

The Deranged Femme Fatale in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

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Abstract: Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* presents one of the most intelligently portrayed deranged heroines in recent times. She attains the tag of a Femme Fatale archetype. The classical Femme Fatales delved within the outline that conventional patriarchy and society had set for her. The Femme Fatales have taken on various forms and demeanors since their arrival into the literary and cultural arena. They have been the 'preying' mantis, the bloodsucking vampire, a lethal siren or wanton courtesan. The protagonist of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Amy Elliot Dunne represents the most evolved form of Femme Fatale depictions. She chooses to be the excruciatingly sly beauty who attempts an absolute annihilation of the patriarchal structures around her. Her childhood trauma and subsequent psychological disability goes into making her the Femme Fatale that she later becomes. Amy Dunne's psychological state is not what we call 'normal'; however, she turns this disability into her armor, as well as her weapon, to defy the patriarchal norms she is forced to adhere to. Thus, by making her disability her shield, she turns out to be the most evolved form of the Femme Fatale character type.

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Gender hegemony encompasses the varied set of characteristic traits expected to be followed by men and women separately. Men and women are divided into two different categories with differing sets of traits, abilities, qualities, feelings, and emotions. Those qualities defining men come within the term 'masculinity' while those defining women are defined under the term 'femininity'. This dichotomy maintains a hierarchical affiliation to patriarchy and hegemonic ideals of gender. Connell (1987) states, "Femininity organized as an adaptation to men's power, and emphasizing compliance, nurturance, and empathy as womanly virtues, is not in much of a state to establish hegemony over other kinds of femininity" (188).

The diversities within the categories of masculinity and femininity were further accounted for by theorists like Simone De Beauvoir, Andrew Tolson, Margaret Mead, etc. Beauvoir has specifically concentrated on the different types of feminine identities like that of the female whores, mothers, working women, lesbians, etc. 'Emphasized femininity' is a term that represents the cultural concepts associated with 'domesticity' and the 'home'. These concepts are further expounded in mass media and popular culture. However the resistant and deviant models of femininity are oftentimes unreasonably removed from the historiography of femininities. According to Connell,

What is hidden from it is the experience of spinsters, lesbians, prostitutes, madwomen, bachelors and maiden aunts, manual workers, midwives and witches. And what is involved in radical sexual politics, in one of its dimensions, is precisely a reassertion and recovery of marginalized forms of femininity in the experience of groups like these.

A single deviation from the 'ideal' kind of femininity often renders women with names. They are identified as 'contaminations' to the hegemonic ideals of gender. Therefore one such deviant trait classifies the individual as a "slut", "vamp", "bitch", "lesbian" or a "shrew". Dominant discursive representations often portray women as individuals staying remote from violence and aggressive motives. However, these qualities of hegemonic masculinities when enacted by women, that is, want for a feminine object ("lesbian"), aggressive nature ("badass"), lack of compliance and authority ("slut", "bitch" etc), they are marked as deviant or 'transgressive'.

The Femme Fatale archetype under study, refurbishes the entire set of ideologies governing the conventional patriarchy. These women depart from the embodied relationship between masculinity and femininity insisted through gender hegemony. They contradict from every norm defined for women and slowly slither into the established 'masculine' traits of violence and aggressiveness. The Femme Fatale denies fitting into the roles of a dutiful wife or a nurturing mother that the patriarchal system prescribes for her. She finds the institution of marriage to be confining, loveless, and dull. Her wildness and sexual magnetism are often put into use to help herself out of this muddle. She nevertheless persists in the face of her annihilation. And despite the inevitability of her death she leaves behind the strong picture of an unremorseful, bold, and daring woman who adheres to her ideals rejecting the rules put forward for her to obey.

