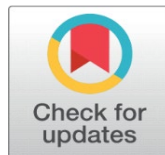


MIRRORED PATHS: ANALYSING GABI BRAUN AS EREN JAEGER'S GENDERED REFLECTION IN ATTACK ON TITAN

Aswathynanda Nandakumaran ¹, Geeta R. Pai ²

¹ Integrated MA English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

² Assistant Professor (Sr. Gr.), Department of English, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



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ABSTRACT

Attack on Titan, a Japanese manga and anime series by Hajime Isayama, depicts a dystopian world where humanity battles man-eating giants known as Titans. While the show revolves, initially, around three pre-teens, particularly Eren Jaeger as the central protagonist, the plot progresses to explore darker themes of trauma, war, the conflict between humanity and individualism, and genocide. This paper explores Gabi Braun as the gendered reflection of Eren Jaeger, focusing on their similar character arcs and eventual ideological transformations. Introduced halfway through the show from an opposing perspective, Gabi shares significant parallels with Eren, going through deep-seated personal trauma through violence that eventually becomes a catalyst for their characteristic evolution, which begins and ends in opposing values. The analysis intends to examine how Gabi's complicated youth and gender act as Eren's narrative counterpart. Eren indirectly represents a hyper-masculine personification of hatred and blind vengeance. Defying norms and challenging traditional gendered representations, Gabi embodies unrelenting steadfastness and aggression not typically ascribed to female fictional characters. Utilising Judith Butler's Gender Performativity and Sigmund Freud's concept of Thanatos (Death Drive), this study explores and critiques both these characters' mirrored journey from naivety to hatred or the realisation of futility in revenge. The paper highlights Gabi's indirect portrayal as a vessel to critique Eren's transformation to bargain for absolute freedom at the cost of his moral consciousness. This comparison provides a nuanced perspective into their characters and a commentary on the dehumanising effects of ideological fanaticism and the possibilities of redemption beyond the cycle of hate.

Keywords: Titans, Individualism, Gendered Performativity, Thanatos, Ideological Fanaticism

1. INTRODUCTION

Drawing admirers from diverse backgrounds, anime has evolved into a global phenomenon, overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. With its origin in post-war Japan, anime has grown from a niche form of entertainment to encompass a variety of genres enjoyed by children and adults alike. Garnering attention through slice-of-life dramas, fantasies and thrillers, anime has established its position in global pop culture, from its debut as television programmes several decades ago, to easily accessible past times through streaming services today. Titles like Dragon Ball Z, Naruto, One Piece and Bleach have become cult classics, watched, rewatched and referenced, even at present. Its unique storytelling methods and complex

characterisation have earned significant international acclaim and continue to do so in an increasingly media-dependent world.

Attack on Titan, a manga by Hajime Isayama later serialised and animated by MAPPA Animation Studios, continues to capture fans, critics and ceaseless debates almost four years after its conclusion. Dystopian in its genre, Attack on Titan is set in a fictitious land bound by towering walls where humanity faces the threat of extinction at the hands of humanoid giants called Titans. The story focuses on the grim realities of war, trauma, genocide, ambiguity of human nature and conflicting ideals.

What sets Attack on Titan apart from similar shonen (action) anime is its challenging approach to the subject matter while dealing with intense philosophical questions, psychological conflicts and morale, raising questions through its gritty storyline that makes clear divisions of opinion even within the fandom. Unlike traditional shonen anime, Attack on Titan subverts itself from the conventional hero-villain dichotomy, without leaving a clear difference between a 'good side' and a 'bad side'. These morally complex characters leave viewers to decide who the real 'villains' are, hence, reshaping the expectations of the genre, making it a show without a whole-heartedly loved protagonist or an antagonist loathed for their actions.

Hajime Isayama draws inspiration from the Japanese visual novel Muv Luv, and Dune by Frank Herbert, among many others. It has even been suggested that the cultural memory of grappling with the atrocities committed by imperial Japan was yet another influence for the author. Other shonen anime like Neon Genesis Evangelion and Fullmetal Alchemist, deal with similar existential and human dilemmas. However, the impact of Attack on Titan rewrites the broader standards on how a shonen anime is produced and received. It is a masterful blend of action, horror, political intrigue and personal explorations of individual characters apart from the main storyline. Without disregarding the occasional positive aspects of life, the author intends to create a form of connection with certain roles in the work, thereby increasing the impact of humanity's horrifying and altruistic capabilities during unimaginable scenarios.

Understanding this aspect, this paper aims to delve into the character arcs of Eren Jaeger and Gabi Braun, examining their separate but similar journeys that mirror the extensive themes, especially through the lens of ideology and gender. By comprehending these transformations, this study analyses Attack on Titan's characteristic influence on the consequences of manic radicalisation and extremist ideologies.

