



Original Article

Masculinity, Class and Social Identity in David Szalay's Novel, *Flesh*

Dr. Shakil Shaikh<sup>1</sup> & Rebello Bernadine Joseph<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Guide, K. B. P. College, Vashi, Navi Mumbai

<sup>2</sup>Research Student, K. B. P. College, Vashi, Navi Mumbai

Manuscript ID:  
IJAAR-140123

ISSN: 2347-7075  
Impact Factor – 8.26

Volume – 14  
Issue – 1  
September- October 2026  
Pp. 186 - 192

Submitted: 22 Sept 2026  
Revised: 03 Oct 2026  
Accepted: 15 Oct 2026  
Published: 25 Oct 2026

Corresponding Author:  
Rebello Bernadine Joseph

Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://ijaar.co.in/>



DOI:  
10.5281/zenodo.23588086

DOI Link:  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23588086>



Creative Commons



**Abstract:**

*David Szalay's Flesh explores the complex formation of individual identity through the interconnected dimensions of masculinity, class, and social identity. The novel traces the life of István from adolescence to adulthood, depicting his movement across different geographical, social, economic, and institutional environments. This paper examines how István's masculine identity develops through bodily experience, sexuality, physical strength, violence, military service, employment, marriage, fatherhood, and emotional instability. It further analyses his changing class position, from a modest life in Hungary to migrant labour and professional employment in London, followed by economic prosperity and entry into elite social circles, before his eventual return to a simpler life in Hungary. The study argues that Flesh presents identity as a fluid, cumulative, embodied, and relational process in which social mobility and external transformation do not necessarily result in psychological transformation. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates how past experiences continue to shape the individual even as social circumstances, class positions, relationships, and masculine roles undergo significant change.*

**Keywords:** David Szalay; *Flesh*; Masculinity; Class; Social Identity; Identity Formation; Migration; Social Mobility; Masculine Identity; Embodiment; Sexuality; Violence; Trauma; Fatherhood; Class Mobility.

**Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)**

*This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), which permits others to remix, adapt, and build upon the work non-commercially, provided that appropriate credit is given and that any new creations are licensed under identical terms.*

**How to cite this article:**

Dr. Shakil Shaikh & Rebello Bernadine Joseph (2026). Masculinity, Class and Social Identity in David Szalay's Novel, *Flesh*. *International Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, 14(1), 186–192. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23588086>

**Introduction:**

*Flesh* is the sixth novel by Canadian-Hungarian author David Szalay. Published on 6 March 2025, the novel received significant

critical attention and was awarded the Booker Prize on 10 November 2025. The narrative follows István from adolescence to adulthood, presenting his development not simply as a



conventional coming-of-age story but as a complex process of identity formation shaped by the body, sexuality, class, employment, family, friendship, institutions, violence, migration, and social relationships.

István's movement between Hungary and England exposes him to changing social and cultural environments that influence his understanding of himself and his position in society. Although his geographical, economic, professional, and familial circumstances change substantially, his capacity to recognise and articulate his emotions remains limited. Physical experience frequently precedes verbal or emotional understanding. The body therefore becomes an important site through which his desires, conflicts, vulnerabilities, and responses are expressed.

The novel can consequently be approached through the interconnected dimensions of masculinity, class, and social identity. These dimensions are not isolated; they continually shape one another and reveal how individual identity is formed through the interaction between personal experience and wider social structures.

### **Masculinity:**

István is the central figure through whom the novel examines the complex and contradictory nature of masculinity. Masculinity is not represented simply through physical strength, sexual success, conventional heroism, or economic power. Instead, it is constructed through physicality, sexuality, violence, responsibility, employment, social status, insecurity, vulnerability, and emotional limitation. His physical experiences frequently precede his ability to understand them emotionally.

One of the defining features of István's masculinity is his restricted emotional communication. His dialogue often consists of brief expressions such as "yeah," "okay," and "I don't know." This linguistic minimalism functions as a form of emotional defence. Rather than articulating fear, desire, grief, or frustration, he tends to express them through physical action, sexual encounters, labour, and violence. His silence does not indicate an absence of feeling; rather, it reveals his difficulty in recognising and communicating his emotions.

