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## **A Psychoanalytic Study of Gillian Flynn's Amy Elliott Dunne with reference to Lacan's Three Stages of Identity Formation**

**Sk Benazir**

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### **Abstract**

*Gone Girl* is a crime fiction by the American author Gillian Flynn which provides a psychological insight into the mind and motive of the central character, Amy Elliott Dunne. The novel starts with Nick, the husband coming under police scrutiny in the case of his wife Amy, who goes missing on the very day of their fifth wedding anniversary. However, as the case gradually unfolds, the scenario gets much more complex. The character of Amy is portrayed as intricately complex and multi-layered. A close reading and psychoanalysis of the character of Amy show that her actions and behaviour patterns are a reflection of her ingrained identity formation. This paper intends to study the psyche behind the actions and behavioural patterns of Amy Elliott Dunne, the protagonist in Flynn's *Gone Girl*, with reference to Lacan's three stages of identity formation.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Identity Formation, Woman Protagonist, Role-play, Conflicts.

The American writer Gillian Flynn, born on February 24, 1971, in Kansas City, U.S. is mainly known for her crime and mystery fiction. Some of her most acclaimed works are namely *Sharp Objects* (2006), *Dark Places* (2009) and *Gone Girl* (2009). This paper intends to study the psyche behind the actions and behavioural patterns of Amy Elliott Dunne, the woman protagonist in Flynn's *Gone Girl*, with reference to Lacan's three stages of identity formation. Lacan's psychoanalysis is a theoretical system that explains mind, behaviour, and culture through structuralist and poststructuralist extensions of the classical psychoanalysis initiated by the work Lacan during the period from the 1950s to the 1980s. Lacan believed that the human mind is composed of three elements: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The three orders correspond with the development of Lacan's thought in their various emphases and are considered to be inseparably intertwined. Lacan's psychoanalysis is rather tenacious in its aggressive challenge to dismantle the imagined fullness (as in the mirror phase) and to eliminate the illusion of self-domination through the mirror image. A strong ego is seen as defensive deception, and what is expressed during analysis is seen as resistance to change. The fear of disintegration and lack drives the individual to validate the self in another imaginary concept.

Gillian Flynn's (2009) *Gone Girl* belongs to the crime and detective fiction genre. In this novel, Flynn presents Amy Elliott Dunne, the protagonist as a grey character tending towards the necessary evil more. The main essence of suspense in this mystery fiction is essentially the question of whether or not Nick Dunne, the husband is involved in the mysterious case of the wife getting disappeared; on the occasion of the fifth marriage anniversary. Flynn here presents an interesting technique of storytelling, the narrative

continuously oscillates between the present and the past, the present day is narrated by Nick as things gradually proceed and the past comes alive from the diary recordings of Amy, however, both Nick and Amy are later found to be unreliable narrators. The underlying tension in their conjugal life is well depicted in the first chapter itself which commences with Nick Dunne reflecting upon his present situation:

When I think of my wife, I always think of her head... What are you thinking, Amy? The question I've asked most often during our marriage, if not loud, ...What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do? (Flynn, 2012, p. 3)

The very first self-introspective thought on the part of Nick reveals an almost broken marriage, where the husband and wife were alienated, cold and distant already and the economic recession which Nick called "The Missouri Grievance", only made the situation worse for them. Nick decided to go back to their hometown Missouri, where his family lived, the father was suffering from Alzheimer and now the mother was battling cancer. Amy clearly disliked the idea but had no other option and followed her husband. There Nick and Margo jointly started a bar, borrowing Amy's money. And Nick vowed to return the money to his wife along with the interest and in the back of his mind he kept himself reminding:

I would not be a man who borrowed from his wife- I could feel my dad twisting his lips at the very idea. Well, there are all kinds of men, his most damning phrase, the second half left unsaid, and you are the wrong kind. (Flynn, 2012, p. 8)

Nick had grown up in a working-class household, with an abusive father, he had seen his father practice domestic violence, verbal abuses and this made Nick very afraid as a child and he feared that someday he might become like his own father and he didn't want that happen ever. He ran away from that small claustrophobic town to pursue his dream and stay away from his father's influence. But finally, he had no option but to return and relocate to his home town and despite all his distaste for his father, the words of his father kept harping on his mind shows the extent and impact of childhood trauma he had encountered.

