

TRUTH ABOUT LIARS:

A Close Introspection of the Two

Unreliable Narrators in Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn

Naina A. Sabu

MA Student

Pondicherry Central University

Pondicherry, India.

Abstract: The novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn was published in June 2012. It was inspired by the infamous Laci Peterson case where Laci, an eight month pregnant lady was murdered by her own husband Scott Peterson. *Gone Girl* reveals the mysterious affairs behind the missing of Amy Dunne, who is the wife of Nick Dunne. The novel's narration is in such a manner, where both of them turn out to be unreliable narrators. Both these unreliable narrators' narrations put light into the flaws of their partner, to the readers. Objective of the paper is to show how unreliability of the narrators sprouts out from denial of truth, from their respective counterparts. The notion of truth plays an important role throughout the novel and becomes the only factor which manipulates the whole dramatic events followed in the lives of Nick and Amy.

Unreliable narrators are usually first person narrators whose credibility might be seriously questioned within the course of the novel. The technique of narrating a story through unreliable narrators is an age old practice. One can find traces of unreliable narrators in *The Frogs* by Aristophanes or *Miles Gloriosus* by Plautus. In English Literature, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* presents one of the earliest uses of unreliable narrators. In the preface to *Wife of Bath's Tale*, she distorts the stories with inaccurate quotations and the merchant in *The Merchant's Tale* bends his story towards his bias against his wife because he is in the midst of an unhappy marriage. With the rise of gothic and detective fiction in the 18th and 19th century, unreliable narrator became a convenient tool in the hands of the author whose sole intention was to shock the ordinary existence of their readers. Agatha Christie, the Queen of crime fiction employed it in many of her novels. Christie's novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is a fine example for narrative unreliability, where the narrator causes unreliability through omission of facts, than deliberately lying about the events.

The term "unreliable narrator" was coined by Wayne C. Booth in his text *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). In the chapter titled *The Price of Impersonal Narration II: Henry James and the Unreliable Narrator*, Booth points out a narrative trend in the stories of Henry James where he transforms a 'subject' into something different through the development of a "reflector" (Booth 340). According to Booth, Henry James first formulated the original conception of subject and later imported unreliable observers. Then he gradually developed the reflector until the original subject is rivalled or overshadowed. In these tales, the first-person narrator is both "self deceived and deceiving" (Booth 342). Through his thorough analysis of Henry James' stories, Booth draws the conclusion that unreliable narratives tend to replace the general rule which states "No narrator can be expected to do contradictory tasks" (Booth 362).

The novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn was published in June 2012. The novel is slightly inspired by the case of Laci Peterson, where her husband Scott Peterson was convicted for her murder, when she was eight months pregnant. The novel revolves around the disappearance of Amy Elliott Dunne and her husband's involvement in the case. While reading the first half of the novel, the reader will find both Nick and Amy to be innocent characters, who love each other beyond limits. In the second half, the author reveals that both Nick Dunne and Amy Elliott are unreliable narrators. Nick had been cheating his wife with an extramarital affair and Amy had been taking 'revenge' upon her husband by fabricating her own disappearance. The novel is told from alternating subjective opinions and experiences of both Nick and Amy.

William F. Riggan in his study *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator* (1982) classifies unreliable narrators into five different types. 'Picaro' is the first type of unreliable narrator, who exaggerates and explains the event to the readers. Second type is the 'madman', who is the narrator who has minor or major mental illness and hence, their narrative cannot be trusted. Third type is the 'clown', who does not take narration seriously and he/she plays with the reader's expectations literally. The "naïf" is the narrator whose perceptions are immature and hence fails to provide the holistic observations of an event. The final type is the 'liar', a narrator with healthy mental state, who bends, disrupts or replaces truth with brilliantly fabricated lies. Both Nick and Amy belong to the final type of unreliable narrators, the liars. Both Amy and Nick have sound mental cognition. In fact, they are far from an ordinary person with average mental IQ. Both of them are well read individuals with high IQ levels who work as writers for magazines.

The novel simultaneously narrates the same events from two different perspectives superficially. Nick narrates from the present events and then goes into the past. He starts off his narration from July 5, the day on which Amy went missing. Whereas Amy's narration kicks off from the day they first met each other. In the second chapter, Amy explains that they first met at a writers' party set up by her friend Carmen. Her first impression of Nick goes, "It is him (Nick), but I don't know it's him. I know it's a guy who will talk to me, he wears his cockiness like an ironic T-shirt, but it fits him better" (26). By the end of first five chapters, the reader might start noticing conflicting opinions about the same events, situations or ideas from both the narrators. These conflicting ideas about same events eventually create what is widely known as 'Rashomon effect'.

