"THE MORE YOU DENY ME, THE STRONGER I GET": EXPLORING FEMALE RAGE IN THE BABADOOK, GONE GIRL, AND THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

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ABSTRACT

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This project explores the recent influx of angry, violent, and unlikable female characters in literature and film. Within the last several years, the bubbly and positive postfeminist protagonist is being replaced by women who are enraged with their status as wives and mothers. My project includes a close textual analysis of three recent texts: Jennifer Kent's 2014 horror film *The Babadook,* Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl,* and Paula Hawkins' 2015 novel *The Girl on the Train.* Using Sianne Ngai's theory on negative affects, I argue that the female characters in these texts are engaging in a form of political resistance by refusing to contain their darker feelings. Whereas earlier depictions of female rage generally conclude with either the woman's emotions being controlled, with her facing some form of punishment, or with her death I examine how this new wave of female characters subvert expectations by refusing to allow their negative feelings to be translated back into patriarchal norms. In the following chapters I analyze how the female protagonists in *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* disrupt the postfeminist notion that feminism is no longer needed by ending without a clean, tidy wrap-up. Instead, the negative feelings expressed by these women are not tamed and are always threatening to re-emerge. Therefore, the female protagonists in *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* make it difficult for audiences to ignore or deny women's rage.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an era that believes feminism is dead. Following the success of the women's

liberation movement during the 1960s and 1970s, *Time* magazine released an article proclaiming

the work of feminism was over and the battle for gender equality had been won (Faludi 1). The

media's announcement that feminism was no longer needed launched the United States and the

United Kingdom into a postfeminist moment. Given postfeminism's various contradictions, the

definition I use in this project comes from Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra who write:

> Postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of
>
> feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as
>
> empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and
>
> professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work,
>
> domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. (2)

For the most part, authors and directors have created female protagonists who embrace

postfeminist discourse through their celebration of women's purchasing power, sexual liberation,

and freedom of choice. But the problem with this discourse is that it ignores forms of

institutional and systemic sexism that continue to affect women's lives. Two of the most notable

genres to emerge during this time period—chick flick films and chick lit novels—feature female

protagonists who are too preoccupied with buying shoes to pay attention to the wage gap; who

are too engrossed in finding the man of their dreams to critique rape culture; and who are too

focused on becoming wives and mothers to notice the attack on women's reproductive rights.

I am not alone in criticizing chick flick and chick lit's dismissal of feminist politics.

Many scholars and critics agree that postfeminist female characters minimize the work of

feminism by focusing too much attention on self-actualization and finding the perfect man. For

instance, Diane Negra claims that "popular culture has just about forgotten feminism despite constant, generally negative invocations of feminists" and that postfeminism portrays feminism as "rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult, and extreme" (2). Likewise, Susan Faludi criticizes postfeminist popular culture for "hiding women's reality while claiming to be its mirror…it has both concealed the political assault on women's rights and become the impossible standard by which women are asked to judge themselves" (71). Considering these postfeminist genres target a largely female audience, their failure to depict serious feminist issues discourages women from recognizing the very real need to challenge the patriarchal order.

Despite the belief that we are experiencing a postfeminist moment, a growing number of texts have emerged to challenge the assumption that feminism is no longer needed. Within the last several years, the spunky, bubbly, and cheerful female protagonists in chick lit and chick flicks are being replaced by female characters who are depressed, hateful, and enraged. This project seeks to explore the recent proliferation of nasty, disagreeable, bad-tempered, and unlikable women in popular culture. My analysis will focus on three texts—Jennifer Kent's 2014 horror film *The Babadook,* Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl,* and Paula Hawkins' 2015 novel *The Girl on the Train.* Amelia from *The Babadook,* Amy from *Gone Girl,* and Rachel, Anna, and Megan from *The Girl on the Train* challenge the notion that the work of feminism is over. As I will demonstrate, this is mostly evidenced by their dissatisfaction with women's roles as wives and mothers as well as their frustration with the fact that they had to sacrifice their careers. According to postfeminist discourse, marriage, motherhood, and women's participation in the workforce are no longer issues because women now have the ability to freely choose their destinies (McRobbie 1). However, I maintain that the characters in *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* complicate the notion that women are

empowered to make their own lifestyle choices. Through their actions and unconventional

emotions, these female characters point out various contradictions and dichotomies that exist in a

postfeminist era.[1]

In order to demonstrate how these texts call for a return to feminist politics, my project

references Sianne Ngai's theory on negative affects and their potential for political resistance.

As I will explain, the expression of feelings such as rage, depression, and envy make the female

characters in *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* stand apart from their

postfeminist predecessors. Rather than pathologizing these female characters for exhibiting traits

that deviate from the norm, Ngai's work allows us to recuperate the feelings expressed by these

women for their political potential. According to Ngai, smaller, negative feelings including

anxiety, envy, paranoia, and disgust are "charged with political meaning" because they point to

an obstructed agency that can be either real or fantasized, individual or collective (3). In other

words, negative feelings like anxiety, envy, paranoia and disgust—feelings that are generally

associated with women—reveal real rather than just perceived inequalities. Whereas

postfeminist protagonists perpetuate the notion that feminism is no longer needed by remaining

positive and upbeat, this new wave of female characters call our attention back to feminist

politics by refusing to contain their anger. The women I explore in this project stand in contrast

to postfeminist protagonists because their rage is not held back for the sake of normalizing

gender inequality. By refusing to control their negative feelings, characters like Amelia, Amy,

Rachel, Anna, and Megan reveal the progress promoted by postfeminist popular culture is a

myth—they show us that women continue to feel the hurt of sexism and they point out the

various ways gender equality has not yet been achieved. Therefore, the women featured in this

project break restraints placed on earlier depictions of angry, depressed, and envious female characters by asking audiences to reevaluate women's current social and political status.

The incorporation of Ngai's work on negative feelings and their link to postfeminism are what separates my project from other studies on unlikable female characters. Two notable scholars who have previously published material on the topic are Roxane Gay and Kameron Hurley. In "Not Here to Make Friends" Gay draws a connection between a woman's expression of complex emotions and her unlikability. She observes that women are shamed into hiding characteristics that contribute to their formation as fully-realized social and political subjects. As Gay points out, women continue to perform likability because they lack role models who challenge this performance. In order to combat this issue, she suggests that there needs to be an increased visibility of unlikable female characters. According to Gay,

> I want characters who behave in socially unacceptable ways, say whatever is on their mind, and do what they want with varying levels of regard for consequences…I want characters to do bad things and get away with their misdeeds. I want characters to think ugly thoughts and to make ugly decisions. I want characters to make mistakes and put themselves first without apologizing for it. I want characters to do the things I am afraid to do for fear of making myself more unlikable than I may already be. (86)

For Roxanne Gay, unlikable female characters have the potential to make visible the parts of oneself that women keep hidden. They demonstrate that being likable all the time is boring and they open spaces to interrogate modern conceptions of femininity. Feminist scholar Kameron Hurley also addresses the importance of unlikable female characters in her 2016 essay "In Defense of Unlikable Women." Hurley's work stands apart from Gay's because she acknowledges that male characters are not held to the same standards as female characters. For

instance, if a female character strays down a dark path or fails to overcome an addiction, audiences are less likely to forgive her transgressions than if a male protagonist displays similar flaws. As Hurley observes, male characters are not contained by the same static roles as women. Instead, male characters are permitted to frustrate, irritate, and disappoint audiences. Hurley states,

> Reader expectations for women writers and their characters tend to be far more rigid. Women may stray, but only so far. If they go on deep, alcoholic benders, they'd best repent and sober up at the end. If they abandon their spouses and children, they'd best end tragically or make good. Women must, above all, show kindness. Women may be strong—but they must also, importantly, be vulnerable. If they are not, readers are more likely to push back and label them unlikable. (110)

In essence, Hurley finds it troubling that male characters can be messy and complicated while female characters are judged according to their sense of morality. Although Gay and Hurley point out why it is problematic to label complicated and complex female characters "unlikable," they do not specifically engage with recent texts which include women who reclaim unlikability.

My project takes a different approach because I focus on the sudden shift from texts that pathologize and dismiss female characters who display unlikable traits to texts that embrace them. Unlike previous representations, there is something powerful in the negative feelings expressed by this recent influx of female characters that is resonating with audiences. Within their cries of anguish and rage lies a form of resistance against contemporary patriarchal norms that cannot be easily tempered. While chick lit and chick flicks conclude with the female protagonist following patriarchal expectations (i.e. leaving behind her career to get married and have children) the characters I explore in this project exhibit darker emotions which continue to

disturb and subvert these expectations. This is critical to Ngai's work because she wants us to understand how negative affects can function as sites for "symbolic struggle" (7). In the past, emotional women—both fictional and literal—have been depoliticized as overreacting, mentally unsound, or hysterical beings. Their unsettling reactions were assumed to be the result of their individual pathology rather than a form of political protest. But Ngai asks us to recuperate ugly feelings as a form of "nonviolent political activism" (1). Thus, instead of dismissing the nasty feelings of female characters, my project attempts to unlock the social and political struggles Amelia, Amy, Rachel, Anna, and Megan direct to our attention. Moreover, the audience's inability to easily deal with the darker feelings expressed by these female characters adds to their potential for political resistance. As Ngai explains, negative affects "are explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (6). Therefore, the darker emotions conveyed by the female characters in this project are not easily managed and have a "remarkable capacity for duration" (Ngai 7). It is not surprising then, that *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* include unsatisfying endings. The fact that these texts conclude without the main characters resolving their anger, depression, or envy is important to the symbolic struggle that takes place between the female protagonists and the patriarchal order. We do not receive a happy, satisfying resolution that solves any of the gender issues present in the novels or films. In contrast, the character's ugly feelings are always threatening to reemerge—making it impossible for the audience to deny these emotions.

  The problems raised by *The Babadook, Gone Girl, The Girl on the Train,* and other similar texts also pinpoint misogyny's continued presence in contemporary culture. If postfeminism claims gender oppression is no longer an issue, the 2016 American presidential

election is evidence enough to prove this assumption false. Hillary Clinton, one of the most qualified presidential candidates in the 2016 presidential race, lost to the most unqualified candidate—Donald Trump. Aside from Trump's lack of experience his campaign was also never harmed by his blatant sexism. During one presidential debate, Trump made a misogynistic comment claiming Fox News host Megyn Kelly had "blood coming out of her wherever" (CNN 2015). Another example of Trump's misogyny occurred when video evidence surfaced depicting Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women. In the video, Trump confesses to Billy Bush that his elite social status grants him free reign to "grab them by the pussy" (*Slate* 2016). Additionally, during the final presidential debate, Donald Trump snidely called Hillary Clinton a "nasty woman" while she explained how she would raise taxes on the rich if she became president (CNN 2016). While Donald Trump was busy making sexist comments without facing serious repercussions, Hillary Clinton's looks, clothes, and smile were under constant investigation. In her first interview post-election, Hillary Clinton admitted that "misogyny played a role" in her loss (Phillips 2017). The fact that the current president of the United States is allowed to make sexist comments and sexually assault women without losing support reveals the ever-present misogyny that continues to exist undetected and unchallenged in society. Social psychologist, Kristin J. Anderson emphasizes that in American culture "sexism is now packaged in a palatable but stealthy form" (xii). She adds that American's subtle sexism leads "many people to believe that women as a group are doing just fine, that feminism has run its course, and that the new victims of sexism are men" (xii-xiii). But what is interesting about the recent influx of postfeminist female protagonists with negative affects is that they direct our attention back to feminist politics by showing that women continue to face institutional and systemic sexism.

One of the ways in which the female characters I analyze reveal gender inequalities is through their interrogation of postfeminism's emphasis on empowerment and choice. As previously mentioned, marriage, motherhood, and a woman's participation in the workplace are no longer considered to be serious issues because it is widely believed that women have the choice to control their own destinies. Postfeminist culture assumes that women freely enter into the institutions of marriage and motherhood without considering how social expectations place pressure on single and/or childless women. In her analysis of the chick lit and chick flick franchise, *Bridget Jones's Diary,* Angela McRobbie critiques how postfeminism promulgates the illusion of empowerment and choice. As a thirty-year-old single and childless woman with a successful career in London, McRobbie observes that, Bridget Jones is consumed by "the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband" (36). She argues that the film problematizes Bridget Jones's choices by highlighting the risks she takes as a single, childless, professional woman. For instance, Bridget Jones is constantly reminded that she risks letting the right man slip from under her nose; she risks not catching a man at the right time, missing her opportunity to have children, and becoming isolated and marginalized from happy couples (37). Thus, the widely held belief that women are empowered to make their own decisions conflicts with messages in popular culture that urge women to become wives and mothers if they want to be considered socially acceptable. Diane Negra is also critical of postfeminism's articulation of empowerment and choice in her book *What a Girl Wants?* Postfeminism's tendency to conflate empowerment and choice with consumerism and individualism is problematic to Negra who states,

> Over and over again the postfeminist subject is represented as having lost herself but then
> (re)achieving stability through romance, de-aging, a makeover, by giving up paid work,

or by coming home…Popular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively

manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a

more authentic, intact, and achieved self. (5)

In other words, according to postfeminist popular culture, women's stability is dependent upon her willingness to meet patriarchal expectations. If the woman wishes to become her best self, she needs to be young, beautiful, and a diligent homemaker.