His masculine insecurity begins during adolescence. At fifteen, after moving to a different town, he struggles to adapt to a new school and its social hierarchy. His male friend's open discussion of sexual experience makes István compare himself with others, while the rejection he receives from a girl further intensifies his sense of inadequacy. Masculinity is thus established relationally through comparison, recognition, rejection, and social expectations.

His first sexual encounter with a forty-two-year-old neighbour becomes a formative but confusing experience. Although the woman tells him that he is now a man, István does not experience any corresponding transformation in his consciousness. The encounter involves sexual exploitation, yet he initially lacks the conceptual framework to understand it. His body acquires experience before his consciousness can interpret it. The novel consequently separates physical development from emotional maturity.

The tension between bodily development and self-understanding is captured in the following passage:



“And all that burgeoning physicality is held within yourself as a sort of secret, even as it is also the actual surface that you present to the world, so that you’re left absurdly exposed, unsure whether the world knows everything about you or nothing, because you have no way of knowing whether these experiences that you’re having are universal or entirely specific to you.” (301)

The passage presents the body as both private and public. István experiences his developing body as unfamiliar, while it simultaneously becomes the visible surface through which society encounters and judges him. His physical development therefore produces a psychological gap between the body and the self.

Physical strength becomes another important component of his masculine identity. His strength is recognised through physical labour, his experiences in the young offenders institution, and his later employment as a doorman, bodyguard, and driver. His ability to protect others becomes economically valuable, particularly through his work with Mervyn. Masculinity is therefore translated into employability: physical strength, endurance, discipline, and the capacity for protection acquire professional value.

Violence, however, exposes the unstable and destructive dimensions of this masculinity. István pushes his neighbour’s husband down the stairs, causing his death, and later struggles to determine his own intention. The narrative states:

“He starts to have this feeling that he wanted the man to be dead, and then the man died, and that in some sense that went beyond the purely accidental he had killed him. He did push him down the stairs. That’s why the man

fell down the stairs. He pushed him. And it’s hard to say what his intention was.” (34)

The ambiguity surrounding his intention demonstrates that violence does not establish a secure masculine identity; instead, it produces guilt, uncertainty, and institutional consequences. His later acts of violence, including punching a door after Riki’s death and attacking Thomas, similarly show his tendency to convert emotional distress into physical action.

Military service provides a more socially sanctioned form of masculinity. Discipline, obedience, physical ability, endurance, and toughness are valued within the institution, and his military background subsequently assists him in obtaining security and close-protection work. His masculine attributes therefore become professional skills. Yet physical and professional competence do not resolve his emotional uncertainty.

Marriage and fatherhood introduce another dimension of masculinity. István wants to demonstrate success to Helen through economic achievement and social mobility, particularly through the Rainham project and property development. Thomas’s description of him is therefore significant:

“He said you exemplify a primitive form of masculinity.” (252)

The phrase points to a masculine identity strongly dependent upon physicality, instinct, authority, and action rather than emotional articulation and self-reflection. István’s relationship with Jacob further complicates fatherhood. He wants his son to have better opportunities than he had, worries about his bullying, and attempts to discuss his fascination with adult material. Yet emotional



distance persists. The loss of Helen and Jacob intensifies his sense of incompleteness.

His later refusal of promotion at MediaMarkt because he prefers taking orders to giving them reflects a broader tendency to accommodate external structures rather than actively define his own direction. Ultimately, *Flesh* presents masculinity as unstable and continuously negotiated: István can be sexually experienced yet unable to understand intimacy, physically strong yet emotionally uncertain, violent yet capable of responsibility, and economically successful yet socially insecure.

#### **Class:**

István's class position changes significantly throughout the novel, making social mobility a central element of his development. He begins in a modest environment in Hungary and later migrates to London in search of better opportunities. His initial experience of migration is economically difficult: he lives with others, earns limited wages, and struggles to manage his expenses. His circumstances improve after his military background and physical abilities lead him into security and close-protection work with Mervyn.

