



# An Exit for the Human Product: A Comparative Study of Extreme Literature

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## Abstract

This paper examines from a comparative perspective six novels telling stories of extreme life experiences set in both Western and oriental cultures. The paper argues that in these extreme cases, the characters, subjected to absolute power domination, lose their individual identities and are transformed into “human products.” Their struggles for power will always remain futile unless they find a way to reverse the power relationships they are trapped in. Such a reversal allows the hope of an exit for the “human products” to escape the hopeless situation of perpetuated social, sexual, and mental enslavement.

**Keywords:** Extreme Literature, Human Products, Identity, Self-Enslavement, Power Struggle

## 1. Introduction

The natural tendency to fight for power is shared by human beings and other animal species. The only difference between humankind and other animals is that humans also have the need to possess an identity, an identity that is closely related to the amount of power and freedom they can obtain. However, when the desire for power and control over others goes to an extreme state and becomes the ultimate goal of life, humans are turned into unified products of all kinds of power forms, no matter whether they are in a dominant or a dominated status in their power relations. For example, Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* becomes a product of a dominating social status, while Bruno in *The Elementary Particles* turns into a typical product of defeated sexuality. They no longer have their own identities in the human social structure. No matter they succeed or fail in their pursuit of power, they are the same as the many others whom they try so hard to gain power and control over, simply because everyone is trying and everyone is failing too.

Abecassis discusses the polarization in society with regard to sexuality and social status (811). The result is individuals like Bruno and Patrick Bateman, whose identities are generalized so much by their extreme desire for power in social status and sexuality that they no longer have their own identity or self, that they become mere products, that their existence becomes a mask, that they become the slaves of their existence. Then, there is really no difference between human beings and other animals. Thus, without any real identity, they are deeply troubled. As Foucault says in *The Use of Pleasure*, the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, “the enslavement of the self by oneself” (qtd. in Rockhill 346) through ultimate desire for the pleasure of power.

Is there an exit to escape from being made into human products? According to Foucault, “to be free in relation to pleasures was to be free of their authority, it was not to be their slave” (qtd. in Rockhill 347). Tender Branson in *Survivor* is made, sold and used as a product. He is a product of so many forms of power sources – the church, the caseworker, the agent, etc. yet, he has an identity because he does not crave for the pleasure of power, he is made a human product by the desire of power in other people. He takes control of his own fate through playing along in the power relations imposed upon him. The following analysis will take Tender Branson and Patrick Bateman as main sample case studies to show a possible exit from the enslavement, and a possible way to achieve an individual identity.

Though there are articles discussing issues of lost or modified identity in the over-globalization of culture and value (Rajae, Hayles, etc.), there are few that deal with this topic according to Foucault’s analysis of power relations. In this paper, the idea of finding an exit from the situation of becoming human products and achieving a meaningful identity through reversing roles in power relations is studied from a comparative perspective within the context of a series of extreme literature set in Western and Oriental cultures.

## 2. Human Products, Lost Identities and Self-Enslavement

All the reflections start from the following question: are human beings really that different from other animals? Michel Houellebecq gives a structure of the animal society in his novel *The Elementary Particles*: “..., animal societies are structured according to a hierarchy in which rank relates directly to the physical strength of each member. The most dominant male in the group is known as the *alpha male*, his nearest rival the *beta male*, and so on down to the weakest of the group, the *omega male*” (38). Interestingly, a similar description of human social hierarchy can be found in

Amelie Nothomb's *Fear and Trembling*: "Mister Haneda was senior to Mister Omochi, who was senior to Mister Saito, who was senior to Miss Mori, who was senior to me. I was senior to no one. You could put this another way. I took orders from Miss Mori, who took orders from Mister Saito, and so on up the ladder" (1). The desire to seek order, to impose force on and to establish control over others has never changed in the nature of both human and animal behaviors. For animals, "Combat rituals generally determine status within the group; ... A dominant position confers certain privileges: first to feed and to couple with females in the group...." (Houellebecq 38). And for human beings, the privileges are predictably similar – social status and sexuality.