1.1. OVERVIEW OF ATTACK ON TITAN

A manga series by Hajime Isayama and later animated by Wit Studios and MAPPA Studios, Attack on Titan is an anime that unfolds in a dystopian world where humanity, bound by towering walls, suffers at the hands of giant, man-eating creatures known as Titans. The show initially follows the childhood and life of Eren Jaeger, a boy driven by the harsh throes of losing his family and hometown, after witnessing the horrifying destruction waged by Titans. The show and its narrative begin with exploring humanity's unending struggle to survive, later shedding light on the extreme socio-political conflicts even within their diminishing population. The series transforms, with time, the character of Eren Jaeger from a naive and idealistic young hero into a morally compromised anti-hero, who is willing to go to any lengths to secure freedom for his people. Using the

unapologetic themes of war, trauma, and complex ethical and moral dilemmas, Attack on Titan becomes an unflinching contrast and a social commentary from the other popular shonen anime.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attack on Titan has been analysed from multiple perspectives to understand its allegorical representations of war, trauma and identity. Titans and Eldians have been interpreted as metaphors for social and racial othering. At the same time, the show has also been explored in its commentary on militarism and nationalism, and the extremities of these ideologies. Studies, even among the general fandom, try to engage Eren Jaeger's complicated transformation into the aforementioned extremisms, discussing his journey as one who reflects the nuances of power, violence and death instinct [Le \(2023\)](#). Critical analyses even plunge deeper into the often overlooked aspects of the psychological toll of war on soldiers like Levi Ackerman, Jean Kirstein and Armin Arlet, among many, that feeds into the difficult process of understanding the normalcy of life, even after war, who are helplessly stuck between the everliving and cyclical nature of vengeance.

However, only limited studies explore the nuances of similarities and dynamics between Eren Jaeger and Gabi Braun as mirrored and gendered reflections of each other. While most discussions focus on Jaeger's unsalvageable descent into radicalism and resorting to genocide, this paper focuses on the opportunity to study and parallelise the character arcs of Gabi and Eren, providing a unique lens into examining their gender, trauma and eventual ideological shifts.

2.1. RESEARCH GAP, FOCUS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper intends to address the gap in scholarship by analysing Gabi Braun as a gendered counterpart or a reflection of Eren Jaeger, scrutinising their character arcs that converge and diverge significantly throughout the show. While the former rewrites the traditional gender stereotypes in shonen anime, the latter becomes the hyper-masculine representation of a victim and later, a perpetrator of wartime violence. Although through similar beginnings, the characters later contrast when Eren descends into compromising his ideals. Gabi acknowledges the cost of unexplained bloodshed and the dehumanising effects of vengeance and nationalist extremism.

Furthermore, to explore this dynamic, this paper draws on Judith Butler's Gender Performativity, and Sigmund Freud's concept of Thanatos or the death drive. Gabi's portrayal of her uncompromising aggression and heroism is analysed through Butler's framework, to unpack her feminine character that parries away from the timid traditionality of women in media, particularly shonen anime. By focusing on Freud's Thanatos, the cataclysmic effects of war illuminate the journey of Eren Jaeger and Gabi Braun — one towards merciless violence and another towards understanding the futility and brutality of hatred.

In connecting these thoughts, this paper intends to conclude how both opposing characters embody destructive internalised ideological conflicts, ultimately using Gabi's redemption as a parallel and critique of Eren's fallacy. Therefore, this approach reveals the former's development not only as a secondary narrative or an antagonist-turned-good but as one among the counter-narrative characters that deliberately foil and reveal the inherent mistake in Eren's dangerous radicalisation.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. GABI BRAUN AND EREN JAEGER: MIRRORS OF TRAUMA AND IDEOLOGY

Surrounding the gritty themes of cyclical hatred, moral ambiguity, and the complex exploration into human nature, Gabi Braun and Eren Jaeger mirror and reflect each other in ways that can further critique and understand the intricacies of this piece of fiction. This parallelisation, from the origin of their character to their vastly opposing views begins and ends with the question of freedom, identity and indoctrination.

Both these characters, introduced during separate points of this work, are made and shaped by the uncontrollable and drilled systems of their youth, which were embedded into their respective nations. Eren, the protagonist turned anti-hero of the show, grew up within the walls of Paradis island, and was tortured by the lurking predators beyond these walls that limited his freedom, his desire to venture past these walls, and his people's survival. As an early adolescent, Eren's motivation to join the Paradis' military was to restore this lost individuality by eliminating all Titans that threatened his dream. Similarly, Gabi Braun, a child soldier in Marley, introduced by the third season of the work, is indoctrinated to view the Eldians of Paradis Island as 'devils' responsible for the suffering of her people. Gabi, although an Eldian herself, can be characterised for her unwavering faith and loyalty towards the Marleyan government, believing herself to be one among them. She believes that her service to Marley by apprehending the 'devils' will lead to her recognition as an honorary Marleyan herself. This illusion of social climbing stems from her need to escape the scorn of the people who were prejudiced against Eldians, whether they were from Paradis Island or not.

