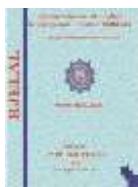


**IMPRISONMENT OF FEMALE CHARACTERS TO STEREOTYPICAL ROLES IN PAULA HAWKINS' *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*****ADITI GUPTA**

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.3.349](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.3.349)**Abstract**

Paula Hawkins' novel *The Girl on the Train* describes the life of three female characters and how their lives are intertwined by one male character. The novel's narrative uses the three female narrative voices, which presents us with the roles and portrayal of female characters in the orthodox mould of a victim. Since the genre of crime fiction has been gender-biased since its inception, the researcher aims at analysing how and if the representation of females has evolved over the centuries. The main objective of this paper is to understand and analyse the representation of the female characters of the select novel by Paula Hawkins. In the paper, the researcher is going to use textual analysis to analyse how Paula Hawkins in her bestselling novel *The Girl on the Train* is reconstructing the female victim and male perpetrator trope in the fictional world of psychological thrillers.

**Keywords:** Female victimisation, psychological thriller, female representation, gaslighting, crime fiction, gendered representation, stereotypical representation, detective fiction, manipulation, violence, abuse.

**Introduction**

John Scaggs defines the term thriller as "any narrative structured in order to maximise tension, suspense, and exciting action" (Scaggs 148). A thriller is a cinematic form that primarily works with the emotions of fear or anxiety. Though thriller has its origin in the cinematic form, it is also a popular genre in literary writings. David Glover describes thriller as a genre that "persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence and shock." (Glover 137)

Mecholsky observes, "The psychological thriller is a contradiction, a self-conflicted genre with a central dialectic: we can understand the mind—we cannot understand the mind".

(Mecholsky 1) This aspect emphasises the cognitive dimension of psychological thrillers. He further observes that psychological thrillers have a few shareable motifs such as "serial killers, psychotic protagonists, children in danger, apparent paranormal danger and/or paranormal gifts, revenge plots, psychotic antagonists who stalk the protagonist and who often are (or seem) beyond the reach of the law, crucial scenes that depict psychological torture, misleading narratives and unreliable narrators (often resulting from some kind of psychosis), psychotic parents/spouses/significant others/apparent-innocents who seemed good, obsessive investigations (often of unsolved cases), severe psychological illness, trauma, or memory loss in a main character; and past traumas that revisit in a new danger". (ibid.)

The genre of crime fiction and from that extension of psychological thrillers have always been male-dominated as it had originated in the phallocentric world of western culture. This is true for both the British 'Golden Age' and American 'Hard-boiled'. (Branford 82)

"Chandler in his manifesto for hard-boiled/noir writing, 'The Simple Art of Murder', made it clear that the predominant figure in any novel which dared to depict American society at its worst could only be male. There are no women detectives in the subgenre dominated by Chandler, Hammett, and Cain." (Branford 90)

In the given context, it is essential to note that the genre of crime fiction is traditionally thought to be masculine and has always been deemed unsuitable for females. Even the feminist critics thought that it was almost impossible to re-gender the genre to the feminist cause. Lee Horsley in his book *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* argues,

"However marginal his position, simply by virtue of his maleness the traditional detective is counted as a member of the male power structure. In restoring order within the narrative, he is acting to confirm the rightness and authority of this patriarchal stasis, the male-dominated status quo. The potency (in every sense) of this image has led some feminist critics of detective fiction to see the genre as so unavoidably male that the whole project of feminist transformation seems a lost cause." (Horsley 246)

"In detective fiction, gender is genre and genre is male." (Roth 1995) To understand this statement one has to understand the genre and the characterisation within and the rationale for the gendered representations.

Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple could be called the English rebirth of American "spinster-sleuth" Amelia Butterworth by Anna Katherine Green. (Branford 83-87) As observed before in Collins's female detective Halcombe, Miss Marple also earns her status at the cost of womanhood. She is considered to be efficient in her work because her character is too old to seduce men, and hereby stripping her off of her sexuality, in

order to make her a successful female detective at the cost of shedding a part of her femininity. On closer observation, it can be found that this is a pattern that has been followed to represent the characters of female detectives or private investigators in the twentieth century. Like Miss Marple, Patricia Wentworth's Miss Maud Silver is also a spinster who is a private investigator. Gladys Mitchell's Mrs Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley is a professional psychoanalyst, is not a spinster but a widow with no wish to remarry. (Branford 87)

Women in the tradition of crime fiction had only two major roles- either the victim of a violent male criminal or *femme fatale*.

James E. Bayley distinguishes victimhood from other types of misfortunes. He defines victims as people who have "(1) suffered a loss or some significant decrease in well-being unfairly or undeservedly and in such a manner that they were helpless to prevent the loss; (2) the loss has an identifiable cause; and (3) the legal or moral context of the loss entitles the sufferers of the loss to social concern." (Bayley 53) According to him, a victim is a person who does not have any contribution to the process that led to his/her victimisation. (Bayley 54)

Lee Horsley while drawing from the Luce Irigaray's argument on the role of victim says that, "the woman is the body in the library on whom the criminal writes his narrative of murder". (Horsley 247) These female victims are either dead right at the beginning of the novel and become a subject of investigation for the male detective or they can be alive but still silenced and trapped and therefore become the subject to be rescued for the heroic male protagonist. For example, Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2016), Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977), Andrew Davis' *A Perfect Murder* (1998).

The other stereotypical role that figures in this genre is of the *femme fatale*. In this role, females are generally portrayed as dangerous villains or seductive temptresses that must be controlled at any cost. James M. Cain's Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* (1943), Raymond Chandler's

Mildred Haviland in *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) are a few examples of the role of *femme fatale*.

*Femme fatale* literally translates to “disastrous” or “dangerous” woman. The role of *femme fatale* has existed since the time of ancient mythology and fairy tales, for example, Medusa and Medea. The concept of *femme fatale* has sprouted from the concept of “bad woman”- women who ‘eat’ their men. (qt. in Resti & Soelistyarini 135) French theorist Simone de Beauvoir gave this concept in her book *The Second Sex*. As cited in Resti and Soelistyarini, “Dijkstra claims that this woman figure is characterised as a seductive yet cunning enchanting lady who baits and victimises men (237).” (qt. in Resti & Soelistyarini 134) In the selected novel, characters like Megan Hipwell, and to some extent, Anna Watson do come across as *femme fatales* because they are using their sexuality to seduce Tom.

In the recent subgenre of psychological thrillers along with following all the rules of representation of traditional crime fiction, female characters are often portrayed as mentally unstable or delusional, for example, the characters of Megan and Rachel in *The Girl on the Train* and Nel Abbott in *Into the Water* by Paula Hawkins. While the genre is filled with male antagonists and villains they are seldom mentally or emotionally vulnerable, e.g. Tom in The Girl on the Train, Patrick and Sean Townsend in Into the Water, and David in Little Face.

Although being relatively recent and popular, this genre reinforces the portrayal of female characters in the stereotypical roles of victim or *femme fatale*. One such novel is *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins. Hawkins, in her novel, has represented female characters who are under constant abuse and are subjected to male violence inside their homes. They were not given the active agency, as characters they “do not act; they react to primary characters- men.” (Munt 4)

Paula Hawkins, in her novel *The Girl on the Train*, created a female protagonist who is an alcoholic who stalks her adulterous ex-husband and his new wife, Anna Watson. “The notion of a barely functioning alcoholic with long gaps in her memory

as a crime-solving protagonist provides an unusual twist on the old amnesia ploy and a strong premise for a thriller.” (Tylor) The standpoint alternates among three characters: ill-fated, fixated Rachel; amiable, complicated Megan; and Anna, the new love of Rachel’s ex Tom. Rachel is still living in the aftermath of the demise of her marriage with Tom; she blames it on her alcoholism which initiated due to her failure to conceive a child and the constant threat of domestic violence. Rachel is still codependent on her ex-husband who is now living the life of her dreams with another woman Anna, with whom he cheated on Rachel. To cope with her shattering life, Rachel lives out her fantasies through a couple, Megan and Scott, whom she calls Jess and Jason and watches daily from the Train going back and forth to London. “There’s something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home.” (Hawkins 12) The plot is set in motion when Megan goes missing, and Rachel’s fantasy world comes crashing down.

