

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

In recent decades, manga has developed beyond its status as a form of popular entertainment and has become an important medium for representing social, cultural, and psychological experiences. Through the combination of visual imagery and verbal narration, manga is able to communicate complex meanings that extend beyond literal storytelling (Berndt, 2019; Cohn, 2013). As a form of visual narrative, manga has increasingly attracted scholarly attention because its sequential images, panel composition, and dialogue construct meanings that reflect broader cultural values and social ideologies (Groensteen, 2007).

One manga that presents these issues is Tatsuki Fujimoto's *Chainsaw Man*. The story follows Denji, a poor young man who becomes Chainsaw Man after merging with his devil companion, Pochita. After becoming a devil hunter under Public Safety, Denji gains physical power, food, shelter, and recognition. However, his life is still controlled by other people, especially Makima and the institution that uses his body as a weapon. Because of this, Denji is not simply portrayed as a strong male protagonist. He is also shown as emotionally dependent, socially powerless, and vulnerable.

This contradiction makes Denji an important character to analyse. On the surface, Denji fits the image of a powerful male protagonist because he can transform into Chainsaw Man and defeat enemies through

violence. However, his emotional life shows a different side of masculinity. He cries, hesitates, desires affection, seeks validation, fears rejection, and struggles to understand whether he is still human. His physical strength does not give him full control over his body, emotions, or future. This makes Denji's masculinity unstable and different from the ideal image of dominant masculinity.

The issue of male vulnerability is important because masculinity is often associated with strength, control, independence, and emotional restraint. Hegemonic masculinity places pressure on men to appear strong, self-reliant, sexually confident, and emotionally controlled. As a result, vulnerability is often treated as something that must be hidden or denied. Galvez-Sánchez et al. (2025) explain that hegemonic masculinity is closely related to norms such as being tough, being silent, being independent, avoiding emotions, and maintaining control. This shows that male vulnerability is not only a personal issue, but also a social and cultural issue shaped by gender expectations.

Among the social issues represented in manga, masculinity has become an increasingly important subject of academic discussion. Contemporary manga frequently moves beyond the conventional portrayal of male protagonists as emotionally invulnerable heroes by presenting male characters who experience fear, loneliness, dependence, and psychological conflict. Such representations challenge the assumption that masculinity is naturally associated with emotional control and dominance (Connell, 2005; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

In Chainsaw Man, Denji's vulnerability appears strongly in the Bomb Girl Arc, which covers Chapters 39–52. This arc focuses on Denji's relationship with Reze, a girl who seems to offer affection, intimacy, and the possibility of escape from Public Safety. Reze's presence makes Denji imagine himself not only as Chainsaw Man or Makima's subordinate, but as a young man who can be loved and choose a different life. However, this romantic possibility becomes complicated when Reze is revealed as the Bomb Devil hybrid and when Makima prevents her from returning to Denji. Through this arc, Denji's vulnerability is shown through romantic desire, betrayal, forgiveness, failed escape, and institutional control.

Tatsuki Fujimoto's Chainsaw Man presents an alternative representation of masculinity compared to many conventional shōnen narratives. Although the series contains intense action and violence, much of its narrative is driven by the emotional experiences of its protagonist, Denji. Rather than embodying the ideal image of a confident and emotionally restrained hero, Denji frequently expresses insecurity, loneliness, confusion, and a strong desire for affection. His emotional condition makes him an appropriate character through which contemporary masculinity can be examined.

The Bomb Girl Arc was selected as the corpus of this study because it presents the most comprehensive development of Denji's emotional vulnerability during the early stages of Chainsaw Man. Unlike the preceding arcs, which primarily emphasize Denji's struggle for survival and his adaptation to life as a Public Safety Devil Hunter, the Bomb Girl

Arc shifts the narrative toward his emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships. Throughout Chapters 39–52, Denji experiences romantic intimacy with Reze, emotional uncertainty, betrayal, forgiveness, the desire to escape his current life, and ultimately the loss of that possibility through Makima's intervention. These interconnected events expose multiple dimensions of his vulnerability while simultaneously questioning his understanding of identity, affection, trust, and personal agency.

The arc also provides a consistent sequence of visual and narrative signs that supports the objectives of this study. Denji's facial expressions, body language, dialogue, symbolic objects such as flowers and the backpack, and recurring references to his heart and the possibility of "running away" collectively illustrate the progression of his emotional state. Rather than presenting vulnerability as a single emotional reaction, the Bomb Girl Arc portrays it as an evolving process shaped by intimacy, manipulation, institutional control, and failed agency. This narrative progression makes the arc particularly suitable for examining how visual signs construct male vulnerability and how that vulnerability negotiates hegemonic masculinity through the analytical framework of Barthes' semiotics, Butler's gender performativity, and Connell's hegemonic masculinity.

Recent studies show that Chainsaw Man has begun to receive academic attention. Satriyo (2023) analyses Chainsaw Man through multimodal discourse analysis and explains how visual and linguistic elements construct fear through the representation of Devils. This study is

relevant because it proves that Chainsaw Man can be analysed through visual signs and panel meanings. However, the study focuses on fear and Devil representation, not on Denji's male vulnerability or masculinity.