His marriage to Helen subsequently brings him into contact with London's wealthy elite. He attends lavish parties, auctions, galleries, private events, and gatherings involving politicians and wealthy professionals. Yet his position remains complicated by his status as a Hungarian migrant. His accent and unfamiliarity with British slang distinguish him from those around him. His experiences demonstrate that class is not determined by money alone but also involves language,

manners, cultural knowledge, social networks, and a sense of belonging.

The Gagosian Gallery episode illustrates his attempt to convert social connections into economic mobility. He invites potential investors and professionals because association with elite spaces may help establish confidence in his property-development project. His increasing wealth and access to elite society therefore represent an important phase of social mobility. However, the confrontation with Thomas at the gallery damages his reputation and contributes to the collapse of the identity he has constructed in London.

After losing Helen and Jacob, István returns to Hungary and works at MediaMarkt in a security role. He wears a uniform, performs routine duties, and has limited authority. When offered promotion to deputy head of security, he refuses because he prefers taking orders to giving them. His return demonstrates that economic and social advancement does not necessarily produce a permanent transformation in self-perception. The London identity proves temporary, while his earlier experiences remain influential.

Thus, *Flesh* presents class as complicated rather than linear. István moves from a modest background into migrant labour, professional security, wealth, and elite society before returning to a simpler life in Hungary. His class position changes, but his sense of belonging remains uncertain. Social mobility transforms his external circumstances without completely resolving the psychological tensions formed earlier in his life.

#### **Social Identity:**

István's social identity develops through a succession of changing roles: son, schoolboy,



sexual subject, offender, soldier, migrant, security professional, therapy patient, husband, father, stepfather, and businessman. Each role introduces a new social environment and modifies how he is perceived by others. Yet earlier identities are not completely erased; they remain embedded within his later experiences.

At fifteen, his identity is shaped by his mother, friend, school, and the social hierarchy of his new environment. His sexual experience with the older neighbour further complicates his understanding of himself. The experience remains largely unspoken, producing a gap between private experience and social recognition. This psychological isolation is captured in the observation:

“As long as no one knows about it, it’s like it isn’t really happening. It’s like it exists in the same way that his fantasies exist, as something he’s just imagining. That’s how it seems to him sometimes.” – (23)

The passage suggests that secrecy prevents the experience from becoming fully integrated into his social identity. The death of the neighbour’s husband and István’s confinement in a young offenders institution then give him another enduring identity: that of a person with a criminal record. Although the punishment ends, its consequences remain part of his biography and later affect his professional life.

Migration creates another important transformation. In Britain, István carries experiences that have profound meaning for him but little significance within his new environment. The novel observes:

“He realises that the things that are so important to him – the things that happened, and that he saw there, the things that left him feeling that nothing would ever be the same

again – they just aren’t important here. Those things have no reality here. That’s what it feels like. So it makes you feel slightly insane or something, to have those things inside you, when they seem to have no reality here.” – (83)

This passage reveals the difference between subjective memory and social recognition. Migration is therefore not simply geographical movement; it also produces psychological and social dislocation. His Hungarian identity remains visible through accent and language even as he enters British economic and social structures.

Military service provides institutional recognition, while therapy creates a rare space in which István is encouraged to articulate emotions. Therapy follows the death of Riki and later becomes part of a plea-bargain arrangement after his attack on Thomas. It also affects how Helen perceives him. These experiences demonstrate that identity is shaped both by individual experience and by the way institutions and other people classify and respond to him.

Family becomes another major component of his social identity. Marriage makes him a husband and Jacob’s birth makes him a father, but neither role completely resolves his emotional limitations. His relationship with Helen becomes increasingly distant, while his relationship with Jacob remains complicated by emotional restraint. After Helen and Jacob die in a car accident, the social roles disappear externally but continue psychologically through memory, grief, and attachment.

