

The Portrayal of Relationship Gaslighting in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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Abstract

Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation that involves a person or group making someone question his/her sanity, perception of reality, memories, or relationships with others. This paper explores how gaslighting can reveal the realities of emotional abuse in fiction, using it as a strategy to undermine the victim's self-esteem by convincing them that they are insane, making them constantly second-guess their own reality, lying to escape 'reality twists', directing emotions, and deceit. It can be particularly problematic when gaslighters are people with whom we have close relationships, such as parents and spouses, who are supposed to be our confidants and would never hurt us. *Gone Girl* (2012) by the American novelist Gillian Flynn investigates how parents can emotionally manipulate and wield influence over their children through gaslighting, and how those very children, in turn, experience gaslighting over their spouses or even themselves (self-gaslighting) by agreeing to the terms of their gaslighters or rationalizing their conduct. Amy, a gaslightee in the novel or movie, was forced on by her parents, dubbed "the tiger gaslighters," and by her spouse, Nick, termed "the Casanova gaslighter," who is forced on by Amy herself in mutual gaslighting. The concepts of the hidden antagonist, 'Gaslight Culture' and discursive gaslighting are also tackled. Amy's parents, her husband, Amy herself, and the media—all engage in gaslighting. The paper is based on Robin Stern's (2007) definition of gaslighting and its effects in her book *The Gaslight Effect*.

Keywords: *emotional abuse, gaslighting, Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl, hidden antagonist, misdirection, Robin Stern, tiger parent*

1. Introduction:

The intention to provoke the black, the anger sparked by a smile, the frustration a wife might feel when her husband accuses her of not being supportive enough, or the shock caused by a deflection are not examples of emotional gaslighting or symptoms a gaslightee might experience. Gaslighting is rather the gaslighter's continued control over another person, causing him/her to doubt their own reality and feel as if he/she is shrinking. It is the emotional burden of having to defend and justify the conduct of others. It is the impulse to put aside one's worries in order to accept and agree to the terms set publicly by those nearby and close to them.

Although the term 'gaslighting' is recent and trendy, it is a long-used practice, particularly in romantic relationships. It originated from the 1938 play *Gas Light*, which was adapted into a 1944 movie, in which a manipulative husband deceives his wife to make her think she is losing her mind and doubt her perception and stability in order to seize her riches.

1.1. Robin Stern's Technique of the Gaslight 'Tango' Dynamic and its Effect

In her 2007 book, *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulation Others Use to Control Your Life*, Dr Robin Stern explains how to choose which relationships are worth saving and which you should end. She identifies how to gasproof your life in order to protect yourself from gaslighting relationships.

If you're caught in a gaslighting relationship, you may not be able to change the gaslighter's behaviour, but you can certainly change your own. Again, it's not easy, but it is simple: *You can end the gaslighting as soon as you stop trying to win the argument or convince your gaslighter to be reasonable. Instead, you can simply opt out* (Stern 34).

Gaslighting is a mind-control technique, in which the gaslighter/abuser attempts to undermine the victims' self-esteem by convincing them that they are delusional or insane and by questioning their reality, perceptions, memories, or relationships with others, including marital and family relationships, work relationships, and any other social or political interactions. A gaslighter can be your spouse, parent, coworker, friend, or anybody you may encounter.

According to Stern, the three stages of the gaslight effect—disbelief, defense, and depression—can be used to understand the types of gaslighters, including the glamour gaslighter, the good-guy gaslighter, and the intimidator (10-13; 15–24). When gaslighter and gaslightee continue to dance together in a tango, the gaslighting effect occurs:

The Gaslight Effect results from a relationship between two people: a gaslighter, who needs to be right in order to preserve his own sense of self and his sense of having power in the world; and a gaslightee, who allows the gaslighter to define her sense of reality because she idealizes him and seeks his approval (Stern 3).

The ‘gaslighting tango’, as defined by Stern, is a dynamic that most frequently manifests itself in romantic relationships by moving through the three stages. She illustrates the source of the gaslight effect as follows:

[T]he Gaslight Effect is truly soul-destroying. Perhaps the worst moment is when you realize how far you’ve gotten from what you used to consider your best self—your true self. You’ve lost your self-confidence, your self-esteem, your perspective, your courage. Worst of all, you’ve lost your joy. All that matters to you is getting your gaslighter to approve of you. And by Stage 3, you’re beginning to understand that you never will. (Stern 14)

The strong gaslighter knows how to communicate with consistency and requires the gaslightee’s agreement that he is correct, but the latter is prone to feeling an increased ‘shakiness of self’ and ‘second-guessing’ his own reality. Stern contends that gaslighting is “insidious” or a harmful behaviour that exploits “our worst fears, our most anxious thoughts, our deepest wishes to be understood, appreciated, and loved.” It might be challenging to believe someone “we trust, respect, or love,” especially when “speak[ing] with great certainty.” Idealizing the gaslighter, such as a loved one or a wonderful parent, can further complicate our perception of reality. For further gaslighting, the “gaslighter needs to be right, we need to win his approval” (Stern 4-5).

