



GRIEF, FREEDOM, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN SANDRA NEWMAN'S THE MEN: AN EXISTENTIAL FEMINIST STUDY

Kaleem Khan
msnkaleem10@gmail.com

Lecturer, Department of English Literature, Cadet College Kohlu,
Balochistan, Pakistan.

Abstract

Dystopian literature often explores how extreme social disruption affects human identity and moral responsibility. This paper examines how Sandra Newman's *The Men* represents grief, freedom, and the search for meaning in a world where men suddenly disappear. It investigates how this catastrophic event unsettles personal identity, transforms social structures, and forces characters to reconsider their sense of purpose. The study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach based on close textual analysis of the novel. It focuses on how grief functions as a deep disruption of relational identity, how freedom becomes both an opportunity and a burden, and how meaning-making emerges as a necessary response to loss and uncertainty. The analysis shows that the disappearance of men does not automatically create a utopian feminist future; instead, it creates new ethical challenges that require responsibility, self-awareness, and social reconstruction. By bringing together existential thought and feminist concerns, this study argues that *The Men* is not simply a speculative narrative about gender absence but a thoughtful exploration of how individuals and communities rebuild identity and meaning after radical transformation. The article contributes to dystopian studies by demonstrating that existential feminism offers a useful framework for understanding grief, agency, and ethical reconstruction in contemporary fiction.

Keywords: *Dystopian Fiction, Existential Feminism, Freedom, Grief, Identity Reconstruction, Search for Meaning*

Corresponding Author: Kaleem Khan (Lecturer, Department of English Literature, Cadet College Kohlu, Balochistan, Pakistan).
Email: msnkaleem10@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In recent decades, dystopian fiction has evolved beyond political allegory to become a profound arena for philosophical inquiry into the fragility of human identity and the structures that sustain meaning. Contemporary speculative narratives increasingly explore not only the collapse of institutions but the destabilization of ontological certainties that underpin social existence. Within this intellectual landscape, Sandra Newman's *The Men* (2022) presents a striking and unsettling premise: the instantaneous disappearance of all individuals possessing Y chromosomes. At first glance, such a narrative appears to imagine a feminist corrective to centuries of patriarchal dominance. However, Newman deliberately resists framing the event as utopian emancipation. Instead, the novel depicts a world thrown into existential disarray—governments falter, economies destabilize, infrastructure deteriorates, and intimate relationships are violently severed. More significantly, the disappearance of men disrupts relational frameworks that previously structured selfhood and social coherence (Newman, 2022). The catastrophe therefore operates not merely as a political rupture but as an ontological one, compelling characters to confront the unsettling reality that meaning itself is contingent upon fragile social arrangements.

Although feminist dystopian criticism has rigorously examined systems of gendered oppression and patriarchal control, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the existential implications of systemic gender erasure. The removal of patriarchy does not necessarily yield stability or moral clarity. Rather, it exposes the extent to which even oppressive systems function as organizing structures that shape expectations, identities, and ethical coordinates. Simone de Beauvoir (1948) argues that liberation cannot be reduced to structural transformation alone; freedom acquires significance only when individuals consciously assume responsibility for their choices and their impact upon others. In *The Men*, the absence of male authority reveals a paradox: while women are no longer subjected to patriarchal subordination, they must now navigate a vacuum in which inherited norms and relational identities collapse. The novel thus invites a philosophical reading that foregrounds freedom as burden rather than uncomplicated empowerment. By destabilizing the structures that once mediated gender relations, Newman exposes the precariousness of socially constructed meaning and the difficulty of ethical reconstruction in a radically altered world.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism provides a crucial theoretical lens for interpreting this ontological rupture. Sartre (1943) contends that "existence precedes essence," insisting that individuals are not born with predetermined identities but must create themselves through deliberate action. However, this radical freedom is inseparable from anguish—the anxiety that arises from recognizing one's total responsibility in a world devoid of fixed moral foundations. In Newman's post-men dystopia, women are no longer

defined relationally through male presence or absence; instead, they confront intensified freedom that lacks familiar coordinates. The collapse of patriarchal structures does not provide immediate coherence; it produces uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Characters struggle to negotiate political authority, economic survival, sexual identity, and interpersonal ethics. In doing so, they reveal the existential tension between authenticity and bad faith—the temptation to evade responsibility by retreating into denial, distraction, or self-deception. Grief in this context transcends emotional sorrow; it becomes an ontological destabilization that compels confrontation with radical freedom and the necessity of self-definition.

