

Longing of Women in *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins

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Abstract

*This article explores the complex lives and multifaceted characters of the women portrayed in Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*. Set against a backdrop of suspense and psychological tension, the novel examines the intricate dynamics of female identity, mental health, and the impact of trauma. By analyzing this text, the researcher argues that Hawkins not only captures the attributes of the thrillers but also secretly reveals the harsh treatment of society towards women. Through the perspectives of Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell and Anna Boyd, the article delves into the nuances of their personalities, relationships, and struggles, highlighting how their experiences shape their actions and perceptions. By analyzing their roles in the narrative, the article reveals how Hawkins portrays women not as mere victims or stereotypes but as flawed, layered individuals grappling with their own personal demons and desires. The article seeks to understand how the portrayal of these women challenges societal expectations and reflects broader themes of self-deception, empowerment, and survival. The paper reveals how Hawkins work serves as a powerful commentary on women oppression in the society.*

Keywords: Self-Discovery, Empowerment, Survival, Trauma, Identity

Women play a vital role in human progress and have a significant role in society. They perform the role of wife, partner, mother, teacher and queen in the family at the same time. Women also play a key and vital role in the socio-economic

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development of the society. As a daughter, a woman is traditionally responsible for taking care of her parents. As a wife she is expected to serve her husband, preparing food, clothing and other personal needs. As a mother, the whole burden of child bearing and the greater part of child rearing are carried out by a woman in the family. A woman devotes her whole time and thoughts for the welfare of the family.

Society expects women to be honest and trustworthy, authentic or genuine, independent, intelligent and curious, confident, supportive, empathetic, passionate and forgiving. The exploitation, discrimination and the crisis of women's identification in society are questioned by female writers, activists and critics. Simon de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* tells how a man defines a woman. For man, she is "sex – absolute sex, no less" (26). Women just have to accept their role in relationships. When a woman does not act in a way that is convenient for a man, he gets tired of her and wants to get rid of her. In the earlier works of British Literature, a woman is often presented only as one thing, an object. They can be objects of desire, beauty or merely objects to be owned, but the woman is rarely anything more than that. The male characters in the novel *Gone Girl* tells that they can use or treat women as they want. "It was pathetically, all I wanted right then: a woman to fix me a sandwich and not ask me any questions" (Flynn 83). Women are also aware of how they are treated: "He uses me for sex when he needs to" (Flynn 256). The word 'modesty' is only meant for women, rules of society are only meant for women.

The article aims to examine the portrayal of women in Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*, focusing on the complex characters of Rachel, Anna, and Megan. It seeks to explore how Hawkins crafts multifaceted female identities, shedding light on their emotional depth, personal struggles, and societal roles. Through this analysis, the article aims to highlight the ways in which the novel challenges traditional gender stereotypes and offers a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences. the article contributes to the broader conversation on the representation of women in contemporary literature.

The Girl on the Train gives more importance to the role of women in society. This novel revolves around three women narrators Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell and Anna Boyd. Rachel Watson is in her mid-thirties. She is an alcoholic narrator who felt isolated in her misery. Since Rachel was lonely and sad, she starts drinking alcohol. She became even lonelier because no one likes being around a drunk. She is a woman with flaws. The weak nature of Rachel is revealed when she describes her state of mind as "I'm going to feel terrible all day, it's going to come in waves – stronger then weaker then stronger again" (30). At the beginning of the novel, we can see that Rachel had an 'overactive imagination'. It can also be called Maladaptive daydreaming in which people are usually aware that they are daydreaming. In 2002, Prof. Eli Somer first defined the phenomenon of Maladaptive Daydreaming as:

a coping mechanism in response to trauma, abuse or loneliness, that leads the maladaptive daydreamer to conjure a complex imaginary world for

them to escape into in times of distress, or loneliness, or maybe, even helplessness in real life. It inevitably creates an emotional attachment to the characters and the life created, which often replaces the painful real-life interactions. (197)