In her bestselling novel, Hawkins has created three female characters who may be complex but are still denied any agency. These characters are reconstructing the traditional female victim trope of crime fiction by constantly being abused by their husband/ex-husband/lover. What is important to note is that a single male character is given so much power, both cognitive and physical, that he is able to harm not one but three female characters. Tom is a typical patriarchal villain who is controlling and using females to his amusement and pleasure and does not flinch even a single time before getting rid of them once they are of no use to him. Therefore, to unpack the rationale behind the gendered representation of the characters in a contemporary bestselling popular culture novel one needs to focus on the representation of the female characters.

Nicholas Honkanen, in her 2019 article “Views on gender in Paula Hawkins’s *Girl on The Train* and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*: A feminist analysis of two novels” focuses on the more “general societal interpretations on gender”. Honkanen studies the extent to which gender stereotypes are manifested in contemporary society and in turn, understand the relationship

between contemporary literature and gender roles. In particular, he studies the examples of male dominance and female powerlessness that are present in the two novels to understand the embedded stereotypes. Keeping Camelia Elias' suggestions in mind about what to look for while analysing a text from a feminist literary perspective, Honkanen used six categories to define how men and women are viewed in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*, namely, "1. Men glorified, 2 Women objectified, 3. Women denigrated, 4. Women empowered, 5. Negative stereotypes about men and 6. Progressive views on gender". (Honkanen 30) Honkanen concluded in his thesis that because the females in these two novels are the protagonists and not the passive characters, therefore the society, according to him, "at least to some extent [has] made progress." (Honkanen 52) He says that both the novels represent all the phases of feminism throughout their narratives and presents us with a "realistic view of what feminism is all about". (Honkanen 48) While the researcher agrees with Honkanen's analyses of male dominance and female powerlessness she does not second the argument that just because female characters are the protagonists, the novels become progressive instead it highlights that even in the postmodern times the women are still shackled in the chains of passivity and powerlessness.

Though there have been numerous studies on the select novel, the researcher could not find any other study that analyses male supremacy and female subjection in *The Girl on the Train*. This allows the researcher to analyse the gendered representation of female characters in the novel and at the same time, reflect on the still stereotypical representation of the female characters in the popular culture of psychological thrillers.

### **Analysis**

According to Jerry Palmer, the core of thriller suspense is "experiencing everything from the point of view of the hero", and it implies "a positive evaluation" of the hero figure (Palmer 77, 81). The qualities of a hero in a thriller are defined by the "hero's ultimate success in restoring a

situation of security" (Korte 184) Though the novel is narrated through the voice of three female characters it still portrays females as the opposite of hero by taking away their agency and rendering them powerless. They are portrayed as passive subjects whose existence is only complementary to males.

Rachel, the protagonist of the novel, while investigating the murder of Megan Hipwell, the women whom she believed to have a perfect life, a counterpart of her own life discovers that her ex-husband Tom is not only the killer of Megan Hipwell but is also her victimiser. He took away her self-esteem bit by bit while they were married, making her his victim with his "falsehoods and half-truths told to make him look better, stronger, more interesting than he was." (Hawkins 313) It is while investigating Megan's murder that Rachel is able to see through Tom's lies and facade and finds her voice when she decided to save Anna and her baby girl from Tom's vicious lies. She takes her agency back by killing Tom by jamming "the vicious twist of [a] corkscrew into his neck" (Hawkins 311) and ascends to the position of a hero as she ultimately restores the situation of security by eliminating the perpetrator of violence, Tom. Barbara Korte argues that the female victims in conditions like these "develop heroic agency because they have to resist victimisation; they do so not as professionally heroic agents but because an unexpected threat has invaded their normal, apparently secure world." (Korte 196) Therefore, just because Rachel finally killed Tom and saved herself and Anna along with her child, she does not become a hero. She is still as much a victim of Tom as she was at the starting of the novel.

