

Linguistic Power and Emotional Capitalism in *Exciting Times*: A Faircloughian Critical Discourse Analysis

Behzad Pourgharib 

Associate Professor of English Language and Literature, Department of English Translation Studies, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran. E-mail: b.pourgharib@umz.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Research article

Article history:

Received: 2 May 2026

Received in revised form: 9 Aug. 2026

Accepted: 24 Aug. 2026

Published online:

Keywords:

Critical Discourse Analysis,
Emotional Capitalism,
Linguistic Power,
Neoliberal Subjectivity,
Exciting Times

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship among language, power, and emotion in Naoise Dolan's *Exciting Times*, drawing on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Illouz's Emotional Capitalism. The interplay of characters' actions is discussed, focusing on ambiguous speech, unequal verbal interaction, and their influence on relationships and power gaps. The researcher illustrates how emotional experience seems personal but is constructed by power, interpretation, and expectations within relational exchange. Emotional depth is unequal; Julian does not show the depth that Ava does. The study suggests that constructing intimacy connects to neoliberal discourses of emotion as commodity in an exchange economy, where language negotiates power, realities, identities, and expectations. To specify scope, this analysis follows Fairclough's three-dimensional model (textual, discursive practice, and social practice) and focuses on key dialogue excerpts that negotiate emotional and economic transactions at the micro-level, correlating with macro-level neoliberal logic.

Cite this article: Pourgharib, B. (2026). "Linguistic Power and Emotional Capitalism in *Exciting Times*: A Faircloughian Critical Discourse Analysis". *Journal of Linguistic Studies: Theory and Practice*, 2026 (Vol.), ...-.....



© The Author(s).

Publisher: University of Kurdistan.

DOI: [10.22034/jls.2026.146005.1384](https://doi.org/10.22034/jls.2026.146005.1384)

*Corresponding Author: b.pourgharib@umz.ac.ir

Introduction

In the past few decades, an expanding scholarship has addressed the relationship between the neoliberal capitalist system and personal relationships, emotions, and identities. This aligns with findings that literature has historically represented dominant discourses while marginalizing women and common people as the 'Other' (Zare & Parsa, 2024). In recent years, the study of current literature has become a common method of investigation in these areas, mainly because a great deal of modern fiction embodies the impact of macro social/economic conditions on micro everyday life. Naoise Dolan's 2020 novel *Exciting Times* is an excellent example of the link between the macro and micro aspects of social/economic connectivity. In this novel, the theme of class difference, globalisation, and emotional dependency speaks of how relationships are more influenced by larger macro-societal/economic contexts than by any desire of the individual (Putz & Neff-Aertselaer, 2008,). This can be discussed in terms of the emotional capitalism of Eva Illouz, who argues that emotional experiences - feelings - are now increasingly enveloped by economic rationalities and the values of the marketplace (Illouz, 2007). Emotions have become a part of economic life and are impacted by value, exchange, self-management, and personal investment. Thus, in many cases, intimacy is expressed through mechanisms that are akin to economic exchanges.

Characters represent different instances of striving to develop love, loyalty, and belonging in *Exciting Times*, within multiple social and economic inequalities/marginalisations. Language is an important component of the process of initiating and maintaining social relationships. Communication creates authority, expresses feelings, and regulates interpersonal distance in *Exciting Times*. This idea is linked to the work of Norman Fairclough and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which regards discourse as a social process that reflects and reproduces larger social systems (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002). In any choice of language used, there is always an alteration of meaning or interpretation that is necessary to be able to speak the language. Language can be used to show the ideology that lies under the text, and therefore can help perpetuate social inequality.

New research shows that unequal power dynamics, mobility, and accumulation of capital often exist in intimate relationships (Carter 2022). Indeed, these disparities are frequently experienced through communication because discourse plays a significant role in the establishment, management, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Reyes, 2015). Although recent studies on emotional capitalism and the subjectification of neoliberalism have grown, few studies have looked at how language constructs an emotional relation within the field of recent literary fiction to date. Moreover, *Exciting Times*, being a piece of literature, has not received much attention in terms of discourse analysis research so far. The Critical Discourse Analysis Framework of Fairclough and the Emotion Capitalism Theory of Illouz are adopted in this research to understand how language functions in relation to power and emotion in *Exciting Times* to create intimacy, how emotions are negotiated through language, and how larger conceptions of emotionality in the novel illustrate neoliberal theory. This research adds to the current conversation in our contemporary society about the significance of language in the development of

emotional experience (Hu & Ge, 2025) and to the conversation on language, power, and intimacy. To achieve the above aims, this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How are power inequalities constructed and maintained from a linguistic perspective (modality, ambiguity, silence and linguistic economy) in the interactions between Ava and Julian in *Exciting Times*?
- 2) What does the novel evoke of emotions that help understand the logics of emotional capitalism, including the differential affective investment, valuation and exchange?
- 3) What does the discourse of *Exciting Times* do to the production and naturalisation of neoliberal subjectivities in the context of self-reflexive narration, self-monitoring, and discursive fragmentation?

The three-dimensional analysis of the novel's dialogue sample (Fairclough, 1995) is directed by these questions, which are then discussed in the appointed order in the Discussion section.

A brief note of previous works

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach designed to grasp the connections between language, ideology, and power in a social context where language and discourse influence broader social structures, and where all linguistic decisions are made within an ideological framework or system that influences social relations (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). In addition to this, the critical discourse theoretical perspective (CDTP) aims to examine the power asymmetries that can be analysed in institutional and everyday communication using discourse analysis. The work by Fairclough and Chiapello (2002) shows how the discourse of neoliberal capitalism is reorganised by the language of managers and organisations, with new concepts of flexibility, personal responsibility, and the subjectivity of consumers. These are significant to literary and cultural studies because they provide a glimpse of how an ideology of neoliberalism is coming to be reflected in the perception of identity, work, and relationality in representations such as literature.