Furthermore, contemporary gender theory complicates any interpretation of the novel as a straightforward feminist triumph. Judith Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender as performative, constructed through repeated social practices rather than biologically fixed essence. The disappearance of men disrupts these performative scripts, yet hierarchy does not vanish entirely. Racial, economic, and political inequalities persist, revealing that power reorganizes rather than dissolves. This persistence underscores Beauvoir's (1948) claim that freedom demands ethical engagement rather than structural substitution. Feminism within the novel therefore shifts from resistance against patriarchal authority to the demanding task of reconstructing collective values and inclusive social arrangements. Liberation becomes an ongoing process rather than a conclusive achievement. The novel thus invites an existential feminist reading that examines how grief, freedom, and ethical responsibility intersect in shaping post-men society.

The philosophical urgency of this intersection becomes particularly evident when considered alongside existential accounts of meaning-making in the face of suffering. Viktor Frankl (1959) maintains that the human will to meaning intensifies in moments of catastrophic disruption. Suffering destabilizes identity, compelling individuals to reconstruct purpose through conscious engagement with their circumstances. In *The Men*, the disappearance of husbands, fathers, sons, and colleagues destabilizes relational anchors through which selfhood was previously understood. This loss is not solely emotional; it dismantles the interpretive frameworks that structured everyday life. Consequently, the search for meaning becomes a survival imperative rather than a theoretical abstraction. Characters respond to grief through varied strategies—political activism, pleasure-seeking, denial, solidarity, and ethical reconstruction—each reflecting distinct negotiations with existential freedom. The novel thereby dramatizes how grief becomes the catalyst through which responsibility and authenticity are tested.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine how *The Men* integrates grief, freedom, and the search for meaning within an existential feminist framework. It asks how grief in the novel functions not merely as emotional trauma but as an ontological rupture that destabilizes inherited identities and compels radical self-definition. It further

investigates the ways in which characters embody Sartrean concepts of anguish, radical freedom, and bad faith as they attempt to navigate the uncertainties of post-men society. Finally, it explores how feminism transforms in the absence of patriarchy, shifting from oppositional resistance to an ethical project centered on reconstruction and collective responsibility. By situating these inquiries within both existential philosophy and feminist theory, the study aims to bridge a critical gap in current scholarship and to offer a multidimensional interpretation of Newman's speculative narrative.



Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the paper.

This article is organized into five sections. Following the introduction, which establishes the study's central concerns with grief, freedom, and the search for meaning in

The Men, the second section reviews relevant scholarship and outlines the theoretical framework, bringing together existential philosophy and feminist theory to guide the analysis. The third section explains the qualitative and interpretive research methodology used for close textual examination of the novel. The fourth section presents a detailed analysis and discussion structured around grief as rupture, freedom and responsibility, meaning-making after loss, and feminist reconstruction within the post-men dystopian setting. The final section offers a conclusion that synthesizes the findings and proposes directions for future research on existential feminist readings of contemporary dystopian fiction. Through this structured progression, the study demonstrates that Sandra Newman's *The Men* is not merely a speculative narrative of gender disappearance but a sustained exploration of how catastrophic loss reshapes identity, intensifies freedom, and compels an ongoing search for meaning within a transformed social order.

2. Related Literature

Hunt (2023) explains that dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives are increasingly examined not only as political warnings but also as cultural texts that register how human communities respond when large-scale disruption fractures institutions, norms, and moral expectations. This scholarship emphasizes that dystopia is not a single formula; it is a flexible mode that allows writers to test the stability of social life under extreme conditions and to expose how quickly “normality” can be undone when trust in institutions collapses. Within the field, critics often approach dystopias as laboratories for studying crisis governance, especially where a society's organizing categories—such as citizenship, security, and belonging—must be reimaged. In such narratives, the focus frequently shifts from describing collapse to tracing reconstruction: how communities define threats, redistribute responsibilities, and rebuild shared values when prior assumptions no longer hold. This broad approach is essential for studies like the present one, because it makes room for analyzing how grief, freedom, and meaning-making emerge as literary problems in the wake of rupture.

