

**The SCUM of Daddy's Girls:**  
*Monstrous Cuteness as Gender Resistance in Bunny*  
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**Abstract:** The novel *Bunny* by Mona Awad explores the gender resistance potential of monstrous cuteness for women. Monstrous cuteness highlights the ambiguous feelings and nonbinary aesthetics that cuteness can generate. Due to their sickly intimacy, hyper-femininity, and secret boy-killing, Awad's clique of girls named the "Bunnies" are simultaneously lovely and depraved. Their workshop is a microcosm for radical gender relations where they manifest Frankenstein-esque boy-creations to meet their needs or die trying. While their monstrous cuteness serves as a weapon of gender reorganization, the inherent privilege of the Bunnies raises the question of who gets to wield it.

We all know the clique. Pretty dolls with their soft hair and matching outfits, the paragons of anatomical perfection. They sit together at lunch, giggling and whispering in code. You wonder if they are making fun of you, despite the fact they never seem to notice anyone outside of each other. And when one of them does speak to you, perhaps to ask about gym class (though you can never imagine them sweating), it is in a syrupy tone alien to your own. You want to be one of them or maybe you just want what they have: a secret language, an impenetrable aura, a bond so intimate it is almost incestuous. In the novel *Bunny* by Mona Awad, MFA student Samantha Heather Mackey encounters such a cohort of women in her poetry workshop. They call each other “Bunny”—*Hi, Bunny, I love you, Bunny*. Samantha lives every outcast’s dream of being invited into the Bunnies’ world, but what she discovers on the other side is much more sinister than one would expect from nice, young girls. Through their cuteness, the Bunnies cultivate a feminine enclave that masks their terrifying project of creating (and killing) bunny-boy hybrids. Their monstrous cuteness is a strategy of gender resistance. They simultaneously take advantage of women’s gender stereotypes and brutally reject them, making way for complete structural upheaval.

Published in 2019, Awad’s novel is set in modern-day New England at the fictional Warren University. Samantha, a scholarship student, suffers from writer’s block and imposter syndrome at the prestigious institution, where the stakes are raised on her attempts at personal expression. Her isolation is intensified by the effortless success of the Bunnies, whose provocative pieces draw praise from their poetry instructor. The setting lures the reader into a false sense of understanding about what is valued in the world of *Bunny*. From the snobbish students producing elusive, soulless art to the elitist professors applauding it, everyone seems to play their part. Yet, Awad observes these academic establishments with a critical eye, questioning the legitimacy of their authority on what makes a creation good or bad. As Samantha comes to realize, women creators can only reach their full potential outside of the classroom and its rigid rules. The Bunnies enable each other’s creative development in their monstrous and cute haven.

Cuteness and monstrosity, though seemingly divergent, actually share a multitude of characteristics. In “Monstrous/Cute. Notes on the Ambivalent Nature of Cuteness,” Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska of Adam Mickiewicz University’s Institute of Sociology (2007) notes that cuteness’ “ambivalent nature” and “certain hybridity” allows it “to link [...] to the monster” (p. 1). Cuteness is not just meant to generate simplistic, good feelings. For instance, many cute objects are also malformed, possessing “freakish” features that elicit sympathy from the viewer (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007, p. 6). An example can be found in manufactured cuteness such as Hello Kitty, who is mouthless with exaggerated proportions that transcend normality. There is an inherent monstrosity, Brzozowska-Brywczyńska suggests, to cuteness. Even before their murderous unveiling, the Bunnies embody monstrous cuteness through their behavior. Samantha sees them at the university mixer, “grip[ping] each other’s pink-and-white bodies,” “temples pressed against temples” as if harboring “the telepathy of beautiful, murderous children in horror films” (Awad, 2019, p. 3). She specifically refers to them as the children instead of the

monsters of horror films, implying that they capture an unexpected terror with their innocence. The Bunnies' "squealing sounds of monstrous love [...] hurt [Samantha's] face." She secretly prays that they might "implode" (Awad, 2019, p. 3). Samantha's extreme reaction to the Bunnies reflects what cuteness, to an uncanny degree, is meant to provoke. In their entangled state, the Bunnies have complete command over her attention. They draw out a primitive and reflexive part of her that desires violence in the face of adoration.