Stern recommends a number of red flags and warning signs that indicate the gaslightee may be subjected to certain types of abuse. These may include frequently second-guessing oneself; difficulty making simple decisions; lying to escape ‘reality twists’; feeling confused, depressed, and unsure about one’s thoughts or beliefs; constantly apologizing and making excuses for the gaslighter’s behaviour; thinking twice before bringing up certain seemingly innocent topics of conversation; Soul Hurts; and so forth. According to Stern, not all of these symptoms should exist in the gaslightee, but two or three are enough "to be in a gaslighting relationship" (Stern 5-6). The following section will explore how Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* incorporates gaslighting relationships and its red signs, such as second-guessing, lying, directing emotions, and deceit.

1.2. Gaslighting and a *Gone Girl*:

Gillian Flynn is an American author and screenwriter best known for her psychological thrillers and mystery novels, such as *Sharp Objects* (2006), *Dark*

Places (2009), and *Gone Girl* (2012). Born in 1971, Flynn, a daughter of two professors, was a shy girl, who pursued literature reading and watching horror films for solace as her father did. After graduating from Kansas and Northwestern Universities with degrees in English and journalism, Flynn worked as a feature writer, entertainment journalist and TV critic, in addition to writing novels in her spare time.

Gillian Flynn's best-selling novel, *Gone Girl* (2012), explores the impact of violence, abuse, secrets, and falsehoods on individuals and relationships. The novel sold over two million copies and was translated into 40 languages before being adapted in 2014 into “an absorbing, ingenious thriller” (Rothman). *Gone Girl* is criticized for its unfavourable portrayal of women in contemporary fiction. Flynn appreciated David Fincher's involvement as the film's director, emphasizing that he was “a great director who really liked the book and didn't want to turn it into something other than what it already was,” and he reaffirmed the book's originality and reassured Flynn “even when she second-guessed herself” (Butler). Gaslighting, a tactic used in the film and the book, involves second-guessing, out of insecurity, uncertainty, anxiety, or questioning one's decision-making. Amy, a gaslightee in *Gone Girl*, was forced on by her parents, her tiger gaslighters, and by her spouse, Nick, the Casanova gaslighter, who is forced on by Amy herself. Amy's parents, her husband, Amy herself, and the media—all engage in gaslighting, highlighting the power of storytelling and the impact of emotional abuse on relationships.

2. The Tiger Parent Gaslighting

Gaslighting involves trying to conform to others' expectations. It can disclose the truths of emotional abuse and cause stress for children who are victims of parental gaslighting. Although it is often used negatively to exert influence over another person, it is not always intrinsically wicked; it does not always involve malicious intent. Parents who gaslight their children use a range of manipulation techniques in an attempt to modify their worldview, believing they are doing the right thing (LaVine). *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), a book by the American author Amy Chua, popularized the concept of “tiger mother” and its association with a woman who outlines her “work hard, play never” philosophy of raising her children to be musical prodigies. The term “tiger parent” has evolved to refer to an overwhelming and domineering parent whose children are only permitted to participate in activities pinpointed by that parent.

In *Gone Girl*, the parents' good intentions for Amy Elliott may have made it difficult to spot the gaslighting, as she is the sole daughter of a psychologist couple. She trusts their judgment more than her own and feels her father is more intelligent and knowledgeable than she is. The children's book series that they have produced

about her fictional storybook counterpart, Amazing Amy, serves as evidence of their success but significantly harms her self-esteem later. Nick Dunne explains to the cops why his wife Amy is considered “the alpha girl in everyone's life” (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 24). Due to her parents' pressures and her lack of freedom to be her own self, she gradually imposes gaslighting on her spouse and even on herself. Amy grows into a smart lady with profound ambitions, she experiences psychological and physical effects of gaslighting along with feelings of self-doubt. Her parents successfully and unwittingly raised her to be a narcissist and psychopath. Rosamund Pike plays her role well; she is, fortunately, an only child.

