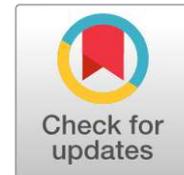


METAFICTION AND REPRESENTATION OF GENDERED IDENTITY IN GILLIAN FLYNN'S GONE GIRL

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay of gender stereotypes in crime narratives through the lens of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. Flynn's novel challenges traditional portrayals of women in crime fiction, positioning them not merely as victims but as complex anti-heroines capable of orchestrating elaborate criminal plots fueled by vengeance and psychological manipulation. The paper highlights the metafictional elements in *Gone Girl*, where the author employs self-conscious storytelling to critique societal expectations surrounding gender roles. By intertwining themes of media representation, domesticity, and the neoliberal notion of choice, the paper underscores how Flynn's narrative structure critiques the commodification of female identity and the performative aspects of gender roles and identity. Ultimately, the study posits that Flynn's work serves as a thought-provoking commentary on the power dynamics inherent in the representation of gender in contemporary media culture, revealing the complexities of identity as shaped by societal constructs.

Keywords: metafiction, identity, empowerment, victimization, Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

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Gillian Flynn's fiction positions women at the center of a crime committed back "home", not exclusively as the victims of domestic crimes but as masterminds of criminal acts inspired by vengeance (*Gone Girl*, 2012) or pathological attachment (*Sharp Objects*, 2006), staged or otherwise. In her interviews, Flynn often expresses her discontent with the lack of "enough layered protagonists who were antiheroes" (Edwards, 2023). Her subtle treatment of the trope of "the dead girl", a staple of the crime fiction, subverts reader's formulaic expectations of the genre. Her best-selling novel, *Gone Girl*, addresses a variety of themes in a 21st century context including mass media and public obsession with true (domestic) crime stories, money and class system, gendered identity and performance, manipulation and marital intrigue and the neo-liberal notion of choice. It has been invariably described in terms of "neoliberal Gothic" (Johansen, 2016), "chick noir" (Kennedy, 2017), "domestic noir" and "literary noir" (Sutton, 2018). Christensen (2020), for example, analyzes the novel in terms of "domestic noir", a contemporary take on "the Angel/ Monster dichotomy" of the traditional patriarchal narratives such as the genre of classic noir in which the femme fatale is eventually destroyed for her transgressions with the end result of restoring the traditional gender roles (p. 90). It is important to note that, unlike the femme fatale characters of the classical noir, Flynn's "millennial femme anti-heroine" as described by Christensen (2020), survives because she does what it takes "to be the author of her own story" (p. 100).

Philips (2021) describes *Gone Girl* in terms of a "fractured narrative" in which the events are presented not only from the alternating perspectives of Nick and Amy, but from different versions of Amy, "Diary Amy", "Amazing Amy", and "Actual Amy" (p.155). As Philips (2021) argues, what makes *Gone Girl* different from other domestic thrillers is the character of Amy who "uses her considerable cunning to undermine her husband in order to forcibly reinstate her marriage; the apparent female victim is revealed to be a murderous manipulator of men" (p.154). The novel also contains female Gothic tropes such as a victimized heroine, a pattern of flight and pursuit, the issue of money and property and an apparently happy ending. However, as Amy's reaction to her husband's flaws and her elaborate plan to frame him indicates, she is far from the passive heroines of Gothic fiction, as she constructs a Gothic narrative to exact revenge on her erratic husband. The use of Gothic tropes in the novel has been analyzed by Johansen (2016) in terms of the neo-liberal Gothic, where the Gothic castles are replaced by vacant

subdivision homes, as the aftermath of 2008 economic crash. In such an environment where the sub-division ruins have become an indispensable part of urban life, home is “hardly safe or heaven” (Johansen, 2016, p. 36).

