

Kink, Crime, and the Gaze: Negotiating Gendered Power, Sexuality, Madness, and Political Resistance in Gotham's Harley Quinn and Catwoman

Srijita Banerjee

Research Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar

Abstract:

In the history and the ever-unfolding tapestry of comic book narratives, anomalies as radiant as criminality, sexuality, and madness enacted by women, refuse to be contained within the patriarchal frames that first bore them. Harley Quinn and Catwoman, born in the shadows of Gotham, have travelled from the margins of the mainstream comics into richly textured icons of ambivalence and this paper seeks to examine the figures as political texts within the comic book medium, arguing that their representations of kink, crime, madness, and feminine spectacle participate in broader structures of gendered politics. Drawing from *Mad Love* (1994), *Harleen* (2019), *Catwoman: Year One* (1987), *Catwoman: Her Sister's Keeper* (1989), *Catwoman* (2002– 2005), *Lonely City* (2022), and *Gotham City Sirens* (2009–2011), the paper seeks to analyse Harley's relationship with the Joker which reveals the political structures that govern female deviance and her reclamation of madness which becomes a political refusal to submit to patriarchal rationality, and the Catwoman is seen to negotiate power through criminality and kink-coded performance. The paper employs Carole Pateman's sexual contract, Michel Foucault's disciplinary power, Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy as a multi-institutional system, Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze, Stuart Hall's cultural politics of representation, Adrienne Rich's critique of compulsory

heterosexuality, and Angela McRobbie's postfeminist politics. The argument of the paper highlights how Harley Quinn and Catwoman are not merely ironic 'bad girls', but they are political agents who are navigating and resisting patriarchal power structures through kink, crime, and spectacle, where their bodies, desires, and madness become instruments of negotiation within gendered political systems, transforming the comic page into a battlefield where power is contested and alternative feminist futures are imagined.

Keywords: *Comics, Gaze, Kink, Madness, Politics, Power, Sexuality.*

Introduction

Terminologies are markers of institution and in political science, terms such as 'madness', 'crime', and 'sexual deviance' are not neutral but they are historically embedded in patriarchal systems of control. As Foucault (1988) argues, Madness is produced when dominant institutions "draw a line between reason and unreason in order to maintain power" and for women, this line is often drawn at the point where they reject prescribed norms of obedience, emotional discipline, and sexual propriety (p. 34). In DC Comics' Gotham, the fictional metropolitan state whose political infrastructure mirrors real world logics of surveillance, punishment, and moral regulation, figures such as Harley Quinn and Catwoman are among the most visible embodiments of gendered nonconformity.

Comics, the visual-text medium, are political texts and Stuart Hall (1977) insists that representation is not a passive reflection but "the active work of culture to make things mean" (p. 15). Gotham's narratives are political in nature as the institutions, villains, and heroes are ideological formations that map anxieties around order, deviance, gender,

sexuality, and discipline. While Batman embodies rational masculine authority which is steeped in surveillance, forensic logic, and moral absolutism, Harley and Selina embody the underside of Gotham's political consciousness, a terrain of unruly women who refuse patriarchal organisation. Harley Quinn and Catwoman are not simply deviant figures, they are political insurgents whose bodies, desires, and madness exposes the foundations of gendered governance in Gotham.

Madness and Deviance as Political Identities

Of the two most politically charged frameworks, madness and deviance produce and regulate femininity in patriarchal societies and in Gotham, these categories operate not just as descriptors of behaviour, but as instruments of governance, becoming the tools through which the state, psychiatric institutions, and cultural narrative discipline women who transgress the social norms. Although emerging from two different socioeconomic and emotional trajectories, Harley Quinn and Catwoman occupy these categories as political identities and reveal how Gotham constructs deviance in gendered terms, and illustrate how such deviance becomes a potent form of resistance.

Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation* (1988) interprets madness as a political construct and he argues that madness is "not a natural fact but a cultural and institutional creation" (p. x). This principle is exemplified by Gotham's Arkham Asylum which is far from being a therapeutic institution, rather it produces madness through confinement, surveillance, and imposed narratives of pathology and Harley Quinn's transformation is one of the most prominent example of this mechanism. Dr. Harleen Quinzel, initially a psychiatrist trained to diagnose and manage deviance becomes ensnared within the very disciplinary apparatus she once upheld and

her descent into Harley Quinn is precipitated not by personal weakness, but by institutional violence and manipulation where the coercive environment of Arkham Asylum primarily its isolation, punitive logic, and male dominated hierarches, produces the conditions for her breakdown.

The Arkham Asylum is primarily a male-dominated in both its power structure where the doctor and administrators who are historically depicted as men and exercise their authority over inmates, making decisions about their sanity, punishment, and treatment; and its most visible “patients” who are also prominent “criminals” such as Joker, Riddler, Scarecrow, replicate the patriarchal dynamics and define the culture of the institution. Harley, as a female doctor, enters this hyper-masculine environment and is immediately drawn into its power dynamics where The Joker manipulates her, not just as a patient, but as a charismatic male figure who wields control over her emotions and further exploits her within a system which is already skewed against her. Harleen’s descent into madness is a product and not a symptom as it is a direct outcome of patriarchal governance masquerading as psychiatric authority, where manipulation define the rules of engagement, leaving her little agency within the system.

Harleen’s madness also destabilises this authority as once she becomes Harley Quinn, her behaviour turns unpredictable, and her emotions exaggerate, and this spectacular chaos resist the disciplinary function of the asylum and Foucault (1977) asserts that institutions “produce the very subjects they then seek to control” (p. 194). Harley subverts this production as she does not conform to the institution’s framework of insanity, she exploits the flexibility of madness which she uses as a performative tool to evade surveillance, confound the state, and undermine the Joker’s

coercive power. Harley's increasing obsession with the Joker is not to be viewed as a naïve romantic illusion, but as an effective formation which is produced within the patriarchal institutional power. Their 'romantic' relationship originates within the Arkham Asylum, a disciplinary site which, as Foucault (1977) argues does not merely confine deviance but actively produces subjects through surveillance, categorisation, and emotional manipulation, and it is within a structure like this where Harleen encounters her where the structure itself positions her as rational authority and the Joker as pathological spectacle (p. 194).

The Joker, performs vulnerability, trauma, and intellectual intimacy which Pateman (1998) describes as the gendered structure of the sexual contract in which women are conditioned to provide emotional labour and care in exchange for masculine validation, thereby gradually subverting the dynamics (p. 2). The Joker, transforms into an affective magnet which Ahmed (2004) describes as emotions which circulate socially rather than privately, attaching subjects to figures that embody intensity, danger, or charisma and Harleen's fascination is intensified by the theatricality of deviance, the erotic charge of transgression, and the institutional framing of the Joker as extraordinary (p. 119). Her transition into Harley Quinn is not simply a surrender to love but a politicised rupture in the structures that define reason, authority and gendered emotional control and madness, in her case, becomes her armour where the refusal of rationality and emotional discipline, both of which are central to the acceptance of femininity in patriarchal constructions.

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue that patriarchal culture often renders female anger and rebellion legible only through madness, noting that "the madwoman is the woman who refuses patriarchal confinement" and Harley embodies

this figure of a “madwoman” vividly (p. 85). Her exuberant violence, glitter-coated mayhem, and chaotic speech acts are not symptoms of loss of control, but they are performances of refusal and she will not be a rational, obedient, quietly suffering, or professionally contained. Her madness acts as a critique and an escape, it becomes a mode of living outside the emotional confines imposed by patriarchal institutions.