3. Mutual Gaslighting:

3.1. The Casanova Husband Gaslighter

Parent gaslighting may be replicated in future relationships in the form of controlling and meddling with emotions. Lies, deceit, and manipulation abound throughout Amy and Nick's toxic union in *Gone Girl*. Their abusive marriage and unhappiness may continue as they enjoy their roles as abusers and victims of each other. Gillian Flynn, the author of the book, acknowledges in *The Guardian* that this can lead to feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, “what's scary is that psychological mind-place: not the serial killer roaming around outside, but that sense of not quite being comfortable in your own skin—of being in your own home but not being quite safe, and not being entirely able to figure out why you feel that way” (Burkeman 3). The manipulator’s power dynamic when dancing the gaslight tango, as Stern theorizes, makes the victim terrified of changing up the relationship or stepping out of the gaslighting dynamic because of the threat of losing that relationship (DiGiulio).

Gaslighting strategies, such as trivializing, forgetting, or denial, which entail making the victim's needs or feelings appear minor and claiming to have forgotten or denied something, are listed by the National Domestic Violence Hotline (www.thehotline.org). Amy falls victim to Nick’s unintentional gaslighting tactics by not listening to her because of lack of time, or by showing astonishment that she is overreacting to a situation. Her falsely constructed, hastily written diary reveals that she feels unsafe around Nick after he has started ‘using’ her only for sex and attacked her sanity when she expresses her desire to have a child; he rejects her, giving her the impression that she is unfit to be a mother. “The ugly truth,” Amy declares, is that “he did shove me once, and he didn’t want a baby, and he did have money problems. But me being afraid of him? Have to admit, it *pains* me to admit, but that’s my dramatic streak” (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 365).

A prominent theme in Flynn’s novel and film *Gone Girl* “is the profound impossibility of ever knowing someone else's mind, even in the supposedly intimate

context of a marriage” (Burkeman 2). Nick secretly despises his wife and imagines that he kills her as he is the main suspect in her disappearance investigation and because of losing his job in the journal, so does Amy. Amy is gaslit by him expressing her feelings as follows:

[Nick] promised to take care of me, and yet I feel afraid. I feel like something is going wrong, very wrong, and that it will get even worse. I don't feel like Nick's wife. I don't feel like a person at all: I am something to be loaded and unloaded, like a sofa or a cuckoo clock. I am something to be tossed into a junkyard, thrown into the river, if necessary. I don't feel real anymore. I feel like I could disappear (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 103).

In the “Boy Meets Girl” section of the novel, Amy falsifies her departure to charge her gaslighter Nick for her murder as retaliation for his year-long cheating with one of his students, Andie, a 23-year-old mistress. She plans to commit suicide in the Mississippi and have her body washed up as evidence to secure his death penalty. Amy meticulously plots her disappearance, filling her personal diary with false events. She describes how she first adopted a "Cool Girl" persona to gain Nick's affection, destabilizing herself by dedicating her life to his pleasure, behaving normally around him, looking after his parents, and even lending him a loan to open a pub. However, when Amy (or the Actual Amy persona) starts to challenge his infidelity, Nick, as a gaslighter, rejects her and even gets irritated, claiming she is overly dramatic and more sensitive. She concludes her diary entries with the words "this man might kill me," admitting that he progressively "killed [her] soul, which should be a crime" (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 233) which calls for retribution and punishment. In their five-year anniversary, Nick receives a call telling him that his cat has escaped, or his wife is “gone” (28). He muses:

Amy was blooming large in my mind. She was gone, and yet she was more present than anyone else. I'd fallen in love with Amy because I was the ultimate Nick with her. Loving her made me superhuman, it made me feel alive. [...] Amy made me believe I was exceptional, that I was up to her level of play. That was both our making and undoing. Because I couldn't handle the demands of greatness. [...] I turned her into the brittle, prickly thing she became. I had pretended to be one kind of man and revealed myself to be quite another (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 214).

Being away, Amy thinks that “everyone loves the Dead Girl” and she is, nevertheless, more present than before. Flynn attempts to unravel the secrets and lies that comprise a gaslighting marriage relationship in the second part of the book. In a "gaslight tango", Nick tries to finish a treasure hunt Amy has left for him in honour of their fifth anniversary. Amy puts a sign as evidence (a trail of clues) at each

location of the treasure hunt; its final stop is the woodshed itself. Manipulating the contents of the woodshed, Amy fills it with expensive credit card purchases ranging from fancy golf equipment to violent, misogynistic pornography, all with the intention of incriminating and pointing out Nick as her murderer.