Gone Girl contains elements of metafictional self-consciousness with alternating unreliable first-person point of view, in the form of “he said, she said”, representing the process of unravelling a crime mystery through police interrogations and the victim-suspects’ statements. The novel poses questions about the nature of reality and the way it can be constructed out of medley of alleged facts and statements in crime narratives. It reflects the way fictional narratives of domestic crime and victimization can be used to fabricate evidence during criminal investigations. On a non-diegetic level, Flynn’s novel is a self-conscious parody of the dynamics of domestic crime and its resultant mass-media frenzy. As the news of Nick’s infidelity spreads fast, the principle characters’ life is laid out in front of the public gaze, providing further evidence for the premise that when the wife disappears or is murdered, it is always the husband. As Sutton (2016) has stated, *Gone Girl*’s self-conscious application of the generic conventions of crime fiction “positions the reader as a kind of literary critic in search of hidden meanings, surface signifiers, non-existent depths” (p. 56). The use of metafictional self-consciousness in this novel not only exposes the constructed nature of reality in tales of domestic crime but it also serves to foreground the notion of gendered identity as performance based on power relations. In general, the issue of how reality is portrayed in fiction is the focus of metafiction. Metafiction often expresses the theoretical and ideological uncertainties regarding fiction’s ability to reflect objective reality. While realist novelists employ traditional narrative techniques to immerse readers in a seemingly authentic fictional world, metafictional writers intentionally break this illusion by adopting a self-conscious style that highlights the artificiality of storytelling conventions. Metafiction exposes the characteristic devices of classic realism such as temporal verisimilitude, narrative perspective, and the lifelike depiction of characters. By representing individuals who assume roles that they have created for themselves based on fictitious or sociocultural models, metafictional narratives investigate the notion of fictionality. As Waugh (2002) has argued “if, as individuals, we now occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’, then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels” (p. 3). The present study discusses the way Flynn

has used elements of metafiction in the novel to highlight the link between formulaic plot patterns of popular fiction and performative nature of gender roles. Through the analysis of Amy's mode of narration, it will be further argued that the narrative self-consciousness in the novel, serves to lay bare the notion of identity in terms of role-playing constructed according to the relations of power.

Gone Girl with its complex narrative structure is a subversive text which exposes the way cultural assumptions and societal expectations regarding gender roles and identities can be used to construct reality. The division of the novel into three parts, "Boy Loses Girl", "Boy Meets Girl", and "Boy Gets Girl Back (or Vice Versa)", plays with the formulaic plot of Romantic Comedies. In the first part, Amy's narrative is written in the form of a diary in which she assumes the persona of an innocent girl falling for a charming man who changes after marriage. Amy's diary is juxtaposed with Nick's account of the day of Amy's disappearance. The second part, "Boy Meets Girl", discloses Amy's discovery of Nick's infidelity and her elaborate revenge plan. The last part, "Boy Gets Girl Back (or Vice Versa)", expresses doubts regarding the viability of the happy ending formula. Although Amy's narrative starts with a fairy-tale love story related through her diary entries that recount the story of how she met "the boy", the first part of the novel emphasizes a breach in the standard plot pattern. In this part, we are introduced to two different accounts of Nick - Amy's story; the two principle character-narrators, Nick and Amy Dunne, walk us through the major events leading to the disappearance of Amy in a linear-nonlinear fashion, constructing different narratives of an alleged crime. On their fifth marriage anniversary, Amy stages her own disappearance to frame her husband, Nick, who as it is revealed later, is cheating on her with a younger student. Amy's original plan is to kill herself after making sure Nick is properly punished. Later on she decides to return home by creating a new narrative. Her statement, "I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir" (Flynn, 2012, p. 34) indicates her awareness of the tropes of the genre of the narratives she is creating. As a last resort, Amy turns to for help to Desi, a former suitor, after she is robbed by two drifters. Later, she frames Desi for kidnapping and rape after killing him. Eventually, she plays the role of a brave wife who had to kill her kidnapper to save her virtue.

In *Gone Girl*, narrative self-consciousness serves to foreground the socially constructed nature of gender roles on two levels. On a personal level, there is Nick-Amy's

romance-performance, from the beginning when they meet at a writers' party till the end when Amy blackmails her husband into staying married to her by secretly impregnating herself. The second level of self-conscious narration resides in Amy's role as the victim of domestic violence, a role propagated by the mass media and societal expectations. In narrating her side of the story, Amy makes use of two types of discourse with regard to gender roles: victim feminism or what Naomi Wolf (2013) has defined as the tendency to view women as "sexually pure and mystically nurturing and stresses the evil done to these 'good' women as a way to petition for their rights" (p. 3), and the post-feminist notion of choice and empowerment, epitomized by Amy's "cool girl" persona. It is important to note that Amy's use of both types of discourse in reference to her relationship with Nick is subversive as it points to the idea that gender relations are a matter of role-playing and performance rather than genuine companionship and mutual understanding.

