

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In our human world, gender is one of the main ways in which human identity, power, and cultural values are shaped. Biologically, based on anatomical and physiological characteristics used to classify individuals, humans can be classified into two sexes: female and male. Through social conditions, both sexes have. Over time, these biological differences have been built into societal systems and cultural expectations that favor one over the other. This process of difference has resulted in an unequal relationship in which men are often in positions of leadership and women are symbolically and socially sidelined. This imbalance is not only structural but also affects the imagination, language, and art of a culture. Women's images are systematically constructed not as independent individuals but as aesthetic, moral, or emotional values, in the masculine image in religion, philosophy, art, and literature. These biological differences have evolved into societal institutions and cultural expectations that privilege one over the other.

The concept of femininity is a result of patriarchal traditions that shape the way women are regarded and portrayed in society. It has been absorbed over many years and is not felt by people who live within it. But the idea of women as objects of beauty, muses, or moral tests is being promoted in contemporary works of art that claim intellectual and artistic sophistication. This is where objectification begins.

Objectification is not an aesthetic act per se, but a symptom of a more basic cultural system that determines what is seen, who is seen, and how this observation becomes a form of control. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) proposed the Objectification Theory to explain the objectification of women's bodies and identities for visual satisfaction in a male-centric culture. Objectification deprives women of their status as subjects by reducing them to objects to be gazed at, assessed, or possessed. Objectification harms women psychologically, but it also affects the views of men and women on the norms of appearance, value, and self-esteem regarding gender.

This phenomenon has crept into ordinary life as well as into the fields of art and literature, where it serves as a space for desire, freedom, and imagination. A novel that allegorizes or reduces the ladies is not merely a depiction of artistic standards and characterizations, but a sign of the cultural consciousness of the moment. The continual objectification of women in most of the canonized literature reveals that writing is not totally free or liberated but rather copies and perpetuates the prevalent wants of a patriarchal system. This is precisely why it is important to research gender in literature. The idealized, silent, and trapped woman of the masculine imagination is proof of the construction of social myths in literature. Women, presented as abstract beauties, moral qualities, or victims of misfortune, always help to strengthen male dominance. And so it is that even in the great literature that claims intellectual sophistication, gender bias reveals itself as an aesthetic feature of the literature.

With this in mind, most authors include gender and sexuality in their characters, consciously or unconsciously. Given the huge amount of literature across cultures and

eras, authors have used their imaginations to build their worlds and characters. They might be read as either reinforcing traditional notions of gender or challenging them. Hence, amid this conflict, the relevance of rereading literary works from a feminist viewpoint appears, showing how artistic imagination may hide and reveal at the same time the systems of power established in culture. Ironically, readers are usually oblivious to distinctions in character agency in narratives. To identify stories where women's agency is taken away from them subtly: as passive, dependent, or subordinate to male characters. The patriarchal imagination limits women's image and the possibilities of women in literature through the quiet machinery of stereotyping and discrimination. The characters' images are recognized by their viewers (female characters especially) as being objectified in order to sap their agency. Women in novels are often depicted as objects of adulation, desire, or moral judgment rather than as entire subjects through narrative viewpoint, description, or interpersonal relations. This process, or objectification, is not only an aesthetic choice but rather indicative of a broader ideological framework through which patriarchy maintains its control over the depiction and formation of meaning within culture.

Even the most intelligent students can be manipulated by patriarchal structures, as in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992). The story takes place in an elegant academic setting, exposing the moral corruption of a group of intelligent students obsessed with classical idealism and beauty. Camilla Macaulay is the only female in this group of six students, and her role in Richard Papen's story is clear. She attracts people to her as an idolised goddess, caught in the masculine gaze, an object of

adoration, not a free being. From the perspective of Tartt's narration, Camilla is a desirable possession and a model of beauty. This is an example of how patriarchal aims are inscribed in the mind. Camilla's double position as both muse and constrained subject is an example of the tension between aesthetic idealisation and the subjugation of the gendered. This is how patriarchal ideologies are inscribed, even in formerly progressive contexts, reducing women to objects of admiration rather than authors of their own narratives.