Abecassis mentions a parallel relationship between money, the most convenient representation of social status, and sex as analogies of power in the social structure of the contemporary world, especially a world where both sex and money are put on a free market and are competed for through extreme individual liberty in the society. This cruel process increases competition, violence and accelerates the differentiation among winners and losers (811).

In the case of sexuality, the new "erotoco-publicitaire economy, where the desire of every agent is engineered by Eros-driven marketing" (Abecassis, 812), is the driving forces for the competition. It idealizes and standardizes the desirable features in the opposite sex, such as looks, the shape and smell of the body etc. This kind of system controls each individual's taste in a way similar to how advertising controls and creates people's needs for particular products. It also encourages people to strive for physical perfection according to a unified standard, to make themselves similar-looking human products in a physical sense. Yet, the perfect and ideal product of an opposite sex is not always available to every individual in the society, and the availability of such ideal product depends on the attractiveness of the individual. Thus, some might have access to many of the desirable products, while others, the majority are extremely pauperized and alienated. The majority thus becomes a mass product of defeated sexuality.

In the case of social status, there is a similar market driven by idealized social status, which is defined by the dominant status in material life and the attention that comes after – "The key to salvation is how much attention you get. How high a profile you get. Your audience share. Your exposure. Your name recognition. Your press following. The buzz" (Palahniuk 152 – 151). The attention attracted by high profile jobs, expensive apartments, stylish clothes and rich beautiful sexual partners, etc. is the ultimate purpose of life and the representation of power in the social status hierarchy. This system encourages people to strive for the unified material standard of social status, to make themselves similar or even identical products of the society factory. The worries about not being able to keep up with the ideal status and losing the "buzz" cause stress and make people slaves of their own desire for power in social status.

The result of the extreme practice of desire for power in sexuality and social status is the loss of individual identity. There are no individuals, there are only human products like the news reporter in *Survivor* – "All her problems are hidden inside. All her flaws are underneath. The only smell she gives off, even her breath, is hair spray" (Palahniuk 107).

Patrick Bateman and Tender Branson are two extreme examples of human products and slaves of their power relations. Patrick Bateman is cast out from the same mould as the one his peers are made from. They work on Wall Street, they wear Armani suits and Gucci shoes, they drink bourbon and champagne, they go to fancy restaurants and date beautiful rich girls. They even cannot get one another's name straight. Is it Patrick Bateman or not, or is it actually Paul Owen? It does not matter: they are all the same. Because they strive so hard for the same standard, the dominant social status they seek becomes a mask, a generalized identity. Patrick Bateman is constantly stressed over the possibility of losing his social status. Worrying all the time about things like business cards and restaurant reservations, he does not notice that he has lost his own identity along the way and become a human product and an unhappy slave. In this situation of self-enslavement, the power he obtains through his dominant social status does not constitute as his power any more, because it is now a chain on his own neck and causes him to lose his individuality. It is only a mask of sanity for Bateman and he has no way of finding his self in his social status. "My life is a living hell... and there are many people I, uh, want to ... well, I guess murder" (Ellis 141). The way Patrick Bateman seeks to obtain power in sexuality is through violence. But, he still cannot find his own self and identity in this power relationship over his victims. The desire and pleasure of killing have made him slave again, and he simply cannot stop.

Tender Branson is the ultimate human product. He is born and educated as a product, sold and used as a product. He does not even have his own name, for "Tender" is like a brand name of all the male workers. He gets the "exact same haircut" as other Tenders – the "product standardization" ( Palahniuk 192), before getting baptized and sent out to the outside world. The whole process is like the shipping of a product – "The feeling is you have no control. The feeling is that we're being delivered. ... We're being processed" (Palahniuk 186 - 185). He goes from one product process to another, from the church's factory of human products, to the agent's factory of religion leader. His body is transformed by the agent to be a perfect product – "My hair styled by. My clothes designed by. My jewelry provided by" (Palahniuk 109), and he is brainwashed to aim at the market – "Think of yourself from now on as a diet cola" (Palahniuk 135), "Think of those young people out in the world struggling with outdated religions or with no religion, think of those people as your target market." (Palahniuk 135).

