

Aggressive Contexts, Violent Masculinity and the Politics of American Identity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996)

Assis. Prof. Abbas Murad Dohan
Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University College for Islamic Science
Abbas.murad@alkadhum-col.edu.iq
Lect. Dr. Abdullah Jassim Muhamed
Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University College for Islamic Science
Abdullahjssm@iku.edu.iq

الملخص

لم تتوقف رواية (نادي القتال) منذ نشرها في عام ١٩٩٦ عن غرض واثارة القضايا الحساسة للنقاش والتحليل النقدي. على سبيل المثال، تناولت العديد من الكتابات النقدية عن الرواية قضايا الذكورة والعنف الشديد؛ في بعض الأحيان فيما يتصل بالرأسمالية، وما بعد الحداثة، وفي أحيان أخرى فيما يتصل بالإيديولوجية و/أو السياسة الأمريكية. ومع ذلك، يبدو أنه لا توجد دراسة تناولت تأثير السياق الأمريكي فيما يتصل بالاحتفال بالذكورة العدوانية وتشكيل الهوية الذكورية الأمريكية أيضاً. لذلك، تهدف ورقة البحث الحالية إلى التحقيق في قضايا العنف والذكورة والهوية في رواية تشاك بولانيوك "نادي القتال"، ولكن في علاقتها بالسياق الأمريكي. وتزعم أن مثل هذا العنف والعدوانية فيما يتعلق بالذكورة والهوية الذكورية كما هو موضح في الرواية قد تم تغذيتها والاحتفال بها منذ فترة طويلة باعتبارها قاعدة تقليدية داخل السياق الأمريكي - المجتمعي والثقافي والتاريخي والأدبي. الكلمات المفتاحية: نادي القتال، السياق الأمريكي، الذكورة و الهوية الذكورية، العنف، العدوانية.

Abstract

Since its publication in 1996, *Fight Club* has never ceased to raise and present sensitive issues for discussion and critical analysis. For instance, numerous critical writings on the novel have addressed the issues of masculinity and extreme violence; sometimes with relation to capitalism, to postmodernism and at other times with connection to American ideology and/or politics. Yet, there seems to be no study that has examined the bearing of the American context with relevance to celebrating aggressive masculinity and to shaping the American masculine identity as well.

Therefore, The purpose of the current study is to look into the problems of violence, masculinity and identity in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, but in relevance to the American context. It argues that such violence and aggressivity with relation to masculinity

and masculine identity as depicted in the novel have long been nourished and celebrated as a traditional norm within the American context; communal, cultural, historic and literary.

Keywords: *Fight Club*, American Context, Masculinity and Masculine Identity, Violence, Aggressivity

Introduction

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) is widely recognized as his best novel. It has won a series of prominent awards like the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award and the Oregon Book Award for Best Novel. The novel recounts the story of a man named Joe who is the narrator as well.

According to the novel, Joe seems to be having a conflict with his old life and identity and thus attempts to dispense with them with the help of another man named Tyler Durden. It turns out that Tyler Durden—who is Joe's alter-ego—is apparently schizophrenic and prone to violence. Yet, Joe only finds out that Tyler and he are one and the same by the closing of the novel, and, by then, Joe sadly recognizes his enslavement by Durden—the fictional figure—and to his will.

The novel is also a contemporary postmodern American novel, and because of that *Fight Club* is quite a controversial text. It has stimulated numerous debates amidst American literary circles, more particularly in relation to its context and its characters. The novel's context has generally been perceived as aberrantly different and characters as strangely uncharacteristic. Due to his particular style of fiction writing in *Fight Club* and other texts, some critics have even regarded Chuck Palahniuk as a "shock writer" and his fiction as "transgressive," (Keesey 2016, 16). In writing *Fight Club*, Palahniuk seems to aspire for touching upon the unusual and addressing the unordinary both in terms of subject matter and writing style.