Although distinct from Harley’s madness, Catwoman’s deviance functions through similar political structures and Selina Kyle is rarely described as “mad” within Gotham’s diegesis but she is persistently marked as a deviant in the realms of sexuality, morality, society, and legally as Gotham’s institutions interpret her refusal of feminine docility, heterosexual compliance, and economic subordination as evidence of disorder. Selina, as a sex worker, is already positioned outside normative femininity as her sexuality is rendered suspect and criminalised under the patriarchal gaze. As a thief, she also becomes subject to the criminal justice system’s punitive power which, according to Foucault, constructs criminality as a political identity rather than a behavioural category. Pat Carlen’s (1988) feminist criminology provides a crucial framework for understanding Selina’s deviance and she argues that women’s criminality often arises from “structural disadvantage, violence, and constrained choices” (p. 7). Selina’s backstory in *Her Sister’s Keeper* (1991) exemplifies this pattern where she underwent abuse, poverty, state neglect, and gendered violence which shaped her trajectory into crime and her deviance is not gratuitous, but structurally conditioned as crime becomes her means of survival and reclamation of agency within a city that offers her neither protection nor opportunity.

In this sense, Selina's deviance reveals the failures of Gotham's patriarchal governance of its inability to provide justice, safety, or dignity to marginalised women. Like Harley, Selina weaponises her deviance as political resistance and her thefts, surveillance-dodging, acrobatics, and moral ambiguity challenge Gotham's classed and gendered hierarchies. She steals from the wealthy, corrupt, and powerful, not out of nihilism but as a form of redistributive justice and this echoes Fraser's (1997) argument that justice requires both redistribution of resources and recognition of marginalised identities and she practices precisely this redistribution (p. 25). Her deviance becomes a method of correcting Gotham's inequalities, revealing crime not as antisocial behaviour, but as a political act within an unjust system.

Harley and Selina's political identities become particularly illuminating when examined side by side as Harley's madness emerges from the failures of institutional authority and Selina's deviance arises from the failures of socioeconomic justice. Both the forms of deviance, of psychological and criminal, are responses to patriarchal governance and both ultimately challenge the systems that attempt to define and contain them and each woman exposes a different axis of Gotham's patriarchal power where Harley reveals the violence of psychiatric and emotional discipline and Selina exposes the violence of economic and legal discipline. Their narratives also demonstrate how deviance destabilises the patriarchal rationality and Gotham relies on this rationality which can be seen in Batman's forensic logic, Arkham's psychiatric diagnoses, and the police state's bureaucratic procedures, to simply maintain control. Harley's unpredictability undermines rational governance and Selina's evasiveness undermines legal governance and it can be seen that madness and deviance function as political disruptions

which destabilises the epistemological foundations of Gotham's order.

The characters reclaim deviance to construct new forms of agency and Harley's madness enables emotional and aesthetic freedom, allowing her to operate outside the constraints of normative femininity and Selina's deviance enables economic and political autonomy, allowing her to define justice for herself and her community. They do not seek rehabilitation within Gotham's systems because these systems themselves are patriarchal and unjust and their deviance is this not a detour, but a destination to a chosen identity that resists patriarchal correction which becomes clearest in *Gotham City Sirens* (2009–2011) where madness and deviance coalesce into a shared feminist and queer alternative to patriarchal discipline and in this collective space, Harley's madness is stabilised not through psychiatric intervention but through a community of care, while Selina's deviance finds ethical grounding in solidarity. Their deviance becomes rational rather than individual, signalling a broader critique of Gotham's atomistic, punitive model.

Kink, Femininity, and the Visual Politics of the Gaze

The visual construction of Harley Quinn and Catwoman is inseparable from the politics of femininity, sexuality, and power as both the characters inhabit kink-coded aesthetic domains where Harley through parodic hyper-femininity, and Selina through dominatrix iconography, where each of them use spectacle to negotiate their visibility within Gotham's patriarchal order. Their bodies become sites of visual governance and resistance, revealing how sexuality and representation operate politically. The comic medium, with its fragmentation, framing, and stylised bodies intensifies these dynamics and by reading Harley and Selina through

the feminist theory and visual culture, kink aesthetics and the gaze function not merely as an aesthetic embellishment but they act as mechanisms through which deviant femininity resists patriarchal control.