These childhood experiences and traumas play an important role in the behavioral action of a grown-up individual. In this context, it can be mentioned that Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic theories states that gender is not biological, it is based on a person's psychosexual development. Gender inequality stems from the childhood experiences that eventually lead men to think of themselves as masculine and women to be inherently feminine. It also argues that discrimination based on gender leads to a male-dominated social system, which affects the psychosexual development of individuals.

Similarly in the case of Amy, the childhood experiences play a major role in shaping her as an individual person, influencing her psychological mindset and the thought process and the actions she eventually undertakes. Amy was born to rich well-off parents, who were child psychologist. She was born to her parents after they faced a series of miscarriages, naming their dead daughters Hope. Amy was their living breathing daughter, much loved and adored, but still once in a while on certain days her mother Marybeth Elliott took some time off to remember her Hopes, and at these times Amy felt a sting of jealousy, the dead Hopes were always perfect even though they were alive for a moment only and Amy had always faced the challenge to prove herself to be perfect, to live up to the expectations. She was also the inspiration for her parent's co-authored book *The Amazing Amy*, thus this fictional Amy proved to be the alter ego, a competition to the real Amy. She had to keep herself way ahead of the fictional Amy in terms of goodness and morality. And as a matter of fact, Amy developed various role plays to keep up her varied images, always had this tendency to consider herself the supreme epitome of grace and beauty, and she could never tolerate compromises and her position demeaned.

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This psychological condition of women is deeply influenced by past experiences as stated by psychoanalytic feminists, and thus shaping their future lives, is proved true in the case of Amy.

Psychoanalytic feminism is a theory of oppression that states that men have a psychological need to subjugate women. The roots of women's minimal resistance to that of men's compulsion to subjugate and dominate them lie deep in the human psyche, established through deeply rooted societal norms and traditions. This specific branch of feminism seeks to better understand how the psychic lives evolve in order to better understand the root cause of the system and how it can change oppression against women. The model of oppression and enslavement is deeply ingrained in society, thus instilling and perpetuating patriarchal norms.

Nancy Chodorow (1987), an activist during the second wave of feminism, known for her *Seventies Questions for Thirties Women: Gender and Generation in a Study of Early Women Psychoanalysts* defined Psychoanalysis as:

the method and theory directed towards the investigation and understanding of how we develop and experience unconscious fantasies (that form psyche, self-identity) and how we construct and reconstruct our felt past in the present. (Chodorow, 1987, p.78)

Jacques Lacan also takes into account the workings of the unconscious mind to decipher the underlying meaning. Besides Freud's approach to psychoanalysis, Lacan developed his own style of thinking, and as Bowie (1991) states:

it is an attempt to extend the psychoanalytic discussion into a fully intersubjective dimension. The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real are not meant forces, personifiable on the model builder's inner stage, but orders...again like the id, the ego, and the superego, Lacan's Symbolic, Imaginary and Real have an air of undisguised ambition about them (p. 90)

The three key orders, according to Lacan are namely: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, and thus in this context to quote from Mellard (2006) "I began with the Imaginary, I then had to chew on the story of the symbolic... And I finished by putting out for you this famous Real." (p. 163)

In this context, the ego of Amy Elliott Dunne can be well understood with reference to the mirror phase. Here the mirror is the children's book series *Amazing Amy* co-authored by her child psychologist parents. The fictional Amy is well ahead of her in perfection and this makes Amy insecure as she is always compared to and judged. Though Amy had been the only child after all the dead Hopes, she knows well that her parents' fictional child "Amazing Amy" has always been more dear to them.