Rachel in this novel creates an emotional attachment with the couple Jason and Jess, who lived on the trackside house: number fifteen where the train 8.04 usually stops at the signal. She describes them as a perfect, golden couple. Rachel used to observe them, even if they are not there, she thinks about what they might be up to. She used to recall the past life which she had with Tom when she sees the couple. Rachel when she is heavily drunk, she almost forgets everything. She has a problem of 'blacking out' which means losing consciousness for a short period. The main flaw of women from the view of society is Infertility, a condition where one cannot get pregnant. Often, when women cannot conceive, the blame is put on them, even when approximately 50% of infertility issues come from the man. In addition, many societies only tend to value a woman if she can produce at least one child, and a marriage can be considered a failure when the couple cannot conceive. The act of conceiving a child can be linked to the couple's consummation of marriage, and reflect their social role in society. The devaluation of a wife due to her inability to conceive can lead to domestic abuse and emotional trauma such as victim-blaming. Women are sometimes or often blamed as the cause of a couple's infertility, which can lead to emotional abuse, anxiety, and shame.

The same scenario is seen in the life of Rachel. She was a woman of infertility. No doctors are able to explain her why she cannot get pregnant. Rachel and Tom did one round of IVF, everyone warned them that it could be unpleasant and unsuccessful. Her friends are having children, friends of friends are having children, pregnancy and birth and first birthday parties are everywhere. She was asked about it all the time. At some point, her childlessness becomes an acceptable topic of Sunday- lunch conversation. "I was still young, there was still plenty of time but failure cloaked me like a mantle, it overwhelmed me, dragged me under and I gave up hope. At the time I resented the fact that it was always seen as my fault, that I was the one letting the side down" (Hawkins 111).

Lara, Rachel's best friend since university, had two children in two years: a boy first and then a girl. Rachel didn't like them and she didn't want to hear anything about them. She didn't want to be near them. Because of her infertility, society made her feel a sense of depression, so she started to drink, everyone starts hating her. She felt loneliness in her life. Rachel tells that it was all her fault, she is blaming herself for infertility.

Rachel tells that women are still only valued for two things – their looks and their role as mothers. She calls herself 'Worthless' because she is not beautiful and she can't have kids. "It's all my fault. I was a drinker anyway – I've always liked to drink. But I did become sadder, and sadness gets boring after a while, for the sad person and everyone around them. And then I went from being a drinker to being a drunk, and there's nothing more boring than that" (Hawkins 113). Rachel felt pain in

her heart and thought that alcohol could be the best medicine to cure the pain. Many infertile women tend to cope with immense stress and social stigma behind their condition, which can lead to considerable mental distress. The long-term stress involved in attempting to conceive a child and the social pressures behind giving birth can lead to emotional distress that may manifest as a mental disease. Women who suffer from infertility might deal with psychological stressors such as denial, anger, grief, guilt, and depression.

Men in some countries may find another wife when their first cannot produce a child, hoping that by sleeping with another woman he will be able to produce his child. Men and women can also turn to divorce in an attempt to find a new partner with whom to bear a child. Rachel's boyfriend was Tom, he is the one who saved her from grief after her father's death. They both were married on an oddly wintry Mayday seven years ago. Rachel was happy, solvent and successful. They moved to a house number twenty-three when she was at the age of twenty-six. All things went wrong when Rachel imagines that they are no longer a couple, but a family. Tom broke up with Rachel because she can't get pregnant. He went in search of another woman and her name is Anna Boyd. "The man, who left me for another woman two years ago. I can't help how I feel" (Hawkins 289). Tom married Anna and they were having a baby. Rachel knows this only after seeing the post on Facebook. The post on Facebook was Tom was carrying his newborn girl, looking down at her and smiling. Beneath the post, it was written as "So this is what all the fuss is about! Never knew love like this! Happiest day of my life" (Hawkins 113). Tom was disappointed in Rachel because she can't give birth to a baby, so he went in search of another woman to fulfil his wish.