Rashomon effect refers to the phenomenon in which the same events are interpreted in distinctly different ways by different people. The term 'Rashomon effect' is taken from the title of Akira Kurosawa's 1950 movie *Rashomon*. In this film the murder of a Samurai is retold by four different narrators in four different ways. The film adopted its title from a 1922 short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, titled "Rashomon", which explores a conversation about the devastation of Kyoto, under a ruined gate in the rain. The term was first used in the field of humanities by the anthropologist Karl Heider in 1980s during a Pacific Island Discussion which was called the Rashomon Sessions. These sessions were coordinated from 1980 to 1984. The term was later elaborately explained by Robert Anderson in his 2015 research paper, *The Rashomon Effect and Communication*. Anderson explains, "...the Rashomon effect has shown up in many historical intellectual undertakings that deal with contested interpretations of events or with disagreements and evidence for them, or with subjectivity/objectivity, memory, and perception" (Anderson252). He further explains:

The Rashomon effect is not only about differences of perspective. It occurs particularly where such differences arise in combination with the absence of evidence to elevate or disqualify any version of the truth, plus the social pressure for closure on the question. (Anderson 265)

According to Anderson, the first ingredient in creating Rashomon effect is the development of a fact. He opines, it should not be simply a fact, but a "compelling fact" (Anderson 253). When such a compelling fact is created, the author has the attention of both implied and actual reader. When the reader has known the fact, they demand answers to the various questions surrounding that fact, or ultimately they strive for truth. This social pressure for an answer makes the fact "compelling". In the context of *Gone Girl*, this "compelling fact" is the missing case of Amy Dunne. She was a fairly known writer from her *Amazing Amy* series and had many fans that were curious enough to know what happened to her. Within a day of her missing, the police and the media becomes interested in the case, which thickens the impact of the fact.

The author then took the next step, where she carefully placed two unreliable narrators to unwind the story. Both these narrators project different interpretations of the fact. The second ingredient in the mixture to create Rashomon effect is, "these interpretative differences", which "are wrapped in long narratives, each carefully cultivated by the teller give us their version of the truth" (Anderson 253). To understand these differing perceptions, close analyses of both the characters are required.

Looking into the character of Nick Dunne, he was born into a middle class family as one of the twin children. His twin sister is called Go throughout the novel. Towards the end of part I of the novel, Go explains Nick's relation to truth since his childhood:

You've always had trouble with the truth - you always do the little fib if you think it will avoid a real argument. You have always gone the easy way. Tell mom you went to baseball practice when you really quit the team; tell Mom you went to church when you were at a movie. It's some weird compulsion. (283-84)

This "weird compulsion" or forceful deception of truth had always been part of Nick's life. Nick had been into all known types of deception including telling lies, equivocations (making ambiguous statements), concealments, exaggerations and understatements. He cheats on his wife and conceals it from everyone. He lied to the police and media that he never had any serious fights with Amy or kept them as understatements saying that the fights were on stilly stuffs such as to cook lobsters or to clean cat box. When he first met Amy, he exaggerated and presented himself to be a "cool guy". After marriage, this deception started fading and he starts dating a very younger woman named Andie. Amy finds out this relation and begins to take revenge upon Nick by fabricating her missing. Therefore at the end of five years Amy's ultimate conclusion is that Nick has changed.

Amy's character is much more complicated than Nick's character. The readers get to see the real Amy in part two of the novel, entitled *Boy Meets Girl*. She begins telling about her actual self in this part. She explains:

To start: I should never have been born. My mother had five miscarriages and two still births before me...they tried and tried, and finally came me...when I remained alive they named me Amy, because it was a regular girl's name, a popular girl's name...I grew up feeling special and proud. I was the girl who battled oblivion and won...As a child, I got a vibrant pleasure out of this: just me, just me, only me. (310)

Amy grew up in a background where she was assured that she is the best. Amy began writing from a very young age and that is how she later developed the *Amazing Amy* series. *Amazing Amy* was everything that the real Amy failed to be. Amy herself points out:

My parents have always worried that I'd take Amy too personally – they always tell me not to read too much into her. And yet I can't fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book...When I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, Amy recommitted to the game. (47)

Through *Amazing Amy*, Amy Elliott was creating a literary doppelganger to her real self. *Amazing Amy* was the epitome of morality and propriety that the real Amy detested. She used *Amazing Amy* as the mask with which she attained the "Cool Girl" status. She believed that everyone loved the cool girl and she would always be the centre of attention.