Nick's sister asks: "what do you call it, not scavenger hunt-" "Treasure hunt," he says, "My wife loved games, mostly mind games, but also actual games of amusement, and for our anniversary she always set up an elaborate treasure hunt, with each clue leading to the hiding place of the next clue until I reached the end, and my present. It was what her dad always did for her mom on their anniversary, and don't think I don't see the gender roles here, that I don't get the hint. But I did not grow up in Amy's household, I grew up in mine, and the last present I remember my dad giving my mom was an iron, set on the kitchen counter, no wrapping paper." (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 22)

As a result, the woodshed houses all of Nick's and Amy's simmering contempt of each other, symbolizing the 'house' they built for their worst ideas, darkest dreams, and sharpest misgivings about each other. Although the woodshed can be described as a safe haven or a place where Nick used to meet his mistress Andie without being noticed, it comes to represent the lies, secrets, half-truths, and deception that both Amy and Nick keep from each other, destabilizing their marriage to the point of hatred and uttering lunacy in an abusive relationship. Although Nick solves more of his wife's labyrinth, the rhyming treasure hunt clues, he seems unconcerned about her safety, increasing the police's skepticism of his guilt.

Furthermore, the violent nature of Punch and Judy dolls symbolizes the idea of manipulation and gaslighting. According to *The Guardian's* article "Punch and Judy: A history of violence," 10 August 2012, the Punch and Judy puppet show has come to symbolize many different things over the years, including the British culture, the decline of traditional values, and the struggle between good and evil. This puppet show features the comical and violent adventures of Punch and his wife, Judy. Although the show has been changed and adapted to various cultures, the core traditional story remains the same.

The significance of Punch and Judy puppets is highlighted when Nick and Go open Amy's gift, traditionally called the 'wood' anniversary, and find a pair of antique wooden puppets. The Judy puppet is missing its handle and bears a baby puppet connected to her belly on a string. It was supposed that Amy would eventually get pregnant. So, Go recognizes the significance of the violent puppet show that often narrates the story of Punch killing Judy and their baby. She believes that Amy may have left the gift to show Nick that he is nothing but a puppet on a string, with Amy orchestrating events and manipulating everything from behind the scenes. The police detectives note that the handle missing could have been used as

a murder weapon, and they find trace amounts of Amy's blood on it. As a result, Nick is arrested.

3.2. The Wife Gaslighter: Actual Amy

In her book *The Gaslighting Effect*, Robin Stern focuses on male gaslighters and female gaslightees in romantic pairings. She states that in the *Gas Light* play or movie (1944), only women were victims of relationship gaslighting. Paula's spouse

is trying to drive her insane in order to take over her inheritance. He continually tells her she is ill and fragile, rearranges household items and then accuses her of doing so, and most deviously of all, manipulates the gas so that she sees the lights dim for no apparent reason. ... Confused and scared, she begins to act hysterical, actually becoming the fragile, disoriented person that he keeps telling her she is. In a vicious downward spiral, the more she doubts herself, the more confused and hysterical she becomes. She is desperate for her husband to approve of her and to tell her he loves her, but he keeps refusing to do so, insisting that she is insane. Her return to sanity and self-assertion comes only when a police inspector reassures her that he, too, sees the dimming of the light. (Stern 7-8)

While both men and women can be gaslighters, the most common pairing is a male gaslighter and a female gaslightee, which aligns with the classic image of man as 'dominant' and woman as 'submissive.' However, there are numerous men and women who have been gaslighted, for gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse regardless of who is involved as Stern puts it, "Gaslighters and gaslightees can be of either gender, and gaslighting can happen in any type of relationship." (Stern 7, 3). Therefore, women can be gaslighters as well.

In his article, in *The Guardian*, "Gillian Flynn on her bestseller *Gone Girl* and accusations of misogyny", Oliver Burkeman questions Flynn's objection to the Feminist portrayal of women as innately good and nurturing in literature. Flynn portrays women as villains or bad characters. Hence, she is accused of misogyny. "In literature, they can be dismissably bad – trappy, vampy, bitchy types – but there's still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish" (Burkeman 2). In *Gone Girl*, Amy, who is gaslit by her parents and husband, transforms herself into a gaslighter, becoming hysterical and psychotic, delighting in making people suffer for minor offenses against her.

Murphy (2018) views Flynn's female characters as facing "internal and external pressures," leading to "self-harming and self-defeating behaviours," notwithstanding their brilliance and self-scrutiny (qtd in Philips 155). *Gone Girl*, Amy created multiple voices or various Amys for herself, revealing her involvement in the process of gaslighting as a gaslightee and then as a gaslighter herself. These

personas are Amazing Amy, Diary Amy, and Actual Amy. As a very 'insidious' manipulator, she struggles to live with her imaginary namesake or satisfy her parents' expectations with the Amazing Amy "a character who will not allow for any flaws or failure" (Philips 155). She admits, "Until Nick, I'd never really felt like a person, because I was always a product. Amazing Amy has to be brilliant, creative, kind, thoughtful, witty, and happy. ... [But] they never taught me how to be happy," and if she gets happier that is due to "pretending to be someone else" (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 218).