Similarly, the novel *Custody* presents a character named Ishita who was a woman married to Suryakanta. The boy's family criticizes her because she had the problem of infertility. Ishita moves from healer to prophet, herbalist to hospital desperately seeking some resolution, driven by hope, uncertainty and despair. Kapur depicts how an infertile woman undergoes negative, individual experiences regarding her infertility. Ishita experiences lack of identity and feels that she is not fulfilling her role as a woman. "Hadn't they valued her for herself? Being childless, relegate her to the status of a 'nobody' as she has failed to prove her femininity through childbearing. This is my karma, nothing will break it" (Kapur 68). Women's social status, a direction in life, economic achievement, well-being and the very meaning of marital life hinges around their ability to give birth and rear children. "Motherhood is usually identified as an essential part of being a woman, to an extent that women without children are usually portrayed as unfulfilled and incomplete" (Anderson 42). When a woman is unable to conceive, she is stigmatized and rebuked by family and society which inflicts multiple psychological tortures by labelling them 'incomplete' and 'worthless'. So, the body is a source of discontentment for an infertile woman.

Megan Hipwell is another female character portrayed in the novel *The Girl on the Train*. She was first introduced as Jess and her husband Scott as Jason. The

names Jason and Jess were imaginary names given by Rachel. They are the people noticed by Rachel every morning when the train stops at the signal. She is described as the happily married suburbanite. She is an independent woman. Unlike Rachel, she is full of responsibilities. Megan has been a “Run away, lover, wife, waitress, gallery manager, nanny and a few more in-between” (Hawkins 39). Though Megan is a woman of capability, she had come across many hardships and failures in her life. She tried to make a success of an art gallery but there was no call for art in suburbia. Due to her failure, the art gallery has now become a vacant shop. She tells that all these happened because of the ‘Wrong place’ and ‘Wrong time’.

Megan is a woman who was unable to live according to the expectations of society. She failed to be a good wife and a good mother. A good wife displays qualities that not only help build a home and family but also helps to project herself as a good human being. A good wife does not cheat because her husband is her one and only lover. Megan failed to fulfill her responsibility as a good wife. At the beginning of the novel, Hawkins portrays Megan as a woman of confidence and a woman who fulfils her responsibility as a wife. As all women wait for the arrival of their husbands, Megan was also waiting for Scott to come home. She waits for Scott to persuade him to take her out for dinner. She loved Scott and lived a happy life. Later, Hawkins brings out some of the changes in the character of Megan. She began to value her plans of doing photography courses and cookery classes more than the role of being a wife. Megan was a failure as a mother, it is visible from her past life. She failed to take care of her child which leads to the death of the child. At first, Megan was portrayed as an ideal woman, but now she wasn't a loving wife, she wasn't a good person, she was a liar, a cheat and she was also a killer. She failed to fulfill the expectation of society of being a good wife and a good mother. Megan stands for the kind of treatment society gives to women who refuse to accept the rules of femininity. She had a tough life and yet she continues her battle all alone.

Hawkins finally focuses on Anna Boyd the next female narrator in the novel. Unlike Rachel and Megan, Anna is a successful woman in her marriage life. Anna was an estate agent who married Tom Cruise. She has a good husband and is blessed with a daughter called Evie. Anna is a character who demonstrates how society pits women against one another, forcing them to value male approval and companionship over female friendships. Such a situation can put women in danger and leave them with little support. Anna was always blaming Rachel for coming into her life. Rachel often sends messages to Tom and often gets upset seeing her message. Rachel often wanders near the place where Anna's home was located. When she saw Rachel standing on the opposite side of the road and looking at her house, she was frightened. Anna fears that Rachel would come into her life and take away Tom with her. She had talked about it several times to Tom, he would console her by saying that he can take care of it. When Anna thinks that all things are getting better, there she was again. Sometimes Anna thought that she will never go away from her life. She finally decides to take the matter into her hands. She decides to put an end to the Rachel issue.