Eva Illouz's sociological work has an important theoretical approach to examine how the development of emotional life in today's world has evolved under the impact of late capitalism. She argues that emotions are becoming more and more "capitalistic" (Illouz, 2007; 2012), that is, they are being produced in a capitalist economy, and then turned into symbolic and social capital. "Emotional capitalism" is a good example of the way intimacy, desire, and feeling are now an integral component of economic systems, rather than a part of them. Illouz's theory will be useful for helping to examine current fiction that depicts emotionally complex relationships that have been impacted by neoliberalism. Moreover, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) have found ways to study the interplay of power and ideology by studying language. Van Dijk (2008) demonstrates the cognitive and social aspects of discourse to reveal how mental models, ideologies, and the control over information in discourse are used to maintain power. Wodak and Meyer (2016) also offer methodological developments in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and offer the possibility of using CDA in other contexts, such as political, cultural, or literary ones. Together, these works exemplify CDA as well as a powerful way to expose the underlying structures of

power.

Sanders & Spooren (2015) conducted a study of causal connectives in the Dutch language and discovered that, although the items in the language might appear similar, the choice of what to use is not neutral. Rather, it is a reflection of the cognitive classification and level of subjectivity of the speaker. Another empirical approach, which Sanders & Spooren used, was to analyze written texts, spontaneous conversations, and chat-based interaction to develop a framework to examine the embedding of ideological influences at the grammatical and discourse connective level. The focus of scholars remains greater on the three aspects of emotional labour, intimacy, and inequality in neoliberal societies. The scholarship on inequalities of intimacy explains that intimate relationships are created in relation to structural inequalities of class, gender, and mobility, particularly in the global context (Carter, 2022). The studies demonstrate that intimacy is not the only kind of intimacy; it is also socially and economically shaped by larger inequalities. Although there are growing numbers of studies that have considered each set of concepts, CDA and emotional capitalism, in isolation, there is very little research that has taken both of these frameworks as a whole when studying the product of the contemporary period in literary works. In particular, the novel *Exciting Times*, a contemporary fiction, has not been discussed in detail in the context of systematic discourse analysis, which shows a correlation between the linguistic structures and the emotional capitalism. Based on the above, this research aims to fill the existing gap in research by applying the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory by Fairclough and the Emotional Capitalism theory by Illouz in analyzing the power, intimacy, and emotion constructed through language in a neoliberal context.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical approach of this study is taken from Fairclough's (1995) CDA theory, which conceptualizes language as an aspect of social practice, which is part of power relations and ideology. This type of Critical Discourse Analysis will likely aid in the analysis of literature because it offers a systematic approach to the analysis of the language of a text in relation to a larger social and ideologically-based discourse. After that, this research will employ Fairclough's model as an analytical tool in the three dimensions. The first of three levels of analysis will focus on the text level. The textual level will be focused on the linguistic features (such as vocabulary, grammar, modality, and cohesion) of discourse, which will not only be looked at as stylistic devices, but will also be indicators of how ideologies are positioned and relations of power exist between those positioned by those ideologies. The second level of the analysis will be on the practice of doing discourse. This will involve the production, distribution, and reception of texts, as well as the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of texts. Last, the social practice of discourse will be examined, and the discourse will be placed in a wider socio-political context to illustrate how language works to reaffirm or challenge social relations through discourse (Fairclough 1995).

From Fairclough's perspective, discourse is not simply a representation of society; rather, it constitutes an area where social realities are constructed. At the same time, language constitutes, reproduces, and

validates power dynamics, and may appear to have become (naturalised) and accepted as an established norm. All of these practices reflect the ideological impact of routine linguistic practice and thus contribute to the perception that people hold of socially 'real' and of where their position or standing might lie (as argued by Fairclough, 1995). One of the main terms Fairclough (1995) uses in his analytical framework is interdiscursivity, which describes how several discourses are woven together in a single text to create meaning and to reproduce ideology. The concept is particularly relevant to the fiction of the present or contemporary period, as there are numerous overlapping and/or interconnected types of discourses that can be found in literary works, such as the intersection of economic/institutional discourse and literary discourse, and conversational registers in everyday life. In each instance of interdiscursivity/overlap of different forms of discourse, the opposing ideologies that exist in the discourses competing with one another and how they are coexisting, can be observed. Another important question in this context is that of naturalisation. Naturalisation is the process whereby dominant ideologies become deeply embedded in the way language is used, and become perceived as something that is 'common sense'. This is important because of the way power is exercised through discourse, especially when one is not using a clear form of coercion. As Fairclough has developed CDA, I will use this in my analysis of the words and phrases in *Exciting Times* as my main framework. Fairclough's model has been effectively applied across various textual genres, including religious and historical discourse (Athari, Khosravi Varmakani, & Sohrabi, 2024). The framework allows for an analysis of the ways in which language constructs power relations, creates subject positions, and reproduces ideology that is represented in the novel in relation to contemporary social life.

Method

In the present study, a kind of qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is conducted based on the three-dimensional model of Fairclough (1995). Data are comprised of 15 dialogue excerpts that were purposefully sampled from Naoise Dolan's *Exciting Times* (2020). The excerpts were chosen because they clearly portray discursive expressions of power imbalance, emotional negotiation, silence, ambiguity and neoliberal subjectivity that are relevant to the research questions.

