

A PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT IN PAULO HAWKINS' *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*

S. Asha Glory Angel,

Research Scholar (Ph. D Part Time/English), Reg: 18121274012008, St. John's College,
Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti,
Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. J. Pinky Diana Evelyn,

Assistant Professor of English, Research Supervisor, St. John's College, Palayamkottai,
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012,
Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

This paper attempts to present the traumatic experiences of the women characters and how they try to handle the situation. The author has beautifully portrayed the characters of the women namely Rachel, Megan, and Anna whose lives are highly interwoven. Hawkins clearly exhibits the sense of restlessness in these women and how they feel insecure in their own lives. These women are simply common human beings who have flaws in them. Rachel, the protagonist of the storyline is showcased as a complicated, unlikeable, and unreliable character. Megan is a troubled and restless young woman, and Anna is a static and selfish character. Among these three, Megan is the one who is highly affected by PTSD which is basically called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Keywords: traumatic experiences, restlessness, insecure, PTSD

Paula Hawkins was primarily a journalist for almost 15 years before entering the world of writing fiction. She focused on writing a romantic comedy named *Confessions of a Reluctant Recessionista* under the pen name Amy Silver and continued three sequels to the novel but didn't gain her fame. Until one day that her fifth novel *The Girl on the Train* (2015), a Psychological thriller came into existence that dealt with the themes of domestic violence, male dominance, alcohol, and drug abuse. Her next best-seller thriller novel was *Into the Water* (2017). She won the Glamour Award for the writer in 2015 and Goodreads Choice Awards Mystery and Thriller for her famous novel *The Girl on the Train*.

The Girl on the Train explicitly unravels the violence and mental suffering of the women. The trauma they undergo is truly unbelievable. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, trauma means severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience, or a case of such shock happening. A person who undergoes a traumatic experience may have emotional breakdowns like sadness, anger, denial, fear, and shame which lead to nightmares, insomnia, difficulty with relationships, and emotional outbursts. Moreover, he/she needs a support system if he/she is affected by trauma. Here in this novel, the support systems the women have are Cathy for Rachel, Dr. Kamal for Megan, and for Anna, it is apparently Rachel who comes to her aid at the end.

According to American Psychiatric Association, PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder means a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act,

war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury. According to the research of Davidson et al (2012), there are three categories in PTSD. They are avoidance symptom, re-experience symptom and arousal symptom.

Avoidance symptom is nothing but avoiding the past trauma. For instance, if a person met with a bike accident, it would take him time to recover from that trauma. At least for a short while, he would not be riding his bike again because it reminds him the accident. So he would avoid such circumstance that it might not trigger him in remembering the past traumatic action. Re-experiencing symptom is as the name itself suggests, remembering the past event. They strongly experience the past action through thoughts, dreams or images. Arousal symptom is that of increase in emotional arousal. People of this category feel difficulty in falling asleep and have emotional outbursts like anger, anxiety, fear, sadness etc. This thriller fiction talks about the traumatic experience of three women namely Rachel, Megan, and Anna, and how they managed to handle it.

Rachel, a divorcee and an alcoholic in her mid-thirties feel terrible after her divorce from Tom. She was once a charming young lady who married Tom but later when she fell into a depression of not conceiving a child, she got addicted to alcohol and become unattractive. She blames herself for everything that happens in her life. She was very much depressed during her father's demise. That's when Rachel got into the relationship with Tom who comforted her. It is clearly expressed from the words of Tom that "... you all sad, because Daddy's died, and just wanting someone to come home to, someone to love you? I gave you all that. I made you feel safe" (300).

Rachel is also traumatised because of her unsuccessful marriage life she believes her to be the one solely responsible for Tom's second marriage. She longs for the love she once got from Tom. On the other hand, Tom has moved on in his life after Rachel. He replaces Rachel with Anna who is a stunning beauty and has also made him proud by becoming him a father. So Rachel's cause of depression is her infertility and her failed marriage due to her alcohol addiction. Her greatest trauma was her marital past that she presently tries to accept the reality. She just hangs on to the idea of losing a perfect life and a perfect partner but she realises later that she was actually in a disastrous relationship where she was controlled by an abusive man, Tom. She states, "'you lied to me' I say, and he turns to face me, surprised. 'You told me everything was my fault. You made me believe that I was worthless. You watched me suffer, you-' (294).