Consequently, postfeminist popular culture punishes female characters who either refuse to meet or fail to measure up to patriarchal standards. Perhaps one of the best examples of a postfeminist female character reviled by audiences for her failure to adhere to patriarchal norms is Alex Forrest from James Dearden's 1987 film *Fatal Attraction.* Alex is an independent and successful editor who has a hot and steamy affair with a married Dan Gallagher while on a business trip. Following their fling, Alex becomes obsessed with Dan and stalks him until she is murdered by his wife, Beth. By portraying Alex as a deranged psychopath who stalks a married man and is terrified that she will miss her opportunity to have children, *Fatal Attraction* paints a horrifying picture of women who fail to meet patriarchal standards. Furthermore, Alex Forrest represents the antithesis of proper femininity and an example of whom women should fear becoming. In many ways, Alex Forrest haunts *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* because she is a character whose negative affects are translated back into patriarchal norms. The film depoliticizes her emotions by positioning her violent rage and erratic behavior next to Beth's rational demeanor as a wife and mother. Moreover, Alex's brutal death at the hands of Beth serves to eradicate any threat Alex poses to the nuclear family or the patriarchal order. Interestingly, Susan Faludi recounts that the film's original ending featured a heartbroken Alex committing suicide to the music of *Madame Butterfly.* But when test audiences complained

that the ending was not cathartic enough and that their extreme hatred toward Alex required

more of an emotional payoff, the script was changed to reflect Alex being stabbed to death by

Dan's wife (135). The female characters I analyze in this project do not meet the same fate as

Alex Forrest. Rather than being pathologized as mentally unsound and punished for their

inability to meet patriarchal norms, the female characters in *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The

Girl on the Train* do not hold back their ugly feelings because doing so would normalize the

sexism they face throughout the novel or film. These women lash out against the societal

pressures placed upon wives and mothers without facing serious repercussions for challenging

the patriarchal order. And instead of concluding on a note that places the female characters back

within patriarchal standards, the endings of *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train*

are ambiguous. Thus, unlike postfeminist texts such as *Bridget Jones Diary* or *Fatal Attraction*

which see their main characters either preparing for married life or killed off for failing to fulfill

their proper roles as a wife and mother, the texts I explore resist expectations by leaving issues

unresolved. As a result, *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* engage in political

resistance against the patriarchy because the emotions conveyed by their female characters are

long-lasting, not easily managed, and cannot be translated back into patriarchal norms.

In the chapters that follow, I take a closer look at how the female characters in each text

use their darker emotions to emphasize the continued need for feminist politics and to resist

notions of proper femininity. Chapter one delves into one of the most romanticized and

essentialized aspects of a woman's life—her potential to enter motherhood. Within this chapter,

I examine how Amelia's repression of rage, depression, and grief in *The Babadook* causes her to

transform into a monstrous mother. As I will explain, women have repressed their negative

feelings toward motherhood because they have been told for centuries that it is one of the most

natural and rewarding parts of life. Using personal narratives from feminist scholars Adrienne Rich and Naomi Wolf, I compare their emotional struggles with motherhood to the ambivalence Amelia feels toward her son, Samuel. Then, I apply Julia Kristeva's work on motherhood and the abject to explain the way Amelia's repression of negative feelings causes her to expel the image of the ideal mother. In the first chapter, I argue *The Babadook* illustrates taboo emotions associated with motherhood in ways never before seen on screen. When we are constantly shown images of mothers who are always loving, caring, and nurturing, we are denied a space to see our own frustrations with motherhood reflected in fictional characters. This in turn, causes real mothers to hide their ambivalent feelings for fear that they will seem monstrous. But *The Babadook* challenges dominant narratives by depicting a more nuanced picture of motherhood—one where a mother can love her child but can also struggle with the reality of being a mother.

My second chapter departs from motherhood to focus on a *femme fatale* figure who violently exposes ideal femininity as a performance. I break my examination of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* into two parts. First, I analyze Amy Dunne as a *femme fatale* who is characterized by her superior intellect and thirst for competition rather than her sexuality. I argue that as a *femme fatale,* Amy Dunne reveals the various masks women wear to meet patriarchal standards. I apply Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" to explain Amy's ability to constantly change personas. The second half of this chapter investigates Amy's unprecedented violence and her ability to avoid facing serious repercussions for her unfeminine behavior. This section draws on the work of scholars such as Lisa Coulhard and Carol J. Clover to emphasize why Amy's violent nature is unlike any female character we have previously encountered.

Finally, my third chapter compares the bubbly and hopeful protagonists of chick lit to the battered and defeated women in Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train.* Whereas chapter one

focuses exclusively on motherhood and chapter two focuses exclusively on marriage, my final chapter brings these two institutions together to examine their horrifying impact on Rachel, Megan, and Anna. The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to an analysis of envy's role in the events of *The Girl on the Train.* I use Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* to show how Rachel, Megan, and Anna's envy toward one another causes the image of ideal femininity to repeatedly fail. I argue that while it appears as though *The Girl on the Train* is a novel that pits women against each other, there is something interesting occurring when their shared envy works to dismantle the image of ideal femininity.

NOTES

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[1] It is worth noting that the women represented in these texts are primarily white, cisgender, middle-class, heterosexual women.

CHAPTER ONE. "MOTHER'S NOT HERSELF TODAY": DISMANTLING THE IMAGE OF

THE IDEAL MOTHER IN *THE BABADOOK*

Performing a magic show before a crowd of teddy bears and action figures, six-year-old

Samuel recites, "life is not always as it seems. It can be a wondrous thing. But it can also be

very treacherous!" (Kent). For Samuel, these lines are merely part of the show, a warning to the

audience to expect the unexpected. However, for his mother Amelia, these words possess a

deeper meaning that speaks directly to her reality as a single mother. The night she gave birth to

Samuel, her husband, Oskar, was killed in a car accident. Thus, for Amelia, creating life resulted

in the loss of her husband; it meant giving up her passion for writing children's books; and it

meant sacrificing any sense of privacy she once enjoyed. As a result, Amelia spends the film

navigating between caring for and protecting her child, resenting his constant presence, and

managing her depression and grief. Whereas most reviews of *The Babadook* pathologize

Amelia, I assert that this reading ignores the power of Amelia's emotions. My interest lies in

interpreting her grief and anger as a response to the constraining societal expectations placed

upon mothers. I argue that her responses reveal society's failures and outdated ways of thinking

about the experience of motherhood. For what Amelia provides is a glimpse into a more

nuanced representation of motherhood—one where a mother can love her child but also resent

and even abhor the reality of being a mother.

But what—I ask—is the significance of Amelia's story? Why is it important to illustrate

the anger, the frustration, the disillusionment, and the boredom that are associated with

motherhood and mothering? To demonstrate how these taboo emotions are not allowed an outlet

for mothers in society, I think it is important to consider western motherhood from a historical

context beginning with the cult of true womanhood.[1] Writing in 1966, Barbara Welter's research

on the cult of true womanhood identifies four virtues women were expected to adhere to for the achievement of ideal femininity including—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (152). These virtues characterized women as passive, docile creatures who were discouraged from questioning the existence of these expectations. If a woman dared to challenge her subordinate position to men she risked being deemed unnatural, unfeminine, and even monstrous (171). Caroll Smith-Rosenberg emphasizes that male physicians in the 19th century began to "transpose the cult of true womanhood into a medical and scientific dogma. Any violation of the cult of true womanhood—such as demands for education or for employment outside the home, or the practice of fertility control—called forth furious jeremiads from the profession" (23). Despite the belief that women were naturally suited for childbirth and motherhood, Smith-Rosenberg notes that beginning in the final decades of the 19th century, women "seemed ill-prepared" for marriage and motherhood and often "complained of isolation, loneliness, and depression" (199). Women found it increasingly difficult to adhere to the cult of true womanhood's virtues resulting in numerous cases of hysteria and nervous diseases among women (Smith-Rosenberg 199).

Feelings of dissatisfaction among wives and mothers continued into the 1950s and 1960s when Betty Friedan wrote her ground-breaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*[2]. In *The Feminine Mystique,* Friedan observes feelings of emptiness and restlessness that plagued suburban homemakers. She explains that women were inundated with expert voices who told them "truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, [and] political rights…all they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children" (58). Friedan writes that "following World War II, women were surrounded by the image of the "suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over

their spotless kitchen floor" (61). The desirable image of the happy housewife caused women to leave school and the workplace in large numbers to become wives and mothers. Friedan explains, "[t]heir only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house; their only fight to get and keep their husbands" (61). However, like the women who came before them, the illusion of grandeur eventually subsided for homemakers as they began feeling dissatisfied, lonely, isolated, and without purpose. *The Feminine Mystique* has its fair share of flaws, but it does acknowledge the ugly, negative feelings that mothers like Amelia are forced to repress. Even though it created a space to talk about the negative feelings associated with motherhood and marriage, *The Feminine Mystique* fell short of changing the way society views ambivalent mothers.[3]

Twenty-first-century women continue to feel pressured into having children. In 2016, *Marie Claire* published an article titled, "Inside the Growing Movement of Women Who Wish They'd Never Had Kids." According to the article, a large number of women around the globe are lamenting their decision to have children and are expressing feelings of fear, guilt, shame, and disappointment on the internet. The article states,

> For many countries, raising a family still constitutes a vast landscape of unpaid work that falls almost wholly on women's shoulders. It's a societal infrastructure that innately depends on women cheerfully embracing the experience, even if every impulse tells them otherwise. (Treleaven)

The *Marie Claire* article reveals a disturbing pattern—spanning over two-hundred-years—of mothers who feel disenchanted, fearful, isolated, lonely, and regretful despite the ongoing narrative that promotes motherhood as one of the most fulfilling, wonderful, and natural experiences in a woman's life. For the most part, mothers have not been exposed to narratives

that speak to the ugly feelings they hide away from their friends, family, and children. The internet, the media, and popular culture uphold the belief that motherhood is a natural, fulfilling experience rather than showing the negative side to having children.

Jennifer Kent's 2014 horror film, *The Babadook* illustrates the repressed and taboo emotions associated with motherhood that have not been seen on screen. By depicting a mother who struggles with feelings of resentment, anger, and grief, *The Babadook* dismantles the image of the pure, pious, submissive, domestic, and all-around perfect mother. *The Babadook*'s break in this narrative creates a more relatable, identifiable character for mothers. Amelia's relatability as an ambivalent mother prevents her from being pathologized like most angry mothers in the media and popular culture. In her essay on media, politics, and motherhood, Katherine N. Kinnick states, "[…] by focusing on the individual level rather than the societal level, media stories frame problems facing mothers as 'personal problems' rather than problems needing systemic, public policy solution" (3). My reading of *The Babadook* focuses on Amelia's negative affects as a response to social rather than individual problems associated with motherhood. In my view, *The Babadook* accomplishes this shift from the individual to the social through Amelia's complex expressions of love, grief, and anger. Although these reactions originate at an individual level, they point to larger cultural anxieties tied to motherhood including the loss of freedom and individuality, lack of community and political support, and socially constructed feminine roles.