However, their shared experiences of personal loss—Eren witnessing his mother's death and Gabi losing her comrades during Paradis Island's unexpected retaliation—become incentives for their respective journeys. Their radicalisation and the subsequent divergence in their path begins with how they internalise their trauma.

4. DIVERGING ARCS

Eren's transformation is characterised by his descent into extremism. His initial hatred of Titans, born out of his naivety in the belief of ending these predators, evolves into a more complex, nihilistic worldview after he realises that there is life behind the walls of his city. It further angers him that the world beyond shuns him and his kind just for being Eldians, hated and cornered for the actions committed against humanity centuries ago by his ancestors. Eren concludes that true freedom can only be achieved through the annihilation of all external threats, leading him to initiate Rumbling. Understanding that Titans are not the true enemy, he uses the same beings for his idea of freedom. This act of genocide cements his unsalvageable moral collapse at the cost of his humanity and relationships to achieve a twisted sense of justice.

In contrast, Gabi undergoes a compelling yet realistic journey of redemption. What makes Gabi a memorable character begins with her divergence from stereotypical female child characters, especially in Japanese anime and manga. This character has garnered negative criticism, among the fandom, following this unique representation due to her early antagonistic portrayal. Away from engaging in the normal behaviours of a twelve-year-old, people notice her steadfast and

assertive persona that is not easily appealing to the general audience [Meowie \(2024\)](#). Additionally, her blind allegiance to the Marleyan government and later, the impersonal killing of an Eldian soldier named Sasha, known as a fan-favourite, further complicates her portrayal [Princess \(2023\)](#). Gabi Braun becomes a three-dimensional perspective of a complex female character even though her representation in the show comes only later. Yet she is forced to question her fanaticism when she gets trapped in Paradis Island. She is compelled to interact with these alienated people, particularly Sasha's family, who mistake her for an orphan and provide her refuge. Witnessing their humanity despite the severity of her actions forces her to confront the lies propagated by the Marleyans.

Unlike Eren, who doubles down on his maniacal ideology, Gabi questions the roots of her conditioned hatred and experiences a bitter but necessary transformative realisation. While Gabi's character arc is comparatively a lesser focus in the main story of this work, she becomes a significant critique of Eren's path, offering an alternative narrative that values compassion, empathy and forgiveness over hatred and vengeance (Francisco).

5. THANATOS IN ATTACK ON TITAN: ANALYSING EREN JAEGER AND GABI BRAUN

Thanatos, also known as the 'death drive,' is a fundamental concept introduced by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It refers to all humans and living organisms, and their unconscious drive toward death, destruction, and the return to an inanimate or inorganic state [Freud \(1961\)](#), pp. 32–35). Through their catastrophic behaviours, they perpetuate cycles of violence, suffering, and even self-harm. Both Eren and Gabi embody the aspects of Thanatos, yet their reflections converge, diverge, and confront their instincts to merge or resist this instinct.

Eren's arc becomes a significant representation of Thanatos, particularly in his desire for global annihilation. The naivety and innocence of his childhood mould his willingness to destroy Titans, which can be seen as a form of productive aggression. Although unusual to be harboured in a child, this can be sympathised with given the environment in which he grew up. However, as he grows to realise the unfair reality he and his people are forced to confront all these years without reprieve, this innocence festers into a force that goes on to eliminate 80% of humanity. This act is an ultimate expression of Thanatos—free from any rationale and compassion—making him an embodiment of nihilism and unchecked obsession for freedom ([Freud \(1961\)](#), pp. 43–51).

Moreover, Eren's trauma of witnessing his mother's brutal death at the hands of a Titan and the constant fear of living within the walls sets another layer of Freud's notion of repetition compulsion. This act refers to the tendency of individuals to relive and repeat their past trauma ([Freud \(1961\)](#), pp. 14–17). Repetition of such a past through one's future actions traps one in a cycle of violence where each act of destruction begets another ([Freud \(1961\)](#), pp. 29–31). His belief that Rumbling is the only solution to their freedom echoes this compulsive behaviour, perpetuating the same dances of oppression and genocide that he initially wanted to escape. Towards the end, Eren's transformation into the Founding Titan and his willingness to sacrifice his life for the sake of the Eldians of Paradis Island through the ultimate act of Rumbling signify his complete submission to this drive. His tragic journey becomes about achieving freedom for

himself and all his kind by taking down the rest of the world, except the island, with him (Freud (1961), pp 43-51).