Although more than a few decades old, the Femme Fatale character type had her etymological origin only towards the 1900s. Theoreticians trace it back as being ascribed

to certain frightful women of lethal nature then found in the public sphere, literature and other cultural representations. Besides these women of lethal nature, representations of extremely powerful women with farfetched physical and supernatural capabilities were adjacently presented within the *Femme Fatale* genres. The early representations purely belonged limitedly to the monotonous and clichéd representations of women as witches, seductresses or vampires. However, there were only a few female representations that were elite and laudable in terms of their intellectuality or intelligence. These categories of ‘powerful’ women were simultaneously portrayed as impotent regarding their psychological and logical state of mind. In literature and other texts, they were often portrayed as being driven by an unquenchable desire for attractive heroes or monetary benefits. Nevertheless, a pragmatic view on the representations of these archetypal figures reveals a recurrent pattern, where oftentimes these characters relied on unrealistic activities like witchcraft or magic.

Interestingly the *Femme Fatale* character type has thrived, flourished and transgressed their initial representations in the literary arena. The true identity of the *Femme Fatale* character type has not yet been discovered despite the growing interest of authors and writers in this lethal woman archetype whose extensive presence was seen throughout the nineteenth and twentieth-century literary and cultural texts. The *Femme Fatales* have taken on various forms and demeanors since their arrival into the literary and cultural arena. She was the praying mantis, the bloodsucking vampire, a lethal siren or wanton courtesan.

Femme Fatales archetypes have made their captivating presence in the nineteenth and twentieth century literary and cultural representations. The composite idea of the identity of the *Femme Fatale* archetype has not been traced yet, despite her unwavering presence and pursuance of authors and writers. The *Femme Fatale* figure has acquired numerous forms since her arrival into the cultural arena. She is the Egyptian Sphinx, half-human, half-animal. She is the Bible’s teenage seductress, Salome. She is the devious World War I spy Mata Hari. She is the evil Queen in *Snow White* (1812). She is the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, the Roman empress Messalina, the much maligned Renaissance princess Lucrezia Borgia, and the misunderstood second wife of English King Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn. While mainstream historiography stubbornly traced the indubitable evilness in these representational figures, it conveniently ignored that the similar temperaments were displayed by a number of male counterparts.

A *Femme Fatale* makes use of her sexual prowess to instigate the male characters around her. She leaves them hanging in an eternal longing for the confirmation of her true love.

Virginia Allen, an American educationalist, attempted to trace back the etymology of the term 'Femme Fatale' and discovered its usage back in the 1900s. The term is believed to have been initially formulated in popular journalism. Mario Praz, an Italian critic of art and Literature devoted a whole chapter of his work, *The Romantic Agony* (1933) to elucidate his findings on the Femme Fatale archetypes. She has made her presence felt through early mythologies and fictions. Praz studied each of these figures to provide a set of consistent traits to define this figure. Praz states that the Femme Fatale figures were in most representations presented as an exotic and irresistible figure. He mentions about her youth, sexual cannibalism and the loose naïveté of her lovers. Writers and critics condemned her as the 'malignant, threatening, destructive and fascinating' heroine. Villainous to the very core, these archetypal figures display a morally confusing nature, exemplifying a sense of mystification and unease in their demeanor. Femme Fatales have been the antagonist figures in numerous fictional works. While some redeem themselves by the end of the tale, some pave way for the greater good by ensnaring the villain and reforming him through her lethal treatments.

Murder is one of the weapons made use of by a classic Femme Fatale and she often uses it to free herself from the clutches of an oppressive marriage or a relationship. They feel trapped by husbands or lovers who treat them as objects with meager value. Marriage for the Femme Fatale represents unhappiness, boredom, and the absence of romantic love and sexual desire. A certain kind of myth is generated within the society rendering the family home as the center of safety, fulfillment, and love. This sense of safety associated with marriage and domestic life especially in the conventional romantic discourses are actually absent in reality.

Throughout the years the Femme Fatale character type has made a recurring presence in literature, other art forms and films. The perpetual position of unpredictability and mystique displayed by these character types paves way for further exploration. She is simultaneously represented as an ineffaceable female stereotype and is by no means wholly knowable, leaving her out of definition. A camouflaged identity and conundrum of expressions are identifiable features of a Femme Fatale. Mary Ann Doane opens her most important discussion of the Femme Fatale by positing 'unknowability' as her key feature: "the Femme Fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristics, perhaps is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be" (Doane 1991:1). The fetishism of her beguiling façade is held against the need to reveal her real identity. Writers and critics place her within the locus of mystery complemented by the additional features of darkness, mystery, violence and revelation.