In turn, monstrous cuteness has a gendered dimension. At its surface, pure cuteness may be conflated with feminine naivete. Certainly, cuteness is often stereotypically attributed to women who demonstrate the youthfulness, innocence, and submissiveness of children. However, this perspective obscures the performance aspect of cuteness that molds it into a tool of manipulation. In reading cuteness through the lens of monstrosity, it becomes more cryptic and androgynous, playing *with* traditional feminine expectations instead of into them. As Anthony McIntyre of University College Dublin (2020) writes in "Gendering Cuteness," the ambiguousness of cuteness "mitigates the judgment of appropriate gender performance" (p. 5). That is, cuteness is "at once seemingly heteronormative and nonthreatening, while at the same time subversive in its creation of a space of personal agency on the part of its practitioners" (McIntyre, 2020, p. 3). Certainly, the Bunnies do not explicitly defy the gender binary. Nonetheless, their hyper-adorability and "fake little girl voices" appear to be satirical responses to the infantilization of women (Awad, 2019, p. 6).

Supporting the idea of their nonconformity is that, while the Bunnies ruminate on men in theory, significant male presence does not breach the fabric of their lives. They only seem to seek physical intimacy, emotional support, and intellectual stimulation from each other. In a group, they recite their own sexually-charged poetry, earning praises from the other Bunnies: "Oh my god. *So* erotic" and "I absolutely love the way the erotic is rendered as a tactile, olfactory experience. Every time you read that poem, Bunny, it seems to possess you" (Awad, 2019, p. 38). The target of their sexual expression is each other's approbation. In the manifesto "The Woman Identified Woman," the coalition Radicalesbians (1970) makes a point that, in our heteropatriarchy society, "the essence of being a 'woman' is to get fucked by men" (p. 2). Thus, "until women see in each other the possibility of primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men [...]" (Radicalesbians, 1970, p. 2-3). Although the Bunnies do not directly have sex with each other, their monstrous cuteness affords them a vehicle of women identification. Because they are so darling, their transgressions of normative heterosexual behavior are not scrutinized, giving them the space to be overt (yet covert) with their affection.

Consequently, monstrous cuteness has the potential for gender resistance. One way in which it fosters resistance is by creating heterotopias for women. Michel Foucault (1986) describes heterotopias as "places [...] outside of all places" in which real sites are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (p. 3). These spaces can be "privileged or sacred or forbidden," they may also hold "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm [...]" (Foucault, 1986, p. 4-5). Though they can be a mechanism for

containing deviancy, heterotopias can also act as a sanctuary for the cutely monstrous by forgoing social constructs. In *Bunny*, one such place is the Smut Salon, a routine gathering space for the Bunnies to share their work. The practice is meant “to awaken [their] creativity,” “to open [their] hearts,” and “to be perverse” (Awad, 2019, p. 37). At first glance, what is “perverse” appears to be their embrace of each other’s minds, sexualities, and company. Certainly, just the spectacle of women reveling in one another is rendered abnormal by heteronormativity.

Nevertheless, the Bunnies take their resistance one step further as women creators. In an attic that looks like a “dollhouse room,” Sam is officially inducted into their “workshop” (Awad, 2019, p. 109). The Bunnies bring out an actual bunny and one remarks, “What kind of boy are we trying for today?” They are not boys, another corrects her, they are “Intertextual spaces. Fusions. Hybrids” or even “Drafts” (Awad, 2019, p. 113). Then, the bunny explodes, covering the girls in gore. A knock comes at the door and it is the manifestation of their bloody ritual, a boy. He is “beautiful” but he has a “harelip” and screams when the Bunnies try to talk to him (Awad, 2019, p. 115). So, a Bunny proceeds to kill him with an axe. As “drafts” of their ideal man, the boys represent the Bunnies’ twisted process of (re)defining the masculine role within their heterotopia.