Rachel's friend Cathy supported her when she fell into such depression. She gave a place in her house for Rachel and being a good friend, she keeps an eye on her. Apparently, Cathy being a caring person treats her friend with great concern. If Rachel has some wine left in the fridge, "...Cathy pours it away. She so badly wants me (Rachel) to get better, but so far, things are not going according to her plan" (160). She even arranges her job interview in her friend's firm for "a glorified secretarial job" (241).

Due to the traumatic life, she suffered from some mental health consequences like the disturbing thoughts and nightmares. Rachel states, "In the wood. I imagine a grave dug beneath scrubby bushes, hastily covered up. I imagine worse things, impossible things – her body hanging from a rope, somewhere deep in the forest where nobody goes" (160,161). It is not just that she imagines things but also feels as she states, "... it wasn't me who couldn't breathe, it was Megan" (161). Even nightmares have become frequent. She says, "I'm having

trouble sleeping, and it's not just the drinking now, it's the nightmares" (150). But eventually, she handles her traumatic situation in terms of getting out of the habit of consuming liquor. Hawkins vividly indicates how Rachel has made an effort to stop consuming alcohol. She states that "I can imagine exactly how good I would feel halfway through my first drink. To push away the feeling, I count the days since I last had a drink: twenty. Twenty-one, if you include today. Three weeks exactly: my longest dry spell in years" (315).

Rachel has experienced all the three symptoms expressed by Davidson et al, like avoidance, re-experiencing and arousal symptoms. Rachel tries to quit drinking, to avoid remembering the past event that was how he lost Tom. In her words, "Some days I feel so bad that I have to drink; some days I feel so bad, I can't. Today, the thought of Alcohol turns my stomach" (23).

Rachel also re-experiences the past trauma through some disturbing thoughts or memories. She expresses, "I close my eyes and let the darkness grow and spread until it morphs from a feeling of sadness into something worse: a memory, a flashback. I didn't just ask him to call me back. I remember now, I was crying. I told him that I still loved him, that I always would." (22) In another scenario where she remembers her past happy life with Tom is when she was in her train journey, exactly at the signal where she could see her ex-husband's house. She re-experiences:

I can almost feel it, the warmth of that morning sunshine on my face and arms as I sit at the breakfast table, Tom opposite me, my bare feet resting on top of his because they're always so much warmer than mine, my eyes cast down at the newspaper. I can feel him smiling at me, the blush spreading from my chest to my neck, the way it always did when he looked at me a certain way.

I blink hard and Tom's gone. (36)

Rachel also experiences the arousal symptoms like anger, fear, anxiety, sadness etc. she gets into a kind of emotion which she couldn't demonstrate. She says, "I'm frightened, but I'm not sure what I'm afraid of, which just exacerbates the fear. I don't even know whether there's anything to be frightened of" (47). Yet, from the perspective of the author, Rachel is a strong character. In the article, "Paula Hawkins: The Girl on The Train author on fiction, difficult women and Emily Blunt" Hawkins expresses her opinion on Rachel. She opines, "I think Rachel is a sad and depressed person but she is a believable person and we see her, over the course of the book, fighting her demons and becoming stronger." (Morris)

Megan Hipwell, a troubled and restless woman has PTSD for quite a long time. She is traumatised by her older brother Ben's death when she was a young girl. She states that "He died on the A10, his skull crushed beneath the wheels of an articulated lorry" (30). Ben's death has deeply affected her since he was "the protective big brother" (63). She thinks that whatever happens in her life, like insomnia, emotional outbursts and the random relationships was because of the traumatic death of her brother. She indicates:

I miss him every day. More than anyone, I think. He's the big hole in my life, in the middle of my soul. Or maybe he was just the beginning of it. I don't know. I don't even know whether all this is really about Ben, or whether it's about everything that happened after that, and everything that's happened since. (30)

