some of the characters are clearer in their intent to expose wrongful and illegal acts. The vulnerability of victims of coercive control, makes it particularly hard for them to be heard. Furthermore, the tactics of coercive control include denying a victim's reality; ignoring her needs and her point of view so that she becomes silent. The end result is that the victim in all her acts and communication only expresses the voice of the perpetrator, her own voice is suppressed or has even 'died'. That is why this novel is so important; to tell the story of coercive control, educate people and hopefully encourage other victims and survivors to tell their stories.

Using tropes in a text is an effective way of evoking feelings, and this renaming trope in *Girl, Woman, Other* alludes to previous texts and functions in the text as a metaphor for the Nzinga's control and Dominique's loss of self:

*“Nzinga said she’d been thinking about renaming Dominique as Sojourner, a feminist re-baptism, after Sojourner Truth, the anti-slavery activist”, (Evaristo 90)*

However, Dominique rejected the idea, but did not tell Nzinga:

*“Dominique decided Nzinga could call her what she liked, she Wasn’t going to answer to bloody Sojourner or any other name”, (Evaristo 91)*

The same literary device, which is an example of intertextuality, and also polyphony, is used in *Jane Eyre* where Mr Rochester insists on calling Antoinette ‘Bertha’ and ‘Marionette’, which underscores the power he has over her and his lack of respect for her. Dominique kept her objection to herself and thereby she allowed Nzinga to call her Sojourner. This shows that Nzinga has power over her, as Dominique is frightened to speak up; she is silenced. The tradition of women taking their husbands surnames after getting married is a type of oppression in patriarchy, since losing your name is losing part of your identity. It is also a tactic of domestic abusers to refuse to call their victims by their real name, and even use name-calling and verbal abuse to exert their dominance. Deploying these well-known tropes may have the effect of stirring affects in readers, (consciously or unconsciously), such as powerlessness and sympathy.

One function of the novel’s use of a more explicit polyphony rather than using tropes as a narrative technique, which is also evident in Machado’s *In The Dream House*, is to enable voices that have been absent in literature to be heard. The difference is that Machado’s polyphony in her memoir is realised through the use of multiple genres, tropes and myths, whereas in Evaristo’s novel it is the characters’ multiple voices that mainly create this effect. Bennett and Royle define ‘heteroglossia’ as a

*“term used by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the variety of voices or languages within a novel, but can be used of any text to give the sense that the language use does not come from one origin but is multiple and diverse, a mixing of heterogeneous discourses, sociolects, etc.”, (Bennett & Royle 370).*

Bakhtin opposed the view that a novel should have one authoritative voice, instead he opened up for novels to be democratic spaces, in which diverse viewpoints that are equally important are aired:

*“The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types (raznorečie) and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia (raznorečie) can enter the novel, each of them permits multiplicity of social voices and the wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)”*, (Bakhtin 1002).

Bakhtin’s concept of ‘heteroglossia’ was developed by Julia Kristeva who in her essay *Revolution in Poetic Language* asserts:

*“If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality) one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated”*, (Kristeva 111).

Furthermore, she explains in her essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel* how the concept of ‘intertextuality’ applies to novels: *“any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another”*, (Kristeva 37). In *Girl, Women, Other* this idea is overtly realised in its four sections - each containing the stories of three protagonists who are connected by family ties, friendship or work. The last chapter (chapter five) named ‘The After – party’, brings together many of the main characters and a few minor characters to celebrate the premier of Amma’s play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* in the novel’s epilogue. This ‘bringing together’ can be seen as a metaphor for the democratic effect of polyphony, the idea that diverse voices and identities can coexist in harmonic symphony. The event functions as a denouement where matters are resolved: Amma is reunited with her long-lost friend Dominique, and Carole meets her teacher Shirley after thirty years and thanks her for helping her getting into the University of Oxford.