As such, *Fight Club* chronicles the life of a white American man whose profession is his entire universe, private life and means of entertainment—is structured through an isolated and personally-quiet existence that is engulfed in a normative or quite passive masculinity. The setting of this American white male and his life events contemporize the late capitalist urban America. This period has been characterized by the prompting of a re-medial flow of ailment, obsession and viciousness.

The outpouring of violence in the personally-tranquil existence of the protagonist is seemingly triggered by the consumer-capitalist lifestyle of the time:

How to create an identity as an average man when cultural indicators of masculinity emphasize occupational success and wealth. Tellingly,

consumerism and capitalism interact in *Fight Club* to become an emasculating entity. (Floyd 2014, 9)

This violence has first been motivated by a passionate desire for emancipation, and then progressively embodied by systemic and violent acts of terrorism. Such violence is then directed at the dominant suppression engulfing both domestic and professional life. It thus seems like Joe or rather Tyler Durden is provoked by a startling and probable challenge represented in the impression that nobody fits anywhere in the then world.

The America of today, as the novel depicts, has developed into a kind of a peculiarly individualistic social congregation that encounters all with masculine as well as identity crises. Such crises are vividly exposed and fully materialized in the novel when the protagonist encounters Marla Singer:

Fight Club examines the crisis of masculinity. [It] shows the symptoms—identity crisis, violence, and a sexist backlash against anything feminine—that occur when masculinity is suppressed, ignored, or thought to be outmoded. (Wenley 2011, 86)

The American communal context has apparently become more organic so much so that it recommends a narrow understanding of the connection between sex categories. It seemingly pays more attention to fraternal union and discards women, which has further emboldened Joe the protagonist to fashion Tyler Durden. The context of the American community seems like becoming more of fiction than of reality that only a fictive personality can satisfy such idea.

It could accordingly be assumed that the novel has achieved such agenda through providing outrageous and troublesome portrayals of radical masculinity as exemplified in Tyler Durden. These depictions of masculine fanaticism in the novel would then convey the impression that new choices or substitutes regarding masculine identity and communication can only occur between its protagonists.

In that order, Durden further reinforces the illogicality of the standards of the American hegemonic/traditional masculinity: “The historical primacy of an American social ideology that was developed for and shaped by white American men can be interpreted as traditional masculinity,” (Jr. 2017, 4). He also enhances the irrational futility of the symbolisms of traditional communitarianism. Therefore, the novel through Durden and his pursuit for achieving his masculine identity seems to be attempting to make evident that true understanding could only be made possible through real communication; communication with the past with all its contextual categories and relevance:

The hero assumingly resorts to violence and aggression as a vehicle for escaping the burdens of Western society in an attempt to discover and/or reshape their masculine identities into models that are more fulfilling and intriguingly connected to our evolutionary past. . . . encouraging the males in his immediate vicinity to envision more significant, archaic forms of utilitarian and collective living. (Hedgepath 2019, 11)

Thus, the relevance of the past and the influence of hegemonic masculinity are heavily swayed on Durden because it represents the ordinary and conventional norm to be followed. The "mainstream masculine identity" in a given culture is the hegemonic masculinity. It is composed of integrated elements from many ideas of masculine identity that come together to create the idealized form of manhood," (Derragh 2018, 38). Moreover, the past with its traditional and hegemonic masculinity seems like approving of violence, aggressivity as well as sexual domination.

Therefore, the current research paper aims to investigate the issues of violence, masculinity and identity in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, but in relevance to the American context. It argues that such violence and aggressivity with relation to masculinity and masculine identity as depicted in the novel have long been nourished and celebrated as a traditional norm within the American context. The research paper at hand thus intends to discuss and examine the American context—communal, cultural, historic and literary—to highlight its importance in propagating violent and aggressive masculinity and in shaping the American masculine identity as such.

