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THE GENDERED WORK OF LOVE: RELATIONAL LABOUR AND RELATIONSHIP REPAIR IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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1. Abstract

Contemporary romance fiction predominantly shows romantic intimacy beyond as an experience of attraction and desire. Besides, romantic intimacy represents continuous emotional and relational work to build a sustainable relationship. This study explores the gendered division of emotional labour in the formation, support, and rebuilding of romantic relationships in four contemporary romance novels: Beth O'Leary's The Flatshare (2019), Emily Henry's Beach Read (2020), Tia William's Seven Days in June (2021), and Emily Henry's Happy Place (2023). Implementing qualitative comparative textual analysis, this research investigates how male and female protagonists play role in sustaining a relationship that involves trust-building, emotional disclosure, care and compromise, conflict management, apology and forgiveness, and reconciliation. Therefore, this study examines considering relational labour and relationship repair to be reciprocal responsibility. It explores that how contemporary romance reproduces traditional gendered divisions of relational labour and relationship repair. The selected narratives upon analysis showcase a transition from feminized relationship maintenance toward reciprocity of intimate partnership. Thus, this dynamic responsibility in contemporary fiction is contributing to a new realm of gendered work of love.

Keywords

Contemporary romance fiction, Gender, Relational labour, Relationship repair, Reciprocity, Intimacy

2. Introduction

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Romantic love persists to be one of the most impactful subjects of literary representation; yet contemporary romance fiction steadily convolutes the assumption that love is persisted by attraction and affection alone. Romantic relationships in contemporary narratives establish through interaction, confidence, vulnerability, emotional support, deliberation, conciliation, and responses to interpersonal conflict. Consequently, love may not be solely deemed an emotion but an ongoing relational labour encompassing mutual formation, maintenance, and repair in relationships.

Moreover, the conception of relational labour is an umbrella term that encompasses understanding a partner's emotional state through bridging communication, enhancing mutual understanding, resolving conflicts, repairing relation, and growing negotiation. These practices are exercised throughout the development of relationships rather than only in the moments of conflicts. They initially aid the development of intimacy that makes a relationship stable. Subsequently, relationship delves into the realm of repair.

However, the chief factor that holds a significant niche to this discussion is gender where since inception, relational labour and relationship repair is associated with femininity. On the contrary, male counter parts often enjoy privilege of autonomy, emotional restraint, and dominancy. Here, contemporary romance fiction provides significant literary space in which all these perceptions can be regenerated. Female protagonists may continue to preserve relationship, whereas male protagonists of the contemporary fiction may increasingly be observed as acknowledging their mistakes, and participating wholeheartedly in sustaining relationships.

This study delves into all these perspectives through four contemporary romance novels: Beth O'Leary's *The Flatshare (*2019), Emily Henry's *Beach Read* (2020), Tia Williams's *Seven Days in June* (2021), and Emily Henry's *Happy Place* (2023). Therefore, this article comparatively examines how male and female protagonists contribute to the formation, maintenance, and rejuvenation of romantic relationship. It investigates whether contemporary romance continues to feminize relational obligation or considers love as a responsibility of reciprocal nature associated with shared emotional accountability.

3. Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study examines gender-based relational labour and relational rejuvenation by comparatively analyzing how male and female protagonists play their vital roles in formation, sustainability, maintenance, and rejuvenation of the relationships.

4. Aim and Objectives

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The study delves into the intricacies of gender-based efforts for preserving and repairing relationship, particularly in contemporary fiction.

5. Research Questions

- How is emotional work divided between male and female protagonists in regenerating, sustaining, and repairing romantic relationships in contemporary fiction?
- What kind of emotional work_ encompassing care, responsibility, liability, conciliation, communication, compassion, and exoneration_ are performed by male and female protagonists?
- To what extent do these representations reconstruct, challenge, or restructure traditional gender expectations pertaining to emotional and relational responsibility?

6. Literature Review

The conception of relational labour is an important source_ laying the foundation for investigating relationships. Hochschild articulates relational labour as the endeavor in managing emotions as per the socially existed expectations [6]. Her paradigm makes emotions evidently something that partners diligently manage rather than only experience. So, according to Hochschild, this perspective/approach applies emotional support, amiable relationships, negotiations, and reassurance to the relational work.