All the selected texts were analysed systematically at three levels of Fairclough's model. Lexical, modulatory, grammatical, cohesive, ambiguous, and silences were analyzed at the textual level. The level of discursive practice examined was how meanings were produced, negotiated, and interpreted through interaction, as well as how meanings were interdiscursive and how communicative control was maintained. The results were analyzed at the level of social practice in the wider ideology of neoliberalism and emotional capitalism with the theoretical framework of Illouz.

Since CDA is interpretive, the researcher took a reflexive stance towards the research where interpretations are based on recurring linguistic patterns instead of individual examples. Alternative interpretations were considered throughout the process of analyzing the data; however, only interpretations that were consistent across the three analytical dimensions and directly related to the

research questions were retained. Any excerpts that failed to fit into the principal analytical categories were not included in the final corpus.

Discussion

Discursive Control and Asymmetry in Exciting Times

Language is significant in the novel *Exciting Times* as it is used to establish and reconstruct the unequal power relations between characters. From the Faircloughian perspective, the cause of these imbalances is not only in personal relationships but also the structural conditions and mechanisms inherent in discourse that affect each relationship's encoding of dominance and subordination at the level of a text (Fairclough, 1995). When it comes to Ava and Julian's interactions, one side has more agency than the other when it comes to discursive agency. Julian's speech is also characterized by being brief, constraining, and lacking in contextualized reference. Julian aims for a discourse of controlled distance with the use of modal distancing and epistemic hedging. Julian uses modal distancing and epistemic hedging to produce a discourse of controlled distance, meaning that he produces a meaning that lacks specificity and can eventually lead to a decreased sense of certainty in the interaction for interpreters and to a continuing sense of control for Julian. In Critical Discourse Analysis, modality is one of the main features that provides information regarding the ideological setting of an interaction as it affects the commitment, authority, and distance of the interaction process between interlocutors (Reyes, 2015). So Julian's minimalistic language should not be interpreted as a lack of communication, but rather as an example of Julian's discursive control, suppressing closure of interpretation, forcing the need for inferential thinking on the part of the participants when attempting to complete a communicative interaction.

Ava's language is much more complex, more emotional, and more cognitively elaborated than Julian's language. For example, Ava over-explains the meaning of her discourse – clarifying, justifying, revising – the more elaborated her discourse is, the less procedural authority she has in the interactional order, from a Faircloughian point of view. On the other hand, the contrast between Ava's use of syntactically ambiguous language and syntactically transparent language is a clear indication of an ideological difference, since the use of economized language is a discursive resource of authority, while the discursive elaboration is a discursive mark of relational vulnerability and of reduced discursive authority. It is the minimal use of responsivity that produces gaps between conversatives that make Julian's case more symmetrical in the distribution of the conversational initiative, thereby affecting the communicative responsibility. According to van Dijk (2008), discourse power is often realized through controlling topic initiation, relevance, and interpretative framing as opposed to through overt coercion. In the novel, Julian's minimal responsiveness is used as a means to invite Ava to continuously interpret, infer, and stabilize meaning; it is vividly illustrated. This is quite clear as Julian attempts to communicate with Ava's expression of emotion, using the characteristic minimalism of his style.

Do you love me? I said.

What he said next didn't hurt me. It was exactly what I'd been looking for to murder the outgrowth.

I like you a great deal,” he said. “Now go to sleep. (Dolan, 2020, p. 69)¹

Julian's response is a multivalent discursive act. It validates the inquiry and offers a more circumspect affirmation that is not strong enough to represent commitment ('like' versus 'love' and 'a great deal' versus an unconditional affirmation), and it also ends further dialogue with 'Now go to sleep. Language's minimalism in Julian's case can be read as a strategic brevity conveying how discursive control can be discovered by exploiting the minimization of the linguistic toolkit to reduce interpretative closure and control the character of emotional interaction. Further, the passage reflects Ava's metadiscursive awareness, as Ava sees that Julian's statement is 'exactly what I had been looking for to kill off the excess. However, the metadiscursive knowledge that Ava has does not give Ava any discursive power; the metadiscursive knowledge does not seem to be an attenuating force towards the continuation of the operation of the asymmetry. This exchange is also paradigmatic in the novel, in the early phase of their relationship: 'I'm glad we're friends,' he'd say, and far be it from me to correct a Balliol man (Dolan, 2020, p. 8) .

Ava is able to correct Julian's language, but she doesn't. This power differential between them maintains that corrections are not understood or communicated as positive. Rather, her taciturn attitude may be viewed as a way of meeting the power relations set up by their previous encounter, where one party had more discursive power than the other. Additionally, Ava engages in a form of self-monitoring that is high – both in terms of self-reflection and the stories she tells about herself – making systems of emotional expressivity easily visible throughout her discourse. Such typicality in the way of expressing emotion can be used to corroborate earlier sociolinguistic studies on the relationship between emotion and vulnerability in relational complexity (Salmon, 2010; Coulmas, 1998). Conversely, Julian is lacking in emotional expression, giving him a further source of diacritical authority and autonomy. This contrast between the two characters is stressed by the author's use of Ava's words:

I knew I'd do anything for money. Throughout college back in Ireland, I'd kept a savings account that I charmingly termed “abortion fund.” (Dolan, 2020, p. 10)

In this case, because material lack defines what can and cannot be talked about, they shape discourse by limiting the chance for articulating resistance/disagreement; this example demonstrates how the financial tension affects the practical decision-making of Ava, and also how the lack of material affects her approval of asymmetrical modes of interaction. Asymmetrical interactional patterns also refer to power and authority in the social meaning of language in everyday life, particularly emotional containment in dominant patterns of interaction, which is perceived as non-emotional and rational, different from subordinate patterns of interaction, which are perceived as exaggerated and/or emotionally charged (Fairclough, 1995). This dynamic is thematised in the character of Ava, as it is when she is described as a teacher:

¹ All quotations from Dolan (2020) are taken from the first edition published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (London). The line “I like you a great deal,” he said. “Now go to sleep.” appears at the end of Chapter 15, on page 69. We have verified this wording against the primary source and standardised all instances of this quotation accordingly.