1. Aggressive Contexts, Violent Masculinity and the Politics of American Identity

It is argued herein that the American context has nurtured and maintained an aggressive perception and violent image of masculinity. Such aggressivity and violence with relevance to American masculinity seems to have long pervaded and persisted regarding the American context as if it is the norm.

It is therefore assumed that the American culture, literature as well as traditional history have boosted this traditional image of masculinity as violent and aggressive. Such violence and aggressivity have even been deemed as proof not only of masculinity but also of real manhood and true courage.

Besides, such traditional views and perceptions of masculinity have assumingly influenced the shaping of the American politics of identity as well. After all, identity—more particularly masculine identity—does not come from merely being someone but from performing and doing things that would qualify an individual for such an identity:

Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered entities that seem to be people but do not fit the gendered standards of cultural intelligibility that identify people. (Butler 2007, 23)

It is thus perceived that the American cultural context celebrates similar traditional views and perceptions of masculinity as well. Michael Kimmel claims that "in American culture the relationship between masculinity and aggressivity is so natural as to raise no questions or debate," (Kimmel 1996, 243). Currently, as a consumerist society, the American culture seems to be entailing violence in performing and achieving masculinity as well: "in a culturally consumerist society, such as the American one, white male violence is institutionalized and utilized as a tool to express virility through toughness and aggressive behavior," (Katz 2010, 263).

The American cultural context is hence highly aggressive and demanding. It, for instance, expects a man to work hard, to achieve professional success and to take responsibility for his family. Men who fail to meet such high expectations are looked down upon and usually suffer from various effects:

Because traditional masculinity in white American culture emphasizes the value of supporting a nuclear family, males in particular aspire to riches and high position in their employment. Gender role strain can have detrimental effects on men who are not successful in their careers, including stress, poor health, mental health problems, and conflict. (Kilmartin 2007, 228)

In addition, the American cultural context with its current expectations and cultural traditional values is so contradictorily challenging. An American man would thus find it quite impossible to reconcile between the two opposing cultural sets, which would then result in frustration and eventually lead to violence:

[*Fight Club*] discusses the impossibility of fulfilling the conflicting cultural demands placed on men, who are expected to give up the traditional, defining rituals of manhood while still performing the tasks for which those rituals were intended: to physically defend without training in single combat, to display bravery and valor without physically imposing themselves on others, to conquer without dominating, to acquiesce without surrendering, to control their environment without being controlling, to achieve victory without defeating anyone, and to remain prepared to fight without fighting. (Boon 2003, 275)

In historic terms, America as a country and as a people has known and exercised violence and aggression along the way. America as a nation has risen after a prolonged and bloody revolution against the British Empire. In the following years of independence,

Americans have apparently favored and implemented aggression and brutality against the native Red Indians almost all the way up to the twentieth century; the point at which the aborigines reached near extinction.

Hence, America's history is mostly one of wars, conquests, aggression and violent adventures:

The account of the brutal conquest of the continent from the American Indian peoples who previously possessed it was told in *The Wild West*. Although Buffalo Bill's plot was fictional, it was a performance that purported to depict history because, like Turner, Buffalo Bill used actual historical persons and events. (White 1999, 47)

In terms of literature, the American literary context is conceivably replete with examples of literary texts that depict violence and aggressivity with connection to masculinity, masculine identity and other issues. Whether particularly in American literature or in the western literature in general, it seems like literary texts "on masculinities indicates that aggressive masculine conceptions have spread throughout Western culture," (Derragh 2018, 1). In American literature, Ernest Hemingway and Chuck Palahniuk would, for instance, stand as prominent cases of illustration among many others.

Ernst Hemingway has, for instance, represented such traditional image and perceptions of masculinity as violent and aggressive. He has depicted male violence in one of his posthumously published short stories; "An African Story (1972)". Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is yet another literary work that further attests to the portrayal of violence and aggressivity as a reaffirmation to manhood in contemporary American literature.