Like Patrick Bateman, Tender Branson does not have a personal history: "We remember almost none of our real childhoods, but we remember everything that happened to sitcom families. We have the same goals. We all have the same fears." (Palahniuk 110). All he remembers about the life in the church district – "...life was calm and peaceful in the district valley. ... the perfect way of life. ... Being happy and belonging, ... feeling safe" (Palahniuk 43) – is a lie. The church district is actually "a farm for raising and selling my [their] children," "[they] didn't even recycle"

(Palahniuk 41). And how the Tenders live their lives outside the church area is also planned and planted in their mind by the product education process.

Throughout Tender Branson's life, "there's always been someone to tell me [him] what to do. The church. The people who I [he] work [works] for. The caseworker. And I [he] can't stand the idea of being alone. [He] can't bear the thought of being free" (Palahniuk 160). Tender Branson is always "used to getting told what to do. Where to go. How to act" (Palahniuk 44). He is the ultimate product and his identity is manipulated so much that viewed from the outside, he does not possess any stable identity, or any identity at all.

However, there is a significant difference between Patrick Bateman's enslavement and Tender Branson's enslavement. Bateman is in the dominant position of his power relationships over people of lower social status and people who are his sexual victims. He is enslaved by his own ceaseless desire for the pleasure of power, and loses his identity as an individual with a soul. Tender, however, is in the dominated position of all his power relationships, ruled by the church, the government, the agent as a property. His identity is masked by the manipulations from outside. His enslavement is forced on him from outside, not by his desire for power. Because of this, he has a chance to find an exit from his enslavement and obtain his own individual identity.

### 3. Seeking for an Exit and an Identity

In the power relations of animal society, "the weakest animal, however, can generally avoid combat by adopting such submissive postures as crouching or presenting the rump" (Houellebecq 38). In the human society, the same pattern exists, as Foucault puts it: "when one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by the government of men by other men – in the broadest sense of the term – one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects and only so far as they are free" (qtd. in Rockhill 346). Once the subject completely gives up its freedom, and subject itself to the manipulation of power, the power relation is then meaningless. By doing so, the weak subject in the power relationship can avoid the exercise of power from the dominant subject. Thus, it can also be viewed as that the weak subject obtains a certain sort of control over its fate and over the dominant subject in the power relation. This is how Tender Branson breaks the power relationships imposed upon him by being totally submissive and performing up to all his expected identities.

One good example is Tender's interaction with his caseworker – "Every session we had, she diagnosed me with another problem she thought I might have, and she gave me a book so I could study the symptoms. By the next week, I had whatever the problem was down pat... One week, pyromaniac. One week, gender identity disorder" (Palahniuk 208). Actually Tender Branson is none of those pathological cases. In this power relation, Tender is totally obedient to the exercise of power from the caseworker, who is supposed to heal whatever mental disorder Tender has. The caseworker takes her authority to be a practice of power over the patient, while the patient plays along in the game by being totally submissive. If Tender practices his freedom to be himself, he would reject all the diagnosis from the caseworker. This will only result in more effort and pleasure on the part of the caseworker to try to prove the diagnosis and force the disordered identity on Tender again. However, Tender avoids the practice of power by being exactly what the caseworker diagnoses. Confused, the caseworker then loses the power in their relationship, because everything is so absolutely effortless that there is no longer the pleasure of the practice. Thus, Tender is able to break the power relation with the caseworker and take control of the situation in his own way – performing exactly as he is expected to be. It can be viewed at the first glance that Tender has absolutely no freedom and no stable individual identity in this case, but, after a closer look, his true identity is revealed as the performer, who obtains power over the case worker and takes control of the game by his perfectly submissive performance. As a result, the caseworker ends up being the one who has an issue to deal with, the one who is constantly unsatisfied, defeated and confused. It is a total reversion of their roles when the caseworker finally finds her therapy in vigorous house cleaning and is more than happy to take cleaning orders from Tender (Palahniuk 224).