Because I lacked warmth, I was mainly assigned grammar classes, where children not liking you was a positive performance indicator. I found this an invigorating respite from how people usually assessed women. (Dolan, 2020, p. 9)

Ava is clear in her links between emotional expression and gender roles, and makes an interesting point in revealing how emotional expression is enforced in the social norms of daily life, as an ideology. Ava's "lack of warmth", unlike the traditional idea of femininity, creates a professional asset for her, only in her specific job setting. Her observation exemplifies how emotions are coded, how they can be manifested in different ways for men and women, and how they are valued differently due to differences in gender. In Ava's mind about Julian's way of communicating when he arrives in London, there's more to be added to this difference. This can be seen in their written communication, for example:

He replied that on the contrary, he suspected sex without bodies might pose challenges.

(Dolan, 2020, p. 79)

Julian offers a very witty and abstract response to avoid any emotion and uses this as a discursive strategy of withholding emotion through intellectualization. Instead of responding to Ava's desire for some kind of emotional intimacy but not physically being present with her, he converted her statement into a logical form of expression. This is evident in their continued communications:

I wrote: I miss having sex with you but only because i have a body, & if i didn't then everything would be easier. He replied that on the contrary, he suspected sex without bodies might pose challenges.

(Dolan, 2020, p. 79)

Discursive power is the product of the conversion of confessional emotional communication to rational disagreement, and it does not lose relational proximity; it also experiences the emotionality as a rational concept and as legitimate. As Fairclough (1995) explains, this practice will render dominant communicative ideology(s) as natural, and the specific language choice used will be established as a logical and/or obvious position. As stated by Pourgharib and Pourya Asl (2022), naturalising can be beyond a fictional relationship. This phenomenon also occurs with regard to non-fiction travel narratives. Western writers, by using methods of minimalism and concision in describing illustrations, have attempted to objectify and neutralise their subjective representation of reality, thus discarding the interpretative points of view that could have been presented to their readers. The authors assert that the choice of linguistic minimalism is not just a stylistic approach, but also a tool to produce and naturalise epistemic asymmetry (Pourgharib & Pourya Asl, 2022). Thus, the linguistic asymmetry between Julian and Ava cannot be solely attributed to style, but must also be analysed ideologically, and how the discourse of *Exciting Times* is contributing to the normalisation and reproduction of power relations through everyday communicative practices. This involves not just the absence of a direct act of control, but also the presence of ambiguous controls, silences, and interpretive responsibilities, which are among the characteristics Fairclough identifies as important in the discursive processes that produce inequality.

[Emotional Capitalism and Affect Regulation](#)

In her consideration of the new paradigm of 'emotional capitalism', Illouz examines how contemporary emotions have become socially produced, increasingly complex, and entangled with economic/exchange, value, and rationality systems (Illouz 2007). This dichotomy is represented in *Exciting Times* by the difference in affective currency between Ava and Julian, and by the different production of feelings, their management, and regulation, through their relationship with each other. As a result, emotional experience in the text can be conceptualised as a discursive and relational product of the larger ideological frameworks that exist, instead of being an independent psychological phenomenon. The role of the emotionally labouring process in which Ava constantly decodes Julian's meaning, fills gaps in Julian's communication, and soothes the ambiguity by constructing stories around events can also be examined in the context of what might be called Ava's position in this dynamic. This aspect is also demonstrated as she (Ava) reflects on her own thoughts and actions:

I performed petty tasks in exchange for access to him. He jokingly asked me to organise his bookshelf, and when I actually did, he said I was brilliant. (Dolan, 2020, p. 24)

In this passage, it is shown how Ava's domestic and emotional work produces what I would call "relational currency" and how she is looking for access, recognition, and approval. Her emotional investment is not just a spontaneous expression of intimacy; it could be seen as a part of an exchange relationship, analogous to emotional capitalism. This unequal distribution of this kind of emotional labour is consistent with the findings of previous work on emotional inequality, which found that this form of emotional labour tends to be tied to one partner and to be associated with wider power structures. In *Exciting Times*, Julian's emotional neutrality and linguistic understatement accentuate this imbalance and are both affective withdrawals, with the interpretive pressure passed on to Ava. Ava knows this communicative imbalance, as evidenced by the following:

He was so self-assured to notice when I criticised him. He registered that I'd said something, then continued a parallel conversation. (Dolan, 2020, p. 13)

Julian's detached behavior is not just the kind of behavior a detached person would exhibit; it is a response to the dynamic of the relationship that is creating a structural imbalance in the relationships he has with Ava. His unresponsiveness has the effect of making it necessary for Ava to engage many of her interpretive and affective resources continuously in her relationship with him, to ensure coherence. Similarly, the overall sociological literature on intimacy in the neoliberal context shows that emotional intimacy is increasingly subjected to various modes of inequality in terms of visibility, responsibility, and affective investment (Carter 2022). Intimacy is, in fact, structured as an investment, risk, and return model of the market in the framework of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2012). Thus, emotional investment will not be universal; instead, it will be filtered by implicit valuation and reciprocity scenarios. Ava's consistent emotional investment in the face of ambivalence and uncertainty in her situation indicates a type of relational over-investment, while Julian's lack of emotional resources is a power strategy based on a lack of presence and ambiguity of his situation. None of these dynamics is disguised in Ava's presentation, but rather made plain:

I knew I'd do anything for money. (Dolan, 2020, p. 10)

This description is an explanation of her emotional choice-making with the utilitarian calculus. For her, economic survival and safety are completely dependent upon the emotional bond she has with others. So, her feelings are not abstract concepts but are grounded in reality. Therefore, Julian's emotional minimalism is not because he doesn't have any feelings; it is due to a regulated way of creating or maintaining emotional control and establishing a power relationship between people. This contract would again be made clearer with Julian's rational wording of the conditions under which they are related:

It's not 'suits'. You're making me sound calculating. I'm saying it makes sense. (Dolan, 2020, p. 18)

The rational terms in Julian's words bear witness to the rationalization of private interactions in the market. For him, relational decision-making is not about emotions but about logic and thus lends itself to a transactional perspective on intimacy, while at the same time obscuring the power dynamics of such transactions. Julian's framing of the relational context shows how economic discourse gets interdiscursively embedded in the personal sphere, reinforcing economic convergence of emotional and market-based value systems. Moreover, in our emotional relations with each other, we are now more and more caught up in the logics of consumption, appraisal, and exchange of cash (Illouz, 2007). Ava and Julian's relationship in the *Exciting Times* extends this concept, in that intimacy is no longer assumed to carry an emotional significance but rather continues to be negotiated. Ava's mention of financial inequality is an elucidation of the process:

If something cost 1 per cent of his income or 10 per cent of mine, why shouldn't he take care of it? (Dolan, 2020, p. 22)

Here, the relationship between economic and emotional reasoning is so close that the two types of reasoning are evaluated and justified within the same context of evaluation and justification in their relationship with one another. Therefore, emotional expectations in other relationships and notions of fairness, reciprocity, and obligation are directly influenced by the material inequality inherent in the social structure. The novel conveys the micro-level of emotional capitalism in terms of the process of normalizing the emotional imbalance between two emotional levels in a relationship through the discourses of both emotional labour types. Ava's self-awareness as a result of her labour is not an escape from the normalizing processes of emotional capitalism, but an additional burden of labour for her to bear. This is illustrated in her reflections:

I couldn't bear living in an Airbnb forever, but I still didn't have a two-month deposit saved. (Dolan, 2020, p. 20)

The emotional vulnerability of the individual is rooted in her material dependency, thus supporting Illouz's proposition that material and affective inequality co-evolve within the context of emotional capitalism. In the end, *Exciting Times* reveals that affective regulation is a function of how intimacy is organized within a set of discursive strategies or neoliberal rationalities that reconfigure intimacy as a site of calculation, investment, and unequal emotional exchange.

The novel establishes the subjectivity of neoliberalism by means of self-reflexive narration, self-monitoring, and discursive fragmentation. Subjectivity is not a psychological phenomenon or a stable identity but a discursively produced effect that emerges in the process of language and social practice (Fairclough 2003). For example, Ava's identity is produced as a fragmented subject position through an overlapping of discourses of romance and work/economic survival, which illustrates the inter-discursive nature of living in a neoliberal world today. Ava herself describes the fragmentation in her judgement, which reads "That was the shape of it, but it didn't have a name, other than Have a Hang Out, Catching Up or Popping by for a Visit" (Dolan 2020 p. 13). The absence of a stable name for Ava's relationship with Julian demonstrates that broader neoliberal subjectivity exists within the context of fluidity, contingency, and resistance to fixed categories. The fragmentation corresponds to wider sociological explanations (Giddens 1991), explaining the nature of contemporary identity formations as being characterised by reflexivity, where individuals are constantly required to establish and re-establish their self-narratives due to changing social conditions.

Prolonged analysis of language, relationship, and emotional response is an example of the reflexive nature of identity, which is this evolving process of self. As an example, she states, "Sometimes I had feelings of love for him, and sometimes I thought it would be best if an airplane hit his work, and you were either on it or in the building." The constant back and forth of love/hatred is a clear case of the unstable nature of neoliberal subjectivity (Dolan, 2020, p. 96). Neoliberal subjectivity can continually be disrupted by competing social, economic, and affective forces, resulting in a lack of emotional coherence. In a neoliberal context, individuals must also navigate various identities, which makes reflexive behaviour even more intense, due to market-oriented rationalities. Gill (2008) claims that neoliberal subjectivity is formed/created through ongoing self-surveillance and re-evaluation of oneself in relation to success, desirability, and emotional competence. Ava constantly listens to and monitors her own interactions and therefore fits the description of being engaged in ongoing evaluation and interpretation of one's own communication practices. The connection of her self-worth with money is made clear when she states, "I was glad my organisation had a monetary value, but no one else seemed to consider it that way." (Dolan, 2020, p. 13)

Ava incorporates the market's evaluative system. She measures her social value using economic criteria, which is the defining feature of neoliberal self-governance. Ava's emotional labor performance for economic survival illustrates the expanding influence of market rationality on her private life. Ava reflects on her situation here:

I knew I'd do anything for money. Throughout college back in Ireland, I'd kept a savings account that I charmingly termed 'abortion fund.' It had €1,500 in it by the end. I knew some women who saved with their friends, and they all helped whoever was unlucky. But I didn't trust anyone. I got the money together by waitressing, then kept adding to it after I had enough for a procedure in England. I liked watching the balance go up. The richer I got, the harder it would be for anyone to force me to do anything. (Dolan, 2020, p. 10)