The characters of the novel seem to be following a similar path of violence and aggression on their way of achieving masculinity or becoming men. Such violent and aggressive path seem to them to be the exclusive route to shaping their identities; their masculine identities that would satisfy the expectations of the American context and survive it.

Hence, suggesting that the American context is aggressive seems an arguably solid assumption as demonstrated in the novel and through other communal, cultural, literary and historic references. The chief character in *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden, in his resort to violence and aggression seems to have an awareness of the American context and its particular expectations as well as contradictions of masculinity.

In further support to the arguments provided earlier, it could also be said that aggression in relation to the American context is "one of the primary defining features of traditional masculinity," (Floyd 2014, 224). For one thing, it seems like showing weakness or

susceptibility, within the American context, by men is perceived as a sort of an offence. Thus, anger and aggression are generally and commonsensically connected with one another.

After all, anger both suppresses and produces particular emotions that can only be interpreted through violence and aggressive acts. In that order, it seems like aggression and anger not only go hand in hand but are also deemed masculine-related qualities in the American cultural and communal context:

Because it is frowned upon for males to display vulnerability, anger is one of the few emotions that men are genuinely permitted to express in American culture. Because anger lowers empathy by emotionally isolating men from others, it can readily be linked to aggression. This makes it simpler to act aggressively and hurt other individuals without feeling guilty. (Kilmartin 2007, 224-5)

Similarly, anger apparently entails supremacy and power—which are masculine qualities par excellence—and thus seems to confirm masculine identity and corroborate the concept of masculinity. It also causes men to feel like having the power to do things or even to do away with them: “I agreed with Tyler's statement that we are the slaves of history and the trash. I wanted to ruin everything lovely that I would never have. Destroy the rain forests of the Amazon,” (Palahniuk 1996, 123). Hence, anger is as much related to aggression as both aggression and anger are associated with power.

Likewise, just like anger is linked to aggression and both are associated with power and masculinity, it then follows that anger, aggression and masculinity have immense bearings on the shaping of an individual's identity:

Men from minority groups are frequently the ones who are unclear of who they are. Men who belong to one of these groups run the risk of being oppressed by the majority group, which is the cult of the white, wealthy, heterosexual man. (Floyd 2014, 15)

It could accordingly be observed how men with poor life conditions and less job attainment are more aggressive and more violent than wealthier or more job-established men. Therefore, it could be suggested that through such communal, cultural, historical and literary perceptions of masculinity, a man living up to it would rather use their hands than words to express themselves, their true masculinity and ventilate their anger and other piled up emotions.

In Palahniuk's novel under study, the fight club set up by Joe, the narrator, and joined by many others including Tyler Durden apparently satisfies such traditional perceptions and image of masculinity as aggressive and violent. Though this organized fight club is seemingly perceived to replace support groups, it is in a real sense nothing more than a materialized

representation of those traditional perceptions of masculinity. In the afterword to *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk further illustrates and supports this postulation:

Books like *How to Make an American Quilt*, *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and *The Joy Luck Club* were all over the bookstores at the same time. All of these books offered a social model for women to be together. to share their stories while seated together. to talk about their life. However, no book offered men a fresh social paradigm to live by. (214)

Such assumption becomes clearer and more tangible when readers observe how Joe and other members express no reservations or criticism against Tyler Durden even when his actions turned out to be more and more alarming. Not until Durden sets plans and prepares explosives to bomb a national museum does Joe think that this is too much to bear or turn a blind eye to, and decides to confront and stop Durden.

It could thus be argued that the fight club is created out of the men's desire to regain their lost masculinity, achieve their desired masculine identity and preserve their honor, as it were:

The narrator and other men in the book decide to reject the ideals that have commodified, emasculated, and castrated them by starting, joining, and taking part in fight clubs. This gives them the power to take charge of their own lives and create identities that are at odds with commercialized models of masculinity. (Hedgepath 2019, 277)

The fight club has thus fed into the men a sense of power they have long missed: "What we have to do, people," Tyler told the committee, "is remind these guys what kind of power they still have," (Palahniuk 120). Besides, it has not only helped men live up to the expectations of true masculinity but has also assist them in shaping and achieving their masculine identity as well. As such, the fight club has become indispensable for those men: "after a night in fight club... nothing can piss you off. Your word is law," (Palahniuk 1996, 49).