Megan's second traumatic incident that happened in her life was the death of her own baby. After her brother's death, she ran away from her home and was completely shattered. She met Mac when she was only fifteen and lived with him. Before she could think, she got conceived. She explains how the child was unwelcomed by both the parents. She shares this with her therapist Dr. Kamal, "The truth is that she wasn't wanted, by either of us" (168). The child Libby was a good girl and once in an argument between Mac and Megan, he left the house. With utter dismay, Megan was lying in the bath tub along with her child in her chest. Unfortunately she fell asleep and in her reckless nature, the child died. This traumatic event haunted her all through her life. She pinpoints her dreadful state that "I was so frightened – too frightened to go to sleep. I'd just walk around those dark rooms and I'd hear her crying, I'd smell her skin" (210). She was completely disturbed by her act of recklessness. Even after moving on in her life with Scott, she could never forget the past memories.

Megan's support system was obviously her therapist Dr. Abdic Kamal. By looking into the psychological condition of Megan, it was Scott who suggested this therapist. He also got relieved to see her wife becoming better, day after day by having her sessions with Dr. Kamal. He motivates her by saying "You won't do anything wrong. You won't. You're not some grieving, lost child any longer. You're a completely different person. You're stronger. You're an adult now" (280, 281). Her avoidance symptom is that she stopped to baby sit Anna's child. She was seriously traumatised by her own child's death and took some efforts to heal from her trauma. As she says, "There's no sense blaming him for this, it was my idea. I volunteered to do it, to become a childminder for the people down the road" (27, 28). She thought of overcoming her trauma by becoming a baby sitter but she quits the job since it is not helpful.

Megan also re-experiences her past trauma when she tries to explain the incident to her therapist. From her words, "My legs are trembling, my knee jerking as though on a puppeteer's string" (168). Here is where she tries to explain about her baby in her womb to the therapist. She obviously has got the arousal symptoms like anger, fear, difficulty in sleeping etc. she suffers from insomnia when she says, "I've been up for hours; I can't sleep. I haven't slept in days. I hate this, hate insomnia more than anything, just lying there, brain going round, tick, tick, tick, tick. I itch all over. I want to shave my head" (30).

Anna, a selfish woman who takes up the place of Rachel. She pays no heed to Rachel's sufferings and takes her man away from her. She finds her life is complete when she gives birth to a girl child, a complete one with Tom, Anne and Evie. She feels proud of the fact that "I can see the way people look at us; I can see them thinking, *What a beautiful family*" (141). Tom keeps himself a responsible husband and a father. She finds Rachel as her issue because of her constant emails and calls to Tom. She is also highly attached to her daughter Evie and this attachment towards her daughter makes her look at Rachel as her serious threat. She is shocked when she finds the truth of Megan, her baby sitter. The news headlines say, "WAS MEGAN A CHILD KILLER?" (196). She is in utter terror when she knows about Megan child's accidental death.

Anna does encounter all the three symptoms stated by Davidson. She has avoidance symptoms as she tries to avoid thinking about Megan. As she puts it, "I try not to think about her and I jump every time I hear a noise, I flinch when a shadow passes the window. It's

intolerable” (179). This incident vividly portrays Anna’s avoidance symptoms as she tries to avoid thinking about little things like hearing a noise or seeing a shadow. She re-experiences her trauma when she says, “But I think about her coming into my house and taking my child, I remember the terror I felt when I saw her with Evie down by the fence. I think about the horrible, chilling little smile she gave me when I saw her outside the Hipwell’s house” (179). She thinks about Anna’s cold smile and re-experiences the past trauma. She also has arousal symptoms which is her sleeplessness. She is not able to sleep as she observes, “I go back to bed, but I can't fall asleep again” (264). She keeps thinking about taking out the phone from the drawer.

This novel *The Girl on the Train*, focuses on the psychological trauma of the three women characters namely Rachel, Megan, and Anna and they all experience avoidance, re-experience and arousal symptoms as a result of their past traumatic experiences. Among the three Megan is the one who has been affected so badly psychologically and eventually falls for Tom and loses her life.

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