How Tender Branson obtains power and control over his fate and his dominant subjects can be viewed as a mental practice of the S&M game, where in the end Tender's role and the role of his dominant subjects become reversed. Foucault's description of the reversion of roles in the S&M game is as the following: "What we mean by power relations is the fact that we are in a strategic situation toward each other ... So we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation. It means that we always have possibilities; there are always possibilities of changing the situation... On this point, the S&M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid... there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end the slave has become the master" (Foucault 167). The sense of reversed orders and roles is significant in Palahniuk's text – "It is weird how the name outlives the person, the signifier outlasts the signified, the symbol the symbolized" (88).

The reason that Tender has the ability to reverse the roles in power relations is that he is "free in relation to pleasures" thus "free of their authority" (Rockhill 347). He is brought up with the education to abandon all pleasures in life, to be submissive. His life purpose is to work, to serve and to deliver himself when called upon. Tender does not directly fight back when he is subjected to power, thus making the practice of power meaningless. His obedience is the mask he wears in power relations. Under the mask of obedience, Tender has an identity that takes control, makes choices and fights back in his own way. "According to my daily planner, I'm dusting baseboards. ... According to the *Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, I should go into a store and shoplift. ... According to Fertility, I should pack a lunch to eat while we watch strangers get killed. ... According to the Bible, I should be, I don't know what. ... According to Creedish church doctrine, I should be dead. None of the above really catches my fancy..." (Palahniuk 178). This

passage shows that though enslaved to all the authoritative opinions on what his life should be, Tender still has his own opinion, his own self. His way of practicing his opinion and his self is by applying the rules back onto those who made them, as in his relation with the caseworker. Another example is his interaction with the people he works for. Tender is supposed to follow the agenda they make for him strictly, and he fights back at them by doing exactly precisely what is on the planner. He would not answer the speakerphone when he is not scheduled on his calendar to do so. He chooses when to answer the speakerphone himself, "When the speakerphone goes silent, then and only then do I start" (Palahniuk 266). He tells them what to do, how to do it. He is the one who fixes their life constantly. In this relationship, it is Tender who is actually in control over the house owners.

Patrick Bateman is a totally different case. He is not able to do this role reversion by himself, because he is a slave of his own desire for pleasures of power, he is so stressed over it that he does not even have his own opinion on his social status any more. "Power is a positive network of strategic relations that we should aim at controlling and orchestrating through practices of freedom in order to keep both states of domination and self-enslavement at bay" (Rockhill 347). Unfortunately, Patrick Bateman is not able to keep his self-enslavement at bay; thus, he suffers from the loss of identity even though he is the one who practices his power over his victims. Bateman can kill all the bums in New York to practice his power in social status, he can kill as many women as he likes to practice his power in sexuality, but he cannot find his individual identity. All he has is only a mask of sanity and the madness that goes out of control under the mask. There is no Patrick Bateman – "there wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, hair, skin – but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure" (Ellis 282). This is the difference between Bateman and Tender: Bateman has no soul, no identity, and no control over his own desire. Even though he is in the dominant position of all his power relations, he is still a slave and his behavior does not differ much from typical animal behavior. If he enters an S&M relation, it is not because he has the power to reverse the roles in the game, which power can only come from his victim such like Jean, who is the submissive weak subject in the power relation. For Patrick Bateman, as long as his desires for the pleasure of power in his social status and sexuality stay, there is no exit for him. He will always be the unfortunate human product of the society's factory.

Tender, on the other hand, has his own identity and finds the exit from the enslavement of being a human product. Through the prediction of Fertility, Palahniuk suggests an exit and a start of a new life at the end of the story: " 'And after you can tell your life story and walk away from it,' Fertility says, 'after that we'll start a new life together and live happily ever after.' " (Palahniuk 6). The crashing of the plane is a symbolic exit from Tender's past and a symbolic start of his identity without the mask of obedience. In the story, Fertility only seems to be a plot instrument, a device to reveal and show the exit, while Tender is the one who have the ability to really take that exit. In this sense, Tender Branson is the true survivor of the power hierarchy of human society.

