

Original Article

An Analysis of Embodied Consciousness and Neoliberal Ecology in David Szalay's *Flesh*

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Abstract

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*This paper examines the interrelationship between embodied consciousness and neoliberal ecology in David Szalay's *Flesh* (2025). Drawing upon the philosophical frameworks of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault, the study explores how the human body functions not merely as a biological entity but as a lived site shaped by socio-economic forces, power relations, and cultural structures. The novel portrays the life journey of István, whose experiences of sexuality, war, labour, intimacy, and loss reveal how neoliberal systems commodify human existence and transform emotional relationships into functional exchanges. Through episodic narration, *Flesh* foregrounds bodily experience as the primary medium through which identity, memory, trauma, and perception are constructed. The analysis highlights how neoliberal ecology destabilizes emotional bonds, weakens moral commitments, and converts the body into an economic and social resource. Ultimately, the study argues that embodied consciousness enables individuals to perceive and endure lived realities, yet remains limited in healing existential rupture and psychological fragmentation. The novel thus presents the modern human condition as one marked by vulnerability, adaptation, commodification, and isolation within neoliberal modernity.*

Keywords: Neoliberalism and Ecology, Body and Identity, Trauma and subjectivity.

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Introduction

Embodied consciousness refers to the idea that human body is not merely a biological entity but a fleshly existence that is shaped by socio-economic framework. It perceives, represents and transmits social and cultural power over life and existence. It is a medium to internalise worldly experience and gives meaning to individual consciousness and phenomenological perception. The French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau Ponty in her *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) has defined embodied consciousness as, "The body is our general medium for having a world". (169) It reconstructs memories and experiences through neoliberal socio-economic structure where human body and its associative factors like education, health, desire and emotions are treated as economic resources.

Neoliberal ecology refers to the neoliberal systems created by environment, where an individual continuously adapts to unstable social, economic and emotional conditions. Race, gender, sexuality, class and neoliberal systems act directly on flesh- through labour, exploitation, desire, violence, and commodification. The vulnerability and struggle of human existence emerge through embodied sensations of touch, pain, pleasure, visual perception and sexual experience which sometimes generate inexpressible silence. Social framework commodifies the physical experience where the flesh becomes a narrative voice of emotional pain and psychic trauma. Michel Foucault in his concept of Biopower has shown how body is more than biological entity and it is shaped by various institutions of health, education, prison and family.

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It records lived experience of torment, pain, suppression, violence, resistance, and sexuality which shape one's identity and perception. Foucault states "The body is the inscribed surface of events." (1) He argues that the body is not only a biological entity but a site that witnesses the mark of social and historical forces and disciplining operations of power. Merleau-Ponty's ideas are aligned with Foucault's concept of bio power. He supports Foucault's ideology that physical entity is a lived experience that bears the primary site of phenomenal consciousness. Merleau-Ponty views that a man's identity is not an abstract cognition but it gets its meaning when the body encounters various experience that shape one's perception and subjectivity. She states, "To understand is to experience harmony between what we aim at and what is given... and the body is our anchorage in the world."

David Szalay's *Flesh*, a Booker Prize winning novel of 2025, is written in episodic narrative style. Through ten chapters the story traces Istvan's journey from adolescence to middle age, who goes through psychological trauma, various experiences and exploitations including early sexual abuse. It unravels the layers of fragmented persona of the protagonist who lingers between his loneliness and desire. The persona of Istvan is made up of sensory consciousness at neoliberal landscape. Here body is a material force which undergoes desire, exploitation, suffering and realization. It is an instrument that functions through neoliberal socio-economic order and exposed to extreme vulnerability where it endures and resist but ultimately survive. In *Flesh*, Szalay portrays human body as a location of **neoliberal ecology**, where István's physical existence and experiences are commodified to trade and transform within the changing landscapes of globalized Europe. The novel's 'poetics' traces the tension between the detached economic valuation and the crude, immature and raw reality of embodied consciousness.

