

Women with Conditions: Locating Mental Illness in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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Abstract

Literature eternally and invariably reflects a realistic and yet a brutal picture of life. Apart from shedding light on the physical repercussions experienced by the characters due to various reasons ranging from betrayal to love and loss, psychological thriller novels display a commentary on mental illnesses through their narratives. Women characters in Gillian Flynn's novels experience distinct and diverse situations wherein they are enforced to choose between their dreams, and the desires their family has envisioned for them. Navigating these treacherous situations impacts their mental health and eventually the family structure they tried protecting. This research paper wishes to study *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn and locate women navigating such tricky situations.

Keywords: Empowerment; Femme fatale; Mental illness; Psychological thrillers.

Introduction

Literature reflects an accurate and true-to-life portrayal of reality through its narratives. It is often considered to hold a mirror to life. It does not simply present a factual commentary on life, but also showcases a deeper insight into the problems and difficulties experienced by people in everyday life. It provides people a respite, a time to rejuvenate and relax but simultaneously allows them to think about their experiences and encounters with challenging situations. This makes the readers often question the age-old dilemma of whether life inspires literature or vice versa.

Psychological thriller novels, similarly, showcase characters navigating difficult terrains and overcoming disastrous mishaps in their lives. By presenting them in situations where they question their family, themselves,

and the world around them; the authors weave a bond with the readers, thereby highlighting the similarities between them and the characters they read. As literature sprouts out of life and reacts to it, the bond woven out of this further develops into a strong foundation that both cannot be separated and studied in isolation.

Gillian Flynn's psychological thriller novels display a range of emotions and vulnerabilities experienced by the characters in her stories. These can especially be noted through the women and children in her narratives. These women are in some situations empowered as they take control of their lives and the ones around them, thereby displaying power and agency through their words and actions. Whereas at times, they are vulnerable to their surroundings and the direction in which their life swerves. This enigmatic behaviour showcased by these women further enhance the readers' understanding of their lives and those of the characters.

Disability and mental health issues cannot be studied in isolation. They present a commentary on our society. They showcase the troubled cases of physical, emotional, and psychosocial discomforts and diseases plaguing people in the world. These narratives are presented through various characters in literature. Authors utilize stereotypical tropes in society and present them enigmatically through their works. Furthermore, psychological thrillers, present women, and young girls in troubled situations at the domestic, social, and political levels. Their actions and reactions to their surroundings, voice the larger problems harrowing women in society.

Locating Mental Illness in *Sharp Objects*

Sharp Objects, a 2006 thriller debut novel by American author, Gillian Flynn is set in a fictional small town Wind Gap, Missouri. This setting starkly contrasts the earlier narrative of the protagonist Camille's life. As Flynn was previously a journalist herself, she introduces Camille Preaker a journalist. Camille is sent to her hometown to trace and investigate the murders of young girls. The dark and brutal murders have harangued and baffled the locals in and around town, and has also tarnished the reputation of small-town living. Flynn, through her narratives, comments on the people's relationship with their town by showcasing the impact our community has on us and its contribution to people's lives.

Camille on returning to her hometown, narrates through linear narratives and flashbacks, her troubled relationship with her mother, Adora. A stereotypical doting mother towards her children, Adora is obsessively con-

cerned about her three daughters and alters their behaviour in ways that bring her fame and attention. By controlling their lives through simple actions such as taking decisions for them, extensively criticising them for unpresentable behaviour in front of guests and allowing them to befriend people based on class awareness, she performs the role of a domineering and manipulative mother.

Amma, Camille's half-sister, at first glance is presented as a naïve young teen girl who wishes to understand and grasp the meaning of the world around her better. As the narrative moves forward, the readers are introduced to the troubled backstory of Adora and her children as they navigate controlling mothers, missing children, attention seeking teens and dysfunctional families. They experience love, loss and betrayal in their lives and carry that forward to their children as well.

Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many sick women all my life. Women with chronic pain, with ever-gestating diseases. Women with conditions. Men, sure, they have bone snaps, they have backaches, they have a surgery or two, yank out a tonsil, insert a shiny plastic hip. Women get consumed (Flynn 262)

The women characters in Flynn's novels illustrate a range of mental health disorders. These disorders range from Non-Suicidal Self Injury, Münchausen syndrome by Proxy, and attention seeking behaviour to name a few. Though some of the disorders they experience are not overtly discussed and named in Flynn's novel, the readers are made to understand them through the consequences the characters' actions on their lives and the ones around them.