Historically, popular culture has pathologized mothers who do not fit expectations by pitting a "good" mother against a "bad" mother. The juxtaposition of the virtuous, self-sacrificial "good" mother to the selfish, violent "bad" mother is a common convention used in portrayals of motherhood that fails to acknowledge mother's diversity. Katherine Kinnick states,

The good mother, the noble mother-saint, makes her family her highest priority,

continually sacrifices her own interests for the good of her family, and conforms to

expected gender roles of femininity. The bad mother is depicted as self-centered,

neglectful, preoccupied with her career, or lacking in traditional femininity. (9)

In other words, this binary establishes two distinct ways to be a mother. One can either be

glorified as a vision of feminine perfection or vilified as a mother who failed to perform her

biologically determined roles. According to this binary, any woman who exhibits qualities

outside the "good" mother category—including a refusal of so-called innate feminine

characteristics—is immediately pathologized as mentally unsound. For example, in *Fatal

Attraction*, a pregnant Alex Forrest is portrayed as crazy and unstable next to Dan's sophisticated

wife who is the mother of their young daughter, Ellen. Presumed to be pregnant with Dan's

baby, Alex's portrayal as the "bad" mom is especially apparent when she breaks into Dan and

Beth's home and proceeds to boil Ellen's rabbit. This scene, among others, emphasizes that

Alex is not emotionally fit enough to be a "good" mother and must be stopped before giving

birth to her and Dan's illegitimate child.

In contrast, Jennifer Kent's Amelia resists categorization as either a "good" mother or

"bad" mother, by illuminating the ways wider social pressures influence modern conceptions of

acceptable motherhood. One such pressure involves giving up individuality and freedoms after

becoming a mother. For instance, Oskar's death also symbolizes the loss of Amelia's pre-mother

self. While Amelia's grief is directed at the loss of her husband, she is also mourning the

freedom and individuality she enjoyed before becoming a mother. For Amelia, bringing new life

into the world coincides with the death of her lover as well as the death of her former identity.

The audience learns that prior to Samuel's birth, Amelia wrote children's stories. But as a single

mother, Amelia gives up her passion for writing professionally to work in a nursing home. Thus, Amelia the writer, lover, and friend is replaced with Amelia the reluctant caregiver. Naomi Wolf recounts the experience of a new mother who also felt as though she lost her identity after giving birth. Wolf states,

> [a]lthough a child and a new love had been born, something else within the new mother passed away, and the experience was made harder because the women were, on some level, underneath their joy in their babies, quietly mourning for some part of their earlier selves. (7)

Amelia mourns the loss of her individuality as well as the loss of her privacy. Samuel's constant presence prevents Amelia from stepping outside the role of mother to the extent that her days begin with him calling her name and end with him crawling into her bed. Even her body is turned over to Samuel, depriving Amelia of her sexuality and her own sexual pleasure.

In the interest of her sanity, Amelia resorts to lying as a means of escaping her motherly obligations. For example, while at work, Amelia fabricates a story wherein Samuel is sick and needs her attention. Rather than going home, she finds solace at a shopping center where she is depicted looking like a little girl enjoying an ice cream cone on a bench. Additionally, at one point in the film, Samuel has a seizure after the Babadook terrorizes him in the car. Following the seizure, Amelia lies to the doctor claiming Samuel has not slept in weeks and needs tranquilizers. Exhausted and overwhelmed, Amelia acquires the drugs for her own benefit—so that she can sleep peacefully and temporarily subdue Samuel's erratic behavior. Amelia's insistence he take the pills when he dissents is an indication of her desperate need to reclaim control over her and her child's lives. The first time he takes the pill Amelia awakens the next morning on her own terms and when she finds Samuel sound asleep in his bed, she smiles in

blissful relief. Although Amelia lies and forces Samuel to take the pills he does not actually need, her desire to salvage a sense of individuality and privacy that was stripped away from her once Samuel was born is presented in the film as an understandable act.

Amelia pushes against the traditional notion that mothers are natural caregivers who are meant to endure a life of submissive servitude. Toward the film's beginning, Amelia internalizes her frustrations while doing her best to perform feminine roles including being submissive, domestic, and nurturing. While Samuel attends school Amelia works in the dementia ward of a nursing home which requires her to perform necessary caregiving duties throughout the entire day. Thus, Amelia must remain patient while caring for individuals such as Samuel and the elderly who cannot adequately take care of themselves. As Barbara Welter notes, the *Young Ladies Handbook* insists women remain passive and nurture anyone in need of care by always displaying "a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper and humility of mind" (159). These are qualities Amelia is constantly trying to perform at the beginning of the film. In one situation, an elderly patient rejects drinking a cup of tea Amelia provides because it contains milk. Amelia tries calmly explaining to the patient that she usually takes milk in her tea but the woman refuses and snaps "I don't want it!" (Kent). Instead of asserting control over the situation Amelia represses her anger and calmly offers to pour another cup. According to traditional feminine roles, arguing with a patient is unwomanly; therefore, Amelia shoulders the blame for the mix-up and promptly corrects the mistake. In another instance, Amelia maintains her composure whilst Samuel violently thrashes in the backseat of her car and repeatedly screams her name. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English remind us that mothers are responsible for creating a benevolent, stress-free environment by providing "loving encouragement to each childish impulse" ensuring the children develop into well-adjusted

citizens (220). Whereas Ehrenreich and English point to society's claim that these are instinctual qualities, Amelia appears emotionally disconnected from the individuals she cares for suggesting she takes no pleasure in shaping a "stress-free" environment for those around her. Rather, Amelia seems impassive while carrying out these roles indicating these acts are more unnatural than instinctual. At one point, Amelia expresses her irritation with constantly being compassionate and understanding while playing a game of bingo with a group of patients at the nursing home. Realizing nobody is listening or comprehending what she is saying Amelia announces, "another few days and someone might call out 'bingo!' Five billion? Anyone got five billion?" (Kent). Immediately after calling out the ridiculous number, Amelia's female supervisor appears in the doorway wearing a disapproving look. The supervisor's disapproval functions as a check on her unfeminine behavior, reminding Amelia to step back into her prescribed gender roles.

Amelia's portrayal brings the negative feelings and anxieties Rich and Wolf express in their respective works to the screen. Like these two women, Amelia's love for Samuel is not necessarily unconditional which causes her to internalize her negative feelings. In one scene, Samuel hugs Amelia but when he hangs on for too long and squeezes tighter, Amelia pushes him away asserting "don't do that!" (Kent). Similarly, when Samuel crawls into her bed at night, Amelia positions herself as far away from him as possible creating a large gap between them. In addition, telling Samuel she loves him proves to be a struggle for Amelia. In fact, one night while tucking Samuel into bed he tells her he loves her and she replies stoically, "me too" (Kent). As evidenced by these scenes, Amelia's resentment toward Samuel stands in direct contrast to the assumption that women share a natural connection to their children. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich explains how her motherhood experience differed from the narrative constructed by

dominant society. Rich insists that nurturing children is not a natural, instinctual process (xiv).

Through diary entries, she reveals aspects of motherhood that are not communicated by the

dominant culture and illustrates the various ways motherhood is an emotionally taxing

phenomenon. Child rearing is the main source of Rich's suffering and she does not feel

emotionally fit enough to handle the responsibility of being a mother (1). Rich admits,

> I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional' and by the
>
> visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of
>
> myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren't those parts then
>
> abnormal, monstrous?...I could love so much better, I told myself, after even a quarter-
>
> hour of selfishness, of peace, of detachment from my children. (3)

Rich's struggle negates the notion that a mother's love is unconditional; however, the image of

the perfect mother is so pervasive that she begins to question her own mental condition. Wolf

makes a similar claim in her book *Misconceptions*. Wolf observes that powerful images of

effortless, unconditional motherly love prevent many women from asking questions or

expressing feelings that deviate from this image. She states, "we too often blame ourselves, or

turn our anger inward, into depression, when our experience is at odds with the ideal" (4). Rather

than representing the perfect mother, Amelia's anger and frustrations mirror Rich and Wolf's

struggle to become the ideal mother. In this sense, *The Babadook* brings to life the

monstrousness society makes Rich and Wolf feel for not being able to achieve ideal motherhood

by transforming Amelia into a metaphorical monster.

Amelia's transformation into a monstrous mother is brought on by her struggle to imitate

the ideal nurturer in the film—her elderly neighbor, Mrs. Roach. Mrs. Roach periodically checks

up on Amelia to make sure she and Samuel are okay. She is soft-spoken and kind. From the

window at her kitchen sink, Amelia is often shown studying Mrs. Roach while in her living

room. Amelia frantically scrubs dirty dishes while peering at the woman she *should* aspire to

become but Amelia has ambivalent feelings about Mrs. Roach. Ultimately, Amelia's attempts to

become Mrs. Roach—the ideal mother and popular culture's "good" mother—fail as she is

consumed more and more by the Babadook. The negative affects Amelia repressed throughout

the film—her anger, frustration, boredom, and disillusionment—manifest as the Babadook. The

Babadook allows Amelia to shed her good mother image and unleash her negative feelings in

horrifying ways. Amelia and Samuel first encounter the Babadook in a children's book that

mysteriously appears on their shelf. Because she used to write children's stories, the film

gestures toward Amelia as the likely author of this story. The book features a young boy

(Samuel), a mother (Amelia), and the creepy Babadook—a type of boogeyman with a pale white

face, top hat, black cloak, and long, grisly fingers. The contents of the book predict how the

Babadook will terrorize Amelia and Samuel. The book reads:

> If it's in a word or it's in a look. You can't get rid of the Babadook.
>
> I'll make you a wager, yes
>
> I'll make you a bet
>
> The more you deny me
>
> The stronger I get
>
> You start to change when I get in
>
> The Babadook growing right under your skin
>
> Oh, come see what's underneath. (Kent)

This passage is important to Ngai's discussion of a negative feeling's "objective or subjective

status" (19). As Ngai points out, an inherent confusion exists regarding the oscillation between

the subjective or objective status of a negative feeling causing one to ask: "Is the enemy *out there* or *in me?*" (19). This confusion is played out in the passage above—is it the Babadook's presence in Amelia's life that is causing her to become monstrous or is her repressed anger causing her to become monstrous? Blurring these lines makes it increasingly difficult to blame the Babadook for Amelia's violent treatment toward Samuel (see Figure 1). The Babadook is something that is Amelia, it is composed of all her frustrations, but it is also something separate from Amelia—something non-human that threatens her and Samuel.

Julia Kristeva's theory of "the abject" is key to understanding how lines are easily blurred between Amelia and the Babadook. According to Kristeva, the abject is a place outside oneself "where meaning collapses" (2). She explains,

> [the abject] is not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, but which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (2)

As we saw in the poem above, the Babadook is and is not Amelia. It is something that enters her body ("You start to change when I get in") but it is also something growing within her ("The Babadook growing right under your skin"). And just as the abject is both non-existent *and* real, the Babadook is a fictional character in a storybook who threatens Amelia if she continues to deny him ("The more you deny me, the stronger I get"). Therefore, just as ugly feelings confuse the boundaries between the objective and the subjective, the Babadook as the abject is something without necessarily being a definable object.

Due to the similarities between Ngai's theory on negative feelings and Kristeva's theory on the abject, we can approach The Babadook as a manifestation of Amelia's repressed rage and

Figure 1: Amelia strangling Samuel. Screen grab from Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook.*

depression. Amelia suppresses her negative affects because she is trying to perform the role of the ideal mother. By holding back her ambivalent feelings about motherhood, she hopes to become Mrs. Roach who functions as the embodiment of maternal love. But when the Babadook finally takes control of Amelia, she stops repressing her emotions, stops pretending to be the ideal mother, and she unleashes her anger. Amelia's rejection of the ideal mother is marked by a series of expulsions. Kristeva states that during abjection "the improper and unclean" are expelled from the body as a means of protection. According to Kristeva, "'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not want to assimilate it, 'I' expel it" (3). The violent expulsion of Amelia's tooth symbolizes her rejection to perform ideal motherhood (Buerger 38). It is not a coincidence that Mrs. Roach represents ideal motherhood and cockroaches pour out of her wall. Amelia is expelling the image of the perfect, nurturing caregiver which has consumed and contaminated her. Thus, the real horror in *The Babadook* is the way notions of ideal motherhood deny expressions of anger and resentment until they become monstrous. The ugly feelings she hides away are transformed into disgusting cockroaches which must be expelled from her body to purify herself. Once she expels the maternal body, Amelia finally begins asserting herself to Samuel. When Samuel asks Amelia for food Amelia replies "why do you have to keep talk, talk, talking? Don't you ever stop? If you're that hungry, why don't you go eat shit!" (Kent). It is important to note that the assertive voice Amelia gains when the Babadook takes possession of her is recognizable as her voice rather than the voice of a demonic entity. Buerger compares Amelia's possession to Reagan's possession in *The Exorcist*. Buerger explains,

> While the total transformation of Reagan's voice into the guttural and terrifying
> masculinized cadence of the devil serves to exculpate her by distancing her from her
> terrible actions during her possession, Amelia's voice remains recognizable, thus

discouraging the audience from seeing her words, or by extension behavior, as being

beyond her control. (42)

Rather than hearing the Babadook's demonic voice, Amelia is responsible for saying horrible

things to her son. Samuel makes the mistake of assuming the Babadook is saying and doing

things to him rather than Amelia. As Amelia gets increasingly violent, she tells Samuel "you

don't' know how many times I wish it was you and not him that died!" (Kent). As Samuel tries

to calm Amelia by telling her he "just wants her to be happy" Amelia says in response,

"sometimes I just want to smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop

out!" (Kent). Samuel, shocked he is hearing these words come out of his mother's mouth replies

that she is not his mother. Amelia screams, "I AM YOUR MOTHER!" (Kent). Amelia asserts

that she is the protective, nicer mother from the beginning of the film but she is also the violent,

angry, frustrated mother he sees now. She demands Samuel accept her as a complex and flawed

mother rather than Amelia exhausting herself by pretending to be an ideal mother. The

Babadook remains in her body until she tries strangling Samuel. Releasing her grip on Samuel's

throat, Amelia vomits a black liquid—expelling the Babadook from her body.