In feminist dystopian studies, scholars have increasingly argued that dystopian texts reveal gendered forms of power not simply through overt oppression but through the subtler organization of everyday life, including the regulation of bodies, family structures, and reproductive norms. Feminist dystopias often operate by showing how the personal becomes political under crisis—how women's identities and choices are shaped by institutions, cultural narratives, and unequal access to safety and authority. Martínez-Falquina (2021) demonstrates that contemporary feminist dystopias can function as warnings about patriarchal control while also highlighting how social breakdown exposes the vulnerability of women's rights when political systems become unstable. Importantly, this line of scholarship also complicates “utopian” assumptions: removing or weakening one form of domination does not automatically produce justice, because power can

reappear through new political arrangements, economic pressures, and moral conflicts. For a study that examines grief, freedom, and meaning-making in a gender-disrupted dystopia, feminist dystopian criticism provides a crucial foundation for understanding why reconstruction is as central as collapse.

Dystopian literature is also frequently framed as a reflective tool through which societies critique their own trajectories, especially in relation to governance, inequality, and ethical decline. In a recent comparative discussion of dystopian texts as social critique, Saleem (2025) emphasizes how dystopian narratives act as “moral maps,” encouraging readers to identify the anxieties of a given era and to question the direction of social development. This approach is valuable because it highlights how dystopias often address multiple layers of crisis at once—political authority, ecological instability, economic breakdown, and shifting moral standards—while also tracing how individuals interpret these conditions in their private lives. The relevance to the present study lies in the fact that dystopian critique is not limited to external systems; it also includes how characters internalize disruption, redefine relationships, and reassess the meanings that once grounded their identities. When a dystopian premise centers on mass disappearance and social reorganization, the critical question becomes not simply what collapses, but what narratives of meaning survive and what new narratives are constructed.

A major contribution to gender and identity scholarship is the argument that identity is not a fixed essence but a social process enacted through norms, discourse, and repeated practices. McKinlay (2010) brings Judith Butler’s concept of performativity into dialogue with the politics of identity, stressing that identities appear stable largely because they are continually reproduced through socially intelligible performances. This is especially relevant to dystopian contexts where disruptions can destabilize the scripts that once made identity coherent, yet do not necessarily erase the conditions that produce hierarchy. When a narrative imagines a dramatic rupture in gender relations, performativity helps explain why social meaning does not simply disappear; it is renegotiated, re-performed, and sometimes reimposed in new forms. A performativity-informed reading therefore supports a careful analysis of how gendered expectations shift after rupture, how “freedom” can be socially regulated even under new conditions, and why identity reconstruction often becomes a contested, unstable process rather than a straightforward liberation.

Another important development in feminist scholarship is the renewed reflection on intersectionality and how it travels across disciplines as a tool for analyzing layered inequalities. Bastia (2022) argues that intersectionality remains vital because it enables researchers to examine how power operates through multiple social positions simultaneously, preventing analysis from collapsing gender into a single, uniform experience. In dystopian narratives, intersectionality is crucial because catastrophe often

redistributes vulnerability unevenly, and social reconstruction can deepen exclusion for some groups even when it expands opportunities for others. An intersectional approach also supports more responsible literary interpretation by making visible the ways race, class, and political status shape characters' access to safety, authority, and voice. For a study centered on grief, freedom, and meaning-making, intersectionality matters because grief is experienced differently across social positions, freedom is constrained by unequal resources, and meaning-making is shaped by who is permitted to participate in public reconstruction and whose suffering is recognized as socially significant.