Harley and Selina's aesthetic choices can be read through Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity as Butler argues that gender is "a stylised repetition of acts" that produces the illusion of stable identity and in this sense, femininity is not innate but performative, a role enacted through attire, gesture, posture, and visual codes (p. 25). Both the characters exaggerate femininity to destabilise it. Harley's clown aesthetics such as pigtails, glitter, heart shaped makeup, and theatrical poses, transforms normative femininity into a parody. Her playful chaos dramatises the artificiality of gender norms as she does not embody femininity but she mocks it. Selina, by contrast, performs a refined and deliberate hyper-femininity through her cat suit made out of leather or sometimes PVC, latex or other shiny and flexible material, stiletto boots, fishnet stockings and a whip, heavily drawing from the BDSM and dominatrix iconography and these choices amplify the performative quality of femininity, revealing it as a curated spectacle rather than a natural expression.

Catherine MacKinnon (1989) offers a political reading of sexuality and she argues that sexuality is "the primary sphere of male power's exercise and women's subordination" and under this framework, kink-coded femininity might seem to reinforce patriarchal aesthetics (p. 113). However, Harley and Selina appropriate these aesthetics in ways that decentre male desire and reassert female power where Selina's dominatrix-inspired outfit is not about pleasing men, but it signals towards control, authority, and erotic self-possession and she gains power through the erotic, refusing the submissive roles

typically assigned to women. Harley's excessive femininity, bordering on camp, similarly disrupts patriarchal pleasure as her glitter explosions, smudged lipstick, and unpredictable gestures makes her visually erratic, undermining the viewer's ability to consume her image comfortably. Their kink aesthetics thus function as political gestures, signalling a refusal to be visually domesticated by patriarchal codes. Laura Mulvey (1975) further illustrates the male gaze and argues that the patriarchal media position the woman as "to-be-looked-at-ness", designed specifically to satisfy male spectatorship through erotic spectacle (p. 11). Early depictions of both characters conform to this structure as Selina's body used to be framed in pin-up lie poses, with panels with emphasised her curves, hips, and arched spine, and Harley's jester outfit and coquettish postures cater to similar visual appetites. Although the eroticisation of the body was visible, the medium of comics allows for disruptions unavailable in films as through fragmented panels, variable framing, and visual exaggeration, Harley and Selina can resist or destabilise the male gaze in ways that defy cinematic continuity.

Harley is particularly effective a subverting viewer control and in many modern comics, she frequently breaks the fourth wall by staring directly at the reader, and commenting on her own objectification, or mocking the narrative herself and this direct gaze reverses the visual power dynamic Mulvey outlines by forcing the reader into a self-conscious position and the viewer becomes the one watched. Mulvey notes that the male spectator's pleasure depends on maintaining "distance and control" and Harley collapses this distance by disrupting the fantasy of stable erotic objectification (p. 14). Her madness, here, becomes a visual tactic as much as a narrative theme and her maniac expressions of wild laughter, sudden stillness, and erratic shifts refuse the viewer's stability

and rather than inviting desire, she provoke disorientation. The spectacle becomes political insubordination. Catwoman resists the gaze more subtly but equally powerfully as she counter-gazes with direct looks, smirks, lifted eyebrows, and breaks the illusion of passive erotic display. Her gaze challenges the viewer as she knows she is being looked at and refuses to remain a complaint object and moments like these reflect Butler's performative model where Selina's gender is an intentional performance and she controls the conditions under which it is viewed, allowing her kink-coded ensemble to enhance this control. While fetish imagery is often used to eroticise women for male spectators, Selina's self-framed dominatrix aesthetic signals for agency and not availability and she chooses when and how she is seen.

The political implications of kink aesthetic, furthermore, shift dramatically in scenes of conflict and movement as Harley's gestures are chaotic, unpredictable, and often violent while Selina's movement are graceful, controlled, and strategic. These contrasting bodily rhetorics reveal different modes of resisting patriarchal visual discipline as Harley resists through excess where her body refuses to stay still, refuses to maintain composure, and refuses to be consumed neatly, while Selina resists through mastery where her movements are exacting and self-possessed, denying the viewer the ability to collapse her into mere erotic spectacle, and together they expand the political possibilities of kink-coded femininity. The visual irony also further complicates their relationship to the gaze as it was seen in Darwyn Cooke's *Catwoman* (2002–2005) where Selina's silhouette may initially appear sexualised but when juxtaposed with action panels in which she apprehends predators or rescues vulnerable residents of the East End, the iconography of eroticism transforms into one of protection and power. In Hall's (1977) term, representation becomes "a

site of struggle” where Selina negotiates and redefines the meaning of her body and similarly Harley’s costumes often employ bright colours and theatrical exaggeration, but within the context of violence or resistance, these aesthetics signal disruption rather than erotic availability (p. 25).