Although the Babadook is no longer inside Amelia's body, she is not free of her negative

feelings. The final confrontation between Amelia and the Babadook takes place in her bedroom.

As a last attempt to lure Amelia into a violent state, the Babadook takes on the form of her late

husband Oskar and forces Amelia to relive her husband's tragic death. Instead of giving in to the

Babadook's trick, Amelia stands up to the Babadook yelling "you are nothing! You're nothing!

This is my house! You are trespassing in my house! If you touch my son again, I'll fucking kill

you!" (Kent). As Amelia regains control of herself and her house, the Babadook is banished to

her basement.

The film concludes with Amelia and Samuel gathering worms in their garden. The two appear happy as Samuel shows Amelia a magic trick and Amelia lovingly embraces Samuel. Once they finish collecting worms, Amelia takes them to the basement where the Babadook cowers in the corner. Amelia is able to keep the Babadook calm by feeding it worms and assuring it that everything is alright. Kent does not end *The Babadook* on a happy, satisfying note where all problems are resolved and the Babadook is destroyed. Instead, the Babadook will always be present in Amelia's life and she has to learn how to manage the Babadook so that it does not consume her again. With the violent Babadook in the basement and the ideal mother—Mrs. Roach—next door, Amelia finds a balance between the ideal mother and the monstrous mother. On the one hand, she learns to live without exhausting herself by trying to always put others first and ignoring her feelings. On the other hand, Amelia acknowledges her rage and learns how to control it.

Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* marks an important shift in how mothers are represented in popular culture. Unlike films such as *Fatal Attraction* which conclude with the destruction of the "bad" mother by the "good" mother, *The Babadook* acknowledges the light and darkness that exists in Amelia—she can love and protect her child while also resenting her status as a mother. *The Babadook* also successfully portrays Amelia's anger and depression as the result of individual and social forces. While Amelia is grieving the sudden loss of her husband, she is also responding to the unrealistic expectations placed upon mothers. From the loss of her individuality to the loss of community support, Amelia's rage speaks to common issues that popular culture ignores when representing motherhood. Her struggle resembles the struggle of many mothers who hide away their negative feelings for fear of being labeled a bad mother. *The Babadook* affirms that mothers can be complex and flawed without being villainized, but it also

points to the ways society has failed and continues to fail at supporting the emotional and physical health of mothers by assuming motherhood is a natural process. *The Babadook* reveals that motherhood is not the blissful, fulfilling experience that is depicted in the media and popular culture. Although *The Babadook* is a horror film featuring a top-hat wearing boogeyman, *The Babadook* includes a more realistic depiction of motherhood in comparison to other films that follow the "good" mother versus "bad" mother convention. The film's realism and the audience's ability to identify with Amelia is what makes *The Babadook* so terrifying. Jennifer Kent successfully represents how society's refusal to provide an outlet for the expression of negative feelings causes mothers to become monstrous.

NOTES

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[1] 19th century ideals that came along with the growth of industry. During this time period men and women were divided into separate spheres where men occupied the public sphere and women occupied with private sphere. Women's increased role in the home brought forth a new set of expectations and rules about what it meant to be a woman.

[2] Texts such as *The Feminine Mystique* are American while *The Babadook* is an Australian film. I feature these texts in this chapter because *The Babadook* has seriously resonated with American female audiences. Therefore, I use texts like *The Feminine Mystique* to understand why American women are connecting with the film and how the film speaks to their historical struggle.

[3] A closer look at *The Feminine Mystique* as a consciousness-raising book is outside the scope of this chapter. See Imelda Whelehan's book *The Feminist Bestseller* for more information.

CHAPTER TWO. "I'VE KILLED FOR YOU": THE *FEMME FATALE* AND FEMALE

VIOLENCE IN *GONE GIRL*

On the opening page of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl,* Nick Dunne introduces his wife Amy with a graphically detailed description of her brain:

When I think of my wife, I always think of her head…I'd know her head anywhere. And what's inside it. I think of that too: her mind. Her brain, all those coils, and her thoughts shuttling through those coils like fast, frantic centipedes. Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts. *What are you thinking, Amy?* The question I've asked most often during our marriage, if not out loud, if not to the person who could answer. I suppose these questions stormcloud over every marriage: *What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?* (3)

Nick is not the first man to ponder the complicated inner-workings of the "mysterious" female brain. However, the events of *Gone Girl* suggest that maybe men *should* fear what the female mind is capable of. Since *Gone Girl*'s release, audiences and critics have described Amy Dunne as a terrifying character. Even *Vanity Fair* crowned Amy Dunne "The Most Disturbing Female Villain of All Time" (Kate Rich). Scholars have also published work on the source of Amy Dunne's terror. Emily Johanson compares Amy Dunne to female villains in Victorian gothic literature and labels *Gone Girl* a "neoliberal gothic" novel (35). The source of Amy's terror, Johanson claims, is her strict adherence to neoliberal values and norms (42). Another scholar by the name of Kenneth Lota argues Amy Dunne is a *femme fatale* figure whose terror lies in her ability to "manipulate the people around her according to the very dichotomous thinking that produces gender roles in the first place" (163). While I agree with Johanson and Lota's analysis

of *Gone Girl* I argue Amy Dunne is shocking because she is unlike the female characters we have been exposed to in literature and film. My examination of *Gone Girl*'s Amy Dunne is twofold: First, I argue that Amy stands apart from previous depictions of the *femme fatale* because her violent nature is tied to her superior intellect rather than her sexuality. I maintain that as a *femme fatale* figure, Amy reveals the various masks women wear to perform ideal femininity and refuses to play by society's rules. Second, I argue that Amy exhibits an extreme level of anger and violence that previous women in popular culture have not been permitted to display without facing serious repercussions. In my view, Amy's violence is not justified like most violent women in popular culture because she does not follow a rape-revenge narrative. Instead, Amy's violence is fueled by her hyper-competitiveness and her need to destroy anyone who challenges her. Finally, I suggest Amy is a shocking character because she ultimately evades punishment for her transgressions. In order to adequately situate Amy as a *femme fatale* figure, I begin this chapter with a brief history of the *femme fatale* in classic *noir* and *neo-noir*. From there, I use Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" to explain how Amy's diary and the "Cool Girl" performance function as masquerades to lessen women's threat towards men. Next, I explore Amy's aggressive, violent nature in comparison to previous representations of violent women and speculate the future for women who are permitted to be violent in popular culture.

<div align="center">The History of the Femme Fatale</div>

Since its emergence as a genre in the 1940s, *noir* reflects changing socio-cultural gender roles and identities (Hanson xv). The genre maintains its relevance by evolving and adapting to address cultural anxieties at a particular moment in history. In this sense, although highly contested by feminists, *noir* remains an important genre for analyzing the representation of

female characters. The most notable female character in *noir* is the iconic *femme fatale.* In *Hollywood Heroines* Helen Hanson defines the *femme fatale* as:

> sexually and generically, transgressive: a female figure refusing to be defined by the socio-cultural norms of femininity, or contained by the male addressed, generic operations of *film noir* narratives in which her fatality resulted in her ultimate destruction. (xv)

Janey Place agrees when she writes that the "spider woman" and the "nurturing woman" are pitted against each other in classic *noir* to distinguish proper and improper female behavior. She describes the spider woman as a sexual and dangerous woman who dwells in the darkness and is the "psychological expression of [man's] own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it" (53). In addition, she observes that the spider woman's main goal is independence which is "often presented as self-absorbed narcissism" (57). According to Place, the spider woman's contrast is the nurturing woman who functions as a redeemer (60). For Place, the nurturing woman:

> offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles, and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he come back to her) and is generally visually passive and static. (60)

Even though the spider woman/*femme fatale* is generally destroyed while the nurturing woman prevails, it is the image of the seductive, manipulative *femme fatale* that viewers remember. Over time the *femme fatale*'s chameleon-like traits have allowed her to transform to meet America's ever-changing political and social climate. Samantha Lindhop identifies two cycles of *femme fatales.* The first cycle, titled the classic *film noir,* took place during the 1940s and 1950s while

the second cycle took place during the 1980s and 1990s and is known as *neo-noir* (1). Lindhop

notes that much like the *neo-noir femme fatale,* the classic *film noir femme fatale* is characterized

by an unwillingness to accept notions of femininity, is presented carrying "'unnatural' phallic

power" such as a gun or cigarette, and has the "ability to bring ruin and misery (in some form or

another) to the men who cross her path" (23-24). Although the *femme fatale* of classic *film noir*

exhibits a heightened sense of sexuality in comparison to other female figures, Lindhop points

out that the Hollywood Motion Picture Code, better known as the Hays Code, was enforced until

the late 1960s and severely censored the *femme fatale*'s actions (25). Lindhop states,

> [s]ome of the principles stipulated by the code were that no motion picture should lower
>
> the moral standards of the audience, that 'evil' must not appear attractive nor must
>
> sympathy be thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, or sin. Thus, the fatale woman is
>
> never shown to get away with any transgressions. She is either punished (often with
>
> death) or it is discovered that she is innocent after all. The code also placed restrictions
>
> on plot material involving social, political, or sexually offensive themes, adultery,
>
> vulgarity, obscenity, nudity or semi-nudity, brothels and dances such as the 'can-can.'
>
> (25)

Since the code was replaced with a new ratings system in 1968, *femme fatales* of the *neo-noir*

could be more openly sexually aggressive, erotic, independent, and she could get away with her

crimes (Lindhop 51). Kate Stables makes a similar observation stating that, "in the 90s, the new

freestanding *fatale* willingly inhabits the cultural margins; what motivates her is her enormous

appetite for power, money, and sex" (170). An example of a *neo-noir femme fatale* is Catherine

Tramell (Sharon Stone) in the 1992 film *Basic Instinct.* In the film, Catherine—a crime fiction

writer—controls the narrative and is hyper-sexualized, appearing nude or engaging in sexual acts

in most of her scenes. Despite her overt sexuality and "immoral" behavior, Catherine does not

face punishment for the murders she committed. As a woman who is characterized more by her

intense competitiveness, resilience, and intellect rather than her sexuality and who ultimately

avoids punishment, Amy Dunne stands apart from the *femme fatales* of the *neo-noir* cycle.

<div align="center">Amy Dunne as a Twenty-First Century *Femme Fatale*</div>

Amy Dunne marks a shift toward a new representation of the *femme fatale;* one that

reflects postfeminist values. Amy is a postfeminist woman because she benefited from the

successes of the women's liberation movement (McRobbie 32). She has a degree in journalism

from Harvard and had a successful career writing personality quizzes for a women's magazine

before she lost her job during the recession. Additionally, her parents funneled the money they

made off the *Amazing Amy* books into a trust fund for her. Amy is a wealthy, well-educated,

independent woman in New York City whose relationship status becomes a source of anxiety for

her parents and friends. But Amy is ambivalent about marriage as an institution because she

does not want to lose her sense of autonomy. As a postfeminist woman she is supposed to have

the choice to marry or not to marry. The pressure from her friends and family to get married

eventually pushes Amy into a relationship with Nick. In a diary entry, Amy writes,

> I have become a strange thing. I have become a wife. I find myself steering the ship of
>
> conversation—bulkily, unnaturally—just so I can say his name aloud. I have become a
>
> wife, I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist
>
> card. I don't care. I balance his checkbook, I trim his hair. I've gotten so retro, at one
>
> point I will probably use the word *pocketbook,* shuffling out the door in my swingy tweed
>
> coat, my lips painted red, on my way to the *beauty parlor.* (38)

After marrying Nick, Amy paints herself as a bouncy, postfeminist wife who is all about her husband. In her early diary entries, Amy playfully acknowledges how the success of her modern marriage relies on the performance of traditional gender roles. For example, Amy constantly repeats the phrase "marriage is a comprise!" but it is Amy who does all the compromising while Nick does what he wants. Amy compromises and eats lobster with Nick rather than getting burgers like she originally requested (Flynn 40). And when they both lose their jobs, Amy leaves behind her family and friends in New York City to move to Nick's hometown so he can be with his sick mother (Flynn 6). However, in Missouri, Nick expects Amy to take care of his mother while he works and goes out with the guys to play poker (Flynn 157). Within the matter of a few years, Amy transforms from a single, independent woman with a successful career in New York City, to a married, jobless, caretaker in Missouri.