Thus, their secluded workshop is an avenue for creative liberation beyond what society finds acceptable or possible. “You’re...blocked,” they tell Samantha about her stagnated writing (Awad, 2019, p. 105). The written word is “flaccid,” but their workshop defies “genre,” “gender narratives,” and “the patriarchy of language” (Awad, 2019, p. 105-6). The Bunnies’ creations are unhindered by the constraints of writing, which cater to the androcentric cannon. As a result, the Drafts are reflections of the girls’ inner selves and deepest desires: they are at once monstrous and cute. Their aesthetics amalgamate human and animal traits, placing them within the “hybridity” that Brzozowska-Brywczyńska pinpoints. Furthermore, their “contradictions” are “irreconcilable” to the point where they seem to be composed “of two or more radically distinct beings that, in their essential nature, have nothing to do with each other” (May, 2019, p. 129-30). The Bunnies successfully produce Drafts who are erudite and poetic, who stroke their faces and speak lines like “Your beauty is nuanced and labyrinthine like a sentence by Proust” (Awad, 2019, p. 84). However, they are still tethered to their beastly instincts, with one “munching on [Samantha’s] corsage with a vengeance” (Awad, 2019, p. 91). The Drafts are prime examples of how monstrous cuteness challenges existing structures. Their resistance to a singular species categorization or conduct makes them profoundly “anti-dichotomy” (May, 2019, p. 8). They move through territory that is familiar and unfamiliar, natural and unnatural, and archaic and futuristic. In doing so, they open up what is possible, particularly for female creators, who are able to conjure their exact visions of boy-girl relations. As the Bunnies put it, “it makes [them] feel a little like God” and, accordingly, they are the gods of creation within their heterotopic workshop (Awad, 2019, p. 125).

Another aspect of the feminine heterotopia is that it encourages community. As Radicalesbians (1970) emphasize, any gender norm divergence, such as lesbianism, can leave its actor “living much of her life alone” (p. 1). Loneliness plagues women who believe that they are

solitary in their struggle against gender expectations when many others feel the same. Enclosed havens give them the opportunity to share with each other without stigma or male obstruction. Although Samantha feels nervous entering the Smut Salon, a Bunny's smile is "like an embrace" (Awad, 2019, p. 33). After she experiences the Draft-making ritual for the first time and faces its marvelous grotesqueness, she joins the Bunny mind-meld. Together, the girls "huddle-hug," saying "*Oh Bunny, I love you,*" "*I love you, Bunny*" (Awad, 2019, p. 124). There is no distinction among them as though they are a joint entity, countering patriarchal individualism. In *The Power of Cute*, Simon May (2019) argues that cuteness "is fundamentally an appeal to others: an invitation to sociality" in which "one discovers oneself already drawn into the orbit of a lovable and intimate other" (p. 18). Monstrous cuteness, then, draws one even closer, for it touches and bonds the darkest, most shameful (yet most wanting) parts of us.

Under heteronormativity, women are shamed for the desire to live a woman-identified life. The Drafts give the Bunnies a way to essentially romance each other. The Bunnies design a bunny-boy inspired by Samantha's past crush, who tells her he doesn't even think about the girl he chose instead of her, but rather "how much infinitely hotter" she is (Awad, 2019, p. 89). The Draft placates her deepest insecurities and—originating from the Bunnies' own intentions—he lets Samantha know that she is still loveable. She dances with him while the other Bunnies dance with their Draft dates. As they sway, one Bunny "locks eyes" with Samantha and "winks" (Awad, 2019, p. 90). They may hold the boys' bodies, but the poetry, comfort, and love come from the girls themselves.

