From Enchantress to Murderess: The Portrayal of Amy Dunne as ‘Femme Fatale’ in Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl

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Abstract

The portrayal of femme fatale can be traced back to ancient mythology, fairy tales, and classic literature. In contemporary literature, femme fatale is revived through Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl whose story revolves around a married woman plotting revenge against her own husband. This study aims to reveal the portrayal of femme fatale through the main character of this novel, Amy Dunne, and whether such portrayal reinforces or resists patriarchy. Applying feminist literary criticism, this study utilizes Beauvoir’s concept of ‘Other’, marriage, and the myth of woman to examine the connection between femme fatale and feminism. This study reveals that Amy Dunne shows the quality of femme fatale through her rejection against traditional gender roles, ‘Other’, and patriarchy. However, in the end it is revealed that the portrayal of femme fatale does not necessarily reinforce the spirit of feminism, rather, it disempowers feminism and upholds patriarchy. Hence, this study concludes that the femme fatale character in the novel is a form of anti-feminist, patriarchy-centred, and misogynistic representation.

Keywords: feminism, femme fatale, ‘Other’, patriarchy, traditional gender roles

Introduction

The character of femme fatale has existed in films, literature, and even ancient mythology. Femme fatale appeared in various works, from classic poems making allusion to mythic creatures, such as Medusa, to films or late nineteenth century literary works depicting femme fatale as vampires. In the real world, an actual example of femme fatale was a woman named Mata Hari who was convicted to death due to her alleged occupation as a spy. Mata Hari’s mythology influenced the projections, terrors and anxieties regarding women and modernity that emerged in the late nineteenth century (Huyssen 52).

The work of Gillian Flynn entitled Gone Girl is regarded as appealing and worthy of note due to its abundant gender-related content, particularly concerning women. The story revolves around a married couple experiencing their inevitable marriage crisis. Interestingly, the main female character in this novel is depicted other than as an angel in the house, who usually represents the figure of a dutiful stay-at-home wife. In this novel, Amy Dunne’s portrayal is in a complete clash with the angel in the house figure whose life is always devoted to nothing but her family. Amy Dunne is vividly portrayed as a woman who transforms from an all loving sweet wife into a merciless one who holds a grudge against her own husband and determines to ruin his life. Bearing similar traits to the features of a femme fatale, Amy Dunne traps her husband and utterly devastates him—making him helpless on his own defence.

Instead of being all frail and weak, a femme fatale tricks her victims and utterly devastates them. Literally, femme fatale means ‘fatal woman’ or to simply say, a dangerous woman who can cause fatality. Dijkstra claims that this woman figure is characterised as a seductive yet cunning enchanting lady who baits and victimises men (237). This is clearly far from the expectation of any patriarchal society who picture woman as a wife or angel in the house. Accordingly, such portrayal of a woman in this novel is worth studying deeper through the eye of feminism—how it is linked with history, how it is represented and exemplified in a literary work, particularly modern literature, and how it is related to culture.

There have been some previous studies on femme fatale. In his article, Vaczi discusses modern femme fatale in the form of soccer players’ wives and girlfriends (WAGs) and how their presence disrupts the stability of the players’ performance and representation. Another study by Coumans shows that the
depiction of *femme fatale* in noir movies is not empowering. The last is Michelle Mercure’s study which reveals that the associated attributes of the *femme fatale* archetype are not always represented in several classic noir films.

In this study, Simone de Beauvoir’s theory is used to conduct a feminist reading on Amy Dunne as *femme fatale*. Beauvoir first proposed the term women as ‘Other’ in her book, *The Second Sex* (16). By ‘Other’, she argues that women are considered as insignificant and minor (21). They are considered as the ‘Others’ who cannot produce meaning of their own world; as a result, they rely on men who can make meaning of their world and eventually their happiness revolves around their men. Beauvoir also claims that, to some extent, marriage is one thing that inclines to keep women away from their independence and freedom—bound to nothing but household chores (449–450).

Under the subchapter ‘myths’, Beauvoir draws her concept on ‘bad woman’ which is defined as women who ‘eat’ their men (223). If a woman happens to freely show her charms, she is a *femme fatale* who comes to be a threat (222). Hence, from Beauvoir’s concept of *femme fatale*, it can be interpreted that when women outperform men, they are assumed to be a menace in the society and thus must be punished in order to restore societal law that privileges men. Denoting the literal meaning of the term, the very notion of *femme fatale* does contradict the idea of the femininity from the point of view of patriarchal culture which casts women as being weak, fragile, dependent, and submissive (Tyson 85). When feminism started to flourish in the society, feminism was perceived as a threat to patriarchy, thus the term *femme fatale* was issued due to the male anxiety of the rise of feminism (Doane in Hanson and O’Rawe 2).

