

## **The Cult Follower: Adolescence and Violence in Emma Cline's *The Girls***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the articulation of adolescent desire and violence as depicted in the novel *The Girls* by Emma Cline. Set against the background of the hippie culture of the late 1960s in California, the novel is an exploration of female identity and bonds of feminine fellowship and friendship within the distinct confines of a hippie commune.

This paper will attempt to analyze how the concepts of femininity and adolescence become the sites for erasure and eventual reformulation of identity aided by violence and aggression. The novel is narrated by two versions of the protagonist, Evie Boyd. A grown up Evie remembers and recounts her experience as a teenage runaway who ends up at the hippie commune led by a Charles Manson like figure. Cline has attempted to revisit the real life Manson murders through her fiction but unlike the real life female followers of Manson, Cline's characters are more alluring and possibly more dangerous than the cult leader himself.

This paper will examine the nature of desire as encapsulated by these female characters who are driven by a constant need to distinguish themselves, both through the eyes of men and through their own perspective. The inevitable tension created by such a desire creates the climax of the novel with its tragic outcome.

**Key words** : female desire, adolescence, cult, violence, identity

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What makes a cult? Historically, the term 'cult' does not have benign implications and the existence of such groups, often led by a charismatic leader, exist even today. Janja Lalich defines a cult "as a particular type of relationship that is not only based on an enormous power imbalance between the leader and followers but also includes a hidden agenda. Whether a group or one-on-one situation, a cult relies on deception, manipulation, and exploitation and almost certainly results in abuse"(4).

All cults operate on variations of the same theme - appeal to that desire of people that wants something better for themselves. This can range from better work performance to the urge to forge better social relationships. Cults sell the suggestion that only they possess the tools for self actualization that people have been desperately craving.

Through this lens, this paper will examine the intersection of power and violence in Emma Cline's novel *The Girls* where the author presents the lives of a young girl who meets a Charles Manson like figure in late 1960s in California. The protagonist's acceptance into a hippie commune eventually reaches a tragic climax with its inhabitants committing multiple murders in Hollywood Hills. However, for fourteen year old Evie Boyd, the commune is the only space that fulfills her desire to leave behind traces of her old existence as she wrestles with a desperate need to be transformed into someone who could be cherished and loved by others. This paper will examine how the adolescence of young girls becomes malleable at the hands of a particular kind of oppressor begetted by patriarchy.

In Cline's novel, adolescent girls navigate the treacherous task of quenching and regenerating their desires which involves varying modes of self -destruction. The protagonist and narrator, Evie, while recounting her past, presents a teenager grasping at straws to fill the deep emotional vacuum in her life. Throughout the novel, it seems as if the grown up Evie is still struggling with a deep sense of loss. As a teenager, her uneventful summer spent in dismay of her neglectful mother and her dull surroundings, leads her to meet an egomaniac drifter inhabiting a ranch with other young women, seemingly controlling their bodies and their minds. This becomes the adventure that Evie wanted. For Evie and the girls she befriends, self erasure becomes a strategy for survival. They fall for the strange charisma of Russell Hadrick, Cline's Manson like manipulative leader of their group. He exploits their weaknesses masterfully but the novel is not simply a tale of the girls' spiral into self -destruction. Their strength comes

from their fervent desire to matter in a world that constantly views them as objects- objects to be used and judged in a continuous cycle. This provides the female characters with a complexity that enable them to construct and reshape their relationship with Russell in their own right, albeit with disastrous consequences.

"The thought-reform program (i.e, behavior control) occurs without the knowledge or consent of the one who is being manipulated. By attacking a person's innermost self, cult leaders manage to dissemble and reformulate members according to the cult's desired image. In other words, through a variety of social and psychological influence techniques, they take away you and give you back a cult personality, a pseudo personality. They punish you when the old you turns up, and they reward the new you"(Lalich,5)

In this regard, it becomes important to discern the differences and similarities that are embodied in the identities of these girls. Evie is first drawn to the strange allure of the group of girls and her desperate need to escape her suburban existence is exposed through that encounter. The free-spirited and bold veneer of these girls, led by the beautiful nineteen year old Suzanne, become Evie's obsession whereas Suzanne and the others are controlled by their loyalty towards the male leader, Russell. Evie wants to be older than she is and amass experiences of freedom and rebellion. Here, Cline presents to us a picture of female adolescence which is not uncommon in its fervent desire to be seen and acknowledged. However, Evie's desire is not centered on Russell but on Suzanne. Though Evie embraces Russell both sexually and ideologically, her focus on emulating Suzanne enables her to see what the other girls don't- Russell's naked greed for power and fame which renders him as a pathetic figure in her eyes. That Suzanne and the other inhabitants of the commune do not recognize themselves as a means to an end but mistakenly believe themselves to be Russell's partners is what accelerates their tragic end. Russell sexually and emotionally preys upon each of the girls living with him as he paints himself as their saviour and a messianic figure, misunderstood by the world.