The origin and evolution of this character type lies across different cultural representations and periods. A careful expedition of transnational and historical works would reveal the in-depth enigma of these archetypal figures. The primate depictions of Femme Fatales in film noirs shocked the critics and viewers for the raw and astute portrayal of women. This came as an opposition to the earlier heroines who were dependent on and obliging to the leading male characters in the movies. These characters therefore exhibited their want for freedom and expressions, slowly moving away from the male dominated discourses. They carefully rupture the prescribed gender codes.

The protagonist of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Amy Elliot Dunne represents the most evolved form of Femme Fatale depiction. *Gone Girl* is a psychological thriller novel by Gillian Flynn published in 2012. Following the pattern of noir narratives, *Gone Girl* begins with a crisis where the protagonist goes missing. It is later revealed that Amy herself staged her own disappearance, to castigate her husband for being infidel to her. Amy's identity as a Femme Fatale gets revealed from her actions.

Amy Elliot Dunne seeks a deep psychological probe into her deranged temperament of revenge-seeking nature. Amy is born right into the threshold of demands, being born into the world after a series of miscarriages and stillbirths in her family. She believes that she was never even supposed to be born. Her parents named all their stillborns Hope, who were all treated as angels as they were all lost to death. Amy was overpowered and shadowed by these 'angels' and she felt unbearable pressure throughout her childhood. Amy's childhood was further made convoluted when her parents used her as the inspirational prototype for their children's book series, 'Amazing Amy'. In consequence, Amy has to be identified as the by-product of a purloined childhood. Her parents irrevocably illustrated Amy as the little prodigy in their highly popularized book series, 'Amazing Amy'. This is how Amy becomes 'amazing' Amy and she inadvertently becomes subjected to the pressure of attaining this ideal image all through her life. Her fabricated childhood brings fame and wealth to her parents. As a child, she was brutally denied her right to have small failures or breakdowns; everything Amy went through was transformed into a triumphant climax. The fictional character becomes the unreachable little prodigy with whom the child in real Amy eternally strives to keep up. Nevertheless growing up doesn't rescue her from the pressure of being as good as the fictional character her parents created. She is forced to live under the shadow of this flawless fictional character, the amazing Amy. As a grownup, she takes over the Femme Fatale identity, where she tactfully remains to be the unknown and ambiguous. The real Amy is unknowable and mysterious. Flynn takes the readers

through Nick's (Amy's husband) and Amy's lives and Amy's missing. Amy's real intentions are never really uncovered until the climactic moments.

Amy is a response to modern patriarchal norms. An assessment of the early stages of female history reveals evident patriarchal predomination, however, modern patriarchy displays a more evasive, shifty and shrewd style of domination. This demands a different sort of resistance as in the case of Amy Elliot Dunne. The early *Femme Fatales* restricted themselves within the scaffoldings set by the early writers. They delved in the fringes of their beauty and magical abilities alone, giving little importance to qualities like intelligence and reasoning. Amy Dunne impregnates the *Femme Fatale* archetype with a tinge of sophistication and poise. Amy, as lethal as her predecessors but far less compromising rewrites the entire genre of *Femme Fatale* narratives. She rejects the male expectations and frameworks and rises to be one of the most provocative anti-heroines of all time.

Amy fits perfectly with the pattern of *Femme Fatale* narratives. She lures her husband into marriage, displays a stereotypical persona of feminine perfection and when her husband is found infidel, she employs methods at her disposal to plot her own missing to later frame him for her murder. A psychological reading of Amy as a *Femme Fatale* reveals her to be the result of a subjugated childhood and a subjugated marital life. Every single character dwelling within the darker shades of characterization demands to have a more psychoanalytical investigation that reads through the wormholes in their personalities. The deeper traumas they faced at some point in their lives, later surface to be the reasons behind their gnashing behavioral patterns.