Impact of Parenting on Children

Flynn ingeniously narrates varying versions of parent-child relationship. Parenting one of the themes of the novel, is woven throughout the novel by illustrating the interactions and actions-counteractions of parents with their children. The simultaneous narratives of other parents in the novel, similarly, display the consequences of neglected parenting. The commentary on building a good foundation in the family structure get highlighted through the brutal stories of kidnappings, murder, and insanity in the novel.

'Sharp Objects' similarly sheds light on unplanned pregnancies. Most of the families in the novel suffer the repercussions of unplanned motherhood or in some cases the desire to give birth to a boy, thereby reinstat-

ing the stereotypes associated with motherhood and childbirth. These expectations lead to sadness coupled with denial and dysfunctional family life. Ann Nash, a young girl from Wind Gap, also, experienced the consequences of a neglected childhood as she was made to feel unwanted by her parents, leading to kidnapping and later murder in the hands of a psychopath. Other families in the neighbourhood acknowledge this as they say “But now she’s getting some attention” (Flynn 20).

Furthermore, a few children in the narrative wish to be kidnapped or try to hurt themselves in order to get attention from their parents. Amma, Camille’s sister showcases such traits as she ultimately chooses violence in order to make her presence known. Her mother Adora, in a heartfelt backstory narrates her being made to feel unwanted by her parents. This leads her to assert her dominance over her husband and children by disallowing them to interact with others.

Furthermore, the other parents in Flynn’s novel constantly discuss a protective approach they display towards their children. Under the guise of protection, they manipulate, persuade, and shape their children’s lives. The display of ultimate control over others by manipulating their lives makes Adora feel significant. At the same time, she also showcases a loving and caring approach by constantly alternating between criticising and praising them for the smallest of their actions. As the story moves forward, the readers are introduced to not simply a beautiful picture of a happy family, but the reality behind upholding a happy façade.

Linda Gordon in ‘Functions of the Family’ famously notes, “a mother is forced to think of herself as ‘mother’ and to approach the whole world as ‘mother” (Gordon 22). By stating this, Gordon encapsulates the idea of a gendered approach to parenting and also highlights how women have to essentially lose and sacrifice their lives and their identities in order to establish a new one. This is one such issue, experienced by the mothers in ‘Sharp Objects’. The mothers in Flynn’s novels struggle with carving new identities according to demanding situations of the modern world.

Flynn’s characters are inherently unhappy but uphold a constant mask of displaying their perfect lives and enacting their happiness in front of the guests and the community. This becomes the source of their displeasure as they constantly strive to live the picture they create. They miserably fail to achieve that level of contentment and then react violently to show their displeasure at the lack of control over their own actions.

Emergence of the Femme Fatale

Gillian Flynn's heroines are often considered femme fatale or fatal women in literature. They behave in enigmatic ways making readers question their actions and reactions. While understanding this dilemma, the author successfully exemplifies the impact of mental illnesses leading to dysfunctional families.

Camille is considered the most damaged of Flynn's characters. She experiences an unhealthy childhood wherein her mother neglects her during her growing years and pays careful attention to Marian, Camille's sister. As Camille is considered a wild child and someone who is beyond her mother's control, Adora ignores her leaving her to fend for herself. This coupled with unplanned pregnancy, makes Camille question her existence, thereby leading to her ensuing downfall.

Camille eventually starts harming herself by cutting up her body and writing hurtful words about herself. Some of the words she writes are 'cook', 'cupcake', 'kitty', 'curls', 'petticoat', 'wicked' and so on. Similarly, most of the words she writes are specific to the intensity she encounters during the exact moment. This points out towards bullying she might have experienced in school and as she is unable to tell her mother about such experiences, she witnesses a drastic yet dramatic upheaval of her own life. Even though she gets admitted to a psychiatric ward and is tested for non-suicidal self-injury, the desire to internalize hate and anger, stays and steadily grows.