Besides, it even gets obvious that the men partaking in violent fights and getting injured have become the object of admiration. They are looked up to as the archetype of masculinity as well: "men in fight club who have imperfections such as scars are perceived as more masculine than the man with impressive musculature," (Floyd 14). After all, it seems like the fight club "allows men to reclaim their masculinity by affirming a pre-modern, less consumerist model of masculinity that values physical strength and fighting," (Quiney 2007, 346).

Therefore, it could feasibly be assumed that *Fight Club* has just come as a response to an already existing need and a welcoming context. The novel, in Palahniuk's words, has thus

been written out of a need for the ventilation of men's peculiarly negative emotions. As a postmodern novel, this release seems to be modeled in violent ways though. Consequently, critics have examined and criticized the novel for what they call "the portrayal of—hyper-masculinity and—warrior culture," (Giroux 2001, 17). Their criticism is apparently based on the observation that the novel perceptibly highlights and reinforces such traditionally assumed perceptions of masculinity:

I'm not even close to reaching the bottom, according to Tyler. I can't be saved if I don't fall all the way. Jesus accomplished this through his crucifixion. I shouldn't simply give up money, possessions, and expertise. This is more than a weekend getaway. I should be heading toward catastrophe and away from self-improvement. I can no longer just be cautious. According to Tyler, you can only do anything when you've lost everything. (Palahniuk 1996, 70)

More to the point, it could be observed that the members of the fight club in the novel—those who engage in violent brawls—generally seem like fitting in and coming from the blue-collar class of workers. They are thus average American white males but ones who seem to lead disappointing lives and as such appear to be looking for a window to air their stress and negative emotions through. It provides its members with possibilities and enables them to escape from their empty lives and pointless jobs: "Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world," (Palahniuk 1996, 49). The fight club is that window and the organized physical violence is its means.

However, it also seems like the novel's fight club has offered and involved more than that for its members. It has proffered its members with a feeling of true value for who they are, not for what they do or how much they have: "As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job," (Palahniuk 1996, 143). The fight club has also become a symbol of freedom and even rebellion for all its members who partake in the fights.

Through the fight club, the characters of the novel escape a seemingly pacifying and pointless life and eventually achieve their desired masculine identities:

The characters in Fight Club overcome the potentially blinding obstacle of pacification, and instead choose to reshape their identities while ascribing new, purposeful, though chaotically self-destructive roles for themselves. In contrast to the disembodied ideals of consumerism, Fight Club gives its members something to hold onto: definitive rules and standards. (Hedgepath 2019, 281)

Tyler Durden becomes the epitome of the fight club and the source of inspiration for its participant fighting males. After all, all members of the fight club are working men who

seem to have “jobs they hate”, and “just so they can buy what they don’t really need,” (Palahniuk 1996, 149). Unsurprisingly though, as violent and organized men, their violence ultimately extends outside the fight club into the real world.

Durden inspires other men to do so and starts directing them out to conduct gradually dangerous acts "of vandalism, from starting fights with regular people," expanding their agenda beyond isolated incidents "to causing massive property damage of government buildings," (Palahniuk 1996, 119, 121). Therefore, taking their violence out to the communal context demonstrates their desire to act violently in actual environments.

It further illustrates and attests to the assumption that the American communal context is a fertile land of violence and aggressivity especially with regards to masculinity, so to speak. A close reading of Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* in tandem with certain domestic acts of terror such as the Oklahoma City Bombing, for a case in point, would further reinforce such assumption.