The concept of intersectionality has also been extended into empirical and methodological research, showing how scholars attempt to translate the framework into systematic analysis without losing its attention to power. Bauer et al. (2021) highlight a persistent challenge: intersectionality is widely referenced, but its core theoretical commitments are often diluted when applied in research practice. This insight is relevant for literary studies as well, because it reminds researchers that intersectionality is not merely a list of identities; it is a theory about how power structures operate together. In dystopian literary analysis, this encourages careful attention to how inequality is represented in narrative patterns, institutional responses, and social hierarchies, rather than treating gender as the only meaningful axis. It also supports more precise claims about "freedom" by showing that agency is not simply personal choice; it is shaped by structural conditions that distribute risk, recognition, and opportunity unevenly. This becomes particularly important in post-rupture narratives where new regimes of order may reproduce old inequalities in unfamiliar forms.

Existential approaches—especially those grounded in Sartrean traditions—have been used to interpret how individuals confront responsibility under morally unstable conditions, including the temptation to avoid freedom through self-deception. Bell (1977) discusses the difficulty of "overcoming" bad faith and explores how Sartrean accounts of self-deception illuminate ethical struggle, contradiction, and the unstable relationship between agency and avoidance. While this discussion is philosophical, it has clear relevance for literary analysis because dystopian fiction frequently depicts characters who must act without clear moral guarantees and who may retreat into denial, distraction, or rationalization when faced with loss. In narratives where catastrophic disruption forces individuals to redefine identity and responsibility, existential concepts provide language for analyzing patterns of evasion and accountability. Such scholarship supports the argument that freedom is not only an opportunity; it can also be experienced as a burden that produces anxiety, conflict, and moral instability—particularly in environments shaped by grief and uncertainty.

In grief studies, meaning-making research has shown that bereavement often involves reconstructing identity, rebuilding coherence, and re-storying the self after loss

disrupts one's assumptive world. Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2019) argue that grief is tightly connected to the narration of meaning: individuals work to interpret loss, integrate it into identity, and regain a sense of purpose through ongoing narrative processes. This perspective is valuable for dystopian literary analysis because dystopias frequently revolve around collective loss, where personal grief and social reconstruction overlap. When a narrative premise is built on sudden disappearance, meaning-making becomes not merely a private psychological process but a social force that shapes decisions, relationships, and new political commitments. Meaning-making research therefore supports reading grief as a narrative driver that influences how characters interpret freedom, accept responsibility, and search for new reasons to live and rebuild.

A complementary strand of grief scholarship shows that meaning-making does not happen only internally; it is produced in interaction with others through dialogue, reflection, and shared interpretation. Meert et al. (2015) illustrate how bereaved people often engage in sense-making, identity reconstruction, and continuing bonds through structured conversations and relational contexts, highlighting the social dimension of how humans process loss. For literary studies, this supports reading grief in dystopian narratives as both personal experience and collective practice: characters grieve within communities, negotiate competing interpretations of catastrophe, and develop new social bonds or conflicts through shared meaning-work. When dystopian settings force communities to decide what kind of society to rebuild, grief can become politically consequential—shaping solidarity, division, activism, withdrawal, or moral collapse. This line of scholarship strengthens the analytical link between grief and the broader social reconstruction that dystopian narratives dramatize.

Finally, literary criticism on youth and gendered agency in dystopian fiction has shown how narratives often position female figures as both individuals under pressure and symbolic actors in broader social transformation. Tan (2015) demonstrates that dystopian texts frequently represent women negotiating constraints, risk, and ethical dilemmas while also becoming central to collective struggles over authority and meaning. This scholarship is useful for the present study because it frames agency as relational: choices are made within structures of power, community demands, and social expectation, and “freedom” is therefore never purely private. In dystopian settings, agency can become heavier rather than lighter after collapse, because responsibility expands while stability contracts. When paired with meaning-making perspectives on grief, this literature helps clarify why feminist dystopian narratives often depict reconstruction as a difficult ethical project rather than an automatic outcome of structural change.