Kink, also becomes a way of articulating political autonomy as in Gotham’s patriarchal environment, where women’s bodies are policed through legal, psychiatric, and visual mechanisms, kink-coded aesthetics allow Harley and Selina to reclaim control over their representation and their bodies become self-authored which rejects both normative femininity and patriarchal sexual scripts. By evidently exaggerating, parodying, or stylising the erotic, they reclaim agency over its political meaning and their aesthetics communicate that femininity is neither natural nor passive but a performative field open to reinterpretation, resistance, and subversion.

Crime, Agency, and Resistance in Gotham’s Political Order

Crime is traditionally understood as a violation of law, but within feminist political theory as it is also a site where power, inequality, and resistance converge and in Gotham which is a deeply unequal and patriarchal city, Harley and Catwoman occupy criminal identities not simply because they violate legal codes, but because they disrupt the political structures that depend on disciplining deviant femininity. Their crimes, whether anarchic violence or precision theft, are responses to structural injustice, economic precarity, emotional coercion, and institutional betrayal and more importantly, these acts reveal how deviant women repurpose criminal identity to assert agency and challenge state power and Gotham’s legal, social, and vigilante systems define both Harley and Selina as criminals and their resilience lies in refusing the moral hierarchy that criminalises the while legitimising patriarchal violence.

Par Carlen's (1988) landmark study on feminist criminology argues that women's criminality often emerges from "constrained choices shaped by poverty, violence, and structural disadvantage"s and Selina exemplifies this pathway as *Her Sister's Keeper* presents her as a woman who grows up amid poverty, abuse, and state neglect, conditions that create the structural preconditions for her later deviance (p. 7). Her thefts are not expressions of inherent criminality but they are direct responses to systemic deprivation and Gotham's institutions fail her long before she ever steps outside the law and in tandem with Carlen's model, Selina's criminality becomes a political commentary on the failures of the state to provide safety, economic stability, and justice for its most vulnerable women. Harley's trajectory differs but the political logic remains comparable as her criminality emerges not from economic deprivation, but from institutional violence, manipulation, and emotional exploitation within the Arkham Asylum.

Foucault (1977) argues that institutions such as prisons, asylums, and hospitals produce the very deviance they claim to contain, through surveillance, coercion, and the imposition of rigid norms and Harley's criminal identity is inseparable from her professional role in Arkham where her emotional vulnerability is weaponised by the Joker and enabled by institutional dynamics that normalise patriarchal authority (p. 194). Once she 'becomes' Harley Quinn, her crimes such as bombing, chaotic violence, subversions of state control, reflect a politicised rejection of the legitimacy of Gotham's disciplinary institutions and her criminal identity is thus both produced by and resistant to patriarchal power.

Nancy Fraser's (1997) model of justice is essential in interpreting Selina and Harley's criminality as resistance as Selina's thefts often target the wealthy and corrupt,

redistributing wealth and destabilising Gotham's economic hierarchies and her action aligns for Fraser's call for economic justice that addresses "the structural inequalities embedded within capitalist societies" (p. 25). Selina steals not to enrich herself but to survive, protect vulnerable communities, or to punish those exploit the poor and her vigilantism in Brubaker's *Catwoman* run further positions her as an alternative provider of justice in a political system that abandons marginalised neighbourhoods and in this sense, her crimes function as radical interventions in Gotham's unequal political economy.