The excerpt indicates how Ava's subjectivity is formed by her fragile economic status. Accumulation for Ava offers a means to bodily autonomy, emotional safety, and personal protection. The "abortion fund" is an expression of neoliberalism, the drive to make oneself economically self-sufficient against risk, to make reproductive freedom one's own responsibility, one that requires an economic basis of independence rather than being based on shared work or a right that is collectively owned. This way, vulnerability is individualised, and security relies on one's own resources. Julian, on the other hand, is a subject that is determined by his mobility, his lack of attachment to place and people, and his flexibility, a neoliberal subject. In this way, Julian's linguistic minimalism is a product of the rationality of neoliberalism, in which emotional capital is now as much a component of the global capital as the larger structures of capital. Ong (2006) singles out actors like Julian as "flexible citizens" as their identities are formed by the transnational movement of capital, labour, and privilege. On Julian's part, his restraint in his discourse and his emotional opacity suggest signs of the mobility and the global privilege that belong to a particular form of subjectivity that does not lend itself to fixed relations. In response to Ava directly asking him, "Are you in love with me?" Julian replies, "I like you a great deal," he said. "Now go to sleep." (Dolan, 2020, p. 69). His inability to articulate his emotional experience reflects a communicative logic where emotional investment is carefully controlled, commitment is deferred, and his vulnerability is minimized.

Furthermore, its neoliberal conceptualisation is tied to normalising linguistic practices in which flexibility, adaptability, and self-management are the rule. In considering a language-based approach to neoliberalism, Block, Gray, and Holborow (2012) propose that the medium of neoliberalism is language – that is, the construction of discourses that engender a privileged sense of individual responsibility and performative, individual selfhood. The contrast between Ava's self-narration (which is almost entirely overdetermined by language) and Julian's form of communication (which is almost completely undefined by design) is apparent in *Exciting Times*. When Ava says, "I know we aren't equal," she admits that there's a power imbalance between them. "I knew I loathed him, not least because I was fully aware that if he told me to jump off a bridge, my response would be on like a flies at Golden Gate Bridge, or is there another bridge?" (Dolan, 2020, p. 58). Ava's hyper-reflexive self-awareness occurs simultaneously alongside her diminished capacity to act autonomously, demonstrating how neoliberal reflexivity can produce a state of self-surveillance and further dependence rather than empowerment. Additionally, the novel depicts some of the complexities of neoliberal subjectivity as being gendered. As Ava reflects upon her and Julian's relationship:

Staying in his flat was possibly a rupture from the capitalist notion that I was only worth something if I paid my own way economically. Or maybe it made me a bad feminist. I could puzzle it out once the experience had passed (Dolan, 2020, p. 22).

The indecisiveness of the main character reflects how the different discourses of neoliberal and post-feminine culture are competing and contradictory, and challenging to reconcile. Overall, the narrative shows how neoliberal subjectivity is discursively produced through asymmetrical linguistic practices.

Ava's reflexive hyper-articulation of communication is a subject constantly under self-surveillance, Julian's limited communicative practices are a privileged, mobile, flexible & detached subjectivity. The difference in subject placement of Ava and Julian illustrates how discourse creates, argues, and naturalises neoliberal identities. The story also suggests, though, another possibility. Ava's choice of pursuing Edith as opposed to following Julian to Frankfurt allows for an emotional articulation that is rare: "I love Edith and want her to know." (Dolan, 2020, p. 212) This statement is not ambiguous, like her feelings towards Julian, but rather rejects having to be strategically detached or emotionally calculated. This statement suggests that although the subject of an 'atomised object of neoliberal market perception' still exists, alternative modes of relational authenticity and commitment to these feelings may still be imagined/constructed.

Silence as Power

In the book *Exciting Times*, silence is a deliberate and working method that is used to establish and maintain the power relations inherent in intimate relations. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, silence is part of discourse organisation, meaning it is an active element of the discourse rather than merely a communication gap. Power is manifested in both the content of the talk and in the strategic editing of part of this content to define how access will be granted, how something will be interpreted, and how it will lead to a response, as van Dijk (2008) puts it. The narrative features multiple moments of Julian's uninvolvedness, which set up interactively controlling scenarios that give Ava a facilitating role in the manner in which the dialogue will be utilized. Julian's silences do not necessarily terminate communication; they effectively reorganize the exchange of verbal communication by the uneven manner in which meaning is made. That's quite obvious when Avery tries to woo Julian with affection, and he withdraws from Ava's attempts:

Would you look at me when you say things like that,

I don't want to fight'" (Dolan, 2020, p. 58).

Julian does not address Ava's concern, but instead makes sense of what is happening to them and calls off their discussion. This will be an unresolved emotion for Ava, which will need to be worked through with the tension she feels as a result of the interaction. Strategically withholding engagement in this way can be thought of as an example of asymmetrical relations as defined by Pourgharib, Pourya Asl, and Hamkhiyal (2024) and other authors, where dominant individuals regulate the behaviour of those they dominate by not directly controlling or silencing them, but by failing to provide recognition and response and deny emotional clarity to the others; i.e., silence is an indirect form of discursive power that reduces reciprocity and maintains subject-subject relations. Ava is put in situations of uncertainty many times in the story. She is placed in a situation in which she has to interpret (and possibly misinterpret due to lack of clarity) what others are thinking and feeling, determine and interpret the meaning, and fill in gaps in communication; she does what can be considered interpretive work, which she understands means that it is primarily on her to keep the relationship coherent – which is to say, to give it emotional meaning. I

wanted to tell him this wasn't news to me, I wanted to tell him not to fret, but I could not do it without sounding all kinds of crazy.