The concept of polyphony is also linked to 'intertextuality':

*“a term which was coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to the fact that texts are constituted by a “tissue of citations”, that every word of every text refer to other texts and so on, limitlessly. Often used in an imprecise or weak way to talk about echoes or allusions”, (Bennett & Royle 370).*

Implicit and explicit intertextuality can be found in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Readers are told that Dominique has never met an African-American before and that: *“Nzinga’s accent evoked the sensory delights of warm cornbread, sticky ribs, gumbo, jambalaya, collard greens, cracklin’ fried cabbage, peanut brittle – and other foods she’s read about in novels about by African-American women”, (76).* This sentence alludes to slave and neo-slave narratives, and there are many references to slavery in the novel. This polyphony helps contextualise the stories, and admits echoes of voices from the past into the text. Readers can therefore link the past to the present, and this gives the characters context and depth, which helps to develop empathy for Dominique and further understanding of coercive control. There are also a more explicit references to literary texts, for example Samuel Selvon’s 1956 classic award-winning novel *The Lonely Londoners*, which one of the protagonists, Winsome, reads with her book group:

*“every month we read a new book, started off with The Lonely Londoners by the Trini writer Selvon, about young Caribbean men in England who get up to mischief and treat women badly, women who don’t even get a chance to speak in the book”, (Evaristo 254)*

This is a critique of the novel that describes only black men’s experiences of living in London. *Girl, Woman, Other* is a powerful response and opens a dialogue with this novel’s omission of black women, and how the protagonists abused women with impunity.

In contrast to how they were treated in *The Lonely Londoners*, in *Girl, Woman, Other* the women and their abuse take centre stage, and therefore insert themselves into the archive. Dominique’s experience of coercive control is narrated in the first quarter of the novel, and it educates the reader about the harrowing consequences of domestic abuse, and acts as a training device that modifies how this abuse is read and understood. Nzinga’s coercive and controlling behaviour is extreme, and there are many warning signs from the start. The variety of interconnected and marginalised voices in the novel emphasises how one character’s

experience of coercive control is intertwined with the experiences of the other women. All the novel's protagonists have faced adversity in their lives ranging from racism, sexism, childhood abuse, genderism and sexual assault.

In this first chapter Amma mentions her friend Dominique:

*“she thinks back to when she started out in theatre  
when she and her running mate, Dominique, developed a reputa-  
tion for heckling shows that offended their political sensibilities, (Evaristo 2)*

And:

*at times like these Amma misses Dominique, who long ago  
absconded to America  
they should be sharing her breakthrough career moment together  
they met in the eighties at an audition for a feature film set in a  
women's prison (what else?)  
both were disillusioned at being put up for parts such as a slave,  
servant, prostitute, nanny or crim” (Evaristo 6)*

It is significant that in this first chapter readers are given Amma's perspective on her friend Dominique, an account which serves as a device to show readers how Dominique's behaviour changed due to the effects of the coercive control she was exposed to during her three-year relationship with her ex-girlfriend Nzinga. It is a type of intertextuality within a text. Parts of Dominique's family history are also relayed in this chapter, whose voices add to the polyphony:

*“Dominique was born in the St Pauls area of Bristol to an Afro-  
Guyanese mother, Cecilia, who tracked her lineage back to slavery,  
and an Indo-Guyanese father, Wintley, whose ancestors were inden-  
tured labourers from Calcutta  
the oldest of ten children who all looked more black than Asian  
and identified as such”, (Evaristo 7)*

Dominique's identity as a black woman is later used by her abuser, Nzinga, who is jealous of her past girlfriends, to manipulate her into changing her world view by stating:

*“they were all white women, they were never going to stick around  
I’m the one who left them, it was true, she was the dumper, never  
the dumpee  
what I’m saying is, only a black woman can ever truly love a black  
woman”, (Evaristo 98)*

The way that Nzinga is devaluing Dominique’s past relationships and forcing her racist views on her is a tactic used to diminish her as a person and increase her own dominance over her.

Stark frames coercive control as a gendered crime that is perpetrated by men towards women. He states that in his practice he has not encountered women who are perpetrators of coercive control. However, it is important to protect all victims of coercive control, and to encourage discourse on all contexts in which it is committed. I contend that Stark’s groundbreaking theory of coercive control can be used to identify abuse also in same-sex relationships, such as the one between Dominique and Nzinga, even though the title of his book, which was published in 2007, is *How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, and has violence as one main “*technology of coercive control*”, (Stark 242-249). Coercive control experts such as Hill and Fontes are now moving away from identifying physical violence as a main tactic in coercive control, which corresponds with Dominique’s experience of coercive control as mainly non-physical.