Serving as a tool to record events and details, a personal diary is used in *Gone Girl* as a discursive gaslighting that aims to create a perfect persona, showcasing Amy as an "amazing" and "cool girl" and building the ideal victim character for the police and news media. The Diary Amy is "a piece of fiction" (216), and a discursive second persona that Amy constructs to shield herself from gaslighting and to control others' perceptions of her. In the form of a seven-year false diary, *Gone Girl* structurally establishes itself as a kind of gaslight tango dance between Amy and Nick who try to control narrator shifts, two first-person narratives through opposing points of view. Cooperating with the investigators, including lead detectives Rhonda Boney and Jim Gilpin, Nick answers their questions and lies to them about Amy's odd disappearance. From her journal entries, Nick recounts what transpired over the story of their marriage and short-lived relationship.

Amy then takes up the narration, detailing their meeting, romance, and marrying, promising not to be a traditional nagging wife, or treating him like a "dancing monkey." In the voice of Diary Amy, she says, "Nick and I, we sometimes laugh, laugh out loud, at the horrible things women make their husbands do to prove their love, the pointless tasks, the myriad sacrifices, the endless small surrenders. We call these men the *dancing monkeys*" (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 57). Amy has constructed an entire persona for herself, succumbing to all of Nick's desires. After discovering Nick's infidelity, Amy makes him pay for the ways in which he changed her reality. She manipulates him by fabricating her own disappearance, leaving behind an apparent killing scene using a fake crime, in the hopes that Nick will be convicted of murder. Amy uses gaslighting to alter Nick's perspective of reality, memories, and beliefs.

Flynn's usage of dual narrators, Nick and then Amy, comes to symbolize the human urgent yearning to expose their complete selves, as well as their sense of manipulation. In addition, Actual Amy is another persona portrayed as the gaslighter and the cunning 'mistress of manipulation' who murders, steals, and blackmails people to return home again and keep up the appearance of a successful marriage. In fact, Actual Amy's self is a distorted and parodic depiction of the ideal modern young lady who is revealed undermining the original account of the events (Philips 155).

As Flynn excels in her masterpiece, time jumps, diary entries, and dense plotting, she effectively presents a dual-natured gaslighter, who readers are unaware of from the beginning and whose feelings range from empathy to hate, showcasing the spectrum of emotions to a character that can be an antagonist (Morganti).

3.3. The Drive of a Hidden Antagonist

Being a ‘mystery’, *Gone Girl* explores the idea that marriage and victimization are related and connected. To focus on psychological manipulation and challenge the partner's interpretation of events, a concealed adversary is deftly used. “No one can predict the film’s ending, highlighting the success of misdirection, a great antagonist, and most importantly, the story at hand. It’s a constant mystery of wondering what’ll happen next” (Morganti). So, the necessity of misdirection and the unpredictable nature of events are then brought to light in the novel. Misdirection leads the readers or audience of a film down one path only to find out that it is the complete opposite. For effective results, a clever misdirect must accompany a strong hidden antagonist. A gaslighter aims to control another person by presenting their own thoughts and feelings as facts. The victim may feel perplexed, guilty, or responsible for the abuser’s behavior.

In the context of mutual gaslighting, “Actual Amy” is a hidden antagonist and this time a gaslighter, Nick a gaslightee. Go described Amy's relationship with her brother Nick as getting "a bead on her, like who she really is." “*You just seem kind of not yourself with her.*” “*The important thing is she makes you really happy*” (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 24). The story portrays Nick's “shortcomings, failures, and neglect,” making it difficult to predict Amy's true nature. Instead of portraying “an innocent, loving husband,” it suggests Nick as the No. 1 suspect in Amy's disappearance (Morganti).

While watching news coverage of her disappearance, Amy takes pleasure in the media's accusation of Nick and adoration for his beautiful and devoted wife. Her father Elliott pleads for her return on TV, “Our daughter, Amy, is a sweetheart of a girl, full of life... and she is smart and beautiful and kind. She really is Amazing Amy. And we want her back” (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 65). The other implied interpretation is that Amy is asked to return as an Amazing Amy who does no wrong. By accident, Amy sees Andie giving a press conference, revealing her affair with Nick.