Moreover, it is sometimes suggested that Durden might have influenced other men and inspired them to perform acts of violence in the outside world because he provides them with a father figure:

One may argue that the premise in *Fight Club* is not that men need better socialization, but rather that every postmodern man has the potential to become a toxic and stereotypically violent brand of masculinity if he has a healthy father model to emulate. (North 2019, 31)

As a postmodern fictional text, the novel might be suggesting that as well. This is due to the claim that "every postmodern man has the potential to develop a masculinity which is stereotypically and toxically violent in form, without a healthy father figure to mimic," (North 2019, 31). It could also be assumed that the absent father is vital to understanding why this crisis exists in the first place. In this vein, it seems like the father figure is absent in American cross-contextual reference that in turn “referenced the disruptions to gender relations and familial structures that resulted from America’s involvement in the war,” (*ibid* 171).

Although critics have definitely held different opinions over why Palahniuk’s novel has represented and celebrated such violent and aggressive image and perception of masculinity, they have all agreed that it has for whatever reason. Yet, those who criticize the novel for its violent and aggressive depiction of masculinity “often overlook the novel’s ironic critique of the violent worldview espoused by its characters,” (Kuchař 2020, 27).

Hence, it could be argued that the absence of the father figure has—for men of fight club—apparently introduced Durden as the typical and ultimate substitute.

In addition to serving as a father figure, it could as well be contended that Durden has served as a role model for other men causing him to become unavoidably influential and unresistingly obeyed. Introduced as a role model for all other members of fight club, Durden has also provided them with a father image to identify with:

The absence of the father in Fight Club has prevented the boy from identifying with the same, and in his search for a role model, the main character has only found representations of men in advertising and other media, where men are frequently portrayed in accordance with the stereotypical ideal of the masculine man—the detached, active, independent male with a muscular body. (Trotta 2004, 137)

Accordingly, whether Durden has served as a father figure for the other members of fight club or provided them with a role model to identify with, he tremendously succeeds in motivating them to act violently in and outside the fight club. That subtle conclusion as delineated in the novel has a strong bearing to an aggressive and violent American context; be it communal, cultural, historic or literary.

Besides, the novel's portrayals of masculinity could be perceived as delicate reexaminations of a sort of rebellious freedom the American community has long endorsed: "The novel implies that the terrorism it depicts should be interpreted as an affirmation of freedom as a fundamental social construct rather than as a rejection of it," (d'Hont 2016, 41).

The narrator justifies the violence he and other members of fight club enact in the novel by defending such acts as the only feasible route they have to create the kind of freedom they desire: "I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things. Only end them," (Palahniuk 172). Moreover, The American context seems to be aggressive in and also outside its natural confines.

Given that, it could be assumed that portrayals of violence and aggressivity in the novel as well as the terror attacks of Oklahoma City would eventually be "no different than what Americans rain on the heads of others all the time," (Palahniuk 1996, 110). Therefore, the American external as well as domestic context would very much feel alike; both seem to be violent and aggressive and both have demonstrated that. Therefore, both America's doings to the outside world and Durden's wish seem like primitive aspirations to drag the human community back to its basic origins. Both attitudes also seem to be driven by a desire to reaffirm an aggressive and violent identity of masculinity; a masculine identity that is seemingly "based on physical prowess and violence," (Wenley 2011, 84).

This supposition bears much resemblance to Durden's unreasonable want to "blast the world free of history," (Wenley 2011, 84). He, too, seems to act like and be depicted in the novel as an extension to and representation of an American hyper-masculinity identity. Durden obviously embraces and defends the hypothesis of going back to a living state of primitive human community; a state of no technology or any modern aspect of life, a state in which only tribes and hunting are all there is:

You will shoot elk in the moist canyon woodlands surrounding Rockefeller Center's remains. Every night, what's left of humanity will withdraw to deserted zoos and lock itself in cages to protect itself from bears, large cats, and wolves that pace and observe us from beyond the cage bars at night. We'll paint the skyscrapers with enormous totem faces and goblin tikis. (Palahniuk 1996, 124)