Further researches presents the nexus of such work with gender. It is argued that historical analysis clearly envisages the gender-based division which is inclined towards the women, thus putting greater responsibility on women's shoulders [2]. Similarly, the demonstration by Erickson in 2005 supports the same. However, it is mandatory to mention that this emotional responsibility is culturally produced.

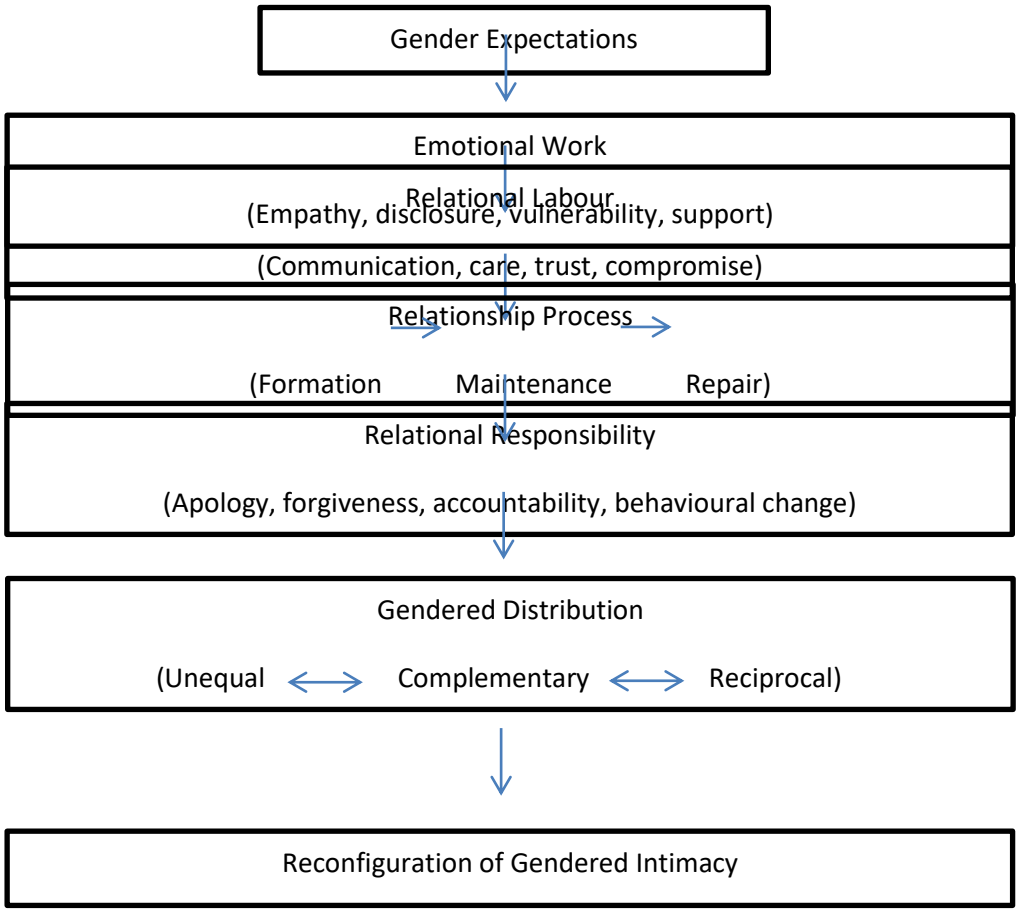
On the other hand, the other research complicates this model of women being overwhelmed for sustaining relation. It symbolizes that emotion work was associated with positive dimensions of relationship quality [1]. Similarly, Horne and Johnson (2019) using data from heterosexual couples found strong predictive importance of women's emotion work in a relationship [8]. Thus, this implies that relational labour should be perceived both a potentially gendered and relationally beneficial factor.

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Moreover, relational work has encountered critical attention on an explicit level within romance fiction. When Popova (2018) applied Hochschild's framework to arranged-marriage fanfiction, it was revealed that the division of emotion work between romantic partners can reveal inequalities in intimacy [11].

Nevertheless, comparative analysis of male and female relational work and relationship repair remain comparatively unelaborated. The current study, therefore, scrutinizes both partners and treats relational labour by analyzing contemporary romance fiction taking into consideration_ mutual understanding, forgiveness, rejuvenation, relationship repair, resolution of conflicts, and behavioural change.