Confronting gaslighting abuse personally and directly is not always good. Nick chooses to take a break to evaluate the situation. Actually, staying calm can help a gaslightee focus on reality and lessen the impact of a distorted account of events on their self-confidence. Being suspected of killing Amy, he looks for additional information about his wife’s strategy. In accordance with the psychoanalytical

principle of restricting the gaslightee's knowledge, Nick also tries to figure out how she pretends to be 'Not Amazing Amy', but 'Avenging Amy' (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 267). Seeking to uncover the truth, Nick investigates Amy's past tracing her wrongdoings. Hilary Handy, charged with stalking Amy in high school, claims that Amy planned the incident after she flirted with a boy Amy liked. Tommy O'Hara, accused of raping Amy, says Amy visited his flat, wrapped shackles, requested rough sex, and eventually reported the alleged rape-related evidence to the police.

Fear for his own life grips Nick; he consents to being interviewed at a bar by a pretty female reporter. Playing the role of the discursive gaslighter, he takes advantage of the chance to tell his wife what she wants to hear since he knows she is listening. Through his deceptive speech or discursive gaslighting, Nick seizes control of the book's narrative, forcing Amy to acknowledge that he is aware of her whereabouts and actions.

Take control of the story, Nick. For both the capital-P public and the capital-C wife, Right now, I thought, I am a man who loves his wife and will find her. I am a man who loves his wife, and I am the good guy. I am the one to root for. I am a man who isn't perfect, but my wife is, and I will be very, very obedient from now on. ...

'My wife, she just happens to be the coolest girl I've ever met. How many guys can say that? I married the coolest girl I ever met.' (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 291)

Nick confesses to having wed the 'coolest' person he had ever met while secretly longing for her murder: "Come home so I can kill you" (291), he thinks. The contradiction between Nick's words and thoughts highlights the fact that Amy's hatred turns into a need, which Nick satisfies, believing that he cares about her. Amy is fascinated and enchanted by her discursive gaslighter's heartfelt answers and remarks, but she is not sure what she should do. Now Amy is again the gaslightee, who begins to second-guess herself out of insecurity, uncertainty, anxiety, or lack of self-confidence. She is now uncertain whether has made a good choice or not, and unsure if she should continue to implement her previous plan.

Nick's reputation improves and grinningly gives another television interview with Sharon Schieber, a famous talk show in which he admits to betraying his wife and pleads for her forgiveness and a safe return. Amy agrees to Nick's terms as long as he learns the lesson and realizes how much she means to him. She is also moved by Nick's presentation of himself throughout the interview as a repented sinner. As a result, she stage-manages a new plan, in which she is victimized, in order to hide her earlier scheme, restore their bond, and rekindle their relationship.

Self-gaslighting occurs when the victim swallows his/her emotions in a twisting path and agrees to or rationalizes the conduct of the opposing party in power. Victims may defend their abusers' behaviour, which undermines their self-confidence and elevates their sense of fear and hopelessness. Back at home, at their McMansion, Amy, covered in blood, and self-mutilation, tells Nick that she was raped by her kidnapper Desi Collings, a wealthy ex-boyfriend, who was obsessed with her and anticipating her return. She stabs him to death in an apparent act of self-defense alleging he is responsible for her disappearance as her captor and rapist (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 388). In fact, in their passionate encounter, she consents to Desi having violent sex with her as evidence of his rape. Yet, she twists reality in order to hide her earlier manipulation and justifies why she slit Desi's throat. Amy ultimately begs Nick to recognize her "brilliant" abilities. Nick, however, is skeptical of Amy's lies. Flynn admires Agatha Christie as her favorite author of mystery fiction, sprinkling literary and film allusions all through the book, with a central story device featuring a woman who fabricates a rape accusation.

Although Nick no longer needs to live under the same roof with Amy, he faces the threat of bad consequences if he leaves her. Under her influence and control, he realizes that without her, he has no idea who he is (the gaslightee). "The question was frighteningly soulful and literal: Who would I be without Amy to react to?" wonders Nick (384). As events go on, he unexpectedly finds himself turning to Amy for help when his father dies. He realizes he is sliding into Amy's trap and becomes frantic to break himself out. Amy erases her worries, while Nick swallows his feelings, keeping silent on violence, dismissing it as fair. Amy thinks, "Nick and I fit together ... my thorns fit perfectly into [his wounds]," and Nick thinks, "All this time I'd thought we were strangers, and it turned out we knew each other intuitively, in our bones, in our blood" (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 342; 373). Nick admits that Amy is his "forever antagonist," yet he accepts his gaslight requirements and begins writing his own biography:

"Yes, I am finally a match for Amy. The other morning I woke up next to her, and I studied the back of her skull. I tried to read her thoughts. For once I didn't feel like I was staring into the sun. I'm rising to my wife's level of madness. Because I can feel her changing me again: I was a callow boy, and then a man, good and bad. Now at last I'm the hero. I am the one to root for in the never-ending war story of our marriage. It's a story I can live with. Hell, at this point, I can't imagine my story without Amy. She is my forever antagonist. We are one long frightening climax" (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 401).