Part of the novel's critique of prescribed gender roles resides in the discourse of women's victimization. Hoeveler (1995) uses the term "professional femininity", or what she calls the "hyperbolic staging of female suffering" (p. 4) to describe the way 18th and 19th century female Gothic novelists portray their heroines as passive recipients of socially prescribed gendered roles as wives and mothers. According to Hoeveler (1995), despite their apparent docility and outward passivity, the female characters of Gothic novels eventually manage to take control of the terms of their own captivity through "an ideology of female power through pretended and staged weakness" (p. 7). In the "Diary Amy" section, which she later describes as "a work of fiction" (Flynn, 2012, p. 219), Amy draws on this type of discourse, giving detailed account of the way her marriage to Nick changed her from an "Independent Young Feminist" (Flynn, 2012, p. 43) to a pregnant battered wife haunted by fear of an abusive husband. It is interesting to note that Amy's diary that covers seven years of her relationship with Nick, from the time they met at a writers' party to the day of her disappearance, was written after her discovery of Nick's infidelity. Amy took care to reconstruct key moments in her marriage accurately and rewrite Diary Amy's proper reaction to an abusive husband.

One hundred and fifty-two entries total, and I don't think I ever lose her voice. I wrote her very carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should the portions be released. They have to read this diary

like it's some sort of Gothic tragedy. A wonderful, good hearted woman – *whole life ahead of her, everything going for her*, whatever else they say about women who die - chooses the wrong mate and *pays the ultimate price*. They have to like her. Me. (Flynn, 2012, pp. 236 -237)

This version of Amy proves to be appealing to the cops and the public opinion as Amy had anticipated. Her Diary entry in the first part of the novel ends with "*This man might kill me. So if you find this and I'm dead, well....*" (Flynn, 2012, p. 206). As expected, Amy's meticulously crafted narrative of her own victimhood is readily taken up by the police and released to the media championed by Ellen Abbott, "America's voice of female righteousness" (Flynn, 2012, p. 243).

Amy's use of pregnancy as an efficient tool to control her narrative works on a double edge; it suggests both vulnerability and strength. For one thing, the fake pregnancy statement in the diary is meant to evoke public sympathies with "the sweet missing pregnant lady" (Flynn, 2012, p. 258) and further incriminate her husband by implying that Amy became the target of Nick's anger due to the unwanted pregnancy. To validate her story, before her disappearance, she even makes friends with her neighbor, Noelle, a mother of triplets whom Amy scorns for her outright domesticity and her devotion to her maternal role. As in the Diary Amy, the whole idea of befriending Noelle is a calculated maneuver on Amy's part because after Amy's disappearance, Noelle steps forward as privy to Nick's abuse of his pregnant wife. In other words, Amy both creates and performs a narrative about domestic abuse. On the other hand, the real pregnancy by the end of the novel proves to be Amy's winning card. As Nick writes his own version of the story, revealing the facts behind Amy's disappearance, Amy uses the baby to blackmail Nick. While both characters go to great lengths to be the authors of their story: Nick confesses that it is Amy who wins: "I created a manuscript, and she created a life" (Flynn, 2012, p. 206). Amy proves to be the master storyteller because she knows the different implications of the role she is playing and her role is well scripted. In this sense, she is similar to the 18th and 19th century female Gothic novelists who according to Hoeveler (1995), have "constructed themselves as victims in their own literature" (p. 4). In both cases, it is possible to see the notion of gendered identity as performance. Similar

to the Gothic female novelists, Amy creates the character of Diary Amy according to the societal expectations regarding domestic disputes.