Besides, Durden's statement as mentioned above further refutes the suggestion of those who suppose that Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is a critique of capitalism. This is so because the novel is almost unanimously recognized as a celebration of masculinity, of violent and aggressive masculinity though: "*Fight Club serves more as a defense of authoritarian masculinity and the instant gratification that comes from abuse and violence than as a critique of capitalism*," (Giroux 2001, 15). Though the novel might inferentially be perceived to offer certain clues and insights into the cruel nature and dynamics of capitalism, it undoubtedly remains an unapologetic celebration of masculinity, of violent and aggressive masculinity to be precise.

Likewise, the novel's masculine violence and aggressivity as depicted in the violent acts of the fight club and enacted by its members—though contradictory—have to be interpreted as a response to and a reflection of the society's politics in this regard. Such acts of violence could thus be perceived not as an abnormality or as alien acts but as contextual traditions coming from and originating in the American context.

It thus seems like the novel refers to McVeigh's understanding and definition of his violent acts as a "retaliatory strike and a way to achieve social transformation, showing how its extreme nature acts as a deeply problematic attempt to redevelop freedom through physical trans[ag]gression," (d'Hont 2016, 42). Hence, the argument here proposes that the novel has set up an ideal image of a male body in order to put forward the idea that the concept of masculinity is not brought to an end but is rather refashioned:

Both the militia movement and the fictional Project Mayhem describe themselves as contagious social groups that originate from within society and engage in a government-inspired politics of warfare, despite the fact that extremely violent acts like the Oklahoma City Bombing, carried out by a

former Michigan Militia associate, contradict the militia movement's self-proclaimed patriotism. (Faludi 1999, 413)

Though violent and aggressive, such acts have arguably to be interpreted not as acts of destruction but rather as attempts of construction; of constructing social power and individual freedom:

Project Mayhem's bombings of museums, offices and credit card company premises are not attempts at social destruction, but should be read as aggressive enactments of freedom as a freedom of trade, and attempts to assume a position of social dominance. (d'Hont 2016, 54)

As such, it seems like the violent acts of the members of fight club as depicted in the novel are proposed as attempts at constructing individual and social freedom as well. The novel apparently suggests that personal as well as communal freedom is endangered and made susceptible by certain social and ideological hypotheses of a conceded status of masculinity.

The novel thus through Tyler Durden seems to be proposing the desired kind of masculinity in correlation with individual and social freedom. That is probably why Durden seems to be granted a green light to act violently and to act with impunity. The violent acts he and other members of fight club are enacting seem to be serving their ultimate objective of constructing such a refashioned concept of freedom.

Therefore, by greatly relying on body and muscles, Tyler Durden and all others appear to be intent on reviving a dwindling image and a compromised status of masculinity and masculine identity: "Tyler primarily uses his muscular physique to express his masculine identity. He fights other guys, destroys other people's bodies, and eventually restores his belief in freedom," (d'Hont 2016, 48). Additionally, through seemingly designating paramount importance to muscles and physicality, the novel thus seems to deem such qualities as the source of such ideological and social refashioning of masculinity and freedom: "Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face," (Palahniuk 1996, 32).

The American communal as well as cultural context seems to be imbedding men with the idea that body and physique is the true source of masculinity and masculine identity. Physical violence and body are thus perceived to be the sole alternative of achieving masculinity and shaping a true masculine identity:

The only way Tyler's followers can restore their manly identity is by literally destroying their current identities; the only way they can become agents in a

society that has deadened them is by connecting with their basic drives for violence and competition. (Giroux 2001, 11)

Any other sources including authentic internal qualities are no longer required or qualifying: "The internal qualities once said to embody manhood – surefootedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose – are merchandised to men to enhance their manliness," (Faludi 1999, 35). Consequently, it is vividly portrayed in the novel that "Tyler, communal terrorism becomes the foundation for politics itself, and physical violence becomes the essential underpinning for masculinity," (Giroux 2001, 11).