Amy then realizes she needs to take another "precaution" to maintain control over Nick. She makes futile attempts to open his laptop and read his work. Amy is delighted to have the opportunity to narrate her own story the ways she desires to,

hence she secures a book deal for her. Before leaving, Nick presents his complete biography book to Amy, who gives him a positive pregnancy test using his sperm sample stored in a fertility clinic after unsuccessful attempts to conceive. Nick, driven by the grief of losing his father and desperate to be a good father, finally confesses that he is *outplayed*; he says, “We had spent years battling for control of our marriage, of our love story, our life story. I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed. I created a manuscript, and she created a life” (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 399). Nick accepts that he and Amy are perfect for each other, and without his “forever antagonist,” he would not be the guy he is. He admits, “Amy was exactly right. So maybe there was no good end for me” (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 385).

Lauren Duca, an Entertainment Reporter in *The Huffington Post*, asks Dr. Puri, a psychiatrist and writer at the faculty of the UCLA, Department of Psychiatry: “How about Nick? What could explain him being so detached that he is willing to stay with Amy despite her monstrous behavior?” Dr. Puri answers by pointing out that desensitization might happen due to two possible reasons:

It's sort of the creeping boundaries or the boiling frog analogy. If you drop a frog in boiling water, he'll jump right out. If you drop a frog in cold water and turn up the heat, he'll slowly boil to death, because he just doesn't realize enough to sense the big jump. [...] That's one possible explanation: that [Nick] has become desensitized to a lot of [Amy's] behavior that way. The other thing is the nature of the way people repeat patterns in their lives. They often try to reset or correct a bad experience, but often they just keep on repeating it. So, if he is drawn to her, many times people are drawn to things that repeat from similar drama earlier in their life and they're trying to, unconsciously, have a corrective emotional experience where things go better this time (Duca).

Although Nick is at first accused of killing his wife, it is later revealed that Amy is no longer the innocent victim that seems to be. As the narrative progresses, we realize that she escaped and became a killer herself, the Actual Amy. However, Nick and Amy eventually realize they have little choice but to resume their marriage and preserve their long-maintained appearance. Both of them start to be codependent on each other as they become unable to split up.

4. The Gaslight Culture and Media Power

Robin Stern sees that the issue lies in what she calls “Gaslight Culture” or the constant pressure from experts, politicians, and media to “believe something that is obviously not true. Advertising insists that no man can love a woman who doesn’t have a perfect size 2 body and a beautifully made-up face” (27). While school officials emphasize the importance of learning and grades for college admission, politicians often change their stance without acknowledging the differences between the new and old party lines. Stern contends,

In that sense, I believe, we are living in a Gaslight Culture. Rather than being encouraged to discover or create our own reality, we are bombarded with a million different powerful demands to ignore our own responses and accept as our own whatever need or view is currently being marketed (Stern 27).

In a ‘Gaslight Culture,’ people are ‘bombarded’ with intense demands to accept the current marketed needs or views. George Orwell’s novel *1984* depicts the government's use of institutional gaslighting to control citizens through its slogan, "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength." This form of propaganda persuades followers to believe in the organization's mission and advertising, with an ulterior motive to comply with its goals. Hence, the Gaslight Culture is prevalent in everyday life (LaVine).

Increased media pressures can lead to the fallibility of falling victim to popular gaslighting practices, as seen in the book or the film *Gone Girl*. Rothman writes in *The New Yorker* that the "cultural uncertainty principle" applies, as both versions “occupy the same brain-space, obscuring one another.” The emotional power dynamic is a growing concern for Flynn and in the media through which we become more aware of the “hidden domestic abuse”, economic gender injustices, and the hidden nature of marriages.

At the same time, our concepts of masculinity and femininity—and of personhood, success, and freedom—have grown less compatible with the compromises of coupled life. The men’s and women’s magazines for which Nick and Amy worked tell us that our ideal selves are urban, maximally attractive, and maximally single, with absolute career freedom, no children, and plenty of time for the gym. To be in a couple, in short, is to be in a power relationship. And in power relationships, there are always winners and losers (Rothman).