As discussed earlier, women in the genre of crime fiction were given only two major roles- either of the victim or *femme fatale*. (Horsley) *The Girl on the Train* projects the victimhood of the female characters in contemporary society. Rachel Watson is presented as a victim of emotional and mental aggression by her husband, Tom, who later ascends to physically harming her. On the other hand, Anna and Megan are initially represented as *femme fatales* who seduced Tom and were both having an affair with him and therefore are

rejecting the traditionally assigned role of the "Other" by the patriarchal society. Later, they both were subjected to emotional and mental violence by him, and Megan becomes the ultimate victim when he murdered her. This, however, could be read as reestablishing the patriarchal order by ultimately punishing the females for daring to move beyond their assigned roles of passive bystanders.

Victimhood, as a concern, has been a part of academic engagement with regards to female representation and/or movements. While women have been represented as 'victims' in many works of fiction, "feminists have raised concerns about some of the attributes often associated with the vulnerability inherent to not only victims but to human nature in general, such as weakness and vulnerability." (Korhola 21) There are also discussions on women's "belief in their own victimisation", some feminists look at it as an "important obstacle to overcome", for women to gain agency in the patriarchal world. (qt. in Korhola 21) Thereby, victimhood becomes a means of reasserting patriarchal orders. For example, in the select novel all the three female characters, Rachel, Megan as well as Anna, blame themselves for the abuse they experience in the hands of Tom in common and by other males as well individually. They are, therefore accepting the role of the victim assigned for them by society.

For example, while Megan's Therapist Dr Kamal Abdik could clearly see the mental and emotional abuse her husband, Scott is putting her through, "The behaviour you're describing—reading your emails, going through your Internet browser history—you describe all this as though it is commonplace, as though it is normal. It isn't, Megan. It isn't normal to invade someone's privacy to that degree. It's what is often seen as a form of emotional abuse." (Hawkins 66) Megan justifies Scott's action because of her own past experiences and her low self-esteem. She says, "He's jealous, he's possessive. That's the way he is. It doesn't stop me loving him, and some battles aren't worth fighting. I'm careful—usually. I cover my tracks, so it isn't usually an issue." (Hawkins 67)

The novel is filled with the instances when the male character, especially Tom is gaslighting and manipulating female characters which leads to the bit by bit disintegration of their sense of sanity and independence.

Tom manipulates Rachel's memories when she blacks out due to alcoholic influence and feeds her lies to make her doubt her sanity, "I humiliated my husband at a summer barbecue by shouting abuse at the wife of one of his friends. It's not as if we got into a fight one night at home and I went for him with a golf club, taking a chunk out of the plaster in the hallway outside the bedroom." (Hawkins 22) "Tom, showing me the bruises on his arm, on his chest, where I'd hit him." (Hawkins 257) "I remember him telling me, in flat disappointed tones, what I'd done and said, how I'd smashed our framed wedding photograph, how I'd screamed at him for being so selfish, how I'd called him a useless husband, a failure. I remember how much I hated myself that day." (Hawkins 193) Although Rachel resisted the lies initially as she "couldn't reconcile the violence that he talked about with the fear that [she] remembered" (Hawkins 257), but she eventually gave in. She started believing in the lies told by Tom rather than her own mind, "After a while, I learned that when you wake up like that, you don't ask what happened, you just say that you're sorry: you're sorry for what you did and who you are and you're never, ever going to behave like that again." (Hawkins 257)

Tom gaslighted Rachel to such an extent that she completely lost faith in herself or what she can and cannot do. Whenever something terrible happens, she would believe that it was her fault even though she would not remember doing anything, "I must have done something. I must have committed some terrible act and blacked it out." (Hawkins 73)