Being the real-life version of a beloved fictional character had always adversely affected Amy's self-identity from the very childhood. The traits of perfectionism, in Amy's literary alter ego, had always kept the living Amy under the constant pressure of proving her self-worth and for that, she often took to unfair means, to keep up with her image – which was always charming, victorious, and, as well amazing. Amy's childhood was thus convoluted when her parents used her as the inspirational prototype of their most popular Children's Book series. Amy was identified as the byproduct of that purloined childhood as she was portrayed as a little prodigy in that bestseller. Amy's psychologist parents made their fortune by exploiting the life of Amy. They had fabricated her ordinary life tales and exploits and created a spunky heroine out of it, who is perfect in every form and sphere. This

mercenary approach of her parents, had a deep adverse psychological impact on her as she felt her parents didn't care about her real self and she felt mistreated. But she learned from this incident that compelling stories trump inconvenient facts. And on the other hand, she also learned how to frame characters' flaws as an asset and mistakes as an opportunity for growth, and how to pretend and role play, and take actions for the fulfillment of her desired ends without any remorse or compunctions whatsoever. Throughout the entire novel, it is depicted how this particular thing has shaped Amy's personality traits, this self-recognition with the fictional character creates a misconception in her and eventually leads to self-destruction. She is in constant conflict between her fictional self and her real self, and misunderstandings are overlaid on her self-awareness as she discovers her wholeness and completeness only through fictional works despite rejection and whining. And for this complexity ingrained in her personality, Amy considers her parents to be responsible for it. And also, in her imaginary world, Nick appeared to be the 'cool guy' the perfect man of her dreams, who could balance her personality so she married him.

Then comes the concept of the symbolic in Lacan's mirror stages, and unlike the imaginary, it involves the formation of both signifiers and language, so it is considered the factor which determines the order of the subject, in it, the entire system of unconscious and conscious appears as an endless web of signifiers/ies and associations, and regarding that Lacan (1956) himself says "Symbols, in fact, envelop the life of man in a network so that they join together before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him..."(p. 42) and that "Man speaks, therefore, but it is because the symbol has made him man". (p. 39)

So rather than focusing on the logical side of interpretation, much emphasis is put on the Language itself. It is because once a child understands and accepts the norms and working of language and societal rules, he can deal with the components of the society. In *Gone Girl*, Amy is portrayed as someone who has a good understanding of society's norms and how they work. However, she does not necessarily converge and blend well with others. She can also bond with people and make friends quickly and easily. But all those are on a superficial level, they are designed to serve her ends and help her manipulate others to fulfil her own selfish motives. She does not act as a part of the society as a whole, but uses it for the fulfillment of her own purpose. She made friends with Noelle Hawthorne, the pregnant neighbor to accomplish her goal and it was the same with Desi Collings, she used her wealthy former lover to further accomplish her end.

Next comes the final stage of the mirror image- the real, and as Bowie mentions:

Lacan's account of the Real is marked by the solemnity of utterance ...the Real is that which lies outside the Symbolic process, and it is to be found in the mental as well as in the material world: a trauma, for example, is as intractable and unsymbolizable as objects in their materiality (Bowie, 1991, p. 94)

"that which resists symbolization absolutely" (Homer, 2005, p. 83) Lacan theorizes it in one of his seminar papers. Our exposure to language and symbols destroys our ability to connect with the real. Since 'real' "is not a thing, its not a material object in the world, or the human body or the reality," (p. 81) says Lacan furthermore, "but something that is repressed". (p. 98)

Lacan calls this state of nature a time of fullness or completeness that is subsequently lost through the entrance into the realm of language. This loss of fullness is well depicted by Flynn through the character of Amy Elliott Dunne and her inability to feel complete. Amy starts by trying to keep up with her parents' expectations- in outliving the dead Hopes and

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then competing with the fictional Amy who is perfect in every sphere. These expectations and credibility of the fictional character with her namesake, her parents' expectation, and the credibility of her fictional identity force Amy to create an altered image of that 'ideal ego'. She struggles with the 'imaginary' and the 'reality', masters the art of hiding her real identity, and rejects its totality. She says that "I am the opposite of Amy." (Flynn, 2012, p. 281) and she further continues:

