

Emerging from the Abyss: Rachel's Addiction and Altruism in *The Girl on the Train*

V. Yogeswari

Independent Researcher, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, India

Email – vyogeswari23@gmail.com

Abstract: Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* delves into the interconnected lives of three women, namely Rachel, Megan and Anna. Rachel gets acquainted with Megan in an interesting way and the very narrative style of the book enhances the depth of the themes. The suspenseful plot centres on the disappearance of Megan and the determined attempt of Rachel in solving the mystery. It would not have been a mystery, had Rachel been sober the night Megan went missing. Drinking is only one part of Rachel's complicated life. It is accompanied with her failed marriage, emotional trauma, frequent blackouts, joblessness and financial crisis. Nevertheless, Rachel decides to help Megan's husband Scott overcome the situation. The psychological factors that go behind lending a helping hand to Scott and always being available to offer emotional support, despite her life being on the verge of crumbling, form the crux of this paper. Rachel's empathy towards Scott motivated her altruistic behaviour. Furthermore, by way of helping him, she sought redemption and validation of herself, which she was unaware that she needed. Sobriety was essential for Rachel to think clearly, which ultimately helped her resist the urge to drink. Thus, she found a purpose and, in a way, Rachel finds her way through addiction and altruism. Grounded in the theories of Daniel Batson's empathy, Freud's concept of the unconscious and B.F. Skinner's reinforcement principles, this paper explores Rachel's psychology, shedding light on her struggles with addiction and her tendencies toward altruism.

Key Words: addiction, altruism, conflict, empathy, marriage

1. INTRODUCTION:

Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* is an interesting thriller with a plot that weaves the story of three women and their interconnected lives. The story is narrated in the form of diary entries, which in turn reveals each diarist's unmasked selves. Rachel Wilson is the girl on the train who commutes without any purpose to convince her flatmate that she is working, and not fired as the reality is, to avoid being homeless. When every other commuter might seem to just watch the scenery and houses across the railway tracks, Rachel often reflects on the people who live there, as she has noted that if there is one shoe, she can't restrain from thinking about the other shoe and "the feet that fitted into them" (Hawkins 15). In fact, during her train journey, she watches a couple every day on the terrace of their house whom she has named as Jess and Jason. The actual story unfolds when Rachel spots Jess, who is another major character Megan Hipwell, with another man on the terrace. The story is also stirred by Anna Boyd, who has taken Rachel's "previous home and husband" (Mehmi 112). This psychological thriller gains momentum when Megan goes missing and Rachel delves into solving the mystery. Despite her drinking habit, frequent blackouts, marital conflicts, emotional instability and joblessness, Rachel's persistent attempt in helping Scott Hipwell and providing emotional support to him is the driving force behind this study.

2. RACHEL'S LIFE OF MESS:

In an interview with Bethanne Patrick about her book *The Girl on the Train*, Hawkins states that Rachel's life was a mess. That is exactly what Rachel's life was. At the start of the story, she is already an alcoholic and a divorcee. Her depression from not having a child gave way to drinking, which resulted in turning her marriage life into a disaster. She loved her husband completely, but she felt that things went wrong when she imagined them as "no longer a couple, but a family" (Hawkins 77).

Tom left her for another woman, Anna who was expecting his baby. Thus happened her failed marriage. Her continuous drinking habit led her to lose her job and this brought to her financial instability. The first-person narrative brings out the intensity of the messy life of Rachel. Neither does she have anything to wake up to nor she has anyone waiting for her when she returns home. Rachel was not living, but merely surviving.

3. JESS AND JASON'S IMPACT ON RACHEL'S LIFE:

For Rachel who feels everything in her life is drained, looking at the seemingly-happy Jason and Jess couple was comforting. In fact, she gives a proper introduction to the "perfect, golden couple" (Hawkins 19) before even she reveals her name through a quote from some insignificant conversation that happens between her flatmate and the latter's boyfriend. It is only for some brief moments that her train halts near the signal across the couple's house and gives Rachel a view of the couple. She admires them thinking they are perfect and happy together, unaware that it is and could be otherwise. But, Rachel's thought about them thus reveals her inner desire of a having a happy marriage. It is her yearning to be such happy with Tom. She even says: "They are what I lost, they're everything I want to be" (Hawkins 26). Perhaps, in other words, Rachel lives the life she wishes to have with Tom through Jess and Jason.