The distinction between fact and fiction is more pronounced when a female writer writes as a woman in the male-dominated literary tradition. Born in Mississippi in 1963, Donna Tartt's first book, *The Secret History*, is considered both delightfully written and philosophically complex. She was surrounded by writers and intellectuals who were victims of the genius and conceit of elite intellectualism, as well as the intellectual passion and bohemianism of Bennington College. Not only did her work involve the study of classical education and a deep understanding of literature, but her career also suffered because of the gender roles expected from female authors during the latter part of the 20th century. Therefore, analyzing *The Secret History* as a feminist novel is complex due to the fact that a woman who writes within a domain traditionally controlled by men and still preserves the femininity of women. This also touches on a larger issue in contemporary writing, which, at the time, struggled to escape patriarchal institutions, despite some efforts to challenge them.

The Secret History is a reflection of the late 20th-century society that is still lingering with echoes of patriarchal thought under the guise of intellectual

contemporaneity, as it looks back on that period. The aesthetic idealism, the classic allusions of this story, its beauty, tragedy, and splendour, remind us of the Western art heritage that regarded women as muse rather than artist. Tarrt revives and subverts this tradition in Camilla, revealing how the quest for beauty and meaning may be ethically blind when detached from equality and empathy. Objectification of Camilla's character is not simply a reading of the character's dynamics but a sensitivity to how literature in this sense makes gender frameworks appear and reappear. Through an analysis of perceptions of Camilla, her representation, and her symbolic constriction, the male gaze and its influence on female subjectivity are shown. Moreover, this method reveals the paradox of intellectual places that proclaim their independence yet are constrained by cultural and gender barriers.

While numerous scholars have explored the philosophical and psychological issues of *The Secret History*, few have investigated Camilla Macaulay as an example of gender differentiation in the novel. This imbalance allows feminist critique to engage with the novel by exposing the portrayal of women in men's intellectual circles and stories in *The Secret History*, and how it shows the ways in which patriarchy exquisitely influences the ways women see the world, relate to others, and operate in the world of fiction and Camilla's inner life within this narrative that makes Camilla more than a character, but a symbol of larger socio-cultural problems. This thesis investigates the construction of Camilla as an object of aesthetic appreciation through the male gaze, the consequences of this construction for female action in the novel, and the ways in which the novel itself participates in or resists this construction. The study contributes

to literary criticism by investigating how patriarchal attitudes shape Camilla Macaulay's representation and constrain her independence within the text. It also needs a theoretical engagement with the mechanisms of objectification hidden in the story structure and in the development of the characters.

1.2 Research Question

In this thesis, *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt is analyzed in relation to the following research questions:

1. What signs suggest that Camilla is shaped by objectifying expectations reflected in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)?
2. How does the male gaze shape the narrative representation of Camilla as an aesthetic object, rather than an autonomous subject, reflected in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)?
3. In what ways do patriarchal perceptions influence Camilla's psychological well-being and restrict her freedom of movement, as reflected in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)?

1.3 Purpose of the Research

In this thesis, *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt is analyzed with the following objectives.

1. To analyze the signs that suggest Camilla is shaped by objectifying expectations reflected in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)?

2. To analyze how the male gaze shapes the narrative representation of Camilla as an aesthetic object rather than an autonomous subject, as reflected in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)?
3. To examine how patriarchal perceptions influence Camilla's psychological well-being and restrict her freedom of movement, as reflected in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)

1.4 Previous Studies

The first previous research is a journal article entitled 'Dark Academia: The Reading Craze, Reader Self-Fashioning, and Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*' by Simone Murray (2023). This literature review adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on literary studies and digital media to examine the formation of the DA subculture through Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

The second previous research is an undergraduate thesis entitled 'Investigating the Artistic Imagery of a Literary Work: Donna Tartt's Novel *A Secret History*' by A.O. Muntian (2019). It investigates the concept of artistic imagery in literary texts, particularly its symbolic and communicative functions in *The Secret History*.