This study applies descriptive qualitative research method which requires interpretation in descriptive form (Ratna 46). To analyse the text, the method of close reading is employed. As the novel pictures Amy Dunne as a superior woman and dominating wife, this study aims to reveal the portrayal of *femme fatale* through her character and whether this portrayal reinforces or resists the patriarchy. As a feminist study, this research seeks to explain how this portrayal of women is perceived from feminist perspective and the culture in which the novel was produced.

**The Portrayal of Amy Dunne as *Femme Fatale***

In order to examine the portrayal of *femme fatale*, this study focuses on Amy as the main female character. Nevertheless, this study also pays close attention to other characters in order to reveal more detailed explanation from the point of view of other characters in responding to the demeanours as well as the depiction of *femme fatale* as shown by the main character.

**Constant Societal Demand Regarding Traditional Gender Roles and Stereotypes**

Amy Dunne has always been an exceptional woman. She is the inspiration of her parents’ children’s book series entitled *Amazing Amy* whose main character is as smart and superior as Amy, yet always many steps ahead of her, and *Amazing Amy* is married. Raised by feminist parents, the real Amy is very much aware of offensive sexism represented in films and gender representation in commercials; thus, she often objects such representation. However, she is often criticised by her husband, Nick, when she appears to be more superior than him. Nick sees Amy as someone who overthinks and analyses too much. Instead of acknowledging her intelligence and highly critical thinking, he criticises Amy. Nick’s attitude towards Amy may represent patriarchal view on gender stereotype, in which women are stereotyped as emotional while men are associated with logic (Lips 3).

This stereotype of women only further proves that women should not be exceedingly smart or critical. Therefore, Amy chooses to remain quiet and obedient in order to stop Nick from criticising her and see her more as a fun person to be with. Amy states that “Just like Nick, who destroyed and rejected the real me a piece at a time—you’re too serious, Amy, you’re too uptight, Amy, you overthink things, you analyze too much, you’re no fun anymore, you make me feel useless, Amy, you make me feel bad, Amy” (321). To conceal her capability and intelligence in front of others, women are often expected to remain quiet simply because being rational or critical is not feminine (Jaggar 316).

Depicted as a decorated scholar who graduated from Harvard Psychology and pursuing her career from the bottom as a writer in New York City (14), Amy herself defines what happiness is. Through her
job women can gain equal position along men, and she frees herself from being the parasite of the family without the help of men (Beauvoir 689). However, she finally realises that people keep questioning about her celibacy despite her triumph as a career woman. Her success does not altogether liberate her from the confinement of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. People around her assert that there is something wrong with her. This is supported by the following remark:

They knit their eyebrows and pretend to think of men they can set me up with, but we all know there’s no one left, no one good left, and I know that they secretly think there’s something wrong with me, something hidden away that makes me unsatisfiable, unsatisfying (39).

This is in line with Beauvoir’s statement that for women access to jobs is not equal to total liberation (689). Women are frequently offered to get married, and if she happens to stay celibate, she becomes a parasite or entirely excluded in society (446). Her idea of relationship is when two partners treat each other equally, and that is what makes her think twice about marriage. However, she cannot deny her being lonely and people are demanding her to get married. Thus, securing her status as a married woman is deemed to be an ideal decision a woman could ever make.

In conclusion, women’s happiness revolves around their men, upon whom they rely and above all, the ones who can produce meaning on their own (Beauvoir 467). Accordingly, femme fatale shares something in common with ‘bad girls’, in which both are defiant towards their tradition gender roles (Tyson 89). How a woman defies their traditional gender roles and stereotypes is also perceived as something wrong by the society for they believe that women should not be independent, superior, smart, or successful. To be feminine means women have to obey their traditional gender roles, and to be independent and superior for women is definitely far from being feminine.

The Defiance against ‘Other’

Having spent years committing to her marriage and being someone she is not, Amy later begins to show that she is more capable than Nick in everything. Amy arises from her inferior position to defy patriarchy and also to avenge her husband for making her limit herself—powerless, foolish, irrational, and fearful. Now all eyes open, Amy confesses how she was always the one who did what Nick loves and loved what he loves. This affirms that Amy used to be in the state of being ‘Other’, as suggested by Beauvoir, that the world of a woman always seems to revolve around where her man is—completely oblivious to the outside world (467).