The next time I see her, I'm calling that police officer – the woman, Detective Sergeant Riley. She seemed nice, sympathetic. I know Tom feels sorry for Rachel, but honestly, I think its time I dealt with that bitch once and for all. (Hawkins 287)

When Anna starts doubting the behavior of Tom, she started behaving like Rachel. Anna started drinking like Rachel, now she feels the situation of Rachel. She tells that it's easier to understand Rachel when you feel like how she feels right now. She describes the state as "There is nothing so painful, so corrosive, as suspicion" (Hawkins 340). Anna can't bear the fact that both she and Rachel are sailing in the same boat. She doesn't like Tom comparing her with Rachel. When Tom says that "you can both be incredibly weak" (Hawkins 379). Anna gets angry and tells not to lump her Rachel. She doesn't bother that her husband Tom is a liar and a killer, but what matters the most is Tom has compared her with Rachel. At the end of this novel, one can see that both the women forget their enmity and stood together. Finally, when Rachel stabbed the throat of Tom, Anna saved her from the police saying that it was self-defense. Anna refuses to acknowledge the darker side of her life and her marriage partly to protect herself and Evie, and partly out of fear of ruining her status as a 'perfect' wife and mother. Her fears of failing to embody society's ideals of femininity impede her ability to know herself or take care of herself as fully as she could.

Throughout the novel *The Girl on the Train*, Hawkins shows how society plays an important role in the life of women. The mental stress that women face when they are not able to live according to the expectation of society is revealed. Women tend to lose their happiness when they live according to society. They cannot live their life in the way they want them to be. Rachel, Megan, and Anna each struggle with the social expectations that have been placed upon them—even as their personal lives grow increasingly unstable and dangerous. This novel is heavily women-centered which encourage female readers to associate themselves with the female characters, even though they are full of flaws. It also portrays the harsh reality and the kind of oppression that each woman have to face in their everyday lives.

In society, people spend too much time in teaching girls to worry about what boys think of them but they don't teach boys to care about being likeable. People spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough. In case of men, the society praises or excuse them for the same reason. All over the world there are so many magazines, articles and books telling women 'what to do, how to be and not to be' in order to attract or please men. The possibility of not having marriage is much more likely used against the case of women than against a man. Women are taught to make life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important one in their life. Our society teaches women to see the state of not being married as a deep personal failure. The word 'respect' is something a woman shows a man but not often for something a man shows a woman. Society raise woman to see other woman as competitors not for job or accomplishments but for the attention of men. Women in general are more likely to do housework than

men. It is because women have been socialized to see cooking as their role. These facts can also be seen through all the female characters in the novel.

Hawkins portrays woman at times are shown negatively, but the novel ends with women taking charge of their destinies. The best example of this is told at the end of the novel where Anna and Rachel stood together and fought for their life. When the female characters realize the negative perspectives of their relationships and their men, they realize their rights and powers. This novel is quite a realistic representation of society and also a defining work in contemporary feminism. The position of women in society has slightly improved. Rules and laws have changed but the deep-rooted opinion of people in the society remains unchanged. Attitude has changed but sexual discrimination remains a problem that one needs to face and fight against.

The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins offers a thought-provoking portrayal of women that transcends traditional stereotypes, showcasing their complexity and the struggles they face in a world rife with deception, trauma, and societal pressures. Through the characters of Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell and Anna Boyd, Hawkins provides a nuanced exploration of female identity, vulnerability, and resilience. Each woman is depicted not as a passive figure but as an active participant in her own narrative, struggling to reconcile her desires, mistakes, and past. Women's longing for love, respect and to be equally treated in all aspects of their life. This article deals with the longing of women for love and respect in the society. Women's quest for love is indefinite. They express love and respect and expect the same from others. The writer clearly portrays women of three different categories and their longing in a descriptive way.

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