Therapists try but fail to identify the causes for such behaviour in Camille. They diagnose it as 'anxiety' which assigns her behaviour a terminology, but not a solution. They fail to recognise the exact symptoms that take the readers back to generations of trauma, physical and emotional abuse and hurt gathered over a long period of time. The narrative later reveals the ways in which Adora poisoned to death her own daughter, Marian. Adora wishes to gain sympathy from the women in her community and get attention from the neighbouring families. Being an unwanted child, she experiences the dearth of love and affection from her parents. This hate and the desire for attention, transform her into a woman seeking constant glorification and idealisation from everyone around her. For this, her family becomes the perfect playground and Marian, the scapegoat.

This behaviour as displayed by Adora can be categorised as Fictitious Disorder or MSbP (Munchausen syndrome by Proxy). With this disorder, the person acts in a manner which convinces others that the person they are looking after or caring for is ill, whereas that is not the case. This leads to them gaining sympathy from others and further damages the other per-

son's reputation. Adora exhibits this behaviour with Marian.

Adora does not simply stop with making Marian fall ill in order to gain sympathy. Once she realises that Marian has understood that she is not sick because of natural causes but due to Adora's insistence on taking dangerous medicines, she kills her daughter. And later gains sympathy from the women around her for witnessing the loss of her daughter. Camille also notes instances in the novel where Adora would care for Marian only when she was ill. Marian was otherwise ignored and isolated from others. Adora's love for her children, an overdramatic display of grief when spoken of Marian's death has been described as Camille, "To this day it remains a hobby" (Flynn 23).

Amma, similarly, learns from her mother the ways of hurting others. She creates a 'Doll's House' which resembles their home and the family in painstaking detail. Amma always seeks the perfect elements to add to her doll's house and when she fails to gather any such material, she throws a tantrum which makes her family rush to her aid. This manner of gathering attention showcases not simply a childlike behaviour but also a childhood devoid of love and affection which has led to lifelong repercussions on her life.

Furthermore, Amma's thirst for attention leads her to brutally killing her own friends as she is unable to share her parent's love with anyone else. The moment she realises the attention gets shifted from her to someone else, she befriends unsuspecting little girls, kidnaps them, and murders them in cold blood. She removes their teeth, tears off their limbs in some cases and displays their damaged bodies to be seen by the public.

This tendency to hunt and hurt showcases the damage occurred on her mind in a young age. Even though she is provided therapeutic help, she does not stop her revenge. As Camille eventually offers her a better way of living, after Adora is imprisoned, she refuses to change her behaviour. This cyclical nature of hate and revenge does not simply make the stories stimulating and thought-provoking, but also hint towards the vicious nature of dysfunctional families.

Conclusion

Gillian Flynn's 'Sharp Objects' is a 2006 mystery psychological thriller novel. Even though the setting showcases a small town, the mental health issues pointed out by the author display the universality of our problems and emotions. She manages to shock the audiences by presenting women in realistic situations. She creates a domesticated setting which highlights

the further enhances the problems encountered by her characters.

Flynn's characters choose to react to betrayal and trust issues they encounter in their lives with violence, and revenge. She allows them agency to decide their actions which lead to devastating consequences for their children, thereby causing the rise of dysfunctional families. Their reactions to such experiences range from violence towards others to self-harm. This realistic and true-to-life portrayal of the changing family value structure across the world showcases rising concerns.

Camille hurts herself by internalising the anger, Adora hurts others to gain sympathy and Amma hurts for pleasure. The actions of these characters hint towards insanity but at the same time makes the readers question the levels to which they will stoop to get attention. Similarly, the desire to hurt does not stop with one outburst, it creates a dynamo effect which manages to devastate their entire family, the neighbouring households and all those that come in contact with them.

The mental health disorders illustrated by Gillian Flynn in *Sharp Objects* further create apprehensions in the reader's mind and make them question the consequences their actions and reactions even towards the most difficult of situations. All her characters cry out for aid, but some go unheard and unheeded in the larger narrative. Flynn, like with all her stories refuses to provide a solution to the concerns raised in her stories, but by creating thought-provoking narratives, she makes them think and develop a gaze to notice calls for help in their surroundings.

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