However, love results to be the fissure in the fatal woman's armor. Amy's character revelation as a *Femme Fatale* begins when she openly plots her revenge against her infidel husband. Amy fiendishly drags Nick to his ultimate downfall by faking her murder. Regardless of recognizing the bogus appeal Nick makes on national television for Amy's return; she once again falls for him. But her return only adds to the tremors Nick further faces in their life together as a married couple. Amy remains to be the most dramatic and maneuvering of all *Femme Fatales*. While earlier *Femme Fatale* narratives have shown these archetypal figures to have either died or being punished for their acts, Amy remains triumphant. Amy's final staged collapse, in a blood-soaked white dress into Nick's arms when she returns, shows her inherent and effortless ability to deceive others. Amy makes use of all her childhood experiences to pretend to be the 'naïve' victim. Amy gets her

‘ideal’ fictional ending at the end; one with a home, husband, and baby. The domestic accountability of the future baby keeps Nick under her eternal control.

Having played the sculpted figure for her parent’s ‘Amazing Amy’ book series, Amy never fails to acknowledge the prevalent ambivalence in her reality. Conversely, Nick is among the very few who is well aware of Amy’s past struggle as a child, one who was always eclipsed by this faultless ideal. This partly becomes a reason for Amy’s metamorphosis into a fatal narcissistic personality. She eternally yearns for admiration and adoration from people around her. The tangential kid in her pushes herself to be as good as the ‘ideal’ image. She does very little to redeem herself and further puppets her husband to play along with her plans to get their ideal make-believe domestic life. He is forced to play his part in her version of the story. Her vicious yet intelligent revenge plan involving a made-up pregnancy spewed bloodstains, swindled money transactions and insurance points to her obsessive need for perfectionism.

One attribute that differentiates Amy from the other psychopaths has to be the close contacts she maintains with others. She voluntarily acts out the roles of a friendly neighbor, an expecting mother, and a victimized wife. Amy gracefully manipulates people to do her bidding. She lacks a conscience, which is evident in the way she makes use of Desi, her ex-boyfriend who is later brutally murdered by her. Amy is a person with ‘antisocial personality disorder’, who is least bothered about rights and.

When examined at multiple levels, this fatal woman archetype corroborates with man’s impulse to idealize women and brand them malicious once they challenge these very expectations. Femme Fatales are marked fatal figures by malice, dishonesty, and brutalism they exhibit. These women are portrayed as mystifying, intense individuals, like the way Amy is described by Nick in the prologue. This projects the perpetual fear of men about being betrayed by women, a suspicion that rises out of pure misogynistic viewpoints they carry of women, as evidently deceitful creatures.

Amy’s feminist assertion of freedom and her objection to playing the roles she is bound to play is contradicted by her character. She was trained to pretend as a child and she keeps pretending all through her life. Unlike the other noir fictions, Amy is the one who instigates her husband to stay within the boundaries of their married life. She transforms him into her kind of an ideal mate. Amy does not limit her revenge plans to murder alone instead put up an act to bring the utmost destruction to Nick’s life. She even includes her death just to ensure his incarceration and destruction.

A gender stereotype has to be perceived more as a general concept that demands certain qualities or features that are expected to be possessed by women. Though noticeably guileless these are damaging and disconcerted misconceptions that often limit the aspirations of a woman. Similarly harmful concepts can be both hostile and negative, for example, stereotypical phrases like, “women are irrational”, “seemingly compassionate”, or “women are nurturing” depict the inherent stereotypical ideologies prevalent in mainstream society. It is a common misconception that child-rearing responsibilities solely fall on women alone. This gender stereotyping effects the society in an adverse manner, where oppressions faced by women get buried within these concocted patriarchal structures of rules and regulations. Women are forced to stay within the ascribed norms and patterns. This amalgamation of gender norms leads to unfair conditions for certain factions of women like those from marginal categories, migrant women, women with disabilities, etc. In the thick of these factors, characters like Amy project a different sort of resistance compliant in this modern patriarchal setting.

Femme Fatale narratives are most appropriate in a society that has an innate and consistent feeling of a threat from the female characters. Femme Fatale narratives overthrow the existing gender power ideologies and emphasized female roles. A Femme Fatale character negates the narrative frameworks where women are always under control or “in their place”. Hence the most recent feminist principles and circumstances heighten the growing importance and precedence of this character type. *Gone Girl* throws light on the sociopolitical, cultural atmosphere of the whole society.