7. Conceptual Framework



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8. Methodology

This study employs qualitative comparative textual analysis of four contemporary romance novels where the examination deals with gender-based endeavor in sustaining the relation through trust, rejuvenation, relational repair, mutual understanding, and resolution of conflict, accountability, behavioural change, and forgiveness.

9. Discussion

9.1. Creating Love: Relational Labour and the Building of Intimacy

Relationship formation is not very commonly portrayed as attraction only in the contemporary romance fiction. Instead, the intimacy is deemed to be the outcome of communication, establishing trust, vigilance, and vulnerability. All such scenarios are prominent in *The Flatshare* and *Beach Read*, where relation develops as a gradual process not a completed romance bond.

Therefore, in Tiffy Moore and Leon Twomey in *The Flatshare* occupy the same physical space without meeting in the beginning [10]. Ultimately, the uncommon arrangement turns out into a mechanism leading to relationship formation. Hence, the initial practical coordination steadily acquires emotional significance. It is worth noticing that the intimacy is consequently contingent upon reciprocal relational labour rather than a conventional model_ envisaging a protagonist who pursues the other.

Moreover, recovery of Tiffy from a diminishing relationship onward makes the gender dynamics complicated. That implies that she has to set boundaries and restore trust to make way to the healthier relation. The novel, consequently, demonstrates the significance of emotional safety to relationship formation and opposes the assumption that relational sensitivity is solely a feminine perspective [10].

Likewise, *Beach Read* establishes an intimacy through mutual emotional disclosure. Here, January Andrews and Augustus Everett procured emotional

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intimacy as both protagonists move beyond insecurity, vulnerability, and disappointment [4].

These reciprocal efforts are of distinguished importance because relational work is not merely associated with performing for a partner, but also associated with being emotionally available to the partner. Here, Hochschild's (1979) proposes active management of feeling [6]. On the contrary, later researches illustrate significance of emotional well-being and relational quality [1]. Therefore, January and Gus demonstrate a model in which romantic bonds depends on both expounding the other and allowing oneself to be expounded.

9.2. Preserving Love: Compassion, Communication, and Reciprocity

Moreover, contemporary romance must discuss that how the relation can be maintained. However, relationship maintenance encompasses continuous emotional efforts in a relationship including: listening, setting boundaries along with respecting them, changing behavior, and being emotionally available.

Erickson (2005) demonstrates that emotion work is predominantly gender-based in family relationships [3]. On the other hand, Horne and Johnson (2019) portray its nexus with relationship satisfaction [8]. Here, it is important to consider the novel perspective that posits emotional contribution is not merely female obligation. This should not be conceptualized as inherently female [1].

This difference is significant for reading the selected novels. *The Flatshare* demonstrates compassion as chiefly to be reciprocal. However, Tiffy's communication represents different relational styles [10]. Hence, equality does not demand identical emotional behavior. It implies that sustaining intimacy does not force that a single protagonist be compelled to sustain relation.

Likewise, *Beach Read* opposes the bifurcation between an emotionally competent heroine and an emotionally unavailable hero. Gus's guardedness initially propounds orthodox masculine emotional constraint, but the narrative necessitates growing disclosure vulnerability from him. Meanwhile, January must show own emotional breakdown rather than fulfilling the emotional gap for her male protagonist [4]. Notably, latest scholarship has undoubtedly identified masculinity and its transformation as a significant perspective of *Beach Read*,

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fortifying the Gus's vulnerability as an element of literary constructions of masculinity [13].

9.3. Re-establishing Love: Trauma, Vulnerability, and Second Chances

Seven Days in June develops the emotional-work schema through second-chance romance. Eva Mercy and Shane Hall interacted after an intense relation in the adulthood, engendering unsettled history and distress and anguish into their revived relation [14]. Hence, their romance cannot be established because they have no past experiences. It implies that memories, emotional trauma, vulnerability, and mistrust are also the determinants of the reconnection.

This framework makes the novel valuable, particularly for gender based analysis because both protagonists endure emotional histories that create complexity in intimacy. Here, Eva cannot bear the endeavor of unlimited understanding for Shane; Shane needs to play the role on his part for sustainable relationship. Consequently, the relationship emphasizes the contrast between attraction and relational readiness. Desire can appear immediately, but maintainable intimacy requires emotional work.