4. RACHEL LENDING HAND TO SCOTT:

If there is one sight that entirely changed the course of her life, it is Rachel spotting her Jess – Megan Hipwell – with another man on the terrace. She could have ignored the fact and moved to wherever the train took her. However, just because she was connected with both of them, without even them being aware of that fact, she just could not get over it. After going through an intense turmoil within herself, she eventually decides to reveal this to Megan's husband Scott Hipwell. One apparent reason for this decision is that the brief sighting brought to her a "familiar ache" (Hawkins 49). She let the cruel memories of Anna replacing her in Tom's life envelope her. She saw Scott becoming another Rachel. Thus, she wanted to do something that she felt was right.

5. TRACES OF EMPATHY-ALTRUISM IN RACHEL:

Empathy is the state of being in another's shoes and looking at a situation through their eyes. It is a feeling of becoming one with the other person and the circumstance they are in. Daniel Batson, the American psychologist who propounded the theory of Empathy-Altruism, stated that paying attention to the feelings of others paves way for empathy, while putting oneself in another person's exact mental state brings empathy accompanied with personal distress. This is what happened in the case of Rachel too. She had faced the same situation which Scott does not know that he is in. She has encountered the heartbreak of being replaced by another woman in her husband's life. Playing the scene of Megan's betrayal again and again in her mind, Rachel says: "I feel as though I have been cheated" (Hawkins 49). That emphasis shows to what extent she empathises with Scott. Rachel's empathy is fuelled by her own depressing experience in her married life. This is personal distress to her and it has evoked altruistic behaviour in her.

Another instant when she feels that Scott's life is not very different from hers is the unborn character in both of their lives. Rachel has never had a child and Scott was informed about the existence of Megan's child only after it had died. Also, when Scott confides in her about his last, angry message he sent to Megan, Rachel immediately becomes familiar because she knows "what it is to love someone and to say the most terrible things to them, in anger or anguish" (Hawkins 242).

Batson, in his *Altruism in Humans*, had defined altruism's ultimate goal as to increase the welfare of other people. As she was aware of another man's presence in Megan's life, Rachel wanted to reveal this to the police and Scott at any cost. She knew that only she had seen what others have not. In that context, Rachel's concern towards Scott is a result of her altruistic behaviour.

6. LENS OF PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY:

Sigmund Freud's Psychodynamic theory lays its focus on the unconscious facet of human mind and unresolved past conflicts as being strong influencers on behaviour. The sight of Anna with her bulging belly is still vivid in Rachel's memory. She is unable to come to terms with her past. She thinks of Anna as a "cuckoo laying her eggs in my [Rachel's] nest" (Hawkins 55). Her feelings of abandonment and failure in marriage have been her unresolved conflicts in life. Perhaps, seeing Megan cheat on her husband triggered these conflicts in her unconscious which in turn reflected in her behaviour, because after all, as Saul McLeod says, human functioning is based on the interactions of drives and forces within a person.

Rachel feels the pain of imagining her ex-husband with another woman as very heavy to bear. This pain is also symbolic for the unbearable feeling that she is unable to stop the same from happening to Scott. That is exactly the moment she decides to meet Scott. Thus, by helping Scott, Rachel is unconsciously seeking redemption for herself.

7. SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY:

Man, being a social being, has to live among others and live along with others. So, there tends to be a constant relationship that everyone is trying to build with one another. Thus, there is a network of social relationships around us and Kendra Cherry specifies that people weigh the potential benefits in such relationships. While she travels to meet Scott, for the first time in a long time she feels glad, "glad to have a purpose" (Hawkins 147). This is the purpose that

drives the whole plot that follows. Initially, Rachel was determined to meet Scott. That meeting paved the way for future meetings as well. Later, in spite of promising her ex-husband that she would not meet Scott, she again went to meet him when he called. If there is nothing that Rachel gets out of her meeting with Scott, she would not have gone again, and again, and again. She felt valued, which she did not know was what she needed. Though the feeling of being useful to someone was an unintended consequence of her action, she felt good about it. The intensity of how good it made Rachel feel when she was of help was very strong when it was absent, more than when it was present. She describes the moment when she greatly depressed Scott by the revelation as: "I felt wretched then. I wasn't helping. I had just made him feel worse, increased his pain" (Hawkins 160). This shows that by way of giving something to the other person, she had unconsciously intended to get something back. Every time Rachel felt that she has not helped Scott to a good extent, she resolves to "make amends for being insufficient" (Hawkins 199). Even when she pondered over telling Scott of how sorry she was for not being able to trap Megan's another man into his wife's case, whom they assumed to be the culprit, unconsciously it was an act of asking herself for forgiveness.

In her case, all Rachel wanted was to help with all the resources she has, as the feeling of usefulness lessened her loss in life. It was a kind of relief for Scott to have someone like Rachel to say things he cannot tell anybody and Rachel was happy to just be there, even if it only meant to be present as a "sounding board" and with the same relief as Scott, she writes: "I'm glad to be of use to him" (Hawkins 168).

8. NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT WORKING ITS WAY:

A person's behaviour is not only what he does but also what he does not. This is being said in the context of reinforcement as pronounced by B.F. Skinner. If a person behaves in a certain way and gets something desirable in return, it is positive reinforcement. Likewise, if a person behaves in a certain way and avoids something undesirable, it is negative reinforcement. This can also be put the other way round as: when a person avoids doing something in order to behave in a certain way, then it is negative reinforcement. Similarly, keeping Rachel at the centre of discussion here, it is apparent that in order to be helpful to Scott and to herself, she keeps drinking away. She understands that blackouts caused by drinking is blurring her memory. There are many instances where Rachel decides not to drink, but ends up doing that and eventually forgetting what she did while drinking. She is trapped inside this loop of drinking and dreaming and waking and deciphering if that was dream or real. She either has a blurred vision or a complete blackout. Because of her drinking, she becomes an unreliable witness in the missing case of Megan, which further depresses her. She repeatedly affirms that she had not been drinking while spotting Megan with another man, but no one is ready to believe an addict. However, she was drunk the night Megan went missing and she had been there around the same time. Thus, she refrains from drinking in order to be in her senses.

Even after she revealed whatever she knew to whoever was concerned, she did not want to stay away from this. She wanted to be "at the heart of it" (Hawkins 145). Driven by this force, she attempts to put all the pieces together. At one point, Rachel herself admits that she has to "keep a clear head, for Scott. He needs me [Rachel] thinking straight" (Hawkins 197). She shows how she adjusts her drinking behaviour in order to achieve the desired result of bringing back the memory. The result of such action is reflected in the climax where she reveals her longest dry spell of "three weeks exactly" (Hawkins 407). Even when she had to chance and realisation that drinking could better her, she points out that it is only for a brief time and stays in her senses.

9. CONCLUSION:

Rachel is a flawed and complex character in the story. Nevertheless, it is the loss, trauma and agony from the past that had shaped her character in that way. She was different to different people: drunkard wife to her ex-husband, rival to her ex-husband's wife, burden to her flatmate, an unknown to Megan. Yet, she was a well-wisher to Megan's husband, Scott. Despite struggling with her own failed marriage, emotional trauma, destructive behaviour and financial instability, she was intent on helping Scott with whatever she can. She helped him because she empathised with him, as she felt that he is walking on the same path that she has walked on. In a way, she did what she did in order to reconcile with her repressed, past conflicts and to quench her desperate quest of her true self.

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