The third previous research is an undergraduate thesis entitled 'Genre Purity and Donna Tartt's "A Secret History"' by A. Muntian and I. Shpak (2018), which reports the impossibility of classifying Donna Tartt's novel into a single genre due to its postmodern characteristics. According to the authors, postmodernism represented in 'A Secret History' is hostile to genre purity.

The fourth previous research is an undergraduate thesis entitled 'Unlocking *Secret History*: New Perspectives in College Fiction' by Martin Lind (2009). This research develops the thesis with regard to the outsider's perspective in college fiction and pays considerable attention to *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, discussing the critique the novel enacts through its peculiar narrative looking-glasses against an elitist academic society.

The fifth previous research is an undergraduate thesis, 'If on a Winter's Night a Poet: Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*', an article by François Pauw (1994). Pauw demonstrated how the classics influenced the novel's narrative and characters, particularly in the case of the elitism and decadence of the classically lettered students, modeled on those studying ancient Greek philosophy and the rituals of Dionysus. There has never been any focused study on a single issue. It is essential for such an investigation because the study of the novel cannot be limited to its mere categorization but must become more systematic and scientific.

The sixth previous studies are journal articles entitled 'What Does She Think of Us? Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* and the Image of Classicists' by Sophie Mills (2005). Researchers see how classicists are portrayed in *The Secret History*. Intellectual elitism in characters' behavior, the novel's approach to Classicists as signs of otherness, and the ways such elitism is connected with social and financial superiority. It critiques the novel for symbolizing classical studies that were outdated and exclusionary.

Although these six articles offer various ways of analyzing *The Secret History*, they share a common tendency to engage with it. They all read *The Secret History* not

as a focus of gender relations, but as a cultural, formal, or intertextual object. What all six studies imply is that Richard Papen's first-person narrative voice serves as an effective media for understanding the book, without being problematized itself. In other words, this implies that the male gaze, in terms of which Richard Papen tells his story, does not influence the perspective the reader takes on Camilla Macaulay.

The study by Murray (2023) is the latest and considers the reader's experience and subculture rather than the psychological analysis of the story's characters. Muntian's (2019) research on artistic symbolism offers a methodology for studying the novel's characters. Muntian and Shpak (2018), by emphasizing that *The Secret History* cannot be classified into any genre, introduce an interesting formal approach to studying the novel. However, their discussion does not go beyond the issues of the book's postmodern form. Lind (2009) highlights the outsider's viewpoint as the novel's primary narrative technique. The discussion provided by the researcher is limited to Richard's masculine gaze, without ever questioning the implications this same gaze has on rendering Camilla as an object of sexual desire rather than a subject in her own right. Despite the focus on the ritualism of Dionysus and Pauw's (1994) elitist attitude towards the classics, there is no consideration of the construction of Camilla's body within that symbolic logic. In the same manner, although Mills (2005) points out the novel's elitist nature, she stops there, since her criticism centers only on elitism in the intellectual and social senses of the word and does not address the gender issue in the discrimination she discusses.

The lack of discussion in the six articles mentioned regarding how Richard Papen constructs Camilla through his first-person point of view is an essential omission. This is the gap filled by the proposed research through considering Richard's narration not as a neutral means through which the story is revealed to the readers, but rather as an ideology-inflected medium that systematically undermines Camilla's inner world by focusing on narratological feminism and the concept of the gaze in analyzing the novel, where the narrator has been seen only as a reliable media.

The seventh previous research is a journal article entitled 'Aspects of Control in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* Novel' by Maria Grip (2018). this research highlights how the element of control occurs in the novel. According to this study, one of the reasons why Bunny was murdered is the issue of control, especially Henry's desire for intellectual superiority.