The novel has gained feminist consideration for its treatment of love, trauma, identity, resilience, and vulnerability [12]. Yet analyzing it through relational labour conveys a distinct question into attention: how does each protagonist promote making a second chance emotionally viable?

Here, vulnerability works as relational endeavor owing to the fact that emotional trauma encompasses risks and create obligations of responsiveness for both partners. The novel resultantly questions rigid masculine behavior in which strength is depended upon emotional concealment. In the same manner, Eva's agency exists partly in her ability to establish conditions for revived intimacy rather than reunion only because romantic sentiments survive. This converts second-chance romance a particularly effective structure for assessing gendered reciprocity: the relationship can be reinvigorated only when emotional obligation joins desire.

9.4. Mending Love: Discord, Responsibility, and Behavioural Change

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The repair stage is most certain in *Happy Place*, where Harriet and Wyn have already ended their relationship before the main events of the novel but have kept secret about this from their friends [5]. Their situation enters into a transition phase of unsustainability showcasing that despite affection, the failure to accommodate needs, pressures, and vulnerabilities caused end of a relationship.

It is noteworthy that relationship repairs, and needs multiple emotional practices apart from initial attraction. This encompasses changing behavior, accepting mistakes, bridging gaps, expressing suppressed feelings, and revising expectations. These processes hold significant niche in romance fiction specifically from gender point of view because repair reveals who is expected to restore relational stability.

Harriet's inclination towards undermining the conflict can be presumed to be a gendered form of emotional management, yet the novel does not implies her to be solely responsible for repairing relationship. Wyn's emotional struggles and participation in restored communication irrespective of gender is quite evident [5]. Therefore, the current assessment of the novel has focused Harriet's pursuit of happiness and the emotional conflict resulted due to her unresolved relationship with Wyn [9]. Thus, a relational-work approach perpetuates this analysis by questioning the couple's emotional practices to end and build up a relationship. In the similar fashion, Popova (2018) emphasizes that distribution of relational labour can reveal the underlying frameworks of relational power [11].

9.5. From Feminized Relational Labour to Mutual Relational Responsibility

In short, the relational labour presented across all the four novels work differently at different stages in a relationship. *The Flatshare* foregrounds belief and emotional safety; *Beach Read* foregrounds reciprocal exposure and vulnerability; *Seven Days in June* shows nexus between reinvigorated intimacy with trauma, assessing behaviors, and trust; and *Happy Place* claims communication and relational reconstruction to be the epicenter of reconciliation [4] [5] [10] [14].

These narratives clearly demonstrate the transition from orthodox gender-bias responsibility to equality in relational labour where both male and female protagonists put efforts to sustain a relationship. While, the sociological research supports through evidences that emotion work is frequently put on woman's

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shoulder [3] [7] [22]. On the other hand, other research showcase emotion work facilitates relationships across gender and that the male contribution is consequential for relationship quality [1] [8].

The chosen novels precisely portray this tension. The female protagonists fully participate in relational labour being at par with the male protagonists. The emotion work is not solely feminized. Nevertheless, this explanation does not imply that contemporary romance has eliminated gender inequality. Rather, this discussion proposes a trend of shift from feminized relational labour/emotion work to a perceivable gender equality revolving around sustainability in relationships.

However, these transitions do not simply justify a complete transformation or shift. This change is desirable in contemporary fiction. In other words, the gendered work of love is best explained as a negotiation of relational responsibility. Gender-bias conventions are still reflected in contemporary romance fiction, but these novels also draft partnerships where emotion work is equally distributed between both protagonists. Hence, romantic fulfillment is portrayed not simply as finding love, but as responsibly sharing the emotion work.

10. Conclusion

To sum up, the narrative of selected novels portray romantic love as relational labour rather than attraction alone. Meanwhile, female protagonists significantly show emotional contribution in a relation, while male protagonists increasingly participate in relational repair through accountability, support, communication, and vulnerability.

The contemporary romance fiction predominantly challenges traditional assumptions related to gender-based emotional obligation. Across the predefined narratives, formation of relationship, sustainability, and rejuvenation appear as mutual processes demanding compassion, care, and compromise. Thus, this demonstration shows transforming understanding of love as reciprocal relational labour within relationships.

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