## **Chapter 10: Links between Coercive Control and Violence against Women**

### **10.1 Introduction**

I contend that coercive control in intimate relationships can be linked to the oppression of women in society as a whole. This oppression sometimes leads to rape and sexual harassment of women and ultimately femicide. In addition, the tactics deployed by perpetrators of coercive control are possible indicators or warning signs of their capacity to commit murder, particularly at the time a victim decides to leave the relationship or following this action. In this section I comment on the important stories of the sexual assault suffered by the following protagonists in *Girl, Woman, Other*: Carole, who is gang-raped as a young girl. I also write about Penelope, who suffers domestic abuse in her two marriages, and LaTisha, who is also raped.

## 10.2 Carole

Carole was raised by her single mother, a Nigerian immigrant, whose loving husband Augustine, who had a PhD in economics, and who: “*died of a heart attack while driving over Westminster Bridge transporting drunken partygoers in the early hours of New Year’s Day*”, (Evaristo 169). Carole’s story represents misogyny in Britain, how some boys view girls’ bodies as sexual objects for them to exploit with impunity. Her story also demonstrates society and law enforcement often fail to protect women and girls from violence, and how women until very recently were blamed for being raped because they wore the wrong clothes. Carole is gang-raped at the age of 13. The matter-of-fact childlike narrative underscores the harrowing crime:

*Carole never told a soul  
definitely not Mama who’d tell her off for lying  
Or LaTisha and the others because everyone said it was Sheryl’s  
fault for wearing slutty clothes when it happened to her in the same  
park in Year 8  
was it Carole’s fault? (127)*

She is still traumatised by her ordeal. Using her inner strength Carole turned her life around and asked her teacher Shirley for help to perform well at school. She succeeds, is accepted to study maths at Oxford, where she feels like an alien, as one of a handful of black students, and “*none as dark as her*”, (131). She wants to leave, but her mother persuades her to stay. She eventually does stay, gets a job as an investment banker, and marries Freddy, a kind white man:

*“I’ll be the househusband in the relationship, he promised, hang  
prettily off your arm when required, mow the lawn, make jam,  
supervise the housekeeper and raise our lovely tawny offspring  
she loved that he was prepared to be subservient to her ambition  
she knew she’d go further faster with him at her side”, (Evaristo 149).*

The way that women and girls are raped, assaulted, harassed and murdered in wider society are symptoms of the same oppression that women experience in coercive control. These abhorrent

acts against women mainly perpetrated by men are described as a pandemic by The World Economic Forum:

*“Violence against women and girls has reached a devastating scale around the globe. A United Nations report recently revealed that one in every three women, approximately 736 million worldwide, have endured physical and psychological violence. From intimate partner violence to sexual harassment, these various forms of abuse are deeply harmful to women. And unfortunately, this situation has further deteriorated since the start of COVID-19”, (The World Economic Forum).*

### 10.3 LaTisha

The poor working class is represented by LaTisha, whose father left the family when she was 13, a traumatic experience:

*“she ran wild, hated school, couldn’t concentrate, even Mummy couldn’t control her and she was a social worker”*, (Evaristo 200).

Her story is also one of overcoming a difficult childhood, misogyny and sexual violence within her peer group. By the time she is 20, she has three children with three different men. One child is a result of a rape by Troy. Her experience of living in a victim-blaming culture was similar to her schoolfriend Carole’s, who was gang-raped six years earlier, also by Troy. That Evaristo has included these stories of rape and misogyny, highlights the dangers that women and girls are exposed to. Rape Crisis England & Wales argue that:

*“Sometimes, we talk about women and girls being ‘objectified’ or ‘hyper-sexualised from a young age. But this, we mean they are viewed as objects that exist to entertain, serve or pleasure men – instead of equal human beings. But why is this? Well, we believe it’s because we live in a society where men hold the most power – what is sometimes known as ‘patriarchy’”*, (Rape Crisis England & Wales).