As a reader we come to know about Tom's manipulation when Rachel starts to piece together her memories of her blackouts and when the stories that Tom had told her does not fit with what she remembers, for example, when Tom and Rachel were married, Rachel woke up in the morning. She found a hole in the wall of her house,

which according to Tom, Rachel had made in her drunken fit but while talking to Dr Kamal Abdik Rachel admits that it is not how she remembers it. She says, "I kept thinking about that night. Every time I passed that hole in the wall, I thought about it. Tom said he was going to patch it up, but he didn't, and I didn't want to pester him about it. One day I was standing there—it was evening and I was coming out of the bedroom and I just stopped, because I remembered. I was on the floor, my back to the wall, sobbing and sobbing, Tom standing over me, begging me to calm down, the golf club on the carpet next to my feet, and I felt it, I felt it. I was terrified. The memory doesn't fit with the reality, because I don't remember anger, raging fury. I remember fear." (Hawkins 227)

Not only is Tom guilty of abusing women in his life emotionally and mentally but also physically. Tom murdered Mehan Hipwell when she told him that she was carrying their child, and she intends to keep the baby. He killed her at the same spot where they used to meet sometimes while having an affair. Violence comes naturally to Tom, and so does lies. Anna finally admitted that, "He is a good liar, a natural. I've seen him doing it: convincing check-in staff that we were honeymooners, for example, or talking his way out of extra hours at work by claiming a family emergency. Everyone does it, of course they do, only when Tom does it, you believe him." (Hawkins 37) and according to Rachel, "Tom's whole life was constructed on lies—falsehoods and half-truths told to make him look better, stronger, more interesting than he was." (Hawkins 313) The evening he killed Megan he also brutally hit Rachel, "I was in the underpass and he was coming towards me, one slap across the mouth and then his fist raised, keys in his hand, searing pain as the serrated metal smashed down against my skull." (Hawkins 258)

Tom called Rachel on the night he murdered Megan to make sure Rachel not only does not remember anything but also to manipulate her memories of that night so that she could not fill the gaps in her memory and instead believe another lie that he is telling her- "Jesus Christ, Rachel, what the hell is wrong with you? I have had enough of this, all right? I've just spent the best part of an hour

driving around looking for you. You've really frightened Anna, you know that? She thought you were going to . . . she thought . . . It's all I could do to get her not to ring the police. Leave us alone. Stop calling me, stop hanging around, just leave us alone. I don't want to speak to you. Do you understand me? I don't want to speak to you, I don't want to see you, I don't want you anywhere near my family. You can ruin your own life if you want to, but you're not ruining mine. Not anymore. I'm not going to protect you any longer, understand? Just stay away from us." (Hawkins 48-49)

It is evident that Tom preys on women's vulnerability and uses it to his benefit. Tom knew that Rachel was drunk that night; therefore, it was easy for him to twist her memories in any way he wanted to. He still had control over Rachel's vulnerable emotions because of Rachel's love for him. He knew that she would easily believe him if he told her that she again went to visit her old house that night even though she did not.

### **Conclusion**

This article has provided a brief literature review on the history of stereotypical female representation in the fictional world of crime as well as psychological thrillers. In contrast to the popular opinion, there is still a boundless need to talk about female equality and their victimisation. It is essential to look for the underlying reasons for why females are still represented in the stereotypical roles in popular literature. Psychological thrillers being a prominent genre in popular culture literature, brings forth the questions of the orthodox portrayal of female characters. *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins is reestablishing the stereotypes of female victimisation and male villainy through its portrayal of Tom as a cold, emotionless perpetrator and Rachel, Megan and Anna as his victims. As mentioned above Lee Horsley says that, "the woman is the body in the library on whom the criminal writes his narrative of murder". (Horsley 247) Hence, in this novel Tom is writing his narrative on the body of all the three female characters, Rachel, Anna and Megan.

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