Another study by Febrian (2024) analyses Denji's journey in the first part of Chainsaw Man using the hero's journey framework. The study shows that Denji's character development can be examined academically as part of manga narrative construction. However, the focus is on Denji's heroic journey, conflict, and sacrifice, rather than on his vulnerability and negotiation of hegemonic masculinity. This shows that there is still space to analyse Denji from a gender and masculinity perspective.

Recent research on manga masculinity also supports the relevance of this study. Martínez-Alcaide et al. (2025) explain that male-oriented Japanese manga often constructs male protagonists through patriarchal archetypes, violence, hierarchy, competition, and the pursuit of power. However, they also argue that some manga deconstruct these masculine ideals by showing male protagonists who are powerful but dissatisfied, isolated, and emotionally vulnerable. This idea is relevant to Denji because he is physically powerful, but his strength does not give him emotional stability, autonomy, or real freedom.

Based on this background, the present study focuses on Denji's male vulnerability in the Bomb Girl Arc of Chainsaw Man. This study uses Barthes' semiotics to analyse visual and narrative signs in manga panels, Butler's gender performativity to understand masculinity as repeated actions and expressions, and Connell's hegemonic masculinity to

examine how Denji follows, challenges, or negotiates dominant masculine expectations. By using these theories, this study aims to show that Denji's vulnerability is not a simple weakness. Instead, it becomes a way to reveal the instability of hegemonic masculinity in the narrative.

Therefore, this study is important because it examines how a physically powerful male protagonist can also be emotionally vulnerable and structurally controlled. Denji's character shows that masculinity in manga does not always appear as dominance, confidence, or control. It can also appear through dependence, confusion, desire, care, forgiveness, and failed agency. Through the Bomb Girl Arc, Chainsaw Man presents masculinity as fragile, relational, and constantly negotiated.

1.2. Research Question(s)

In line with the issues raised in the background, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. What visual and narrative signs construct Denji's male vulnerability in the Bomb Girl Arc of Chainsaw Man?
2. How does the representation of male vulnerability negotiate or challenge the norms of hegemonic masculinity in the narrative?

1.3. Purpose(s) of the Study

This study aims to analyse Denji's male vulnerability in the Bomb Girl Arc of Tatsuki Fujimoto's Chainsaw Man. First, this study identifies how Denji's vulnerability is constructed through visual and narrative signs

in the selected manga panels. Second, this study explains how those signs show Denji's negotiation of hegemonic masculinity

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on Tatsuki Fujimoto's *Chainsaw Man*, specifically the Bomb Girl Arc in Chapters 39–52. The analysis is limited to Denji as the central male character. Other characters, such as Reze, Makima, and Power, are discussed only when they directly affect Denji's vulnerability and masculine identity.

The data consist of twenty-one selected manga panels and dialogues that show Denji's emotional vulnerability, romantic desire, betrayal, forgiveness, attempted escape, and institutional control. This study does not analyse all arcs of *Chainsaw Man* or compare the manga with the anime adaptation.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is expected to contribute to the discussion of masculinity in manga and visual narrative studies. By focusing on Denji's vulnerability, this study shows that male characters can be physically powerful while also emotionally dependent, fragile, and controlled by larger power structures.

This study can also be useful for students and researchers who are interested in manga, gender studies, masculinity, and semiotic analysis. It provides an example of how manga panels can be analysed as literary and cultural texts.

1.6. State of the Art

Several previous studies discuss Chainsaw Man, Denji, manga as a visual text, masculinity, and male vulnerability, but they do not specifically analyse Denji's vulnerability in the Bomb Girl Arc using semiotics, gender performativity, and hegemonic masculinity. Satriyo (2023) examines Chainsaw Man through multimodal analysis, focusing on how visual and linguistic elements construct fear, which shows the manga's visual complexity but does not address Denji's vulnerability or masculinity. Febrian (2024) analyses Denji's character using the hero's journey framework, highlighting his development and struggles, yet the study focuses on Denji as a hero rather than on his vulnerability or unstable masculinity. Johnson (2025) explores Chainsaw Man through grotesque and postmodern elements, confirming its relevance in academic studies, but it does not focus on Denji's vulnerability in the Bomb Girl Arc. Martínez-Alcaide et al. (2025) discuss masculinity in manga, showing how male characters can be powerful yet emotionally unstable, although the study does not focus on Chainsaw Man or Denji. Meanwhile, Galvez-Sánchez et al. (2025) explain how hegemonic masculinity shapes men's emotional lives, emphasizing norms such as emotional restraint and toughness, which supports the idea that Denji's vulnerability reflects broader masculine pressures.

Previous studies have examined Chainsaw Man from various perspectives, including violence, trauma, character development, and gender representation. Other scholars have also explored masculinity in

manga by examining how male characters conform to or resist dominant masculine ideals. While these studies have contributed to broader discussions of gender in popular culture, limited attention has been given to the relationship between visual representation and masculine identity in *Chainsaw Man*, particularly through the integration of semiotic and gender theories. Moreover, studies that focus specifically on the Bomb Girl Arc remain limited despite its central role in Denji's emotional development. This indicates a gap in the existing literature regarding how visual and verbal signs construct male vulnerability and how those meanings negotiate hegemonic masculinity through a sequential analytical framework.