Her writing is stripped back. The description of her rape is matter of fact and its simplistic poetic form accentuates LaTisha’s powerlessness and suffering and the rapist’s brutality and his sense of entitlement and complete lack of regard for her wellbeing:

*“I don’t want to, not yet, get off me, please, Trey,  
she said  
out loud to deaf ears  
so she gave up couldn’t stop him  
had led him on  
anyway, she let him get on with it  
until he groaned  
as he finished  
lay half on top of her*

*crushing her ribs  
fell asleep  
didn't want to disturb him by moving  
wanted to go home”, (Evaristo 210-211)*

Rape Crisis England & Wales report that “*more than 1 in 4 women have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult*”, (Rape Crisis England & Wales). In 2023 Gekoski et al. conducted a study which explored rape myths within a large English police force and found that “*rape myths were employed by most officers*”, (Gekoski et al). These myths were that ‘women lie’ and that ‘women ask for it’. They discovered that some officers did not understand the term ‘rape myths’, that many of the officers rejected that training in the area was needed, and that some denied that rape myths exist. ‘Rape myths’ is another concept that is not widely understood in society,

*“that are at an historic low, despite significantly increased reporting, with just 1.6% of reported cases resulting in charges”, (Gekoski et al).*

Despite LaTisha’s adversity, hers is an uplifting life-affirming story, as she finds out who she is and what she is capable of as a strong single woman:

*“very smart and professional, because that’s what she is now,  
after she crawled her way out of the horror movie of her teenage  
years  
to begin climbing the giddy heights of retail supremacy  
winner of Colleague of the Month six times in three years “, (Evaristo 190)*

What seemed to improve LaTisha’s life was not having to deal with immature irresponsible men any further, who made her pregnant and then abandoned her, and that she is able to live at home with her mother – heart-warming story of a supportive mother-daughter relationship.



## 10.4 Penelope

Penelope was told at 16 that she was adopted by her parents, which had a serious negative affect on her. The shock of the revelation was amplified by her parents' lack of empathy for her when they ignored her obvious distress and tears:

*“what they didn't add, in that moment, was that they loved her,  
something they'd never told her  
what they didn't add, in that moment, was that they loved her,  
something they'd never told her”*, (Evaristo 280)

This emotional abuse led Penelope to look for love elsewhere, and she was unlucky to marry two husbands who became abusive:

*“after three years of having two suckling children gorging on her  
engorged breasts, she began to feel a tad vampiric, if she was honest”*, (Evaristo 286)

And:

*she felt terrible feeling like this and was eager to start teaching to  
counterbalance her now rather unwilling role as an earth mother,  
especially as she was beginning to feel quite side-lined from the  
greater scheme of things, what with the papers going on about the  
various cultural revolutions erupting globally, including the women's  
liberation one  
meanwhile, she was knee-deep in kiddie poo and vomit”*, (Evaristo 287)

The actions of her first two husbands show they were abusive by refusing Penelope her freedom to be and to do what she wanted. The abuse they perpetrated echoes tactics used in coercive control. This excerpt describes how Giles controlled her life:

*“she raised the issue of returning to her job as a teacher with him,  
it's not like we can't afford a childminder  
he replied that it was impractical to have two masters: a boss at  
work and a husband*

*was he joking? not by the look on his face”, (Evaristo 287)*

Dissatisfied with her restricted life as a mother, and having to discuss recipes and how to organise a 'National Vol-au-Vent Day' at toddlers' coffee mornings, (287), Penelope was handed Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which opened her eyes:

*“she realized then that what she'd hitherto thought personal to her was, in fact applicable to many women, masses of them, women whose husbands forced them to stay at home when they were more than willing to put their intellect to good use in the skilled workforce, women, such as herself, who were going bonkers with boredom and banality”, (Evaristo 288-289)*

She and Giles had many arguments about the issue, such as:

*“she was going to make him change his mind until one morning he put his fist through the glass window of the front door, shouting she was lucky it wasn't her face before slamming it behind him”, (Evaristo 289)*

Giles's behaviour is controlling and coercive for the following reasons. He sees himself as her superior, as her 'master': he ignores that her mental health is deteriorating by her staying at home and not going to work; he refuses her financial independence; he makes her into a domestic servant, and he breaches her human rights by denying her personal freedom. Penelope manages to break free, gets a divorce, keeps the house and custody of their children, finds a childminder and gets a job at Peckham School for Boys and Girls - a new comprehensive down the road. At the time, in the 90s when this happened to Penelope, Giles's behaviour was not illegal as it is today. It can be seen as anticipating coercive control legislation. Penelope was being refused financial independence, her desires and feelings were ignored, and this pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour was repeated over time. His violent and threatening outbursts affected her day-to-day activities and created fear within her. She may have found herself wondering: when will he be physically abusing me? In those days police would not have been interested in his behaviour had she reported it, it was seen as a 'domestic', or as 'situational couple violence', which Hill identifies as different from coercive control because

*“there generally isn’t one partner totalling dominating the other”*, (Hill 216). However, Penelope saw the warning signs, and she managed to liberate herself. Had she had not left the marriage, it is possible that the abuse would have escalated. Her second husband, the psychologist Phillip, who she found refreshing at first when he:

*“wanted to know who she was deep down inside “*, (Evaristo 291)

This lasted

*“until she noticed Phillip’s benevolent probing had a tendency to turn into intrusive interrogations when she did things he didn’t like or when he couldn’t get his own way”*, (Evaristo 291-292)

And

*“let’s find out what’s prompting this negative behaviour, shall we? he’d ask, leaning forward in his chair, the half-eaten dinner on the dining table between them, staring so deeply into her eyes she felt, how to describe it? Psychologically raped, yes that was it”*, (Evaristo 292)

It is clear from the writing that Phillip also had a strong need to control Penelope, and in the process, he disregarded her own needs. His behaviour was emotionally abusive. It seems that he used the tactic of gaslighting to distort Penelope’s reality, saying that there was something wrong with **her** when she does not behave the way he wanted, when in fact **his** behaviour was abusive.

## 10.5 Jane Monckton Smith's Eight Stage Progression to Homicide

Monckton Smith, a Forensic Criminologist and a prize-winning author, outlines her eight stages of domestic abuse that escalate from coercive and controlling behaviour to femicide:

*“The coercive control discourse, which has its theoretical roots in feminism, is a resistance to this knowledge and constructs IPF as preceded and motivated by a breakdown in the control the perpetrator has of the relationship (and which they may feel entitled to) and their perceived loss of status or stability as a result”, (Monckton Smith).*

Monckton Smith's “*Stage 1*” relates to the “*prerelationship*”, which can identify a perpetrator's history of domestic abuse, “*Stage 2: Early Relationship*”, is the time when the perpetrators is “*attentive*” behaviour with a view to “*seeking commitment from the victim*”, (Monckton Smith). “*At Stage 3*” of the relationships “*there were controlling patterns in every case study*”, and “*some cases saw this stage last as little as 3-6 weeks; in others it was as long as 50 years*”, (Monckton Smith). “*At Stage 4*” the victim might try to leave the relationship or withdraw from it, which the perpetrator will see as “*loss of status, where control is threatened through separation and other triggers*”, (Monckton Smith). At “*Stage 5*” there is an “*escalation in frequency, severity, or variety of abuse, control, or stalking. Escalation appeared to be an attempt to re-establish control or status*”, (Monckton Smith). “*Stage 6*” is marked by “*the idea that homicide may be a possibility, may occur at this time*”, (Monckton Smith). The next is: “*Stage 7: Planning*”, (Monckton Smith), and: “*Stage 8: Homicide*”, (Monckton Smith).

Penelope seems to have left her abusive marriages before the abuse escalated beyond Stage 3, and although Evaristo has not revealed any controlling behaviour by her exes after she left, there are clear allusions in the text to the tactics of coercive control. Monckton Smith's work on the stages of coercive control highlights the importance of intervention at an early stage of the abuse, and teaches police and other professionals how to identify and prevent coercive control.