Harley's criminal actions which are more chaotic, also challenge the state's monopoly on legitimate violence as her attacks on police stations, psychiatric institutions, and corrupt officials reveal the limits of Gotham's legal authority and her violence is not moralised, but it is a political theatre. Harley is Ahmed's (2017) "feminist killjoy", a figure who refuses to maintain social harmony and instead exposes the violence beneath patriarchal order, and this is seen in her explosions, pranks, and destructive mania which reveal the instability of Gotham's institutions (p. 51). Her crimes refuse the emotional and behavioural discipline that patriarchal governance demands and through chaos, she disrupts the aesthetic of rational, masculine authority that Batman represents.

Agency, however, manifests differently for each character as in Selina's case, her agency is rooted in skill, precision, and calculated autonomy where her burglaries require mastery, discipline and knowledge of Gotham's spatial and institutional vulnerabilities. Her crime, is a strategic intervention, a feminist reworking of the city's economic logic. Meanwhile, Harley's agency emerges from her rejection of normative rationality and her anarchic violence challenges the very framework that defines legitimacy demonstrating Foucault's (1988) madness' ability to "speak the truth of

power” and her unpredictability becomes a tool that denies Gotham’s disciplinary infrastructures the ability to govern her (p. 35).

Both the women articulate a critique of the state’s monopoly on moral authority as the Batman, police officers, and Gotham’s legal apparatus all operate as patriarchal enforcers, determining which acts constitutes legitimate violence, Selina and Harley expose this moral double standard. Batman’s vigilantism is seen as noble while Selina’s is criminal and the police brutality is ignored while Harley’s retaliatory violence is pathologised. This asymmetry reveals the patriarchal foundation of Gotham’s political order and transgressing legal boundaries, Harley and Selina demonstrate that these boundaries are not neutral, rather they are gendered.

Their participation in *Gotham City Sirens* demonstrates how crime can become collective resistance rather than individual deviance and together Harley, Selina, and Ivy form an alternative micro-political community grounded in queer kinship, mutual protection, and shared survival strategies. In this space, crime becomes cooperative rather than antisocial as it becomes a means of resisting patriarchal vulnerability rather than succumbing to it and their homes becomes a sanctuary from the disciplinary forces that see to correct them. Crime, in their hands, becomes a political language, a way of refusing patriarchal discipline while rafting new forms of belonging. Crime is not incidental to Harley and Selina’s identities but it is central to their political significance as their criminality reveals the failures of Gotham’s patriarchal order and challenges the legitimacy of its institutions and constructs alternative models of agency, justice, and solidarity.

Conclusion

Harley Quinn and Catwoman emerge from the world of Gotham's comics as two of the most politically charged embodiments of deviant femininity in contemporary visual culture and their narratives reveal that madness, kink-coded aesthetic, crime, and alternative kinship structures are not narrative ornaments but political language through which marginalised women articulate resistance to patriarchal governance. Taken together, Harley Quinn and Catwoman demonstrate that deviant femininity is not merely a threat to Gotham's patriarchal order, but it is a profound critique of it and their madness, kink aesthetics, criminality expose the contingent nature of gendered discipline, offering alternative ways of being, feeling, and belonging. In their resistance, they illustrate that the margins where the deviant women reside, are sites of political imagination where new forms of justice, solidarity, and freedom can emerge.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Brubaker, E., & Cooke, D. (2002–2005). *Catwoman* [Comic series]. DC Comics.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Carlen, P. (1988). *Women, crime, and poverty*. Open University Press.
- Chiang, C. (2022). *Catwoman: Lonely City*. DC comics.
- Dini, P., & Timm, B. (1994). *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*. DC Comics.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Madness and civilisation: A history of insanity in the age of reason* (R. Howard, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interrupted: Critical reflections on the "postcolonial" condition*. Routledge.

Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.

Hall, S. (1977). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage & Open University.

MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Harvard University Press.

Mulvey, L. (1975). *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.

Newell, M., & Balent, J. (1989). *Catwoman: Her Sister's Keeper*. DC Comics.

Pateman, C. (1988). *The sexual contract*. Sanford University Press.

Winick, J., March, G., & Guillem, M. (2009–2011). *Gotham City Sirens* [Comic series]. DC Comics.