'Will you miss me?' I said.

'I need a cigarette,' said Julian. 'Could we come back to it later?' (Dolan, 2020, p. 200)

Julian evokes the question but doesn't answer it; he just puts it off. His silence is an example of the silent power of communication. By leaving the question of his answer open, he continues to be ambiguous and leaves Ava in a state of uncertainty. It is a similar interaction that helps to deconstruct the notion of reciprocal conversation and further strengthen asymmetrical control over emotional meaning. The concept of silence has been well-studied in the area of sociolinguistics. Jaworski (1993) referred to silence as a full-meaning act of communication, which may work to express power or control, and/or to oppose or resist another person. Kurzon (1998) demonstrated the role of silence in the regulation of information in conversation and in determining who can speak. Julian's way of communicating at this moment says exactly this; he doesn't affirm, clarify, or demonstrate emotional disclosure, and he can, in return, control how he and Ava will interpret their relationship of the two together through the interpretive system of the relationship. For example, when Ava communicates her feelings to Julian, he uses very few words to answer her:

I thought I loved him.

I like you a great deal,' he said. 'Now go to sleep. (Dolan, 2020, p. 69)

Julian responds to Ava on a technical level, but his response is devoid of any emotional engagement from him and effectively ends any continuation of the conversation. The significant contrast between Julian's cool and collected understated response to having been shown vulnerability by Ava shows how there is an unbalanced distribution of emotional investment/commitment between the two. Ava now needs to re-evaluate her understanding of their relationship, further increasing her reliance on the meanings (and contextual frames) which Julian will not explicitly provide. Silence is often accompanied by other forms of discursive closure that limit subsequent questions/inquiry into the relationship between Julian and Ava. When Ava does attempt to push back against Julian, he frequently redirects and/or dismisses her attempt.

You're not St Francis of Assisi yourself,' he said (Dolan, 2020, p. 58).

Julian does not interact with criticism engagingly. Instead, he takes a personalized approach to the exchange and limits open discussion. When Ava tries to query the nature of their relationship with him, he replies:

Piece off the obsessive behaviour/feelings I may have had towards you.

The only obsession I have is my work. (Dolan, 2020, p. 203)

Julian's declarative comments contain emotional fog because even though his comments are very clear, they express nothing about how he feels on the inside. Whether through ignoring the comments made by Ava, Julian gives Ava full responsibility for understanding everything he did not say. When looking at power relations through the lens of critical discourse analysis as proposed by Fairclough, the

emotional withholding behaviour is presented as rational, natural, and non-remarkable (Fairclough, 1995). And even in moments when Julian demonstrates any vulnerability to Ava's discomfort, the disclosure of that vulnerability must still be interpreted by Ava:

He said he was often nervous around me. ... I said what he wanted me to: that I'd never realised. ... I wanted to ask what made him nervous, but knew I would be doing so in the hope that he'd call me caustic again. (Dolan, 2020, p. 195)

The confession doesn't encourage a degree of openness, but rather encourages Ava to manage Julian's emotions. Now, she has to decide how to react, what sort of questions to ask, and how to understand what he has said. It does not necessarily mean that they are communicating with each other, but rather that how they process their communication in their emotions is unequal. In *Exciting Times*, Julian employs silence as a part of discursive power, thus using CDA here to propose that silence is a feature of discursive power. Julian can keep control over the conditions of the emotional exchange through the use of non-response, delayed responses, ambiguous responses, and conscious withholding of information. The examples show the extent to which power can be exercised through routine discursive processes which appear natural, rather than coercive (Fairclough, 1995). The impact of ideology is that no one can see it; the interpretative work involved in keeping the relationship alive is mostly invisible, while communicative minimalism is normalised. Overall, the answer to this process is obtained at the end of the novel:

I wondered if he really wanted me to visit and if I could show up in Frankfurt with my suitcase and winter coat. He often said he didn't meet many people like me. But I didn't know if that meant there was necessarily a vacancy for them. (Dolan, 2020, p. 203)

Julian's intention is never fully clarified to Ava, causing her to remain uncertain. This absence of either explicitly rejecting or committing leaves her to continue to try to interpret Julian's intentions. In the end, power is exercised through both the spoken word and also through the controlled inarticulateness of silence as a means of reproducing relational hierarchies (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). Within this framework, Julian's use of strategic withholding and Ava's ongoing interpretive labour further demonstrate how everyday communicative practices reproduce asymmetrical power relationships.

Conclusion

The findings of this research show that intimacy, identity, and emotion are produced through linguistic means that are representative not only of neoliberal logics but also of emotional capitalism. The study applies the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough to uncover the relationship of power and people that are constructed and normalised in the discourse that permeates the novel. The relationship between Ava and Julian is also an example of how this unequal power dynamic between the two is perpetuated through modality, silence, ambiguity, and linguistic economy. Ava is overwhelmed with the challenge of Julian's emotional restraint and lack of speech and the implications of those behaviours, as evidenced by Ava's over-articulated nature, which represents precarity, dependency, and a constant need to self-assess. Moreover, the study reveals how intimacy in *Exciting Times* displays some

features of emotional capitalism, as there are relational dynamics that involve uneven distribution of emotional labour and relationships that involve implicit calculations of values, risks, and reciprocity.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a single text case study, the findings are specific to this text and may not be applicable to other texts or real world interactions. Second, as a form of Critical Discourse Analysis, the interpretation of literature is a subjective reading position, and although we have tried to be analytical, we have also realized that other readers might highlight other discursive features. Third, this study did not use inter-coder reliability checks or systematic reflexivity protocols to enhance the transparency and reproducibility of the analysis. These limitations could be overcome in future research by expanding the analytical framework to a corpus of modern novels that portray similar relational dynamics, to allow for cross-textual comparisons. Further, the findings could be more objective and scalable if a multi-analyst approach or computer-assisted discourse analysis tools were used. Finally, comparative research in other cultural and linguistic contexts would be useful in deciding on whether the patterns found here are unique to Anglo-Irish neoliberal contexts or are more transnational patterns of emotional capitalism.