## 10.6 Intersectional Feminism

I read this novel as an intersectional feminist vision, not because it explicitly lays down rules about what feminism should look like, but because it describes a Britain that is populated by a diverse set of women. Their voices have so far been silenced by the gatekeepers in British publishing, as pointed out by Evaristo at a *Full Question & Answer session at the Oxford Union*:

*“Up until probably 2019 I could probably count on not even two hands the number of black women novelists getting published in this country. That changed last year, there were considerably more getting published but still not many”, (Evaristo).*

It is important to point out the statistics to inform people about the void that black women's books should have filled. Describing women's lives, and thereby giving silenced women a voice, is feminism in action; a political act which enables black women to contribute to the cultural landscape and to academic discourse. One of its strengths is its non-prescriptive stance when it narrates the ways in which people are marginalised according to their colour, gender, class and sexuality. This is attained by modifying a character's representation by the perspective of a character(s) they are interconnected with. Therefore, many readers will recognise themselves in Evaristo's heterogeneous description of British society, which has the effect of validating their lived experiences. Other readers learn about the lives of people they have never met. In her Oxford Union interview Evaristo tells her audience:

*“Suddenly I was getting a lot of white men in the audiences, which was not always the case, and older white guys. Sometimes I was doing festivals and they would come up to me and say: I've read the book and I really like it. That was quite unusual for me.....I'm definitely used to a lot of women in my audiences, suddenly there were taking me seriously, the guys were reading my book..... a lot of response on social media as well, so it was incredibly gratifying to see that perceived barrier to enjoying a work of literature had disappeared and people were engaging with these characters”, (Evaristo).*

Evaristo's statements are backed up by the phenomenal sales figures of the novel which stands at more than one million copies. It is very likely that such a successful novel will have an

enormous impact and raise awareness of the issues that women in Britain have had to navigate in the last century, and issues that are still very much on the agenda today. The novel tells stories of how these women are oppressed on a societal level and on a personal level in intimate relationships. It portrays the characters as complex, flawed, contradictory and sometimes hypocritical. This complex and often surprising characterisation subverts readers' expectations because it is refreshing and invigorating, also enhanced by the text's unconfined form. Significant events in the protagonists' past lives are outlined and their present-day contexts are compared with their histories, which gives the readers an insight into how they develop over time, whilst exploring their challenges and their achievements.

I suggest that Machado would have welcomed Evaristo's depiction of coercive control in a queer relationship. However, she has not mentioned it in her discussions about the lack of books on the matter. It is possible that she was unaware of it being published before her memoir, or that maybe her manuscript was already in production when *Girl, Woman, Other* was published. Therefore, as far as I know, there is no evidence that shows Machado intended her memoir to be in dialogue with *Girl, Women, Other*. However, both texts are connected in dialogue regarding coercive control, particularly, where no physical violence is present within the context of queer relationships. With this thesis I situate both texts in the intertextual relationship with the wider political dialogue on the subject. I believe that *Girl, Women, Other* will be entered into the canon of coercive control, and as a result of this book the "emptiness" of the "vast crevice", (Machado 4), that Machado wants to fill with her story has diminished even more.

## Conclusion

From personal experience I empathise with those who perceive coercive control as the worst form of domestic abuse, and this view is reflected in the opinions and findings of coercive control scholars and experts, as previously outlined. Intimate terrorism is perpetrated in your own home, a place where you come to rest and be nourished – but instead you are gradually broken down by the perpetrator’s chosen tactics until you are shattered into unrecognisable fragments. Between the walls it is inflicted on you by the person who is supposed to love you and care for you. The theories of coercive control show us that the abuse follows a pattern of behaviours that are repeated over time. The beginning of these ‘love’ affairs are experienced as a meeting of soulmates, followed by an intense period of love-bombing, which is a manipulation tactic carried out by the perpetrator to seduce the victim into believing they have found their soulmate. Once the perpetrator has trapped their victim, who believes that this is real love, and has got to know their thoughts, dreams and vulnerabilities, they will begin an insidious pattern of coercive and controlling behaviours designed to deprive the subject of their freedom and agency, in order to satisfy their need for control. To most people, who would value a person’s freedom and human rights, this type of behaviour is utterly stupefying.