In contrast to Eren, Gabi represents a counterpoint to the death drive. Her initial embodiment of Thanatos is through her violence and blind loyalty to Marley (Freud (1961), pp. 32-35). Her character arc transcends and resists the bounds of self-destruction and hatred. The child soldier didn't bother to question why she and every Eldian in Marley loathed the existence of Paradis' 'devils' despite facing discrimination from Marleyans simply for sharing the same blood as the 'devils'. The bitter confrontation of her actions begins from her unwilling presence in enemy territory. Her interactions with Sasha's family and other Eldians on Paradis Island made her break free from the perpetuated hate spewed by her homeland's propaganda. The bittersweet acknowledgement of humanity in the 'devils' is attributed to the slow and steady rejection of Thanatos that defines Eren's descent.

Hence, Gabi's rejection of Thanatos represents her transformation into the concept of Eros, which is the drive towards life, connection and creation (Freud (1961), pp. 36-37). Juxtaposing Eren's succumbing to Thanatos and Gabi's rejection of the same, serves as a commentary on the consequences of the human condition, fatalistic nihilism, obsessive attachment to freedom and the allure of fanaticism. These characters' star-eyed ideology regarding complete liberation has only led them to death and despair. Gabi's withdrawal from her conditioning opens her eyes to the large-scale retaliation of a nineteen-year-old boy, caused by the same ideology she once coddled along with the rest of the world (Freud (1961), pp. 44-48).

6. GENDER AS A PERFORMANCE: EREN'S MASCULINE IDENTITY

Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* introduces the key concept of 'performativity', which becomes central to her gender identity theory. The theory plays a significant role in understanding how gender is constructed and enacted through social practices. Gender performativity refers to the idea that gender is not an inherent or fixed attribute, but rather a series of repeated actions or behaviours that reinforce the illusion of stability in gender identity (Butler (1999), pp. 178-179).

Eren Jaeger's character arc demonstrates how masculinity and his hypermasculinity are the direct construct followed by his response to trauma and the desire to control. In the earliest seasons of the series, the audience witnesses Eren's performance in traditional masculine expectations: as protector and one among the many child soldiers who vowed to destroy Titans. Throughout these early stages, we are accustomed to his dominance, aggression, and stubbornness in wanting to "kill every last one of them" Kobayashi (2013). These qualities align with the societal expectations of a male hero, reinforcing the constructed nature of gender through repetition (Butler (1999), p. 177).

Yet these perceived qualities become more destructive and extremist. His violent and uncompromising idea about genocide is centred around his macabre chase for freedom, even at the cost of his own life. Using brute force to reduce the world into charred bones and ashes—combined with his numbness to compassion, refusal to seek alternative solutions, and emotional stoicism—becomes the ultimate hallmark of Eren's hypermasculinity. These rigid ideals, and critical aspects of his toxic masculinity, lead to his tragic and perpetual moral decay, alienation, and harm to those around him.

Meanwhile, Gabi Braun's character challenges the traditional portrayal of female shonen anime characters and personifies the same attributes seen in Eren. Her anger, resilience and uncompromising confidence despite being a child reflect the unusual yet deliberate subversion of traditional female archetypes (Butler (1999), p. 179). She actively engages in combat and unabashedly exhibits her determination, rejecting the typical nurturer or supporting roles prevalent through works such as these. While Gabi is only among one such female character in this series, her character leaves an indelible mark on the audience despite her controversial appearance. Her behaviour may not be inherently tied to the gender expectations placed on her but rather to the expectations of a patriarchal and militaristic structure of the Marleyan government in making child soldiers like her (Butler (1999), p. 180).

Gabi's character arc maps out the exploration of her identity, femininity and above all, her existence as a child before a structured war machine. The fluidity and openness of her metamorphosis—accepting humanity over propaganda and institutionalised hatred—provide a nuanced critique of rigid roles, regardless of gender. By dethroning the binary of gender roles and criticising the glorification of aggression and dominance of masculinity, Gabi becomes an underrated figurehead of this show that represents balance and progression (Butler (1999), pp. 178-180).

7. CONCLUSION

The exploration through the lens of literary theories such as Judith Butler's gender performativity and Sigmund Freud's death drive unveils the series' intense thematic and sociocultural relevance. Examining Gabi Braun as Eren Jaeger's gendered reflection highlights their mirrored journey and trauma, shaped by circumstances and desperation. The seemingly separate lives of Gabi and Eren, confront and highlight the philosophical undertones of Attack on Titan that go beyond casual understanding.

This approach expands the scope of anime studies and implores the importance of reinterpreting texts to uncover their layered meanings. By integrating these perspectives, Attack on Titan is a timeless piece of fiction that underscores the dehumanising effects of war, marginalisation and unfettered control over the powerless.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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