Because the Bunnies fully embrace monstrous cuteness in their creations, they can take transformative and even violent action against patriarchal oppression. In "S.C.U.M. Manifesto (Society for Cutting Up Men)," radical feminist Valerie Solanas expresses that men are an inferior species that project their shortcomings onto women. The tyranny they enact takes away women's freedom of expression and creation. Critically, the Drafts do not possess any of the suppressive qualities that Solanas lists. For Solanas (1967), men are appalling when they prevent platonic relationships between women. Ideally, women should have the power "to engage in intensely absorbing, emotionally satisfying activities which, when shared with those you respect, lead to deep friendship" (p. 8). Likewise, the workshop is an intensely absorbing, emotionally satisfying activity from which the bunny-boys culminate. Therefore, these "men" depend on the Bunnies' material bond and have neither the objective nor the capacity to destroy it.

Solanas goes on to criticize male artists who con women into believing that "Great Art" is "created by men." These men proclaim that "only those with exquisite sensitivities far superior to [women's] can perceive and appreciate the slop they appreciate" (Solanas, 1967, p. 9). Contrarily, the bunny-boys speak to the greatness of women's artistic measures as art by women. Their sensitivities to literature and culture *are* the Bunnies' sensitivities. And with their manifestation, Samantha is no longer insecure about external perceptions of her work. She thinks, "Fuck you, poets. You think you are so smart, so cool with your word art. You have no idea. Can you conjure hybrid spaces?" (Awad, 2019, p. 124). As she learns, under male domination of the artistic realm, women can only exact great potential in modes that are

inaccessible to them. Samantha relishes in that fact that these supposed “poets” have “no idea” what extraordinary artistry she and the Bunnies possess.

Finally, Solanas (1967) says that “the lecherous male [...] *has* to [have sex]” because his “ego consists of his cock” (p. 9). In contrast, the Drafts are distinctly cockless; they are missing “hands,” “genitals,” “an untwisted mouth,” and “possibly a soul” (Awad, 2019, p. 125). All of the body parts that seek sexual attention/gratification from women are gone or warped, as is the soul that motivates the ego. While the Drafts are corporeally monstrous, they are made cute by the irregularities that make them tangibly less threatening. As one of the Bunnies puts it, “An Other but not a so Scary Other that he won’t be able to make her tea with the dainty gestures of an anemic Englishmen” (Awad, 2019, p. 129). Ultimately, the Bunnies’ construction of bunny-boys gives insight into the extent women can thrive in the company of cuter, weaker, and emphatically better men.

In spite of the promise they offer, the Bunnies are still unafraid to put the Drafts on the chopping block. Similarly, in her manifesto, Solanas (1967) vows for SCUM to “kill all men” except those “who are working diligently to eliminate themselves” (p. 14). Many of Solanas’ readers interpret her goal as a sardonic jab against self-important men, though it is hard to say what her true intentions were. Either way, her murderous intent received the reaction it sought to provoke: men were outraged and forced to reflect on their own offenses. The Bunnies take it one step further by bringing her vision into reality. In doing so, they rebuff the doubters who found safety in satire, substantiating the value of an actual women-run society. Even when the Drafts pose no threat to them, the Bunnies axe them for not meeting their standards. “The ones who don’t work out for [them] for a number of reasons, [they] let go” (Awad, 2019, p. 126). Unlike Solanas (1967), they are unconcerned about making their killings “selective and discriminate” (p. 15). In a way, they encapsulate Solanas’ lawless call to action even better than her imparted directions, for they exact their power without worrying about being good role models, good leaders, or good girls. It is made clear that the bunny-boys are both disposable and replaceable—the girls do not depend on them for anything substantial. They rebel against the misogynistic conception whereby “[women] are authentic, legitimate, real to the extent that [they] are the property of some man” (Radicalesbians, 1970, p. 3). If anything, the Drafts are the ones who are “unreal” and mercurial in comparison to their hatchet-wielding female creators.