Janja Lalich writes that "most people come into cults with certain personal values, including having a sense of their own sexual preferences, behaviors, norms, and expectations. But because of the influence of the group's persuasive methods, reinforced by leadership demands and peer pressure, in most cases a cult member's value system and sense of morality get altered, sometimes radically"(pg6). Lalich adds that "given the arbitrary and erratic nature of cult leaders and their reasoning, rules may change often and unexpectedly. But no matter what the set-up, behaviors and attitudes are directed from on high and are not to be disputed. The cult leadership justifies these rules by explaining that the particular lifestyle is necessary to reach the purported goal"(10).

In the novel, Russell's cultivated personality betrays his need for power and attention, just like his followers. He was part musician and part preacher of free love who wanted to be someone important, someone others could not do without. He was hungry for a record deal and the money and fame that would come with it. His failure in this regard would transform into violence, thus altering his own fate and of his female followers.

His effect on Suzanne and the other girls made Evie curious and eventually accept him. The devotion he inspired was unlike anything Evie had known - it was steadfast and stubborn unlike the silly longing of teenagers that Evie had seen and experienced herself. By giving Russell and Suzanne the pragmatism that Evie lacked in herself, she prepares herself to surrender to their reasoning. In Evie's words, "I was jealous of that trust, that someone else could stitch the empty parts of your life together so you felt that there was a net under you, linking each day to the next"(pg 101).

However, the role of violence within a cult cannot simply be explained as the result of brainwashing. It is true that Evie and Suzanne were the victims of manipulation and coercion but Cline does not completely strip her characters of agency. The climax of the novel occurs when Suzanne and a few other girls are persuaded by Russell to kill Mitch Lewis, the man who had rejected Russell's ethical and musical aspirations. The girls commit the horrific crime at Russell's behest but as imagined by Evie, who was abandoned in the streets by Suzanne hours before the incident, the girls wanted to shake the world in a way that no one would ever forget it. This determination, however horribly twisted in its execution, was solely their own. This was their opportunity to leave a mark on the world. Evie was dramatically spared this opportunity as she ultimately made her way back home, the one place she had desperately tried to avoid. Being characterized as a blind, unquestioning follower does not fully explain the thoughts and actions of Evie and Suzanne. However, it is important to note that their agency is left fractured as their drive for freedom and rebellion collides with Russell's toxic masculinity. He tries to project his own ideas onto the lives and minds of his followers but lashes out when he is unable to capitalize upon the same. Strangely, it is not Russell himself but his followers who become the fiercest believers of his values. This irony engenders the colourful personalities of Suzanne and the others and emboldens them to do the unthinkable in the end.

As a result, Evie under the tutelage of Suzanne immerses herself into getting rid of her mediocrity. She had convinced herself as a teenager that she was average, both in looks and intellect. But at the ranch/commune, she was provided with a space that could transform her into something better. The affection and friendliness of the older, more attractive girls pushed Evie to correct her so called flaws. These included letting go of her timid personality and embracing the role of a bold seducer of not just men but people. Therefore, Cline demonstrates how within the ecosystem of the hippie commune, Evie's actions become wilder and more dangerous. She steals

money from her mother to support the commune members and breaks into the home of a family friend. Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler argue that "to create places of their own, girls must struggle to assert their rights to place-making practices that often put them into conflict with institutionalized power structures"(2).

The burden to erase their old, mediocre identities in favour of a new, bold and therefore desirable one leads to Evie and the other teenagers becoming both victims and perpetrators of violence. The girls grow closer due their shared goal of never becoming ordinary, of never becoming invisible. The answer to whether they fully succeeded in achieving their goal is highly complex.

The girls surely buy into Russell's promise of utopia where led by him, they must flourish in an environment free from exclusion and norms that restrict their spirit of abandon. However, when Russell spirals into resentment over his failure to shed the tag of a third-rate musician, the gloss of the utopic promise also comes off. In a world of malfunctioning adults who have let them down, Russell's commune has the promise of letting these girls seize the confidence and power that has been denied to them for far too long. However, these girls at the cusp of burgeoning womanhood fail miserably in discerning between unschooled confidence and sheer recklessness. The lack of inner control that they so craved for leads to circumstances of external excess which originated in the mind of Russell and not their own. The desire to be seen and to be loved ironically becomes the biggest obstacle to be their fully realized selves. They failed to love themselves first or be sympathetic towards their so called ordinariness. They trade the stigma of being average for something more darker and tainted. Probably, within the twisted ecosystem of the ranch/commune, this is their only success.

Cline presents to us fascinating female characters in an even more fascinating setting of the late sixties in America where the hippie driven gospel of radical acceptance of everything and anything proved to be especially troublesome for the young, female and the vulnerable. Russell like male figures want to create and sustain their followers in such a manner that make them extensions of himself. This can be seen in Russell's way of describing Suzanne and the other girls and the vastly different way in which Evie describes Suzanne to the reader and later remembers them as a grown woman years later. This is not to say that the girls are not monstrous in their capacity to kill but it is not an easy extension of Russell's evil. His villainy may have made them commit the final murderous act but their evolution towards it began much earlier. It began in their anger at being dismissed and discarded by the adults of their world, whether it was Evie's parental neglect or Suzanne's refusal to say no to danger at any cost. The adolescent girls as presented by Cline chase desire and danger beyond the boundaries of their own experience which makes them compelling storytellers of how loneliness and desperation can ravage even the most ordinary of people.

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