The journey of Istvan's life is narrated through his physical experience rather than unravelling the psyche of the protagonist. The complexity of human behaviour can be understood only through bodily experience of desire, hunger, touch, pain, pleasure or sexual contact and its response in the form of withdrawal, endurance, resistance and acceptance. *Flesh* opens when Istvan is fifteen years old boy living with his mother. He has no opinion of himself and responds either 'Okay' or 'I don't know' which reveals either his acceptance of the situation or his ignorance which is constituted by his own lack of experience dealing with complex situation. His mother wants him to help a wealthy older woman who is in her forties. Her husband is a heart patient so she needs an assistant to help her whenever she goes to super market. Istvan does not want to go with her as he feels it's boring and monotonous to carry the grocery bags and helping a middle-aged woman. But Istvan's mother is firm to send him as that woman had helped Istvan's family sometimes back. Istvan accompanies that woman whenever she goes to the supermarket and helps her in carrying the heavy bags. In exchange that woman offers him some food and beverages. Gradually her needs change and her expectation from Istvan is not merely carrying her grocery bags but to provide his body as a disposable resource. Now Istvan is not just a practical helper but his body is an easily available resource to fulfil her sexual desire. Her sexual advancement reveals the neoliberal framework of relations that normalises exploitation and the objectification of the human body. Being an adolescent and a shy boy Istvan does not know how to respond. His raw understanding about moral codes is weaker than his curiosity to understand his own sexual impulses. He accepts whatever the woman offers him whether hospitality in the form of food or sexual overtures. The unquestioning compliance between Istvan and the woman is based on passive acceptance rather choice or resistance. As their casual sexual encounter turns into a regular practice Istvan struggle to identify that his dependency on the woman is driven by his physical desire or emotional need. Foucault's idea of power relations is evident here, as the woman exercises control over István's body, and the terms of their relationship are determined by her authority than by István's choice. As Foucault states, "Sexuality is not a natural given; it is a dense transfer point for relations of power." (103) Istvan's weak physical submission resists the single authority of woman over his body and life and he tries to subvert the abstract power relation. Istvan expresses his feeling of love which is conditional not emotional. As his emotions are raw but demands some accountability and bond in relationship, it creates a breach between them as the woman withdraws herself from him. The physical bond between Istvan and the woman survive till it is quiet, unemotional and unnamed which escapes the threat of moral obligations and ethical concern. It shocks Istvan when he realizes everything has been taken from him complimentary food, comfort and sexual access- and that nothing was ever in his control. It is difficult for István to distinguish between a mature emotional relationship and mere physical need. Although he attempts to subvert the power and control exercised over him by confronting the woman after her withdrawal, he ultimately fails. His confrontation with the woman's husband leads to the man's death, marking a decisive moral and psychological rupture in István's life. The trauma of his broken adolescent relationship continues to haunt him throughout his life.

The second phase of Istvan's life starts when he joins army as it was the only way to get a job. He gets posting in middle Eastern deployment (Iraq) as a part of the international coalition force. His five years tenure in armed forces leave an indelible mark on his whole life. He experienced extreme violence, death of his companions, helplessness, monotonous waiting for extraction, hunger, harsh conditions including heat and fatigue. He realizes that how the ideology of heroism proves empty and creates an existential void. There are no identity and glory but a meaningless endeavour which starts from physical discomfort and leads to psychological detachment. In the words of W.H.R. Rivers, "The psychology of war neuroses is one of the most difficult and complex problems which medicine

has ever been called upon to solve.” (150-160) River’s observation is apt and suggestive here as human body and mind have their limits and they fail to adopt the neoliberal rationality which constitutes militarized economics and technological violence. War enforces violent conditions on human mind and body that demands extreme adaptability from both yet embodied and psychological resistance reveals the failure of neoliberal systems that treat human life as infinitely adaptable.

Another chapter of István’s life depict his service as security driver for Karl Nyman and Helen Nyman. They have a son named Thomas. Karl Nyman has diagnosed with colon cancer. Helen, who is fifteen years younger than Karl, engages in an illicit relationship with István. After Karl’s death, István marries Helen; however, this union disrupts the family structure. Thomas refuses to accept his mother’s second marriage, and István, in turn, is unable to develop any genuine sense of fatherly affection toward Thomas. After their marriage, István and Helena have a son named Jacob. In his will, Karl leaves nothing to Helen, stipulating that the entire property will pass to Thomas when he reaches the age of twenty-one. István becomes a property developer and finances his various projects through Nyman’s trust, a practice that is essentially illegal. In an attempt to secure substantial funding for his Raniham project, he attends a party where a drunken Thomas publicly exposes István’s fraudulent dealings. This revelation shatters István’s ambitions and brings his aspirations to an abrupt collapse. Thomas is a drug addict, and at one point, due to an overdose, he is on the verge of death. Although reluctant, István calls the police, and Thomas’s life is saved. When Thomas turns twenty-one, he takes charge of Nyman’s trust and immediately forces István to repay all his debts. In addition to this, István’s life is further devastated by personal tragedies: his son Jacob dies in an accident, and Helena passes away after many years of hospitalization. These events shatter István’s life, breaking him both emotionally and financially. István engages in a sexual relationship with Mrs. Szymanski, Thomas’s nanny, as a means of escaping his grief and pain. However, it offers only a brief distraction and fails to erase his sense of loss. Ultimately, István becomes bankrupt and leaves England completely penniless, taking up work as a head of security. At a wine shop, he meets Bori, an attendant, and enters into a sexual relationship with her that is devoid of emotion or attachment. The relationship is short-lived, and they eventually part ways. His mother dies after ten years, and his life is reduced to bare survival. At the end, István sits on a bench, stripped of everything in his life—name, fame, love, joy, hope, relationships, and even a sense of purpose to move forward. The narrator quotes the emptiness and void feeling of Istvan in following words:

When it’s over he sits on a bench. The dry petals of chestnut flowers fall onto the path. They move on the asphalt with a papery sound, and when the wind stops they lie still. He watches them for a while. Then he stands up and walks back to the apartment. After that he lives alone. (304-305)

So, it is quite evident from the journey of István’s life that his relationships with all the women in his life are built not on emotional intimacy or moral commitment, but on physical proximity, utility, and contingency. His relationships whether with the older woman, Helen, or Mrs. Szymanski reveal how neoliberal conditions reshape intimacy, turning the body into both a site of experience and a resource to be managed. In Istvan’s relationship with the old lady is entirely based on sexual contact and routine existence, however it leaves an indelible mark on his psyche. While Helena plays a vital role in making overall personality of Istvan but it was also constructed on situational and physical framework. As it is portrayed:

Sometimes he misses Helen. It is only now that he fully understands what a significant part she played in his life. A more significant part than anyone else probably. In a way, that’s obvious. In another way though, it surprises him. Or it seems strange somehow, to put it like that. He is not sure why. (293)

It is true that the role of Helena in his life is partially opaque but it plays vital role in the development of his interior self. The overall journey of Istvan’s life emphasis on surface experience over psychological depth. Hence the intimacy in *Flesh* which starts with bodily connection, is pre-reflective and body acts before the mind articulate meaning. As a consequence, relationship lack permanence, accountability and progression. Istvan himself is incapable to form a conscious level of self-identity.

As the neoliberal structure works, it demands an individual’s adaptability to unstable social, economic and emotional conditions. Neoliberal ecology is crafted by neoliberal systems where ethical and moral commitments are weakened and relationship offers not stability and comfort but temporary ease, survival, distraction and disruption. Thus, Helen becomes part of István’s environment, providing him with employment, housing, financial support, and bodily pleasure, yet failing to fill the emotional void that gradually widens in the later stages of their life together. Eventually, they grow physically detached, sleeping in separate rooms, and remain connected only through the functional arrangements of a neoliberal ecology rather than through emotional intimacy.

István has two sons—Thomas, a stepson, and Jacob, a biological son. While Jacob represents the possibility of emotional rejuvenation in István’s life, Thomas embodies emotional rupture and resentment. His relationship with Jacob contrasts sharply with the logic of his neoliberal ecology, which denies him moral responsibility toward the child. Simultaneously, his emotionally void attitude and broken bond with Thomas align with the rational, economic, and social imperatives of a neoliberal environment, where ethical commitment and desire are absent. Though he is able to save Thomas’s life, yet he fails to save Jacob, who was truly the real source of hope and continuity in István’s life. The accidental death of Jacob shows the collapse of future hope, emotional continuity and moral possibility.

At the beginning, István's relationship with Helen shows his physical strength and sexual presence which provide him both control and a sense of protection. However, by the end of the novel, when he develops physical intimacy with Bori, a wine shop attendant, exposes the central truth of *Flesh*: when a man is emotionally and psychologically broken, the body can offer only a transient and short-lived distraction. The shattered psyche cannot be repaired, even though the body remains the primary medium through which all experiences- both pleasurable and painful are perceived. Hence body can perceive and can endure the pain but it can not heal the existential loss.

The critical study of *Flesh* shows how neoliberal conditions the very experience of human body including emotional bonds, relationships and existential identity. It represents a world where moral responsibility, emotional bond and relationships are subordinate to neoliberal ecology and embodied consciousness. Embodied consciousness can perceive worldly experience and can provide body as a commodity but limited heal emotional and psychological rupture. And at the end one's inner self is left vulnerable to endure irreparable trauma and isolation. The survival of human body within the world costs commodification of the self and demands sacrifice, adaptation and compromise. At the end, István is left without any relationships or social attachments, retaining only his fragmented persona, a product of his embodied consciousness, shaped and constrained by neoliberal ecology.

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