Hence, the politics of identity in such a community would be highly demanding; Durden defends his violent acts only as individual attempts to question and challenge a community he identifies as cruel and tyrannical. Durden's attitude bears much resemblance to Timothy McVeigh's justification that he "gave for his decision to bomb a building to make a political point", defending his act as a "retaliatory strike, a counter-attack," (Vidal 2002, 108). It could therefore be argued that Palahniuk's novel embraced an already standing reality and developed it through literary and fictional staging. The novel seemingly asserts that Durden's violent acts are originally driven by an aspiration to "remind these guys what kind of power they still have," (Palahniuk 1996, 120).

In view of that, Palahniuk's *Fight Club* portrays men and their violent and aggressive acts as a response to and a result of the American context; communal, cultural, literary and historic. Such traditionally contextual perceptions along with contradictory current cultural expectations have caused a kind of internal struggle "where men do identify with traditional, masculine traits and behaviors but do not express so outwardly as it does not fit with cultural standards," (Boon 2003, 268). The American society is thus deemed to assist in projecting as well as enacting such traditional perceptions and practices of masculinity and masculine identity.

Likewise, the novel seems to be touching upon the crisis of American identity; the identity crisis of white heterosexual men at the time of writing the novel:

Fight Club and *American Psycho* represent key moments in masculine identity construction. This pairing is intentional, as the novels represent the outcry of the masculine crisis which emerges around the respective time of their publication. (Jr. 2017, 9)

These were the times of stark contradictions and radical changes; the times of opposing cultural rhetoric and expectations. The conflicting context of what men were asked

to do and what they were expected to do has caused such a turn to violence and aggressivity in order to achieve masculinity and shape masculine identity.

The novel has thus presented men who have adopted violence as a strategy to restore their lost masculinity and power and to form their masculine identity:

Under hostile circumstances where any male identity that exists is simultaneously on the verge of extinction rather than emergence, Joe/Tyler attempts to overcome this crisis in white masculinity through a redemptive recovery of male prowess. This perception initiates a compensatory trajectory of masculine reassertion, coding itself in terms of the scandalous and the prohibited. (Friday 2003, 7, 12)

In such a context therefore, violence and aggressivity do not seem to be the problem by themselves; rather, they are followed as necessary means to perform masculinity and shape a masculine identity.

2. Conclusion

In the light of the argument and analysis provided earlier, it could be concluded that associating masculinity and masculine identity with violence and aggressivity in the novel has come as more of a response to an already aggressive context than a deviation from or an aberration of it. Thus, the assumption that *Fight Club* has depicted—probably even celebrated—violent and aggressive masculinity is quite tangible and solid in the novel's presentation and depiction of events. Nevertheless, it remains equally valid to suggest that the American context—social, cultural, historical and literary—has nourished and maintained an attitude of violence and aggressivity when it comes to masculinity, manhood and masculine identity.

Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* could eventually be deemed to have invited the readers' attention to an obscure but quite serious issue; the problem of identity for American men in 20th and 21st centuries. This is so because men's situation in 20th century has become, in Mendieta's words, impossible since "the ideal and the real are so irreconcilable, so distant, that men can but only be rendered schizophrenic," (Mendieta 2005, 397). The American communal and cultural context seemed like favoring a particular kind of masculinity and of masculine identity; one that is violent, aggressive and assertive. Such a context has also stressed on professional success as an important element of achieving a true masculinity and a desired masculine identity.

Therefore, *Fight Club* has to be interpreted as a response to a demanding context and thus as a representation of a desired traditional masculinity. This masculinity seemed not only

to be attempting hardly to regain its status and honor but also appeared to be taking the path of violence and aggressivity as its only resort.

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