István’s struggle to find meaning after Jacob’s death is reflected in the following passage:



“He desperately wants to believe that his son still exists – still exists in some actual sense, not just as a memory – and that what happened to him is somehow part of some larger plan or scheme. And not just a meaningless single event. What these people believe seems to make that possible. He assumes that that’s what drew his mother here, or something like it. She has never shown any interest in this sort of thing until now. So he understands why she comes here and how it might help her. He also understands, after a few weeks, that it won’t be able to help him. He knows it’s not true, that’s the problem. He wants to believe that his son still exists, and his desire to believe that is almost enough to make him believe everything else that he needs to believe in order to make that possible, but not quite. The part of him that knows those things aren’t true is just too strong for him to overcome.” – (318)

His continuing attachment to Jacob is further expressed through his reflections on death:

“Sometimes when he’s drunk he has the feeling that he and Jacob will be reunited in the future. It’s not that he thinks they will actually meet again in any sort of afterlife or anything like that. He knows that they won’t. He knows that the only sense in which they will be reunited is that one day he will also revert to being insentient matter and sometimes when he’s drunk that seems like a strangely comforting idea.” – (319)

These reflections demonstrate that fatherhood remains part of his identity even after Jacob’s death. Similarly, his relationship with Thomas exposes the instability of his identities as husband, stepfather, businessman, and member of London’s elite. His use of

Thomas’s inheritance for the Rainham project and his violent response to Thomas’s accusation reveal how personal resentment, economic ambition, and social status intersect.

István’s emotional detachment also affects his understanding of relationships. The narrator observes:

“There’s often this feeling of – Yes, I like you, but I like other people as well. It’s not even that I like them more. It’s just that I don’t like them less. So to be with any one person feels like an arbitrary thing, and that arbitrary feeling has started to undermine any lingering sense that there might be a particular person that he’s somehow meant to be with.” – (152)

This suggests an inability to establish stable emotional attachments. His relationships become part of a fragmented social identity rather than permanent foundations of selfhood. His understanding of death intensifies this instability:

“Thinking about death makes everything seem sad because it makes everything seem unimportant, at least for a moment.” – (179)

The persistence of ordinary life after personal tragedy also creates alienation:

“There’s something terrible about the way normality asserts itself. About the way that summer insists on happening. About the way the chestnuts blossom and Wimbledon takes place.” (317)

These observations emphasise the contrast between private suffering and public normality. Although István’s life is transformed by loss, the world continues according to its ordinary rhythms. His trauma therefore remains psychologically powerful even when it becomes socially invisible.



Ultimately, István's social identity is cumulative rather than substitutive. The adolescent, offender, soldier, migrant, professional, patient, husband, father, stepfather, and businessman continue to coexist within him. His later social success does not erase earlier experiences. Instead, those experiences remain embodied and continue to influence his behaviour.

### **Conclusion:**

Masculinity, class, and social identity emerge as deeply interconnected dimensions of *Flesh*. István's masculinity develops through insecurity, sexuality, physical strength, violence, military discipline, employment, marriage, fatherhood, and emotional instability. His changing class position takes him from a modest life in Hungary to migrant labour and professional security work in London, then to wealth and elite social circles, and finally back to a simpler life in Hungary. His social identity similarly changes through his roles as son, sexual subject, offender, soldier, migrant, therapy patient, husband, father, stepfather, and businessman.

These transformations, however, do not erase his past or produce a completely new self. Earlier experiences continue to shape his behaviour, relationships, emotional responses, and sense of belonging. The novel therefore presents masculinity, class, and social identity as fluid, relational, and constantly changing, while also demonstrating that such change is

always conditioned by accumulated experience. István may move across countries, occupations, social classes, and family roles, but he continues to carry the bodily, emotional, and social traces of the life he has already lived.

### **Works Cited:**

1. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, 1984.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
3. Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., University of California Press, 2005.
4. Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton, 1968.
5. Fussell, Paul. *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*. Simon & Schuster, 1983.
6. Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books, 1959.
7. Kimmel, Michael S., Jeff Hearn, and R. W. Connell, editors. *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. SAGE Publications, 2005.
8. Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 1959.
9. Szalay, David. *Flesh*. Jonathan Cape, 2025.