The fatal woman created an unwavering aura in nineteenth-century literary and cultural texts. This presence sheds light on the vital role she played in developing a particular genre of cultural narrative, representing gender and power. Nineteenth-century literary and cinematic genres saw the complex union of available cultural forms and the Femme Fatale archetypes, which exposed major alterations in thoughts about gender, sexuality, and eroticism. Her uncertain aura and irreplaceable fame are possibly found in the strongest Gothic ballads, realist novels, and sensation fiction and vampire tales, which were the narrative forms that enhanced her mystifying charm. The fatal woman character in such experimental forms depicts a marked departure from the conventional characteristics and popular trends.

Gillian Flynn tactically portrays the overarching presence of media and its influence over the creation of stereotypical concepts. Flynn presents the insensitive nature of media play. *Gone Girl* depicts how media creates perceptions. *Gone Girl* demands a

comprehensive reading through the lens cultural studies of *Gone Girl*. This interdisciplinary field of the study evaluates the role of social institutions in the creation and instigation of ideologies in the working of established social systems. Cultural studies extend its pervasive presence in all aspects of social situations in the creation of rights and wrongs. Gender remains to be one of the most significant areas of study within the realms of cultural studies.

Psychoanalytic theories and feminist concepts when applied together to *Gone Girl*, reveals the passive oppression faced by Amy at the hands of Marybeth Elliot, her mother and Nick Dunne, the two characters who instigate her transformation into a deadly psychopath. Amy Elliot Dunne's character embodies this non-assertive kind of oppression she faced from her parents and husband. *Gone Girl* illustrates the ease with which opinions are hastily formed and altered. It provides a realistic glimpse of a distressed relationship. It effortlessly questions the truth and lies in marriage, affection and reliance, the multiplicity of how different categories of people observe the truth in different situations and how these truths control people. Amy is also a victim of this phenomenon. Amy herself is controlled by her psychological state even when she is a pro at controlling and manipulating others. These factors are planted by her 'self'.

Femme Fatale narratives are believed to be an outcome of unjust gender stereotypes prevalent in society. Subjugation and mistreatment lead to unjust structures within the gender hierarchy. These gender structures derive from the concepts created by patriarchal institutions. *Gone Girl* gives an unprecedented account of several institutions indulging in the procreation of several cultural concepts and practices. These so-called ideologies are produced, introduced, operated and inculcated into the ideologies people possess. Amy herself is a victim of these levels of emphasized femininity demanded by such institutions. These institutions and their defining practices pass through several generations. The very same concepts are later reproduced, manipulated and sometimes become a reason for transforming the existing structures of power. Studies based on cultural studies recognize the historical foundations from which certain ideologies spring. Every individual is subjected to the demands of cultural power structures but eventually adopts ways of survival, struggle, resistance, and change.

Femme Fatale character type is the true embodiment of growing patriarchal fears. They demand the scope of interchangeability in gender roles. The fatal woman, especially those in the 19th-century literary works personify multiple concerns like violence, sex,

epidemics, lunacy, infections, and social degeneration. Later periods saw the Femme Fatale narratives addressing widespread concerns like prostitution, pornography, and sexual diseases. These fatal women were ultimately punished for their devious acts.

The Femme Fatale character has gone through many changes and developments and has adapted to the changing times and society. The contemporary Femme Fatale in Amy strives for total male submissiveness, which she achieves solely through her intelligence. *Gone Girl* begins and ends with the depiction of Amy's beautiful blond head along with Nick's monologue expressing his cluelessness as to what is going on inside Amy's head. He is clueless in the beginning, so is he in the end. Amy the Femme Fatale remains incomprehensible at every level. *Gone Girl* presents a completely evolved form of Femme Fatale.

Amy's broken psychological state forces her to play furthermore roles throughout her life. She simply makes use of the roles imposed upon her to achieve her ends. The crude antagonist in her is nothing less than an actor playing another role in the long line of roles she had to play throughout her life. Amy Dunne as a woman is expected to be empathetic and feminine. She refuses to fit into the frame of set norms and rules traditionally laid down for women. Rather than limiting her into the boundaries of a typical woman, Amy Dunne chooses to be the intricate deranged personality, a blemished villain-like human being, fit for the feminist frame.

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