In her diary entries, Amy plays off her frustrations with her and Nick's marriage. Although she knows Nick is having an affair, she avoids conflict with Nick because she wants to "be a good sport" and she "refuses to turn into some pert-mouthed, strident angry-girl" (Flynn 65-69). Amy's diary functions as a masquerade. Amy portrays herself as a hyper-feminine wife who calmly tolerates her husband's sexism in order to mask her true self. The concept of womanliness as masquerade dates back to the 1930s when British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere first proposed that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (70). Women who possess masculine traits wear a mask to hide her masculine traits and flaunt her femininity. To explain her theory, Riviere gives an example of a housewife who is "a woman of great ability, and can herself attend to typically masculine matters. But when, e.g. any builder or upholsterer is called in, she has a compulsion to hide all her technical knowledge from him" (73). As a way to downplay their intellect,

women pretend to be "uneducated, foolish, and bewildered" to protect themselves from attacks by men who feel anxiety toward intellectual women. In her diary entries, Amy wears a mask of womanliness. She portrays herself as a passive, flighty victim, but in reality, she is a brilliant woman who is sick of playing games and is devising an elaborate plan to destroy her husband. In one entry, she pretends to be horrified of needles and dramatically faints while donating blood (Flynn 156). Later, the real Amy easily slices her own arm and bleeds out to stage her murder (Flynn 220). In another entry, Amy pretends to be afraid of her husband and travels to the abandoned mall to purchase a gun (Flynn 197). Later, she admits she fabricated her fear of Nick to convince the police that Nick murdered her (Flynn 250). Although Amy comes off as defenseless and weak in her diary, the real Amy is savvy and cunning. Mary Ann Doane argues that womanliness as masquerade is a defining characteristic of *femme fatales* because they rely on an "excess of femininity" to "evade the man, the word, and the law" (26). As a *femme fatale,* Amy uses a masquerade to make herself into the victim of a heinous crime rather than the orchestrator of her own disappearance and murder.

In the second part of the novel, Amy finally rips off her mask of womanliness and admits she fabricated her disappearance and murder to frame Nick after she caught him cheating on her with a younger woman. During this shocking scene, Amy confesses that she performed the role of "Cool Girl" for the last seven years to be the woman Nick wanted her to be. Amy explains,

> The Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a

chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want…Men actually think

this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to

be this girl…Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was

something wrong with *you*. (Flynn 222-223)

By admitting that she was only pretending to be the Cool Girl, Amy reveals that this woman does

not actually exist; she is a social construct formed to keep women dependent on men. Her

discussion of the Cool Girl demonstrates that being a modern woman entails constantly donning

and removing a series of masks. When women wear the Cool Girl mask they are less threatening

to men. Therefore, when Amy exposes the Cool Girl and refuses to perform the role, she directly

challenges the patriarchal order. Her recognition that being a woman is about performing a

series of roles makes her a serious threat to patriarchal society; especially considering that when

she is not playing the role of Cool Girl, Amy is contriving elaborate plans to destroy anyone who

challenges her.

Aside from her awareness that modern femininity entails wearing a series of masks, Amy

stands apart from *neo-noir femme fatales* because she is hyper-competitive. Whereas most *neo-

noir femme fatales* are hyper-sexualized, Amy is dangerous because she possesses an intense

need to ruin anyone who threatens her.   Amy's hyper-competitiveness dates back to her birth.

She explains that before she was born, her mother miscarried or still birthed seven children—all

named Hope. Amy was the only child to survive; to make it out of the womb alive. Her

competitiveness is visible in the following passage:

I grew up feeling special, proud. I was the girl who battled oblivion and won. The

chances were about 1 percent, but I did it. I ruined my mother's womb in the process—

my own personal Sherman's March. Marybeth would never have another baby. As a

child, I got vibrant pleasure out of this: just me, just me, only me…I've always been

better than the Hopes, I was the one who made it. But I've been jealous too, always—

seven dead dancing princesses. They get to be perfect without even trying, without even

facing one moment of existence, while I am stuck here on earth and every day I must try,

and every day is a chance to be less than perfect. (Flynn 220-222)

Amy has an obsessive need to be the best. She does not care who or what is destroyed on her

path to success and survival. However, her mother's seven unborn children haunt Amy because

she can never measure up to their perfection. In addition to the seven Hopes, Amy spends her

life in competition with her literary alter-ego—Amazing Amy. The line of children's books

written by her parents features a girl by the same name who is always one step ahead of Amy:

When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book.

("Sheesh, violin can be hard work, but hard work is the only way to get better!"). When I

blew off junior tennis championships at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends,

Amy recommitted to the game. ("Sheesh, I know it's fun to spend time with friends, but

I'd be letting myself and everyone else down if I didn't show up for the tournament.").

(Flynn 26-27)

Amy's parents model Amazing Amy off the girl they want their daughter to be. For every bad

decision Amy makes, Amazing Amy makes the right decision. Amazing Amy even married

before the real Amy, leading journalists to ask Amy when she planned to marry and if she was

jealous of Amazing Amy and Able Andy's marriage (Flynn 27-29). Because it is impossible for

Amy to outshine seven unborn children and a literary character based on her life, she responds to

altercations in real life with excessive violence.

It is uncommon for women to express the level of brutal, graphic, and remorseless violence Amy inflicts upon her victims. In *Push Comes to Shove: New Images of Aggressive Women* Maud Lavin argues that "[a]ggression is an essential ingredient in effecting messy but constructive change" (107). Through an exploration of the film *Kill Bill,* Lavin investigates how films featuring violent women can encourage viewers to accept one's own aggression as the key to "healthy, constructive social interaction with others" and narcissistic moments that contribute to one's happiness (123). She goes on to explain that this acceptance has "not historically been culturally condoned" for American women which significantly limits the "possibility of imagining one's own full and messy and excessive potential for aggression" (122). Prior to Amy Dunne, fictional women who engaged in excessive violence and aggression had to fall into one of two categories: First, a woman could be violent if her actions were rational and justified—this usually transpired through the rape revenge narrative (Coulhard 163). According to Carol J. Clover, within the rape revenge narrative, "women seek their own revenge—usually on their own behalf, but sometimes on behalf of a sister (literal or figurative) who has been murdered or disabled in an act of sexual violence" (138). One of the most well-known rape revenge narratives is found in the 1978 film, *I Spit on Your Grave.* Following Jennifer's rape, she proceeds on a quest to viciously axe, castrate, and hang her rapists. Referencing *I Spit on Your Grave,* Clover points to the various ways rape revenge narratives reveal gendered power dynamics. Interestingly, Clover observes that female victims in rape revenge narratives take on masculine traits during their quest to avenge themselves (144). Second, a woman could be violent if the effects of her violence were not visible to the audience. In "Return of the 'Angry Woman'" Lisa Purse notes that physically active female protagonists such as superheroes and action heroes' "'unladylike' bouts of violence are framed in ways that locate her at a distance

from real life" (190). She continues that almost all signs of physical violence including blood, marks, pain, and broken bones inflicted by a violent female are not visible so that "moments of physical activity do not, then, intersect with more realistic notions of bodily consequences of violence, as this would unbalance the marketable hybrid formula of active hero and erotic object that the so-called 'action-babe'represents" (190). Clearly, showing the blood and pain suffered by the victim of a violent female disrupts socially constructed notions of femininity. What is interesting about Amy Dunne is that she does not fall into either one of these categories. Amy's violence is not justified or rational. The punishments Amy doles out usually exceed the crime and she is violent without needing to avenge a rape. In addition, in the film adaptation of *Gone Girl,* Amy's violence is not sanitized for viewers. Thus, Amy signals new possibilities for violent women in American popular culture.

Amy's aggression takes several forms in *Gone Girl.* For the most part, Amy harms her victims' reputations. One of her first victims was a childhood friend named, Hilary. When the kids at school began preferring spending time with Hilary over Amy, Amy threw herself down a flight of stairs and blamed the incident on Hilary (Flynn 291). Following the accident, Hilary was forced to move out-of-state where Amy tracked her down and sent a letter detailing all the ways Hilary betrayed their friendship (Flynn 292). Another of Amy's victims is Tommy whom she accused of rape. Tommy and Amy dated briefly, but when Tommy realized he was no longer attracted to her and began dating another woman, Amy decided to punish him. One night, Amy seduced Tommy, they engaged in consensual sex, and then she reported that he raped her (Flynn 277). The first time Nick discovers Amy's passion of doling out punishments, she took down a truck driver. The truck driver flipped Amy off because she would not let him merge in

front of her. In response, Amy called the number on the back of the truck to report his bad

behavior. According to Nick,

> two months later I walked into our bedroom, and Amy was on the phone, repeating the
>
> license plate. She had a whole story…she said it was her fourth call. She said she'd even
>
> researched the company's routes so she could pick the correct highways for her fake
>
> near-accidents. She thought of everything. She was really proud. She was going to get
>
> that guy fired. (Flynn 254)

In these examples, it is not only Amy's lies, but continued dedication to destroying her victims

that distinguishes her as an excessively aggressive woman. Amy exhibits her most violent

behavior against her teenage boyfriend, Desi. When Amy's original plan to frame Nick goes

astray and she finds herself without money, Amy calls Desi to her rescue. While staying in

Desi's lake house, Amy realizes that his care is actually a form of control. He controls the food

she eats so she will lose weight, he dyes her hair back to blonde, and he picks out her clothing

(Flynn 349). She states,

> I look at Desi with outright disgust now. Sometimes I feel my skin must be hot with
>
> repulsion and with the effort to keep that repulsion hidden. I'd forgotten about him. The
>
> manipulation, the purring persuasion, the delicate bullying. A man who finds guilt erotic.
>
> And if he doesn't get his way, he'll pull his little levers and set his punishment in motion.
>
> (Flynn 362)

When she catches an interview where Nick begs her to return home, Amy decides she would

rather be with Nick and devises a plan to escape Desi. In an effort to lure Desi to his death, Amy

pretends to be a victim who needs Desi's affection. After she seduces him and—in the film—

she slits his throat with a box cutter while he climaxes. Upon returning to Nick, drenched in

Desi's blood, Amy fabricates a story wherein Desi kidnapped Amy, tied her to a bed, and repeatedly raped her (Flynn 375-380).

Interestingly, like her recognition of the Cool Girl performance, Amy is aware of the rape revenge narrative and exploits it to her advantage. In this sense, her character subverts the rape revenge narrative by recognizing its existence and using it to absolve herself and Nick. Additionally, the graphic, intense scene where Amy slits Desi's throat without remorse challenges the convention dictating that women's violence should be free from displaying physical markers. Instead, audiences are forced to observe Desi's blood oozing from his neck while a blood-soaked Amy casually slips away from his lake house (see Figure 2).

Of course, many will probably disagree with the assertion that Amy Dunne's violence challenges the patriarchal system. For instance, Lisa Coulhard's essay "Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence" presents an interesting argument involving the depiction of violent women. Coulhard states that, "[*Kill Bill*'s] depiction of female violence is entwined with discourses of idealized feminine whiteness, heterosexuality, victimhood, sacrificial purity, maternal devotion, and eroticized, exhibitionistic, sexual availability" (158). Coulhard believes that "the violent woman of contemporary popular culture does not upset but endorses the status quo" (173). My reading challenges Coulhard's assessment of the violent woman because Amy Dunne recognizes that gender roles promoted by the status quo are merely social constructions and uses them to her advantage. Rather than upholding the status quo, Amy works within the system in order to dismantle the system. Amy's ability to work within the system and to manipulate dominant narratives allows her to escape punishment for her crimes.