2.1. Research Gap

Previous studies has made strong progress in separate directions: feminist dystopia critics have examined how dystopian futures rework gendered power, reproductive

politics, uncertainty, and social rebuilding, but these studies typically emphasize institutional critique more than the lived processes of grief and personal meaning reconstruction (Martínez-Falquina, 2021). In a different field, grief researchers have shown that bereavement often triggers “meaning-making” work—people try to restore coherence, identity, and purpose after loss—but this research is rarely used as a central lens in feminist dystopian literary analysis (Neimeyer et al., 2019). Meanwhile, intersectionality research repeatedly shows that inequality reorganizes across multiple axes (gender, race, class), yet even systematic work notes that applying intersectionality in a sustained and methodologically consistent way remains challenging across disciplines, including humanities work that uses the concept mainly as a general commitment (Bauer et al., 2021). As a result, the literature still lacks a focused, integrated discussion that brings (1) grief as meaning disruption, (2) freedom as responsibility-bearing agency, and (3) feminist reconstruction under unequal power conditions into one interpretive account for contemporary feminist dystopias. This article addresses that gap by reading *The Men* through a unified framework that connects grief, freedom, and the search for meaning, rather than treating them as separate themes.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This article uses a practical, text-driven theoretical framework that explains what concepts guide the reading and where they are applied in the analysis. First, to examine how gender roles and identities are unsettled and then re-formed after a major rupture, the analysis treats identity as socially produced and uses performativity-informed scholarship to track how “new” norms emerge in language, relationships, and public expectations (McKinlay, 2010). Second, to interpret how characters respond to expanded freedom under instability, the article uses Sartrean-informed ideas about responsibility and self-deception; the concept of bad faith helps explain moments where characters avoid ownership of choices, justify harmful actions, or retreat into denial—patterns that are examined in key decision points and relational conflicts (Bell, 1977). Third, because the novel is driven by mass loss, grief is treated as a meaning problem as well as an emotional experience; meaning-making research guides the reading of how characters attempt to rebuild purpose, identity, and moral direction after disappearance (Neimeyer et al., 2019). Finally, to keep the analysis firmly within existential feminist ethics, recent Beauvoir-focused scholarship is used to frame freedom as ethically demanding—freedom is not only “having options,” but also being accountable for how one’s freedom affects others; this ethical lens is applied when discussing solidarity, responsibility, and rebuilding projects in post-rupture society (Langley, 2024; Nicholas, 2021).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design based on close textual analysis. The purpose is to explain how grief, freedom, and the search for meaning are represented and connected within Sandra Newman's *The Men*, and how these experiences are shaped through an existential feminist lens. The method is suitable because the study focuses on meanings embedded in narrative structure, character development, plot movement, and recurring motifs rather than on measurable variables. The analysis therefore prioritizes interpretation of language, scenes, symbols, and character choices, with the aim of developing a coherent argument grounded in textual evidence.

3.2. Data Source and Scope

The primary data for this research is the novel *The Men* (2022). The scope of analysis is limited to those narrative moments that directly represent (a) experiences of grief and loss after mass disappearance, (b) characters' responses to freedom and responsibility in a destabilized world, and (c) strategies of meaning-making through relationships, belief systems, social action, or withdrawal. While the study remains centered on the novel, it also draws on key existential and feminist concepts as interpretive tools to understand how characters negotiate identity, responsibility, and ethical reconstruction in the post-men setting. This scope ensures that the analysis stays aligned with the study's title and research questions rather than drifting into general commentary about dystopian fiction.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The novel was read multiple times to locate and organize relevant textual material. In the first reading, the focus was on understanding the overall narrative trajectory and identifying major turning points related to loss, social disruption, and character transformation. In the second reading, the focus shifted to marking passages that reflect grief, moments of choice, moral conflict, self-justification, and attempts to rebuild meaning. In the third stage, these passages were grouped into analytical clusters aligned with the study's key categories: grief as disruption, freedom as burden and possibility, meaning-making practices, and feminist reconstruction in the altered social order. Each cluster was then examined closely to determine how the text constructs these themes through character voice, relationships, imagery, and narrative consequences.