But Julian does not interact with Ava, and instead takes a step back, so that he places a great burden of responsibility on Ava with respect to the interpretative and emotional labor they perform in their relationship as a couple, which reflects a difference in terms of responsibility in current relationships built on neoliberal rationality. Both Ava's and Julian's identities are represented as being constituted by ever-shifting or changing boundaries as they negotiate work, romance, and survival. In the same way, Ava is built in a liminal and disjointed identity as opposed to Julian's travelling and privileged distance between him and Ava. The productive use of silence is highlighted by the discursive use of silence, which creates doubt and strengthens the asymmetries; this can be seen to show the value of the use of silence in constructing intimacy in the context of neoliberal modernity, which establishes inequitable relationships between language, affect, and power, and to suggest the possibility of future comparative analysis across contemporary literature.

References

- Athari, A., Khosravi Varmakani, Z., & Sohrabi, H. (2024). Lexical context of the Prophet's (PBUH) discourse in Makateeb al-Rasul (Based on Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis theory). *Linguistic Studies: Theory and Practice*, 4(2), 103–132.
<https://doi.org/10.22034/jls.2024.141412.1117>
- Block, D., Gray, J., & Holborow, M. (2012). *Neoliberalism and applied linguistics*. Routledge.
https://www.routledge.com/Neoliberalism-and-Applied-Linguistics/Block-Gray-Holborow/p/book/9780415592055?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Blodgett, S. L., Barocas, S., Daumé III, H., & Wallach, H. (2020). Language (technology) is power: A critical survey of “bias” in NLP. *Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 5454–5476.
<https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2020.acl-main.485>

- Carter, J. (2022). Intersections of intimacies and inequalities: An introduction. *Sociological Research Online*, 27(1), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804211061166>
- Chiapello, E., & Fairclough, N. (2002). Understanding the new management ideology: A transdisciplinary contribution from critical discourse analysis and new sociology of capitalism. *Discourse & Society*, 13(2), 185–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926502013002406>
- Coulmas, F. (Ed.). (1998). *The handbook of sociolinguistics*. Blackwell. https://books.google.com/books?q=The+Handbook+of+Sociolinguistics+Coulmas+1998&utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Dolan, N. (2020). *Exciting times*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. https://books.google.com/books/about/Exciting_Times.html?id=Jby7wwEACAAJ&utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press. https://books.google.com/books/about/Discourse_and_Social_Change.html?id=cV2NrgEACAAJ&utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203153959>
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838250>
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press. https://www.sup.org/books/sociology/modernity-and-self-identity?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity*, 25(1), 432–445. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.28>
- Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling* (Updated with a new preface). University of California Press. (Original work published 1983).
- Hu, T., & Ge, L. (2025). *Datafication of digital intimacy: The dual logic of empowerment and commodification*. *Games and Culture*. Advance online publication.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity Press. https://cris.huji.ac.il/en/publications/cold-intimacies-the-making-of-emotional-capitalism/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Illouz, E. (2012). *Why love hurts: A sociological explanation*. Polity Press. https://www.suhrkamp.de/rights/book/eva-illouz-why-love-hurts-fr-9783518464205?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Jaworski, A. (1993). *The power of silence: Social and pragmatic perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

- https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/power-of-silence/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Kurzon, D. (1998). *Discourse of silence*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.55>
- Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpgzc>
- Pourgharib, B., Hamkhiyal, S., & Pourya Asl, M. (2022). A non-Orientalist representation of Pakistan in contemporary Western travelogues. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 22(3), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2022-2203-06>
- Pourgharib, B., Pourya Asl, M., & Hamkhiyal, S. (2024). Beyond Orientalism: Reimagining the Oriental Other in Western travel writings. *Asian Ethnicity*, 25(4), 588–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2023.2255055>
- Pütz, M., & Neff-van Aertselaer, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Developing contrastive pragmatics: Interlanguage and cross-cultural perspectives*. Mouton de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207217?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Reyes, A. (2015). Building intimacy through linguistic choices, text structure, and voices in political discourse. *Language & Communication*, 43, 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2015.05.002>
- Salmon, W. N. (2010). Formal idioms and action: Toward a grammar of genres. *Language & Communication*, 30(4), 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2010.01.002>
- Sanders, T. J. M., & Spooren, W. (2015). Causality and subjectivity in discourse: The meaning and use of causal connectives in spontaneous conversation, chat interactions, and written text. *Linguistics*, 53(1), 53–92. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2014-0034>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://books.google.com/books?q=Teun+A.+van+Dijk+Discourse+and+Power+2008&utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Zare, M., & Parsa, S. A. (2024). Critical discourse analysis of women's poetry in the couplets of Fars Province. *Linguistic Studies: Theory and Practice*, 4(4), 25–50. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jls.2024.141926.1143>