The eighth previous research is a journal article entitled 'Interpretations of Fear and Anxiety in Gothic-Postmodern Fiction: A reading of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*' by Stacey A. Litzler (2013). This novel belongs to Gothic-postmodernism, which emphasizes how the aura of fear and loneliness in this novel reflect the concerns of the postmodern age. It seems that Litzler believes that the novel called *The Secret History* is a critique of the alienation caused by the late capitalist mode and Gothic approach to it.

The works by Grip (2018) and Litzler (2013) add to the already extensive literature on *The Secret History* by focusing on psychological and atmospheric themes. In her work, Grip (2018), by analyzing the battle of control, especially Henry's

intellectual power and how that shapes interpersonal interactions and ultimately leads to Bunny's death from the perspective of New Criticism, fails to apply the same theory to analyze the focalization technique used as a means of gendered manipulation against Camilla's representation, whereas, in her discussion of the novel from the lens of Gothic-postmodernism, Litzler (2013) interprets the atmosphere of fear and isolation as a critique of the alienation prevalent in the capitalist world of modern times. However, the two scholars' analysis of *The Secret History* has one significant aspect in common, which is that they both take an interest in *The Secret History*, both works implicitly treating the first-person narrative of Richard Papen as an objective and gender-neutral mode of communication rather than a biased masculine mode of observation, thereby neglecting the significance of the narrative in objectivizing Camilla Macaulay's representation.

The ninth previous research is a journal article entitled 'Natural Violence and Escaping Reason: Reading Gender and Nature in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*' by Malin Niklasson (2014). Applies the ecofeminist perspective to *The Secret History* and analyzes, through characters like Camilla and Henry, the duality of reason and nature, as well as gender roles. This research has yet to investigate the issue of Camilla's and women's objectification, as its focus is more on the philosophical dualistic framework than on a thorough analysis from a gender studies standpoint. Although the research has considered the power structures, it has yet to reveal how women are objectified in the text.

The tenth previous research articles include a journal article entitled 'The Cult of Donna Tartt: Themes and Strategies in *The Secret History*', by Ana Rita Catalão Guedes (2019), which debates the novel's positioning within the American Gothic genre and the college novel. In addition, the research highlights class, education, and women from an ambiguous perspective and identifies three female characters and their symbolic functions in the novel. It is narrowed to portrayals of female protagonists as a representation of women's analysis, which remains symbolic rather than critical of women's roles and subjectivity. This will give rise to a new perspective.

Niklasson (2014) and Guedes (2019) are the two pieces of literature that have addressed gender issues related to *The Secret History*, the one closest to the proposed research. However, neither paper offers a detailed character-based exploration of gender issues as required by the proposed project. Niklasson (2014), adopting an ecofeminist perspective on the duality of reason and nature as it reflects gender relations among certain characters in *The Secret History*, discusses the concept of power that exists in the book. Niklasson (2014) is more concerned with the philosophy of reason and nature and does not explore how women are objectified in the book. Moreover, Niklasson mentions Camilla but does not give her gender close scrutiny. On the other hand, even with the contextualization of the novel within American Gothic literature and campus novels, as well as the identification of the symbols associated with female characters, Guedes (2019) continues to overlook gender-related questions in her analysis.

Of all the articles referred to, the works by Niklasson (2014) and Guedes (2019) seem to pay the most attention to gender questions in *The Secret History*. Niklasson (2014), in particular, employs ecofeminism to analyze the gender relationship between Camilla and Henry, while Guedes (2019) focuses on the significance of the female characters in the novel. However, while each article makes a significant contribution to the comprehension of gender identity formation in *The Secret History*, neither of them pays special attention to the process of the objectification of the female body, including Camilla Macaulay's, resulting from men's desire and patriarchal logic. Thus, the present paper attempts to fill this gap by focusing specifically on how Camilla is objectified within the masculine, patriarchal discourse expressed in Richard's first-person view.