3.4. Validity and Trustworthiness

To maintain interpretive reliability, the analysis follows three principles. First, all arguments are anchored in explicit textual evidence, ensuring that claims remain traceable to the novel. Second, the study maintains conceptual consistency by applying the same interpretive lens across different scenes and characters, avoiding selective reading. Third, the analysis differentiates between description and interpretation by first establishing what the text presents and then explaining how it produces meaning through narrative technique. This approach strengthens the credibility of the findings and supports a balanced reading

that recognizes both the emancipatory possibilities and ethical difficulties that emerge in the novel's post-men society.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Grief as rupture and identity dislocation

Newman presents grief as a rupture that unsettles identity by removing the emotional structures through which characters once felt protected and oriented. The opening memory—"He's telling you it's going to be okay" (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6)—is not simply comforting; it signals how loss disrupts the basic human need for reassurance and stability. The phrase is small, but the novel uses it to show that grief reaches into ordinary dependence and daily emotional order. What disappears is not only a person but also the everyday narrative that told the characters where safety, certainty, and reassurance lived. In this sense, grief destabilizes the self because the self had been partly built through those relational routines.

The same passage also frames grief as an identity shock tied to intimacy and recognition. Newman ends the remembered scene with a blunt marker of absence: "Being an object of desire for men, gone" (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6). The loss here is not only personal; it is structural because it removes a social role and a form of recognition that previously shaped how the body and the self were understood. Even when the novel later shows women experiencing relief from harassment and fear, grief remains present as a dislocation—relief does not erase the collapse of intimacy, memory, and relational identity (Newman, 2022). Grief, therefore, becomes the starting point of the novel's broader struggle: characters must rebuild a sense of self without the old framework that silently organized meaning.

4.2. Freedom, responsibility, and bad faith

Freedom in *The Men* emerges suddenly, but Newman presents it as morally demanding rather than automatically empowering. The remembered surrender—"Letting him take over. Letting him drive. Letting him decide" (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6)—captures how authority and decision-making were often distributed in intimate life, whether lovingly or habitually. When men vanish, that familiar delegation disappears, and the characters must confront responsibility more directly: choices can no longer be handed over, postponed, or masked behind routine (Newman, 2022). The novel's post-men world therefore produces a form of freedom that is inseparable from pressure, because people must decide how to live without inherited structures that once carried decisions on their behalf.

Newman also implies that this expanded freedom creates conditions where self-deception becomes tempting, especially under grief. The same memory registers the appeal of emotional surrender—"The rush of being sexually helpless before it" (Newman,

2022, pp. 2–6)—and this helps explain why characters may later seek escape through denial, distraction, or impulsive choices (Newman, 2022). In moments of destabilization, avoiding responsibility can feel like survival. The novel thus suggests that freedom is not only about what becomes possible; it is also about how easily individuals can misuse freedom to avoid accountability, especially when grief and uncertainty make stable moral reasoning difficult.

4.3. The search for meaning after loss

The search for meaning is central to the novel because grief does not merely remove people; it removes coherence. Newman’s phrasing—“it’s going to be okay” (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6)—functions as a small but important sign of meaning itself: it represents the human desire for a story that explains suffering and promises continuity. After disappearance, that promise is broken, and characters are pushed into meaning-making—through rebuilding, relationships, activism, belief, and personal reinvention (Newman, 2022). Meaning, in this narrative, is not discovered as a fixed truth; it is pursued as a way to keep living when the old story collapses.

The novel also shows meaning-making as tied to worth and self-recognition, not only survival. In the same remembered scene, the affirmation “You are beautiful” (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6) indicates how identity and meaning are supported through recognition and intimate language. Once men vanish, characters seek new sources of validation and purpose—some through public responsibility and social rebuilding, some through new relationships, some through faith practices, and some through pleasure as a substitute for direction (Newman, 2022). The text thereby presents the “search for meaning” as an ongoing struggle: it is shaped by loss, pressured by freedom, and constantly tested by the instability of the post-men world.

4.4. Feminist reconstruction and ethical tensions

Newman’s post-men scenario does not automatically produce a feminist utopia; it produces a difficult reconstruction where ethical choices determine what the new world becomes. The remembered dependence—“Letting him decide” (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6)—can be read as a symbol of the old gender order, where authority (in private and public life) was often assumed to sit with men. When that structure collapses, women must not only take space; they must build institutions, norms, and systems capable of reducing harm and distributing responsibility more fairly (Newman, 2022). The novel therefore frames feminism less as celebration and more as work: the ethical labour of creating a just order when the old order is gone.