Notably, the Bunnies commit the slaughters within the confines of their heterotopia. “SCUM will always operate on a criminal as opposed to a civil disobedience basis, that is, as opposed to openly violating the law and going to jail in order to draw attention to an injustice,” Solanas (1967) writes, “SCUM is out to destroy the system, not attain certain rights within it” (p. 15). The Bunnies align with SCUM in this respect; likely, their reimagination of gender relations would be stifled and demonized by the public. Heteropatriarchy boxes women within “goodness” and “badness,” a trap that Solanas (1967) comes close to falling into with her separation of “Daddy’s Girls”—“nice, passive, accepting ‘cultivated’, polite, dignified, subdued, dependent, scared, mindless, insecure, approval-seeking”—and SCUM—“dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant” (p. 14). The

Bunnies are outwardly perceived as saccharine, but, had their activities become known, they would immediately be shut down as negative outliers of proper femininity. In their covert elimination of the Drafts, the Bunnies are able to freely resist binary categorization, proving that women can encompass multiple and seemingly contradictory facets. In the hybrid space of their workshop, they are monstrously cute in their closeness and bloodthirst. They are the SCUM of Daddy's Girls.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to gender resistance within monstrous cuteness. Although the Bunnies try to define their creations as "Hybrids" and "Drafts," several times, they slip and refer to them as "boys" (Awad, 2019, p. 131). They struggle to view the Drafts in a nonbinary or genderless light; in turn, they still cling to maleness as a means of fulfilling their fantasies. Their killings take away the breaths but not the growing influence of the boys. One of Samantha's creations develops the ability to make judgments for himself, escaping the heterotopia. Because the Bunnies are all "in love with [him]," it sends their friendship into a frenzy (Awad, 2019, p. 260). At their poetry program, the Bunnies criticize each other instead of giving praise like they usually do. Samantha notices that they "look like puked up soup," failing to maintain their lovely image (Awad, 2019, p. 255). It seems that their monstrous intimacy could not survive the heteronormative attack. Radicalesbians (1970) may condemn them as "women [who] have related to and through men," who are too afraid to truly decenter men from their lives (p. 3). Eventually, Samantha strikes an axe at her creation, so that "the boy they are fighting for isn't a boy anymore" (Awad, 2019, p. 296). Only then do the Bunnies somewhat return to their previous selves. Yet, they are still "a ring of broken girls" with "four crooked pink-and-white bodies"—less cute and also less monstrous (Awad, 2019, p. 301). It can be interpreted that monstrous cuteness, to the extent that the Bunnies possess it, is paradigm-shifting within their heterotopia but vulnerable to the gender pressures outside of it.

Another deficiency of monstrous cuteness as a tool of women's liberation is the issue of which women get to use it. It cannot be discounted that the Bunnies are all rich, white girls within an elite institution. They carried out their monstrous actions without consequence because society already assigns innate innocence and cuteness to them. On the other hand, women of color, particularly those of the working class, are already made "monstrous" by discrimination. Cuteness is not afforded to them, much less the nuance of monstrous cuteness. Even as a scholarship student, Samantha has decidedly less access to the heterotopia formed by the Bunnies and has to be introduced by them. In accordance, "cuteness [is] a marker of racial distinction" that reflects the "asymmetries of social power" (McIntyre, 2020, p. 4). Readers are urged to give more scrutiny to the Bunnies' backgrounds, which affix them very much within the system of privilege.

All in all, in *Bunny*, monstrous cuteness grants the Bunnies control over their identities in relation to womanhood, creation, men, and each other. In the refuge of their workshop, they played and killed in hybrid space. Monstrous cuteness, then, is "a harbinger of what the future might hold" (May, 2019, p. 126). It allows us to "question [...] who really has power" and even "the point of being in the dominant position" (May, 2019, p. 45). That is to say, the Bunnies had

knowledge and impact in strikingly clever, artistic, and unmasculine ways. Although the Bunnies' efforts were sequestered, they inspire the notion of a feminine heterotopia in which monstrous cuteness can evolve and permeate.



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