A similar case is Amelie in *Fear and Trembling*. Her interaction with Fubuki is a typical power relation where Fubuki is the dominant subject who practices power over the weak subject Amelie. At the beginning, Amelie tries her best to prove that she is not the half-wit that Fubuki assumes her to be. This effort to fight off the control over her and to be a free subject, simply invites more on Fubuki's part to prove that she is the half-wit as she should be. Apparently Fubuki enjoys the practice of power to force Amelie under the label she makes for her, until Amelie completely gives up her struggle for her proper position in the office and becomes totally submissive even when her career is "in the toilet" (Nothomb 94). Then, Amelie does not fight back; instead, she plays along in the game by performing exactly as what is expected from her. This leaves Fubuki's pleasure down in the toilet too. She cannot force Amelie to resign and lose face, and Amelie's calmness and obedience take away Fubuki's triumph and excitement in the battle. Thus, the power relation is broken and Fubuki's practice of power becomes meaningless.

Amelie takes control of the situation by putting on the mask of obedience, the mask of fear and trembling. It takes her a long way to learn the trick, but she succeeds anyway. Her performance of being a half-wit allows her to feel the satisfaction of fooling and controlling Fubuki's mind instead of being fooled and controlled by her in the office hierarchy. "So I put on the mask of terror and start to tremble. ... 'Perhaps...I...perhaps the garbage collectors would hire me.' 'Yes!' she replied, a little too enthusiastically. She took a deep breath. I had succeeded" (Nothomb 121). In the end, Amelie has reversed her role in her relation with Fubuki, she has then become the one taking control of the game and guiding the game according to her rules. Amelie is different from Bateman because she has her own opinions of the office hierarchy, and she is not stressed to insanity about her status though at one point that was pretty close – when she was defeated by the accounting assignment (Nothomb 60). But she is able to finally become free of the authority of the office status hierarchy and survive the battle against Fubuki. Amelie is the same kind of survivor as Tender Branson. She finds the exit from being a human product in the office hierarchy. However, for Fubuki, unfortunately, there is no exit, and she expires as a women product when she reaches thirty.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although human beings differ from other animals by having the need for an individual identity, their desire for power in social status and sexuality can be related to similar patterns in animal behavior. When this desire for the pleasure of power becomes the ultimate goal of human life, human beings are actually deprived the distinction of having individual identities. In this case, there are no more individuals, there are only human products produced by the extreme favor toward certain values. The result of this situation is the pathological individuals who have no identity, whose existence is merely a mask, and who are trapped in slavery no matter what are their positions in their power relations in society.

There are two kinds of enslavement, one is the self-enslavement of the Patrick Bateman type, and the other is the enslavement enforced upon the Tender Branson type of individual from outside. The basic difference between Bateman and Tender is that Bateman is in the dominant position of his power relations and he cannot overcome his desire for power and pleasure; while Tender is in the dominated position of all his power relations, and he adopts a submissive posture in those relations. Tender's way of playing along with expected obedience becomes his weapon of fighting back. The same rule holds for Amelie too. That is why Tender and Amelie are able to find an exit from their enslavement, while there is no exit for Patrick Bateman out of his self-enslavement. Under Bateman's mask of sanity, there is no identity, while there are individual identities for Tender and Amelie under their mask of obedience.

For individuals to be able to find the exit from the enslavement of being human products, first, they need to be at the weak end of whatever power relationships that are turning them into human products. In this position, they are the slaves, but they are not self-enslaved like Bateman. Secondly, they need to be able to give up the desire for pleasures in power, like Tender and Amelie does. If Amelie does not give up her struggle against Fubuki for the pleasure of possible power, she will still be trapped in the power relation and the hierarchy of human products. Then, they can take control of their own fate in the power relation and reverse the roles of the pair in the power relation. This is a mental S&M game that provides an exit for individuals like Tender and Amelie to escape from the trap and keep their own individual identity.

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