Raised by feminist parents, Amy’s idea of independence and intelligence in women is deeply implanted in her mind. She believes that a woman must be able to stand for herself and be bold whenever she disagrees with her husband’s expectations and wrong behaviours. Thus, it should not come a total surprise when she finally rejects the position that places her as the inferior one whose act of independence and intelligence are very limited. When she is finally married to Nick, she admits she has to forfeit her Independent Young Feminist card and ready to be a wife who does wifely duties and commits her entire life to indulge her husband (52). This proves, once again, that marriage makes women lose their autonomy over herself and voluntarily gives herself in the hands of their husbands (Beauvoir 449). She does not mind when her husband wins her over, thus she embraces her status as ‘Other’.

Nonetheless, being ‘Other’ seems to degrade Amy. As Amy senses something wrong with her marriage, she reminisces the moment she met Nick and learns that, after all this time, she had better quit being the non-existent girl Nick wants. Amy defines this non-existent girl whom every man wants as ‘cool girl’, a girl who basically also functions as ‘Other’, who cannot create her own happiness thus seeks some by holding on tightly to her man who can pledge a “live happily ever after” promise. The image of a ‘cool girl’ that Nick longs for is embodied in his young mistress, Andy. Nick asserts that Andy is the complete opposite to Amy since Andy is not as demanding as Amy and, most of all, she can please Nick. Amy’s confession is evident in the statement below:

Sure, he may be happy, he may say you’re the coolest girl ever, but he’s saying it because he got his way. He’s calling you a Cool Girl to fool you! That’s what men do: They try to make it sounds like you are the cool girl so you will bow to their wishes (303).
Beauvoir claims how women and men’s wrongdoings are perceived differently. When a man commits wrongdoings, society labels him simply as *enfant terrible* or a terrible child. On the other hand, when a woman commits wrongdoings, she is labelled as a woman who brings dishonour to her family and the society and in the end she is punished because she is considered as of the devil. She draws her concept on ‘bad woman’ which is defined as women who ‘eat’ their men (223). If a woman happens to freely show her charms, she is a *femme fatale* who comes to be a threat (222).

Bearing similar traits to *femme fatale* who does not bow down to patriarchy, Amy manages to avenge her husband by framing him for her murder. Amy’s plan turns out to be very depressing for Nick, who is completely oblivious of his wife’s intention. Amy believes that the reason behind her crumbling marriage is not only because Nick commits adultery, but also because she feels that her husband is using her for money. From how Amy expresses her objection towards her husband, it can be inferred that men are expected to be the sole provider or the benefactor in a family. Tyson argues that in America, the degree whether a man is of a ‘real man’ is measured by his financial success. On the contrary, when a man fails to achieve his economic goals, he is encouraged to perform her manhood by being sexually active (87–8).

A handful of people who stands for Nick Dunne also grow the same fear as he does. They seem to be constantly forcing him to leave his house as they learn that Amy is pregnant. Unfortunately, his sister’s firm persuasion does not assure him much. Instead, his lawyer suggests him to always “play nice” and try not to offend Amy. This is supported by the following quotation:

> Me, Nick Dunne, the man who used to forget so many details, is now the guy who replays conversations to make sure I didn’t offend, to make sure I never hurt her feelings. I write down everything about her day, her likes and dislikes, in case she quizzes me. I am a great husband because I am very afraid she may kill me (543).

It is pretty unbelievable how Amy is so much feared by her own husband even if at the end of the day she vows to never hurt Nick when the two attempt to revive their marriage. Moreover, judging from Nick’s response which claims that he is a great husband, it could be argued that Nick is somehow trying to distinguish himself from Amy—lightly dismissing the fact that he is also the reason why Amy turns her back on him. It means that in some ways he very proudly labels his wife as a “murdering, mind-fucking, evil, crazy bitch” (531) and himself as the great husband who will never hurt her despite his infidelity that disrespects both his wife and his marriage. This affirms Beauvoir’s argument that men never label themselves because of myth, meanwhile the labelling addressed towards women is exclusively defined in their relation to men (174).

What ‘Other’ has to do with the transformation of a lovely woman to *femme fatale* is that in this novel Amy as the *femme fatale* has been the victim of being used and treated unequally by her husband. She opposes her ‘Other’ position which always places her beneath her husband, thus she turns into someone who fights to liberate herself from being ‘Other’. Amy proves that she does not kneel before the power of patriarchy because a *femme fatale*’s ambition is to stop the practice of masculine power (Hanson and O’Rawe 160). Other than that, a *femme fatale* is regarded as something associated with outside normality, order, and light (Stott 31). This is represented in Nick’s persistence that he does not want to be compared to the deceitful murderous Amy. Instead, he always claims himself as the right one. Whenever her intention to murder his wife crosses his mind, he always reminds himself that if he kills Amy, he will be as bad as her—completely forgetting that his adulterous act is the reason why Amy turns her back against her.