Facebook, online dating services, and phoney social networking accounts enable us to transform ourselves into our desired selves. Nick criticizes humanity's "play-acting" and the Internet-ridden society, which led him to abandon magazine writing. The police and the media in *Gone Girl* believe that Nick is guilty, and Nick begins to doubt his own innocence and reality as Morganti puts it, “With his wife's disappearance having become the focus of an intense media circus, Nick sees the spotlight turned on him when it's suspected that he may not be innocent.” Being in front of a camera makes it difficult for any person to behave and talk “naturally” due to the media’s familiarity with the situation. As a media gaslightee, Nick describes the TV *Showtime* and his feelings of worry, confusion, hoarseness, and dysphonia as follows:

We'd all seen these news conferences before—when other women went missing. We were being forced to perform the scene that TV viewers expected: the worried but hopeful family. Caffeine-dazed eyes and ragdoll arms... When I saw the broadcast later, I didn't recognize my voice. I barely recognized my face. The booze floating, sludgelike, just beneath the surface of my skin made me look like a fleshy wastrel, just sensuous enough to be disreputable. I had worried about my voice wavering. So I overcorrected and the words came out clipped, like I was reading a stock report. 'We just want Amy to get home safe...' Utterly, unconvincing, disconnected. I might as well have been reading numbers at random. (Flynn, *Gone Girl*, 65)

Flynn claims that because of his tendency to overcorrect his words, "when in reality, in that intense situation, you'd almost have to be a sociopath in order to give the media the playacting they want" (qtd in Burkeman 3). It is critical to acknowledge the impact media representation has on our perceptions of gender roles and power dynamics. Filmmakers claim gaslighting is intended for humor to entertain audiences, not to tackle healthy relationships psychology (Barry). However, *Gone Girl* is "a thriller but with some dark humor—deep and dark" (Butler). It is a deeply contented and gendered fantasy story that explores the idea of victimhood.

Media portrayals of Amy as a victim and Nick as a villain reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and perpetuate the notion that women use emotional manipulation to control men. Comparing Flynn's *Gone Girl* whether on the page or on the screen to David Fincher's 1999 adaptation *Fight Club*, Joshua Rothman admits that *Gone Girl* is essentially a 'farce' that speaks to the "creepy, confused, and troubling part of us" and is a 'fantasy' that occurs "in a dream world, not reality" (Rothman). Actually, "[t]here is no real crime or horror in the Dunne household. Amy and Nick hurt one another, but in unexceptional ways," Rothman contends. It is the cultivation of a high level of suspicion surrounding those minor "crimes" that finally leads to serious ones. Dark fantasies stem from narcissism, where suffering from a manipulative madwoman or abduction into a Gothic lair can be both special and heroic. The novel explores genuine sympathy and solidarity with victims amidst the politicized, media-enabled "cult of victimhood." It reveals "the irrational side of our fear of coupledness," since "the tabloid media" often portrays the beautiful couple's house as a macabre murder scene that is filled with cruelty, adultery, and evil (Rothman).

One of the best examples of relationship gaslighting is *Gone Girl*. In *The Washington Post*, Alyssa Rosenberg declared that she was at first "unconvinced by the book" because of Amy's depiction as "a woman stunted by her parents' use of her life as material for a popular book series, and Nick as a man terrified of turning into his hateful father." However, she became fascinated with the novel and the film

partly because “Amy Elliot Dunne is the only fictional character [she] can think of who might be accurately described as simultaneously misogynist and misandrist. In fact, [Amy] hates pretty much everyone else on the planet, except, briefly, her husband Nick” (Rosenberg).

5. Conclusion

Gaslighting involves trying to conform to others' expectations. It can disclose the truths of emotional abuse imposed on the victims, or gaslightees, such as children or spouses. Amy's parents forced her to live up to the role of Amazing Amy, a storybook character, lacking the freedom to be herself. Her husband's ambivalence, self-righteousness, and manipulation annihilate Amy Dunne, the main gaslightee in the story, turning her into a gaslighter and a monster. With hostile gaslighting techniques, she seeks to control his actions and thoughts. The story highlights the theme of mutual relationship gaslighting in the case of Amy and Nick, who are influenced by gaslight celebrity culture and Nick's status as the prime suspect after her disappearance. Their abusive marriage and unhappiness may continue as they enjoy their roles as abusers and victims of each other. Flynn's portrayal of gender roles and power dynamics reinforces negative stereotypes and perpetuates the myth that women are cunning and unreliable.

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