Figure 2: A bloody Amy Dunne after murdering Desi. Screen Grab from David Fincher's *Gone Girl.*

At the conclusion of the novel, Amy returns to Nick—covered in Desi's blood—as a hero. Nick is exonerated of murder charges and everyone believes Amy killed Desi as an act of self-defense. With Nick and Amy back together and a baby on the way, the story should end on a happy note. Like Beth in *Fatal Attraction,* Amy kills in order to return to Nick and restore the nuclear family. However, the ending of *Gone Girl* is sinister in tone. Nick knows Amy is lying about Desi and he knows she tried to frame him for her murder. But Nick cannot leave Amy now that her story of heroic survival is circulating in the media. She takes complete control of their narrative. She reminds Nick he cannot write a book exposing Amy's lies because she is writing a book about their love story (Flynn 409). Amy ends the novel on a haunting note about unconditional love:

> I was told love should be unconditional. That's the rule, everyone says so. But if love
>
> has no boundaries, no limits, no conditions, why should anyone try to do the right thing
>
> ever? If I know I am loved no matter what, where is the challenge? ... Love should
>
> require both partners to be their very best at all times. Unconditional love is an
>
> undisciplined love, and as we all have seen, undisciplined love is disastrous. (Flynn 414)

Amy ends the novel promising she will never stop challenging Nick and leaves the reader feeling as though her next elaborate scheme is right around the corner. The nuclear family is together because Amy is blackmailing Nick and pretending to be an abduction and rape survivor in the media. Although Nick and Amy are together at the end of the novel, they did not reach this decision mutually. Rather, Amy assumes control over Nick—she insists they will remain together and assumes complete control of Nick's narrative. It is clear that their marriage will not result in both Nick and Amy living happily ever after. It is only a matter of time before Amy embarks on another violent rampage.

Conclusion

While classic and *neo-noir* cycles focus on postwar anxieties and women's increased desire for sex, power, and money, Amy marks an important shift in the representation of *femme fatales*. Her superior intellect, graphic, remorseless violence, competitive nature, and the fact that her anger is directed at the entire system, rather than a single individual separates Amy from earlier representations of the *femme fatale.* Through her elaborate schemes which demonstrate a supreme understanding of the system, Amy is able to exonerate herself from punishment. She not only exposes the Cool Girl performance, she also reveals how modern femininity requires women to constantly wear and remove a series of masks. Thus, by the novel's conclusion, Amy reiterates that becoming a wife is a "strange thing" because it requires women to hide their true selves—something she is no longer willing to do with Nick. She decides she will not suppress her anger, she will not ignore her violent nature, and she will not allow Nick to exercise power over her. Whereas previous depictions of angry, violent women conclude with the woman being silenced through marriage, punishment, or death it is Nick—not Amy—who is silenced by the end of *Gone Girl.*

CHAPTER THREE. FROM CHICK LIT TO GASLIT: UNDOING IDEALIZED FEMININITY

IN *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*

> "After all, there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (*Bridget Jones's Diary* 20).
>
> "When someone leaves you, apart from missing them, apart from the fact that the whole little world you've created together collapses, and that everything you see or do reminds you of them, the worst is the thought that they tried you out and, in the end, the whole sum of parts adds up to you got stamped REJECT by the one you love. How can you not be left with the personal confidence of a passed-over British Rail sandwich?" (*Bridget Jones's Diary* 193).

With the emergence of postfeminist culture in the 1980s and 1990s came the introduction of a new genre of female-oriented literature—chick lit. Characterized by pink covers with shopping bags and shoes, chick lit usually features a single white, middle-class, heterosexual woman who is in desperate search of true love. Stephanie Harzewski describes chick lit as, "lighthearted fiction of women, with strong ties to romantic comedy, the confessional, and, to a lesser degree, social satire" (xi). Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young add, "chick lit features single women in their twenties and thirties navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships" (3). Chick lit's popularity in the United States and the United Kingdom began with Helen Fielding's 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary.* *Bridget Jones's Diary* follows a single woman in her thirties who obsessively tracks her weight and is in desperate search for a husband before her biological clock runs out. Fielding's novel is now a major franchise consisting of a sequel novel and three films. Soon after the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary,* similar novels were released featuring single women who struggle with

their careers and search for true love such as Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada,* Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus' *The Nanny Diaries,* and Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic.* Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon note that while chick lit characters are "presented as independent working women enjoying financial and sexual freedom…they are also portrayed as neurotic and preoccupied with finding a man and scrutinizing the size of their bodies" (85). Due to its postfeminist themes such as the disavowal of feminism, the desire for marriage, and consumerism, chick lit has received mixed responses. Genz and Brabon explore the various responses to chick lit observing some critics dismiss the genre as "trashy fiction" that undoes the work of feminism while others praise it for "exploring the complexities of twenty-first-century femaleness, femininity, and feminism" (84, 87). Chick lit fails to critically engage with women's struggles under the patriarchy by concluding with a happy ending. Most chick lit heroines find a solution to their career problems and fall in love with the man of their dreams by the novel's end. Therefore, chick lit functions as "an anxious genre that does not know what to do with the problems and paradoxes it unearths about contemporary women's lives and experiences" (Genz and Brabon 88).

However, the recent proliferation of woman-centered psychological thrillers such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* respond to chick lit's fun and lighthearted approach to contemporary women's issues by featuring dark, violent, and uncomfortable plots and characters. Novels such as *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* mark a shift away from the playfulness of chick lit to a more somber and gritty approach to women's issues. Claire Fallon claims *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* stand out as novels that depict "the drama found within women's domestic lives" and "unearth the roots of women's pain and trauma" ("Why Everyone's Talking About 'The Girl on the Train'"). In this chapter I examine

how *The Girl on the Train* responds to chick lit by returning to the feminist politics that

postfeminism dismisses. Using Angela McRobbie's theories on postfeminism, I analyze how *The*

Girl on the Train's three main characters—Rachel, Anna, and Megan—speak to society's

ubiquitous and pervasive sexism and the dangerous realities of navigating modern life as a

female. Next, rather than pathologizing Rachel, Anna, and Megan, I explain how the

idealization of femininity that appears in chick lit and other representations of women in popular

culture is responsible for eliciting negative feelings among groups of women. As I will discuss,

Rachel, Anna, and Megan are depicted as being envious of each other in the novel. Therefore,

using the work of Sianne Ngai, I unpack how Rachel, Anna, and Megan's expression of envy has

political potential and reveals gender inequalities in *The Girl on the Train.* Finally, I argue that

unlike chick lit novels, *The Girl on the Train* critically engages with contemporary women's

issues by concluding with an unsettling ending. Whereas chick lit novels are resolved with the

heroine falling in love with the man of her dreams, *The Girl on the Train* concludes with its

female characters grappling with the trauma caused by Tom's involvement in their lives.[1]

Many scholars label or have labeled Bridget Jones as the quintessential chick lit

protagonist. Bridget is characterized as a thirty-two-year-old woman who is fearful of spending

her life alone. When *Bridget Jones's Diary* was first released, women celebrated Bridget as an

iconic figure who resembled their own experiences with singlehood and dating in an era marked

by an unprecedented number of divorces and an increase in the number of single person

households. Bridget's quirky personality and self-deprecating humor made her a relatable

protagonist for women who also repeatedly fail to find love (Gill and Herdieckoff 490). Women

identified with Bridget's articulation of the "Singleton"—"a thirty-something woman who is

employed, financially independent, sexually assertive, and (unhappily) single" (Genz and Brabon

84). As Imelda Whelehan explains, women readers feel "so much better about their own attempts at self-improvement" after witnessing Bridget's pathetic attempts to make herself more appealing to men. Bridget's fear of remaining single is so intense that she tries new diet fads, reads dating advice columns in *Cosmo,* and endures painful beauty routines such as waxing (Whelehan 180). Bridget is afraid of becoming someone men will not want to marry like Alex Forrest from *Fatal Attraction.* In fact, the 2001 film adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary,* features a scene where a recently dumped Bridget sits on her couch in her pajamas, drinking vodka while watching *Fatal Attraction.* Bridget watches in horror as Alex's dead body slumps into the bathtub and realizes that she could possibly meet the same fate—especially considering that her boyfriend, Daniel, left Bridget because he is engaged to another woman. The only thing Bridget desires is to become the kind of woman a man wants to marry. Angela McRobbie encapsulates Bridget in the following passage from her book *The Aftermath of Feminism:*

> [Bridget Jones] is self-mocking, self-disparaging, and her witty observations of the social life around her create a warmth and an audience who is almost immediately on her side, as she negotiates the codes of contemporary sexual relationships. Although she constantly defines herself as a failure, and even plays dumb…she is also aware of every wrong step she takes, scolding herself along the way. Much of the comic effect evolves around her daily attempts to become the sort of woman who she thinks will be the kind of woman men want to marry…The audience is wholly on her side. She ought to be able to find the right man, for the reason that she has negotiated that tricky path which requires being independent, earning her own living, standing up for herself against demeaning comments, remaining funny and good humoured throughout, without being angry or too

critical of men, without foregoing her femininity, her desires for love and motherhood,

her sense of humour, and her appealing vulnerability. (McRobbie 22)

McRobbie's assessment of Bridget Jones highlights her overall likability and relatability as a

character. Despite her constant errors and self-loathing, audiences root for Bridget because she

represents what a woman should be—she's funny, she never expresses extreme anger, she's

vulnerable, and she desires her own nuclear family. It is precisely because Bridget does not stray

away from contemporary conceptions of femininity that she is rewarded at the end of the novel

with a man who loves her just the way she is.

Rachel Watson, the main character of Paula Hawkins' novel *The Girl on the Train* is a

darker version of Bridget Jones. Like Bridget Jones, Rachel desires to be with the man of her

dreams and to become a mother. But the man of Rachel's dreams—Tom—divorced her because

she cannot produce children and replaced Rachel with a new wife, Anna. Soon after Tom and

Anna married, they had a daughter named Evie. Rachel blames herself for the end of her

marriage. The shame she feels as an infertile woman leads Rachel to develop a severe addiction

to alcohol, an addiction she believes contributed to the divorce. Although both Rachel and

Bridget are self-loathing and blame themselves for being single, Bridget is more endearing than

Rachel. Rachel does not maintain her humor or remain in good spirits. Her constant depressed

and inebriated state as well as her compulsion to lie causes Rachel to lose her career. Rachel

laments her singlehood in the following passage:

I felt so isolated in my misery. I became lonely, so I drank a bit, and then a bit more, and

then I became lonelier, because no one likes being around a drunk…I liked my job, but I

didn't have a glittering career, and even if I had, let's be honest: women are still only

valued for two things—their looks and their role as mothers. I'm not beautiful, and I

can't have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless. (Hawkins 79)

While audiences laugh along when Bridget is critical of herself, there is something deeper and

more disturbing about Rachel's poor self-image. Whereas Bridget believes her issues can be

resolved by buying the right outfit and snagging the right man, Rachel's issues stem from her

lack of choices. Rachel understands that she needs to follow society's prescribed script if she

wants to be considered socially acceptable. She is aware that society measures her worth based

on her ability to meet feminine beauty standards and her ability to produce children.

Additionally, she knows that no matter what choices she makes, no one will find her desirable.

Rachel states,

I am not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I'm off-putting in some way. It's

not just that I've put on weight, or that my face is puffy from the drinking and the lack of

sleep; it's as if people can see the damage written all over me, can see it in my face, the

way I hold myself, the way I move. (Hawkins 11)

Rachel's undesirability cannot be fixed by choosing to make healthier lifestyle choices such as

giving up alcohol and dieting.   Rachel's problems—along with Anna and Megan's problems

that we shall see—require a return to the feminist politics that postfeminist chick lit dismisses.

Chick lit texts including *Bridget Jones's Diary* are marked by a disavowal of feminism. Imelda

Whelehan explains that chick lit consciously dismisses feminism due to its condemnation of

marriage and its perceived support of single life. According to Whelehan, "chick lit is

committed to showing the obverse—that the only happy ending to aimless singledom is

coupledom of the quite traditional kind" (188). While the feminist movement of 1960s and

1970s focused on the formation of the autonomous woman—a woman who can support herself

financially without the necessity of a husband and who can exercise control over her own reproductive capabilities—chick lit reinforces traditional values but suggests that women are empowered to make their own choices regarding marriage and motherhood. Therefore, as McRobbie points out, chick lit texts such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* write off feminism as a thing of the past while simultaneously relying on feminist vocabulary like "empowerment" and "choice" (36-37). The point is that chick lit celebrates marriage and motherhood as the key to happiness in a woman's life. However, *The Girl on the Train* brings feminist concerns of violence against women and institutional misogyny back into focus. The novel challenges chick lit by depicting the ways marriage and motherhood continue to be a source of pain and suffering for women. *The Girl on the Train* also demonstrates how these institutions are presented to women as requirements rather than options if they want to be recognized as truly feminine beings.