1.5 Research Method

The method used in this thesis is library research. As George states, "Library research is a form of structured inquiry with specific tools, rules, and techniques. Also like its twin, it is unpredictable, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately rewarding as you examine your findings, then add your own insights to make a compelling case." (2008:1). In this study, Fredrickson and Roberts's Objectification Theory (1997) serves as the primary theoretical framework, providing a basis for understanding and analyzing how the female characters in the novel experience objectification. By relying on the studies by Fredrickson and Roberts, it is possible to understand the effects of objectification on the characters' identities and experiences. This approach will be used

to understand the social and academic relationships that shape Camilla's experiences in elite academic circles. Objectification Theory is employed to analyse Camilla Macaulay's character as a site of patriarchal projection, an extension of the male gaze, and a mirror of systemic gender imbalance.

The data consist of both primary and secondary sources. According to George, "A primary source can be, for instance primary, a son-net, a speech, a law, a photograph, a musical score, a stock market chart, an equation, a computer graph of a drug interaction, or just about anything else—provided that it can be shared." (2008:41). The main data of this research is taken straight from the text of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992). The textual evidence is especially concentrated on Camilla's physical description, her interactions with male characters, and the perspective of the male narrator. Secondary data, as defined by George, "Secondary sources, in contrast, come exclusively from people, because only the human mind can interpret." (2008:57). The secondary data in this study include books, journal articles, and literary critiques of *The Secret History*, feminist theory, and objectification theory.

This study is grounded in feminist literary criticism and analyzes how patriarchal ideology shapes the representation of women in literature. Using the radical feminist perspective, the present thesis is based on the power structures present in the interaction of the characters in the novel. As Showalter explains in feminist criticism, "Feminist criticism written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery." (1981:188). Showalter's perspective helps us understand

how patriarchy and gender roles shape the relationships among the characters in the story. In this tradition, radical feminism is concerned with the power relations and systemic inequities that support the subordination of women. Radical feminism complements Objectification Theory by arguing that objectification is not merely an individual experience but also an experience of patriarchal control over women's bodies and identities. Thus, whereas Objectification Theory explains the effects of objectification on individuals, radical feminism reveals the ideological basis of objectification. This critique of *The Secret History* explores the book not only as a novel of intellectual fixation and moral deterioration, but also as a narrative that illuminates deeper social mechanisms of the objectification of women. The combination of feminist theory and thorough textual study produces a more nuanced interpretation of how Camilla's portrayal at the same time reveals and undoes the societal and psychological structures that maintain women in oppression.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The objectification of Camilla Macaulay in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) is crucial to understanding her identity and character, as it is molded by the protagonist's thoughts, psychological conflicts, and the social context around her, this study contends. This will show how the characterization of Camilla shows how patriarchal ambitions, social hierarchies, and cultural standards reduce her agency and support the gender-based power relations in the story. To do this, this study employed feminist literary theory and an intrinsic approach encompassing character,

characterization, conflict, and point of view. This synthesis makes the essential characteristics into literary places where the objectification and patriarchal procedures are shown and understood. This way, the analysis of form and content together explains the mechanisms that determine Camilla's objectification.

1.7 Writing Organization

In the writing of this thesis, the organization of the study will follow this outline:

1. CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents background information on the study, research questions, purpose, previous studies, research methods, scope, and the organization of the study.

2. CHAPTER II: THEORY AND METHOD

This chapter outlines the theories and methods used to analyze the object of study, covering both intrinsic and extrinsic elements.

3. CHAPTER III: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the object under study, supported by data from the novel. It aims to identify the factors that shape the objectification of Camilla Macaulay, to analyze the ways in which she is portrayed and perceived through the lens of Objectification Theory, and to explore how this objectification reflects the power dynamics

and gender roles depicted in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992).

4. CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This chapter provides a summary of all the findings obtain from the analysis of the object of study.

REFERENCES

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