In this thesis I have explored contemporary and Victorian narratives of coercive control with female protagonists, authored by women. These texts raise awareness of the tactics deployed by perpetrators, and the effects they have on victims and survivors. Researchers and scholars have found that there is a lack of understanding of what the concept constitutes. For example, a 2020 BBC Three documentary revealed that 70% of participants did not recognise the mechanisms of controlling and coercive behaviour.

The literary texts I have examined, with their unique features such as narrative techniques and figurative language, have revealed often hidden tactics of coercive control. The three canonical texts I have explored were previously read as romances and realist narratives. Now, with the introduction of coercive control legislation, I have analysed them through the lens of coercive control theory. By doing so, I show that the tactics are not intrinsically secret or undiscoverable. I argue that these tactics have been unrecognised for so long, due to the historic emphasis on the physical aspects of domestic abuse, which has resulted in women suffering in abusive relationships. Perpetrators have carried out their coercive and controlling behaviour with impunity

Coercive control was made unlawful in England and Wales through section 76 of the *Serious Crime Act 2015*. This legislation has the power to prosecute these crimes. However,

experts on coercive control have expressed concern about the slow enactment of the legislation, and have called more measures to raise awareness of the concept. The identified lack of awareness calls for increased consciousness raising, to make the enactment of the legislation effective.

I have shown how literature can contribute to these efforts. I have set out how the historic passing of relevant legislation affected the freedom of women in society from the mid 19th century to the present day. Campaigns have been carried out by women's rights groups, from second-wave feminists to the work of current feminists, including those who advocate for the importance of intersectional feminism. The theory of intersectionality, first coined by Crenshaw in 1989, examines intersections of multiple forms of discrimination, including racism, sexism, genderism, classism and ageism. This idea is expressed in the narrative of *Girl, Woman, Other* through Bernardine Evaristo's use of polyphony.

I have argued that the contemporary literary texts analysed in this thesis have a unique ability to raise awareness of coercive control, due to their use of innovative narrative techniques and figurative language. The canonical Victorian novels that I have explored, looking for mechanisms of coercive control employed by Victorian intimate partners, have revealed an extensive use of deliberate tactics of coercive control. They were perpetrated at the time when married women were constrained by society's gender conventions and a legal system that favoured their husbands, even to the extent that husbands had the legal custody of children. Women are still oppressed and abused in various ways in patriarchy today, despite progress made in protecting their legal rights, which is evident in today's pay-gap, where women in general earn less money than men, and in the coercive control and sexual assaults and harassment women experience.

It is essential to raise awareness of coercive control, which Evan Stark has defined as a liberty crime, and is now seen as a breach of a person's human rights. Coercive control is often perpetrated covertly and insidiously. Victims are often not aware of the abuse. Jane Monckton Smith established the importance of being aware of the eight stages to homicide in coercive control.

I have explored these texts as narratives of coercive control, and I have analysed them using the lens of Sara Ahmed's affect theory. Literary texts portray experiences in such a unique way, which factual texts are unable to do. According to Ahmed, the affects that are created facilitate understanding by evoking emotions in readers.

In *In The Dream House* awareness of coercive control is raised by the use of a series of vignettes, through which the abuse she experiences is recalled and explored. Furthermore, her



experience of coercive control is narrated through various genres and tropes, creating a polyphony of voices and intertextual references, in which Carmen Maria Machado inserts the missing narrative of queer domestic abuse into the archive.

*Girl, Woman, Other* also uses polyphony to express the experiences of 12 diverse black women, also inserting their stories in the archive and into the canon of coercive control. Bernardine Evaristo's polyphony is expressed through these multiple voices, which opens up a democratic space for diverse lived experiences.

Machado and Evaristo's texts, with their innovative and experimental narratives in both form and content, have highlighted the coercive control in relationships between women, which has been missing in the canon of coercive control.

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