The ethical tension of reconstruction also appears through the novel’s emphasis on difference among women and continuing struggles beyond gender alone. Newman’s memory of intimacy includes “Letting him drive” (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6), and this phrase becomes suggestive: if men historically “drove” many systems, the question

becomes who drives them now and whose interests shape direction. The narrative shows that power does not disappear; it reorganizes, and the rebuilding phase introduces conflicts over politics, resources, safety, and recognition (Newman, 2022). Feminist reconstruction in the novel therefore becomes a test: whether a new society can be built with dignity and inclusion at its centre, rather than reproducing inequality in different forms.

4.5. Synthesis of Findings

Across the novel, grief initiates a rupture, freedom expands into responsibility, and meaning-making becomes necessary because inherited coherence collapses. Newman captures the rupture through the line “Being an object of desire for men, gone” (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6), which condenses how loss is both emotional and structural: it removes not only people but also the relational meanings through which identity had been stabilized. From this point, characters must confront a world where freedom is real but heavy, because choices cannot be deferred to old roles and routines (Newman, 2022). The narrative therefore links grief to freedom: grief destabilizes, and freedom demands response.

At the same time, the novel positions the search for meaning as the ongoing task that connects private life to public reconstruction. The remembered reassurance—“it’s going to be okay” (Newman, 2022, pp. 2–6)—exposes the human need for a meaningful story, and the disappearance breaks that story, forcing characters to pursue meaning through rebuilding, belief, activism, intimacy, or escape (Newman, 2022). Finally, feminist reconstruction appears as an ethical project rather than an automatic outcome: the collapse of patriarchy does not end the struggle for justice, it changes its form, making responsibility and inclusion central to what follows (Newman, 2022). In this way, the novel indirectly supports the study’s central concerns by showing how grief, freedom, and the search for meaning operate together in the work of rebuilding a post-men world.

5. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

5.1. Conclusion

This article examined how Sandra Newman’s *The Men* constructs grief, freedom, and the search for meaning within a post-men dystopian setting through an existential feminist lens. The discussion showed that grief in the novel operates as more than personal sorrow; it functions as a rupture that unsettles identity by removing relational anchors through which characters previously experienced reassurance, intimacy, and everyday coherence. In response to this rupture, the novel frames freedom as an intensified condition rather than simple liberation: with familiar structures disrupted, characters face the pressure of responsibility, the challenge of ethical decision-making under uncertainty, and the temptation to escape accountability through denial or self-justification. The analysis further demonstrated that meaning-making becomes central precisely because loss destabilizes the old story of life; characters pursue purpose through rebuilding roles, reconfiguring relationships, political engagement, belief practices, and other strategies that

attempt to restore coherence in an altered world. Finally, the study argued that feminism remains relevant after the disappearance of men, not as a finished victory but as a demanding project of reconstruction in which justice, inclusion, and ethical responsibility must be actively built rather than assumed. Taken together, the findings support the article's central claim that *The Men* is not merely a speculative scenario about gender absence; it is a sustained exploration of how catastrophic loss reshapes identity, makes freedom ethically heavy, and forces individuals and communities to re-create meaning within a reorganized social order.

5.2. Directions for Future Research

Future research can extend this study by comparing *The Men* with other feminist dystopias to test whether grief consistently functions as an identity-disrupting force across post-catastrophe narratives, and by examining how different cultural contexts shape the representation of freedom and responsibility in gender-altered worlds. Scholars may also explore intersectional dimensions in greater depth by focusing on how race and class tensions persist or transform after patriarchal collapse, and how these dynamics affect meaning-making practices. Another productive direction is to analyze narrative technique—voice, focalization, and memory structure—to show how the text formally produces grief and ethical uncertainty. Further studies could also examine reader-response and ethical reception, asking how audiences interpret liberation, loss, and feminist reconstruction in such scenarios. Finally, researchers may apply alternative philosophical frames—such as trauma theory, care ethics, or posthuman feminism—to broaden understanding of how dystopian fiction imagines survival, rebuilding, and the limits of social transformation.

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