Amy went farther than Nick in deception because, Nick never deceived his own self whereas Amy was involved in self-deception. William Von Hippel and Robert Trivers in their paper *The Evolution and Psychology of Self-Deception* (2011) opine, "The classic form of self-deception is convincing oneself that a lie is true. This sort of self-deception can be difficult to verify, as it is difficult to know if the person believes the lie that they are telling others" (Hippel & Trivers 10). Amy does the same as this basic form of deception. She recreated a doppelganger and believed that she herself was the perfect, all praiseworthy *Amazing Amy*.

According to Hippel and Trivers self-deception can also lead into deception of others with the ultimate aim of presenting ourselves as much better than we really are (Hippel & Trivers 4). It is to this deceived self that Nick fell in love. Both of them fell in love with their pretended self and failed to hide their real self after marriage. Amy who grew up believing that she was the most desirable human being in the world could not accept the fact that she was cheated on by her husband. He hurt her ego for which she paid off in the form of framing him for her constructed murder. By the end of five years, Nick also gradually realizes, Amy is not the "cool girl" that he dated before marriage.

The third and final ingredient that Anderson discusses in Rashomon effect is “the absence of evidence to elevate or disqualify any versions of the truth” (Anderson 265). Through a close reading of the novel *Gone Girl*, one can notice that out of two people, we have three different perspectives to the story. One is Nick’s perception of the story, second is the fake diary entry of Amy and finally the real Amy’s perception of the story. These perceptions are different from each other, plausible in its own rights yet confuses the reader as to which is ultimately the truth.

These conflicting perceptions and confusions can be pointed out in various instances. One major conflicting, question raised in such manner was, whether Amy was pregnant while she went missing or not. In her diary entry dated October 21, 2011 Amy notes that she said Nick about getting pregnant:

...now might be the right time. To start a family. Try to get pregnant. I know it’s crazy...I have become the crazy woman who wants to get pregnant because it will save her marriage...he jerks away from me. ‘Now? Now is about the worst time to start a family...(267)

Here she presents Nick as a ruthless man who denies a woman’s right to be a mother. Later in the novel Nick says his perspective to the lawyer in the chapter titled *Eight Days Gone*, “I whispered the words, Let’s do this Amy, let’s have a baby – and she said no...nothing dramatic, no big deal, just not something she was interested in anymore...I begged her, Amy remained unmoved” (409-10). These lines show Nick to be an ordinary man and Amy to be an evil woman. Later it is revealed by Amy that her pregnancy was just another plot created by her to trap Nick. But, there is no evidence to prove any of these arguments to be true.

Anderson concludes his essay by making the statement, “Rashomon effect provides us with an epistemology that we can apply to a special set of situations, that tracks how we come to terms with the complex properties of these situations, and that suggests how we understand them or misunderstand, depending on our insight. From this epistemology we can see precisely how we communicate what we think we know, and what we say, about this set of situations” (Anderson 266). These lines show us how Rashomon effect tends to be a means of communication from the writer to the readers, leaving the readers in an eternal state of confusion without a sense of closure to any of their questions. By the end of the novel *Gone Girl*, many questions lie unanswered. Who is the real reason behind the cracks in relation between Amy and Nick? Is it Nick the cheater or Amy the murderer who has committed serious crimes? By the end of the novel Nick reunites with Amy after realising that they do not have any other evidence to prove either of their accusations to be true. Is this end justified? Is it morally acceptable to have an ending where the murderer Amy is left without any punishments? Finally the Rashomon effect leaves the readers into accepting the fact that the author is the magician and he has the right whether to choose truth or to leave the truth undisturbed to complete the aesthetic effect in fiction. As Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* comments:

Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anderson, Robert. "The Rashomon Effect and Communication." *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 2nd ed., vol. 41, Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation, 2011, pp. 249–270.
- [2] Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed., The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- [3] Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. *Coming to Terms: the Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press, 2006.
- [4] Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012.
- [5] Von Hippel, William, and Robert Trivers. "The Evolution and Psychology of Self-Deception." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 34, 2011, pp. 1–56., doi:10.1017/S0140525X10001354.
- [6] Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. Dramatists Play Service, 1975.