The idea of victim feminism that reflects cultural anxieties regarding gendered violence is largely indicated in the fascination with the dead female body so dominant in crime fiction. The violated female corpse signifies perfection in its passivity and submission to aggression. Amy uses the trope of the missing female body to create a socially appealing story about her own victimhood. She is well aware of the conventions of the story she is writing: a nice blood puddle poorly cleaned up, havoc in the living room, the missing wife and clues left behind to incriminate the husband. Her rage toward Nick is mainly caused by his betrayal which diminished her “Amazing Amy” persona to the type of unhappy woman she has always scorned; the mediocre pathetic wife who submits to her victimhood. Interestingly, Amy regains “perfection” in the public eye by feigning victimhood; she hides behind the missing (dead) girl trope of crime fiction because she knows that “everyone loves the Dead Girl” (Flynn, 2012, p. 233). She even leaves clues on Nick’s computer as to how to dispose of a body: the search history indicates the key words “body float Mississippi” (Flynn, 2012, p. 244). The erotic description of her own imaginary dead body, “my slim, naked, pale body, floating just beneath the current” (p. 244) mocks the cultural tendency to fetishize the dead female body. The idea of the perfect dead girl is further reiterated in Amy’s seven baby sisters who were born dead. While Amy’s life becomes the inspiration for Amazing Amy, a character created by her parents in a series of children’s book, the dead baby girls do not need to do anything to prove themselves as perfect. Named by the grieving parents as “Hope”, they are born perfect by the virtue of being dead. As Miller (2018) asserts, throughout the novel, Flynn sustains “a persistent and self-conscious referencing to the crime genre and the commercial environment that reduces women to an inert corpse” while subverting the cultural dynamics behind the genre (p. 97).

Deviation from the first account of Amy’s victimization occurs in the second part when Amy rejects the idea of having a stable personality. Her contention that she is able to change her personality according to the situation exposes the contingent nature of identity. This idea is also reflected in Nick’s assertion that mass media has turned individuals into “a collection of personality traits selected from an endless automat of

characters" (Flynn, 2012, p. 77). While the notion of role-playing according to societal expectations is highlighted in both Nick and Amy's narratives, Amy's performance is more calculated and critical, foregrounding the notion of gendered identity as performance. Nick has to be coached by his lawyer to say the right thing and act a certain way to acquit himself in the public opinion. Amy, on the other hand, is more self-conscious in exposing the dynamics of power in the discourse of identity and gender roles. She draws her power from what Luce Irigaray (1985) terms the "mimicry" of the societal definition of femininity. Irigaray's idea of mimesis, which means the deliberate acquiescence to the feminine role, is a subversive attempt on the woman's part to "recover the place of her exploitation by discourse without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (p. 76). In other words, mimicry allows the woman to use the masculine discourse to her benefit and in this way, "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 76). In this sense, Amy is a "good mimic" in so far as she is able to create an identity which is in fact a "playful repetition" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 76) of all that is expected to happen to a woman in the domestic sphere. It should be noted that while Irigaray uses the idea of mimicry as the way to subvert the masculine discourse and regain a female voice, Flynn's application of performance in her novel represents a subtle commentary on the construction of gendered identity in the contemporary society induced by media culture. The character of Diary Amy in the first part of the novel is a good case in point which indicates her masterful ability to both construct and perform a narrative based on societal expectations. It is through reiteration of the socially prescribed roles and presumed reactions that she manages to outwit her husband.

As it was mentioned before, in Amy's narrative it is possible to identify two types of discourse with regard to feminism; namely the type of discourse that looks at women as victims of the patriarchy and the post-feminist discourse of choice and empowerment which argues that women can choose to be in control of their body. Banet-Weiser (2018) defines Post-feminism, as "a set of ideologies, strategies, and practices that marshal liberal feminist discourses such as freedom, choice, and independence, and incorporate them into a wide array of media, merchandising, and consumer participation" (p.153). Gill (2007) describes Post-Feminism in terms of "a sensibility" reflected in contemporary media products such as movies, television shows and advertisements (p. 148). It should be noted that both types of discourse, i.e. victimization and empowerment, indicate a

preoccupation with the societal preconceptions regarding the construction of feminine identity. One of the most important qualities of the post-feminist notion of female empowerment, according to Gill (2007), is “femininity as a bodily property” which allows a “shift from objectification” to active subjectivity through the dynamics of self-surveillance and meticulous self-monitoring (p. 149). In the contemporary media culture, this new perception of femininity has replaced the traditional notion of motherhood which has long been used to describe the ideal feminine identity. While in the past women were expected to find fulfillment in their maternal role, the new perspective into the question of the feminine identity promotes self-sexualization as a source of empowerment for women. Amy openly criticizes this type of discourse when she describes her body before disappearance in terms of “a beautiful perfect economy, every feature calibrated, everything in balance” which she was happy to cast off after she fakes her own death (Flynn, 2012, p. 249). The constant self-monitoring prioritizes the body both on a personal and social level in the sense that the possession of a carefully monitored body, fit and toned, becomes the main determinant of success. In the contemporary popular culture, women are duped into thinking that as successful agents, both in personal and social domain, strong women draw their strength from their feminine body.