**The Fraud and the Murderess**

Amy Dunne is described as a woman who loves competition and winning, which unfortunately is not in the flattering way. When her disappearance draws so much attention from the American media, some people who used to be close to her finally break their silence and begin to spill the ugly truth of Amy Dunne back in the old days. Wanting to be adored and sympathised, Amy Dunne often draws attention by positioning herself as the damsel in distress who has been endlessly mistreated. This depiction corresponds with the statement that a bad woman, *femme fatale*, always gets her way to use men and finally victimises them (Beauvoir 223). She confesses that “Desi, another man along the Mississippi. I
always knew he might come in handy. It’s good to have at least one man you can use for anything. Desi is a white-knight type. He loves troubled women (433)”. Amy decides to kill Desi, this is how far the negative representation of hers has gone, from framing to murdering.

Upon learning that Amy Dunne walks free with no further investigation, people who were tricked and fooled by her, furiously express their rage knowing that Amy is not punished for her crime. This affirms the idea that when a woman is deemed to be dangerous, society wants her to be severely punished for her misconducts may threaten the lives of others (222). Agreeing upon the punishment on the femme fatale as a sinner among the society seems to reinforce the idea that femme fatale is indeed a total opposition to what is regarded as ‘normality’ (Stott 31). In this case, Nick, as the husband is given the trust by her army of defenders to hopefully, one day, could bring Amy to her downfall. This represents how actually Nick is destined to bring back the power of patriarchy, which corresponds to Doane’s understanding that in attempt to restore the power of patriarchy, femme fatale will also need to be punished due to their wrongdoing (qtd. in Hanson and O’Rawe 46).

Resembling Beauvoir’s claim, the arguments elaborated in advance match two conventions existing in the society, first is that it is the responsibility of the man to contain his spouse whenever she commits immoral deeds (243). In this matter, Nick, as the husband, becomes the primary agent assigned by the society to be responsible for his wife, as he shares her sin which is regarded by the society as great dishonour. Second, to re-enact the power of patriarchy, the femme fatale has to be punished at the end of the day.

**Amy Dunne as Femme Fatale: Promoting Feminism or Upholding Patriarchy**

Within weeks after her disappearance, Amy finally returns to Nick and chooses to rekindle their once-disintegrated marriage. Although Nick determinedly refuses to do so, Amy still manages to negotiate with her husband despite the spreading rumours that Amy is often mistreated by her husband. There is indeed nothing wrong with rebuilding marriage. Yet again, seeing the fact that Amy was once the one who plotted revenge on her own husband, implies that marriage is the only institution that could secure women’s position in society.

Regarding marriage, Beauvoir contends that it is not only an honourable and less strenuous career than many others, but it also encourages woman to achieve her complete social dignity and also to place herself sexually as lover and mother (352). When a woman is to become a wife, she will free herself from her parents’ home, and from her mother’s hold. She will open up her future not by an active conquest but by passively and compliantly delivering herself into the hands of a new master, which in this case is the husband (352). From Beauvoir’s view on marriage, it can be concluded that a woman gains better status in the society only if she is married. Therefore, Amy has to include herself in marriage once again in order to gain sympathy and reclaim her honour as a wife. When marriage is linked to patriarchy, it is believed that women are typically inferior compared to men for he is the head of the family (446). Amy’s confidence that her marriage will be just fine if she and Nick keep working on their problem together is supported in the quotation “All of America wants us to go forward. It’s the story the world needs right now. Us. Desi’s the bad guy. No one wants two bad guys. They want to like you, Nick. The only way you can be loved again is to stay with me. It’s the only way (518)”.