I've always been better than the Hopes, I was the one who made it. But I've always been jealous too... They get to be perfect without even trying, without even faking one moment of existence, while I am stuck on earth, and every day I must try, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect. It's an exhausting way to live... I was pretending, the way I often did, pretending to have a personality. I can't help it, it's what I've always done. The way some change fashion regularly, I change personalities. (Flynn, 2012, p. 250)

And once she realized that she can't keep up with the image that her parents wanted her to be, she turns to society. She plays the "cool girl" that the society applauds, "I was playing the girl who was in style, Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman..." (Flynn, 2012, p. 280) but deep down she disapproved of these cool girls and felt that their situation was pathetic because "They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be." (p. 281) so this fact is hinted at that she won't carry this cool girl image long either and so it happened:

It had to stop because it wasn't real, it wasn't me... I tried so hard to be easy. But it was unsustainable. It turned out he couldn't sustain his side either: the witty banter, the clever games, the romance, and the wooing. It all started collapsing on itself. I hated Nick for being surprised when I became me. I hated him for not knowing it had to end (Flynn, 2012, p. 253)

She begins to use the image of an ideal woman that has developed in society and tries to meet these standards. And in all this process of living up to her imaginary perfect image, as she tries to be what everyone else wants her to be, she forgets who she wanted to be and loses herself to her needs. And it was because of this that when she had to move back to Missouri, in that laid-back environment, with all her dreams shattered and finding it difficult to settle there that she discovered her husband cheating on her with a much younger woman, and instead of confronting him she decided to punish him in keeping with her ideal self. Her whole life is constructed by her 'Mirror Image',

The mirror -image seemed to be the threshold of the visible world if we go by the mirror disposition that the image of one's body presents in hallucinations or dreams, whether it concerns its features, or even its infirmities, or its object-projections (Jameson, 1977, p. 234)

Thus, the mirror stage is the phase in which the child initially identifies himself as a person limited by his skin. Until then, the newborn form has no idea about its physical limitations. Our free-wheeling and fragmented consciousness takes on a stable, unified identity and our ego is revealed. We need the approval of others to know ourselves better. Recognition from others that makes us know ourselves better, gives us a sense of belonging. This stage of the mirror leads to the imaginary, followed by the symbolic and the real, which are pre-symbolic reality. Amy Dunn's mirror is the popular children's book *The Amazing Amy*. This mirror creates the sense of alter ego for Amy, where she is superior, perfect, obedient, intelligent, fearless, and in her assumed perfect self, she far ahead of her time, a role

model for others. Throughout the entire novel, it is evident how this particular event plays a major role in shaping the personality traits of who Amy becomes in her life.

Besides being an absorbing, ingenious thriller comprising concreteness, forensic and pathological details, and critical insight into the psychological mindset, Flynn (2012) in *Gone Girl* provides a different take on the depiction of her women characters as it is finally revealed how Amy actually took control of her fate and life by rejecting the dominance of her parents and defying Nick, the husband and acting the way she preferred, going to extreme extents to fulfill her motives, she comes across as both a victim and a victimizer.

Flynn has often been labeled a misogynist for her portrayal of crude female characters with innate evils, but Flynn is of the opinion that she just portrays women with the same capacity as men even when it comes to evil. Amy, the protagonist here too embodies the necessary evil, a grey character all along turned a murderer yet comes out clean of the charge and is successful in making Nick, the husband stays with her according to her wishes and gain control over everything.

Thus, Amy Elliott Dunne of Flynn's *Gone Girl* is a perfect manifestation of Lacan's Three stages of Identity formation and mirror theory and besides that, the most significant challenge presented in this novel is to decipher the real characters beneath the layered personality traits and pretensions.

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### Bio-note

Sk Benazir is an Assistant Professor of English, Barjora College (Affiliated to Bankura University) WB. She is currently working on her Ph.D. on the American novelist Gillian Flynn. Her areas of literary interest are contemporary American fiction and science fiction.

Email Id: benazir.sekh@gmail.com