Amy’s cool girl monologue in the second part of the novel, indicates a controversial issue in post-feminist discourse, the question of agency. As Schneider (1993) has stated, the contemporary discourse of choice and empowerment has led to the construction of a “false dichotomy” between victimization and agency as if the existence of one excludes the other (p. 387). The articulation of victimhood and agency as opposites fails to reflect the reality of women’s life for the very reason that it disregards the fact that both are “interrelated dimensions of women’s experience” (Schneider, 1993, p. 395). According to Madhok et al. (2013), in the contemporary media culture, the neo-liberal subjects are caught up in “a range of coercive practices” in which they are led to believe that as active agents they have an unparalleled degree of personal freedom, all the while forgetting that the choices offered to them are “coerced” by the consumer culture or what they call as “practices of consumption and accumulation” (p. 5). Therefore, to have a clearer idea about how subjects exercise their freedom to choose, it is important to understand the way agency works “under coercive conditions” (Madhok et al., 2013. p. 7). On the other

hand, while the traditional idea of ideal femininity induces docility, passivity and conformity to the dominant patriarchy as proper feminine traits, the end result of the post-feminism's emphasis on agency and individualism in contemporary media culture is nothing short of the internalization of the same traits masked in the discourse of empowerment. Amy's account of how she came to meet Nick and her later confession that in her early interactions with Nick she pretended to be the "cool girl" is a commentary on the unfeasibility of the whole question of agency the way it is practiced and propagated by the media culture. Amy describes "the cool girl" as the kind of persona modeled on "movies written by socially awkward men who'd like to believe that this kind of woman exists" (Flynn, 2012, p. 221). It is the media that coerces people into thinking that to be desirable they have to act and look a certain way. To be a cool girl is to be actively compliant to the male gaze, to be a "hot, brilliant, woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes and burping", to be a reflection of the male desire and simply do and want what he wants. (Flynn, 2012, p. 221). And above all, to be a desirable woman means to be an understanding person and never complain when your man lets you down, because "Cool Girls never get angry" (Flynn, 2012, p. 221). In this type of discourse, women are patronized into being strong and when a woman refuses to conform to that ideal set up by men, she is no longer considered a "strong" woman. In other words, the discourse of agency concentrates on female empowerment disregarding the fact that it might be practiced under "exploitative power relations" (Madhok et al., 2013. p. 12). Amy further criticizes women's collusion in popularizing the idea of the "Cool Girl" by conformity to the prescribed role to the extent that a certain way of acting and dressing becomes the normative behavior for the "Standard Girl", while men are under no obligation to be "a Cool Guy", which means to be the man every girl wants:

I waited patiently- *years*- for the pendulum to swing the other way, for men to start reading Jane Austen, learn how to knit, pretend to love cosmos, organize scrapbook parties, and make out with each other while we leer. And then we'd say, Yeah, he's a *Cool Guy*. (Flynn, 2012, p. 222)

What Amy is complaining about is the double standard on which the idea of female empowerment is constituted; how is it that there are so many determinants for the denomination, "the Cool Girl", but when it comes to men, no one talks about a "Cool Guy".

As can be seen, in *Gone Girl*, Flynn has used the metafictional technique of self-conscious narration to critique the representation of gender roles in crime fiction and their propagation in popular culture. In a society where individuals are understood and labeled in terms of stereotyped models of behavior, Amy survives because she creates a narrative that fits the framework. She has a deft awareness of prescribed societal norms and expectations while being a nonconformist by disposition. Flynn's subtle treatment of Amy's character calls into question the way dynamics of power function in the construction of gendered identity. Her representation of gender relations and roles induces a thought-provoking exploration of identity indicating that identity both in the domestic and social context is a matter of power relations.

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