   The Girl on the Train marks a major shift away from chick lit's positive portrayal of marriage and motherhood. Like chick lit protagonists, Rachel, Anna, and Megan operate under the belief that marriage and motherhood are essential in a woman's path to happiness and fulfillment. However, Rachel, Anna, and Megan fail to experience pure marital and maternal bliss. Instead, Rachel, Anna, and Megan feel disillusioned with their roles as wives and mothers. For instance, Anna—Tom's new wife—decides to leave her career as a successful real estate agent to stay at home full time with Evie. On the one hand, Anna is incredibly proud of the family she's formed with Tom. While strolling down the street with Tom and Evie, Anna imagines everyone they pass admires Anna's family and wishes they also had a "beautiful family" (Hawkins 138). On the other hand, Anna misses her life before marriage and children when she was Tom's mistress (Hawkins 233). She is jealous of Tom's ability to leave the house

every morning with a sense of purpose. She realizes that as a mother, her work is no longer

valued and she admits that her life as a mother and wife is boring. Anna confesses,

> When…[Evie] was playing happily by herself, I let myself cry for a minute. I allow
>
> myself these tears sparingly, only ever when Tom's not here, just a few moments to let it
>
> all out. It was when I was washing my face afterwards, when I saw how tired I looked,
>
> how blotchy and bedraggled and bloody awful, that I felt it again—that need to put on a
>
> dress and high hells, to blow-dry my hair and put on some makeup and walk down the
>
> street and have men turn and look at me. (Hawkins 233)

Whereas the chick lit protagonist longs for the day she becomes a wife and mother, Anna wishes

to return to singledom. For Anna, the thrill of chasing the man of her dreams—which is bound

up in chick lit's emphasis on consumerism (for Anna, feeling empowered is wearing a sexy

dress, high heels, and making herself attractive to men)—is more fulfilling than being Tom's

wife and Evie's mother. Anna's secret desire to return to singledom reverses the chick lit

narrative. She was happier as a single, independent woman with a successful career. In this

sense, *The Girl on the Train* reverts to the feminist politics chick lit dismisses. Instead of

glamourizing marriage and motherhood as the key to women's happiness, *The Girl on the Train*

points to marriage and motherhood as oppressive institutions that contribute to women's

unhappiness. The Singleton's lifestyle is more appealing to Anna after she realizes her work as a

housewife is not valued by society.

Anna's wish to return to singledom is echoed by Megan Hipwell. Megan Hipwell's

marriage to Scott Hipwell is marked by her expression of claustrophobia and a desire to run.

Megan is the only character in *The Girl on the Train* who somewhat resembles *Gone Girl's* Amy

Dunne. The most obvious connection between *Gone Girl's* Amy Dunne and *The Girl on the*

Train's Megan Hipwell is that they both disappear. Because Megan's disappearance functions as the main plotline in *The Girl on the Train* her voice is available to readers using flashbacks— much like Amy Dunne's diary entries in the first part of *Gone Girl*. Although Megan does not exude the same level of intense violence and brilliance as Amy Dunne, she is labeled a "mistress of self-reinvention" due to her ability to easily take on different roles and identities such as the "[r]unaway, lover, wife, waitress, gallery manager, [and] nanny" (Hawkins 20). Megan is also the only character who directly challenges normative femininity by repeatedly cheating on her husband and openly admitting she does not want to be a wife. Married life is boring and she cannot handle staying at home all day. When the gallery she worked at permanently closes, her mundane life as an unemployed housewife starts to take a toll on her emotional health. In the following passage, Megan illustrates the stifling reality of married life and her desire for something more:

> When did this house become so bloody small? When did my life become so boring? Is this really what I wanted? I can't remember. All I know is that a few months ago I was feeling better, and now I can't think and I can't sleep and I can't draw and the urge to run is becoming overwhelming. At night when I lie awake I can hear it, quiet but unrelenting, undeniable: a whisper in my head, *Slip away.* When I close my eyes, my head is filled with images of past and future lives, the things I dreamed I wanted, the things I had and threw away, I can't get comfortable, because every way I turn I run into dead ends: the closed gallery, the houses on this road, the stifling attentions of the tedious Pilates women, the track at the end of the garden with its trains, always taking someone else to somewhere else, reminding me over and over and over, a dozen times a day, that I'm staying put. I feel as though I'm going mad. (Hawkins 162-163)

Megan's disillusionment with married life causes her to question why she made the decision to get married in the first place. By asking herself if marriage is what she really wanted, Megan problematizes the belief that in a postfeminist culture, women freely enter marriage and motherhood through their own personal choices. She brings into question whether marriage and motherhood are requirements for women to be considered socially acceptable women. As Diane Negra points out, postfeminist popular culture celebrates marriage and motherhood as "milestones in the normative female lifecycle" and spreads the idea that women "without these experiences are temporally unmapped" (50). Thus, if women choose not to become wives and mothers, they are out-of-sync with the requirements of normative femininity. Based on Negra's observation, social pressures place women in a difficult position—they can either conform to the requirements of normative femininity or face social and political repercussions for deviating from the norm.

However, Megan disrupted the "normative female lifecycle" before she married Scott. Megan confesses to her therapist, Dr. Kamal that she gave birth to a daughter when she was only seventeen-years-old. After Megan ran away from home, she met a man named Mac who took her in and cared for her. She admits that she and Mac took a lot of drugs but it was one the happiest times of her life (Hawkins 166). While she was pregnant with Libby, Megan did not know what she was doing—she did not see a doctor, she did not eat properly, and she did not take prenatal vitamins. She even gave birth to Libby at home rather than in a hospital. Sadly, Megan confesses that one day, while trying to keep herself and Libby warm in the bath, Megan fell asleep and Libby drowned. Libby's (accidental) death prevents Megan from ever being able to meet the requirements of normative femininity. She knows she is already marked as a socially unacceptable woman and therefore Megan has no problem engaging in other behaviors that

society deems "unfeminine." To add excitement to her boring life, Megan has an affair with Tom. Although she knows it is wrong to cheat on Scott with Tom, she decides to indulge herself and continue the affair. Megan acknowledges that men who cheat on their spouses are not held to the same moral standards as women who cheat on their spouses. She openly admits that she will not deprive herself of this affair because it is the only source of excitement in her life:

> I told myself I wouldn't do it again, not after last time, but then I saw him and wanted him and I thought, why not? I don't see why I should have to restrict myself, lots of people don't. Men don't. I don't want to hurt anybody, but you have to be true to yourself, don't you? That's all I'm doing, being true to my real self, the self nobody knows—not Scott, not Kamal, no one. (Hawkins 46)

The only woman in *The Girl on the Train* who engages in behavior without fearing repercussions for her actions, Megan pays the ultimate price and is brutally murdered by Tom. When Tom discovers Megan is pregnant and the baby might be his, he beats her to death and buries her in the forest. As the most desirable man in novel, Tom's involvement in Rachel, Anna, and Megan's lives is the source of their trauma rather than the source of their happiness. Tom's presence in Rachel, Anna, and Megan's lives disrupts chick lit's narrative that a man is the answer to woman's problems.

Rachel's experience with marriage also stands apart from chick lit narratives because she was married to a compulsive liar, serial adulterer, and cold-blooded killer. While Bridget Jones fantasizes about her dream wedding, Rachel Watson copes with the post-traumatic-stress-disorder that is the result of her marriage to Tom. Tom physically and emotionally abused Rachel while they were married and gaslights[2] Rachel into believing she was the perpetrator of violence in their relationship. He manipulates Rachel by claiming she beat him on multiple

occasions while she was drunk. Because Rachel suffers from frequent blackouts while intoxicated, her memories of the beatings are fuzzy. Thus, Rachel relies on Tom to recall what she did during gaps in her memory. As a way to manipulate Rachel, he constantly fabricates stories. His lies range from her humiliating him at a coworker's summer barbeque to Rachel swinging a golf club at his head (Hawkins 13). Although she accepts Tom's accounts as truth, she feels unsettled as violent behavior is not within her character. Rachel shrugs off her suspicions and deals with the "anguish of shame" she places upon herself for ruining her marriage (Hawkins 13). As Abramson explains, gaslighting leaves its target feeling lost and worthless as they begin to question their own perceptions of reality. According to Abramson, "[a] gaslighted woman has lost, albeit partially and temporarily, *herself*...she's grieving the loss of her independent perspective, her ability to form and maintain her own reactions or perceptions" (23). In other words, gaslighting silences women from questioning their own perceived inequalities. Tom's gaslighting causes Rachel to internalize her rage and to blame herself for their marital problems rather than acknowledging that Tom is a misogynist who manipulates women to control them. Tom's gaslighting of Rachel symbolizes the way contemporary women are gaslit by patriarchal society at large.

Contemporary women who experience misogyny are led to believe that they have done something to cause this behavior—there is something wrong with them rather than with the culture at large. Kristin Anderson notes that in a postfeminist, neoliberal culture, women are expected to assume individual responsibility for the inequalities they experience and to accept that inequalities "are something of one's own making" rather than the result of society's pervasive sexism (5). Approaching inequalities at an individual level rather than a social level prevents women from coming together to talk about their shared experiences of gender

oppression. Angela McRobbie writes about women's inability to come together in a postfeminist

culture. McRobbie uses the term "disarticulation" to describe the "force which devalues, or

negates and makes unthinkable the very basis of coming-together on the assumption widely

promoted that there is no longer any need for such actions" (26). She maintains that

disarticulation "displaces possible solidarities" between common voices and foils any attempts

for women to band together (27). As a result, institutions and regimes continue spreading sexist

rhetoric without challenge.

At first glance, it appears as though the women in *The Girl on the Train* represent the

anti-feminist sentiment that is the result of disarticulation. The envy they feel towards each other

makes their relationship seem like it is based on conflict rather than cooperation. On the

contrary, Sianne Ngai theorizes that one possible way women can come together to form

coalitions and resist sexist institutions is through their expression of ugly feelings such as envy.

Ngai observes envy as an emotion that is easily "dismissed as an overreaction, as delusional or

even hysterical" and "lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or

responding to social disparities." She finds society's dismissal of envy's political potential

especially odd considering envy is "the *only* agonistic emotion defined as having a perceived

inequality as its object" (128). It is precisely envy's feminization and moralization that leads

society to dismiss it as an unjustified emotion. According to Ngai,

> envy's concomitant feminization and moral devaluation points to a larger cultural anxiety
>
> over antagonistic responses to inequality that are made specifically by
>
> women…especially when it involves representations of antagonistic relations *between*
>
> women. (130)

To put it another way, envy's association with women's feelings and its interrogation of gender inequalities makes society feel uncomfortable. Thus, Ngai asks us to reconsider envy for its political potential. Her analysis of *Single White Female* refuses to focus on the "negative and unhappy bonds between women" because this focus limits the ways the film can be read. Instead, she reads *Single White Female* to investigate the "importance of antagonism in these alliances" (139).

It is easy to focus on the negative bonds between Rachel, Anna, and Megan without considering why their antagonism towards each other is important. Upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that there is more going on between Rachel, Anna, and Megan's envy and hatred towards each other than petty disputes among females. Ngai's analysis of *Single White Female* provides us with a preliminary theory for analyzing the relationship between the female characters in *The Girl on the Train.* Although the antagonism between Hedy and Allie is more direct and vindictive than the antagonism between Rachel, Anna, and Megan, *Single White Female's* interrogation of idealized femininity is mirrored in *The Girl on the Train. Single White Female* pits idealized femininity (Allie) against a threatening femininity (Hedy) (130-131). Hedy's emulation of Allie "is represented in the film as an unstable mode of admiration that easily slides into aggression, or, more specifically, as a mimetic behavior that initiates a trajectory from the reverence of an ideal to full-blown antagonism toward the subject embodying the ideal" (141). Idealized femininity is meant to be envied. In other words, women should want to be the ideal. However, the moment a woman acts toward the ideal, the act is depicted as "troubling or problematic" (141-142). But she wants us to consider how "emulation does not necessarily entail wishing to *be* that someone" or wishing to "take over the social or symbolic position he or she occupies in order to enjoy its privileges." Instead, Ngai argues emulation "can

be a form of aggressive *self-assertion:* performed with the purpose of causing the other anxiety or distress…by rendering her own identity unstable" (142-143). Therefore, Ngai works to separate emulation from identification to show how emulation can function as a way to "forcefully assert one's difference from the other whom one emulates" (143).