Despite having an intention to murder his wife for what he has done to him, Nick, in fact, begins to shrink himself around Amy. He replaces Amy’s position as the inferior one yet wishing Amy to get arrested as soon as possible, so he could live a new life without her. Nick, however, cannot deny that his wife is ruling at the moment because when he tries to write a manuscript about her lies, she creates life—far more credible than the truth. After all, Amy has single-handedly punished and rehabilitated her husband. Meanwhile, Nick can only give up. Not only does Amy return to marriage, she also readies herself to be a mother. Amy, fully prepared for everything prior to her disappearance, in fact, has kept her husband’s semen so she can impregnates herself. This reflects the greatest fear inflicted by a femme fatale, that it is not merely her unquestionable beauty and sexuality which create chaos, but also her power to overthrow and triumph over men. Her role should also be perceived as the combination of feminine beauty and masculine power (Hanson and O’Rawe 57).
In relation to motherhood, it is believed that it fulfils a woman’s psychological destiny, it is a natural call directed to them to reproduce (Beauvoir 501). Pregnancy, according to women, is often perceived as something that defines their femininity. Thus, when a woman happens to have miscarriage, she would feel as though her feminine quality has vanished. Amy was, at first, reluctant to hear her husband’s plea to have a baby. However, she finally impregnates herself since she truly believes that America loves pregnant women. In the attempt to regain her husband’s love, she gladly announces to Nick that she is pregnant. According to Beauvoir, the hearts of the western women truly lie on the satisfaction of being recognised as the wife, the mother, and the mistress of this house (542). Thus, this belief encourages Amy to do so in order to earn recognition from the society.

Although Amy’s attempt to rebuild her crumbling marriage and pregnancy seems to conceal the truth, she begins to learn how to be a true wife who does not lose her femininity—by devoting her life to marriage and being pregnant. Regardless of what she has done to Nick, she is willing to settle once again, in a patriarchal society although it is only a façade. Then, there is Nick who swears on his life that he will always obey Amy and protect his child. Nick, who has always wanted to have a baby with Amy from the beginning, truly cherishes a baby, but he cannot stand it if, one day, Amy will ruin his life again. In relation to this matter, Nick is depicted as the hero who will save the innocent child from the bad mother. Therefore, this concludes that Amy, as the femme fatale agrees that marriage can keep her safe and sound, because all she wants is recognition from the people that she is faithful to her marriage and soon to be mother to her child. This approves another patriarchal belief that women are recognised and happy when they are married and soon to be a mother, and less when they are not. She is willing to recreate a new and happy marital life together with her husband, although it means imprisonment to him. Meanwhile, Nick, fitting the role of the hero archetype, swears to protect his child if Amy ever once tries to destroy him again. This proves another belief in patriarchy that men will always be the hero in every story.

The Ideology Constructed in the Portrayal of Femme Fatale

According to various websites –Time Out, The Telegraph UK, and The Guardian— one of the most notable writing styles Gillian Flynn has is that she likes to explore mystery and violence. She has female characters who are violent in each book whose representation always draws attention from her friends and people around her. Regarding how people respond to her style of portraying female characters, it can be inferred that some people expect her female characters to be friendly and less threatening. This perpetuates the idea that women are always expected to be delicate, gentle, and nurturing, traits which faithfully adopt stereotypes and traditional gender roles coined by none but patriarchy.

Apart from the accusations on her way of portraying several female characters who are presumed to be dangerous, many people constantly question her why she would expose so much violence, language profanity, and explicit adult contents in her books. This implies that women are generally taught to be gentle, afraid, and soft-hearted or, in some way, to stay innocent because the ones taught and supposed to be brave are men. Nonetheless, some others regard Flynn’s style of portraying female character as anti-feminist and misogynistic for Amy’s independence and superiority is associated with violence and chaos. For further implication, such representation may trigger the notion that feminism is ruthless and threatening because when women are getting more and more powerful, society suspect that she will commit immoral deeds that could threaten others and disrupt the course of nature.

Conclusion

This study on Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl has confirmed that the character of Amy Dunne represents a femme fatale due to her rejection towards traditional gender roles, ‘Other’, and patriarchy. Nevertheless, instead of promoting feminism, this novel merely further affirms an anti-feminist representation since the image of empowered woman is damaged by the femme fatale’s destroying persona. Additionally, Amy’s feminist spirit is destructed by her determination to destroy and dominate her man. This may lead to a misogynistic assumption that powerful women are dangerous, and thus created hatred towards women. Being anti-feminist, this novel also depicted how a woman with superior power undermines the power of patriarchy in such a way that trigger a man to respond to her negatively.
A feminist reading on this novel also showed how this novel, in fact, firmly holds on patriarchy. First of all, the husband poses to be the great saviour at the end of the day, proving further that today’s convention still adapts to the ancient belief of men being the hero who should bring down the enemy to their knees. As hero, man is assigned to restore patriarchy by punishing the femme fatale. Furthermore, the return of Amy Dunne, the femme fatale to her marriage reaffirms that despite the power and control she has over her husband, she remains devoted to rebuild their marriage. Hence, marriage can be regarded as the only place in which the femme fatale can be tamed. In conclusion, the portrayal of femme fatale in this novel is basically anti-feminist, misogynistic, and patriarchy-centred representations of male anxiety towards the power of women.

Works Cited