Take, for instance, the scene in *The Girl on the Train* where Rachel breaks into Anna and Tom's house while Anna is sleeping and takes Evie. Now that Rachel and Tom are divorced and she lost her job, Rachel takes the train into London every day to gaze upon the street where she used to live with Tom. Anna does not like that Rachel stalks their house every day and feels threatened by her lingering presence. Anna constantly asserts her superiority over Rachel claiming she is more attractive than her and stating Tom would have gone mad if he did not leave Rachel for Anna (Hawkins 233). In this situation, Anna represents idealized femininity while Rachel represents threatening femininity because she is an unemployed alcoholic, who is divorced and cannot produce children. The scene where Anna catches Rachel holding Evie outside their home could easily be read as Rachel attempting to become Anna because Rachel wants Anna's life. However, if we approach this scene using Ngai, we see there is something else going on in this moment. Rachel destabilizes Anna's identity. In the act of holding Anna's baby, Rachel transforms *Anna* rather than transforming herself because Rachel destabilizes the ideal. Anna is transformed after Rachel takes her baby which is further evidenced by Anna's eventual realization that Tom cheated on *her* with Megan. In other words, Rachel makes Anna identify with her rather than Rachel identifying with Anna. Further, when Rachel destabilizes the ideal by holding Anna's baby, Rachel does not become Anna; she does not make herself *one* with Anna. Rather, Rachel's emulation of Anna symbolizes the "process of making twoness" (Ngai 153). Rachel does not become the ideal when she holds Anna's baby. Despite Rachel's

unfeminine qualities, Anna watches as Rachel adequately performs the role of mother. The ease

with which Rachel enters Anna's house and takes her child symbolizes how Anna's identity is

replicable. With Anna's baby in Rachel's arms, Anna is no longer exemplary (Ngai 160).

Anna's realization that she is easily copied makes her feel anxious. She even goes as far as to

call Rachel "dangerous" (Hawkins 156). But for Anna, Rachel's danger does not lie in the fact

that she attempted to kidnap a child (the story she tells Tom and everyone else); Rachel is

dangerous because she makes what Anna represents (idealized femininity) fail.

The image of ideal femininity fails in *The Girl on the Train.* It fails over, and over, and

over again and again. Aside from Anna's realization that she is easily copied, Megan also fails

as the ideal woman. As noted earlier, Rachel takes the train into London every day and observes

the neighborhood she used to live in with Tom. One house in particular grabs Rachel's

attention—Megan and Scott's house. As Rachel sits on the train, she fantasizes about Megan

and Scott's perfect relationship. Rachel imagines her own chick lit fantasy where Megan and

Scott are crazy in love with each other and have a perfect marriage. She even goes as far as to

transform Megan and Scott into her own chick lit characters, naming them Jess and Jason. But

the chick lit fantasy Rachel plays out in her head while riding the train cannot be sustained.

When Rachel witnesses Megan kissing her therapist, Dr. Kamal she realizes Megan is not the

embodiment of ideal femininity. Outside of Rachel's fantasy, Megan is unhappy with her

marriage to Scott which leads her to have multiple affairs and Megan has a secret traumatic past

that entails the death of her daughter. Thus, like Anna, Megan represents what Ngai refers to as

a "bad example" of idealized femininity. I agree with Ngai's concept of the bad example,

especially when she notes that,

If a bad example is an example that destabilizes the argument it is supposed to bolster, or constitutes the idea it is merely supposed to reflect, it could be argued that *all* examples are potentially bad examples…this in turn suggests that bad examples of *X* might be good for group *X,* since they compel its members to constantly question, reevaluate, and even redefine what it is they supposedly exemplify. (165-166)

All the women in *The Girl on the Train* are bad examples of idealized femininity. The fact that all of them fail to perform idealized femininity suggests that maybe they are not to blame for their inability to meet the ideal. Instead, maybe the problem is the idealized vision of femininity that these women are trying to achieve. Therefore, envy is a politically motivated emotion because it functions as the catalyst for interrogation. Rachel, Anna, and Megan begin to question, reevaluate, and redefine idealized femininity after they envied a female subject who turned out to be a bad example.

Although the women in *The Girl on the Train* are antagonistic towards each other, their antagonism ultimately reveals idealized femininity is a myth. In this regard, *The Girl on the Train* includes the same antagonistic female homosociality found in *Single White Female.* By the novel's end, the women in *The Girl on the Train* bring into question whether idealized femininity is something they should admire or if it is something threatening and harmful to women as a group (Ngai 163). Therefore, like Ngai's concluding thoughts on *Single White Female, The Girl on the Train* uses envy to make a point about the possibility of a female coalition that is not based on "similar love for the same object" but is instead based on functioning as "examples that do not properly exemplify" and through their "disidentification" with each other (Ngai 168). In other words, we can read *The Girl on the Train* as a text that depicts how women form coalitions based on their inability to meet patriarchal expectations of women. What makes *The Girl on the*

Train stand apart from chick lit texts is that Rachel, Anna, and Megan are not bound by their shared love of married life and motherhood. Rather, their bond is the result of their shared trauma and the fact that none of them can become the kind of woman patriarchal society expects them to be.

Unlike chick lit novels, *The Girl on the Train* does not include a tidy wrap-up where Rachel solves all her problems and lives happily ever after. In contrast, Paula Hawkins denies her audience the satisfaction of a happy end to Rachel's storyline. The fact that the novel closes with Rachel admitting she plans to get back on the train in the morning raises several questions regarding women's status in patriarchal system. Are we—as a society—doomed to repeat our mistakes? Will women ever be freed from the oppressive patriarchal system? Even though the novel concludes ambiguously, Rachel's actions are not translated back into patriarchal norms because she is not cured of her trauma or looking to enter a new relationship. For this reason, I believe the ending challenges the patriarchal system by resisting a clear resolution. Like the negative feelings that cannot be easily managed, Rachel's issues are not easily resolved. Therefore, *The Girl on the Train* exposes the postfeminist concept of domestic peace as a myth by refusing to normalize women's domestic lives. Rachel, Anna, and Megan do not experience eternal bliss as wives and mothers by the novel's end; on the contrary, they are all traumatized. Thus, readers are confronted with the horrors of women's domestic lives and are forced to grapple with Rachel and Anna's continued pain.

NOTES

[1] It is important to note that it is not my intention to discredit chick lit or to ignore the many nuances of the genre. Instead, my aim is to point out some of the differences between chick lit protagonists and the female characters in *The Girl on the Train.* In addition, I aim to show the what chick lit considers to be women's issues and how the genre approaches those issues. Finally, this is not a comprehensive study of chick lit as that would be outside the scope of this project.

[2] "Gaslighting" is a term that comes from the 1944 film, *Gaslight.* In the film, a man manipulates his wife into believing she is going insane so that he can have her sent to a mental institution. For more information on gaslighting, refer to Kate Abramson's article, "Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting."

CONCLUSION

Amelia from *The Babadook,* Amy from *Gone Girl,* and Rachel, Anna, and Megan from *The Girl on the Train* are the antithesis of the postfeminist female protagonists we have grown accustomed to in chick lit and chick flicks. As angry, depressed, envious, and violent women, these characters stand in stark contrast to the bubbly, happy, and positive protagonists postfeminist popular culture encourages real women to emulate. But what makes *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* so surprising is that these texts do not depoliticize or dismiss their female characters for conveying negative emotions. The fact that women's negative affects are privileged in these texts is especially shocking because, as Ngai points out, "forms of negative affect are more likely to be stripped of their critical implications when the impassioned subject is female" (130). By acknowledging the negative affects of female characters, *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* call our attention back to the feminist politics which chick flicks and chick lit ignore. They do not trick viewers and readers into believing the solution to a woman's unhappiness is a shopping spree, makeover, marrying the man of her dreams, or giving birth to the perfect child. Instead, the texts conclude without a tidy wrap-up that places female characters back within the confines of a patriarchal system. They remain outside patriarchal expectations by dealing with their darker affects long after the text has concluded.

The ongoing presence of Amelia, Amy, Anna, and Rachel's darker feelings is precisely why these female characters are engaging in a form of political resistance. Unlike chick flick films and chick lit novels which either ignore or downplay the seriousness of systemic sexism, *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* refuse to gloss over issues associated with marriage, motherhood, and ideal femininity including the ways society expects women to repress

their rage. By featuring Amelia feeding the monster in her basement, Amy threatening Nick if he publishes a book giving his side of the story, and Rachel getting back on the train, these texts continue to subvert and disrupt expectations. In other words, the female protagonists in *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* subvert and disrupt expectations because their negative emotions are not silenced by the end of text. Generally, emotional female characters' voices are controlled when they are paired off with a man or killed off by the end of a text. Susan Faludi notices that most of the "loudmouth" and emotional women in films of the late 1980s were "toned down through coercion or silenced through death" (128). But as I explained in chapters one, two, and three, something different is occurring with this recent influx of unlikable female characters—they are not being silenced and because their emotional reactions are privileged, they are revealing our continued need for feminism.

Of course, I am not suggesting texts such as *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* are the key to ending systemic sexism. However, I do believe they are moving us forward in terms of how female characters are represented in popular culture. The female characters I analyze in this project are forging a new path in how we depict angry, violent, and complex women. For instance, Amelia is unlike the mothers we have grown accustomed to in literature and film. Illustrating the frustrations associated with being a mother, the events in *The Babadook* demonstrate why it is problematic to assume motherhood is a natural and rewarding phenomenon. The film pushes previous boundaries by dismantling the good mother/bad mother binary and taking motherhood off its cultural pedestal. Likewise, Amy Dunne challenges previous limits to female violence. Whereas earlier depictions of violent women either required their ultimate destruction or required they follow a rape-revenge narrative, *Gone Girl's* Amy Dunne sets new standards for how we represent violent women in popular culture—she is not

hyper-sexualized, her violence is not sanitized, and she is not punished for expressing an exorbitant amount of rage. Finally, *The Girl on the Train* establishes new possibilities for interpreting antagonistic female relationships while simultaneously critiquing our culture's preoccupation with stories about women meeting the men of their dreams and starting families. All of these texts are important because they break female characters out of patterns which uphold the patriarchal order rather than challenging it. They move us beyond the static, one-dimensional female characters we have grown used to and are complicating earlier beliefs regarding what a female character is capable of doing.

Additionally, *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* are examples of the kinds of texts Roxane Gay and Kameron Hurley say we previously lacked in popular culture. The characters I feature in this project represent a crucial step towards allowing our unlikable female characters to be as compelling and appreciated as our unlikable male characters. As Hurley states,

> There is something hypnotic in unlikable male characters that we don't allow in women, and it's this: we allow men to be confident, even arrogant, self-absorbed, narcissistic. But in our everyday lives, we do not hold up women as leaders and role models. We call them out as selfish harridans. They are wicked stepmothers. Seeing these same women bashing their way through the pages of our fiction elicits the same reaction. Women should be nurturing. Their presence should be redeeming. Women should know better. Female heroes must act the part of the dutiful Wendy, while male heroes get to be Peter Pan. (112)

Amelia, Amy, Rachel, Anna, and Megan are flawed, complex, and contradictory female protagonists who freely express unlikable traits. Finally—and perhaps most importantly—these

characters ask us to stop denying women's rage. *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* ask us to consider the consequences of women continually repressing their negative feelings. Lastly, these texts ask us how we are normalizing gender inequality and promoting a progress that does not exist when we contain or dismiss women's rage.

In this project I have offered a lens for reading texts like *The Babadook, Gone Girl,* and *The Girl on the Train* in different ways. Although the female characters in these texts possess unlikable traits, their rage does not look the same. Protagonists like Amelia, Amy, Rachel, Anna, and Megan invite us to acknowledge various forms of female rage and how each form is a reaction to a particular inequality. In *The Babadook,* Amelia expresses her grief and depression as a mother; in *Gone Girl,* Amy expresses intense and violent rage as a dissatisfied wife; and in *The Girl on the Train,* Rachel, Anna, and Megan's expression of envy interrogates ideal femininity.

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