

Insane Girl Literature: Modern Femininity in Post-Reagan, Post-9/11 Literature

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From *Gone Girl*, dir. David Fincher, 2014

Over the past two decades, a wave of literature centered around unhinged, mentally ill female protagonists has consistently captured the attention of readers both domestically and globally. Deviating from traditional roles of modern femininity, these new female protagonists are undoubtedly not only a reflection of the tumultuous socioeconomic and political sphere, but also a reflection of the young women voraciously consuming them—a feminine twist to the byronic hero: cynical, attractive, morose, volatile, self-destructive and extremely clever. These novels are fronted by a female figure who is defined by her sense of malaise and discontent, two sensations that rose to prominence through the culmination of our post-Reagan socioeconomic world and the effects of 9/11 on the American mindset. The rise of conservatism from both the Reagan administration and the attacks on 9/11 reconfigured many aspects of American society, subsequently engendering a restrictive role on traditional femininity, socially and mentally. This conservatism along with the rise of consumerism—egged on by both the Reagan administration and post-9/11 capitalist exploitation of tragedy and memorialism—defined the last two decades of modern femininity in American literature. Gillian Flynn’s “Gone Girl” and Otessa Moshfegh’s “My Year of Rest and Relaxation” are strong examples of this representation of bored, insane women whose characters resonate with and cater to young American girls growing up in a restricting culture of overconsumption and conservatism. This genre that I call “Insane Girl

Literature” depends on its female characters’ ability to successfully act on her socially unacceptable thoughts or desires, as well as her relatability to all young women in regards to their concerns with men, beauty, and ennui. The genre reflects the way its readers—young women—comprehend and express their understanding of femininity, human relationships, and literature, and the feminine desire to break apart from social norms.

Reaganomics, Consumerism, and Degrading Relationships

The American psyche has always been defined and dominated by the focus on the individual rather than the collective. Mentalities such as the American Dream support the emphasis on one’s own needs and desires rather than the nation’s. As the fledgling country rose to prominence and power during the 20th century—a century riddled with war and subsequent rapid economic boom—so came along with it a new blossom of industry and capitalism. Although many figures stood at the forefront of American dominance over global capitalism, none were as controversial as Ronald Reagan and his administration in the 1980s. Reagan’s economic policies both domestically and internationally favored a free-market economy, encouraging a kind of hedonism that would only snowball from there on out. American sociologist Amitai Etzioni writes in his book “Aftershocks: Economic Crisis and Institutional Choice” about the crisis of consumerism in the 80s:

“Self-restraint was further eroded under the influence of Reaganism and Thatcherism, which celebrated unfettered self-interest and weakened both government regulation as well as the importance of a self-regulating culture. In economic terms, the lack of self-restraint reflected in the modern willingness to max out our credit cards, whereas in the 1950s, debt was considered a sin. The lack of self-restraint is compounded by the fact that, over the past fifty years, the American public has held a strong yet schizophrenic ideology [towards the economy]” (Etzioni 156).

This increased sensation and desire to spend money—under the guise of improving the United States’ domestic economy—created an unprecedented urgency to consume. Etzioni notes “Consumption turns into consumerism—that is, into obsession . . . [and] It is especially psychologically damaging when the labor required to pay for consumerism cuts into human relations that are sources of affection, by neglecting family and friends, and undermining non-material sources of self-esteem” (159). This particular sentiment—obsession, hedonism, and stunted affection—is especially important when evaluating the foundations of the modern affliction of boredom, malaise, and discontent in twenty-first century novels centered around femininity. The ever-encroaching invasiveness of consumerism and its pervasive effects is reflected in novels such as “Gone Girl” and “My Year of Rest and Relaxation,” conveyed through the female characters’ internal monologue. Both Amy Dunne and Moshfegh’s narrator are women dissatisfied with their lives despite their social success. They express in their respective narration a sense of detachment, aloofness, and apathy: Dunne in her ability to mechanically frame her husband for her murder, Mosfegh’s narrator in her utterly indifferent perspective on everything in life. Despite the female protagonists’ position of economic

privilege, ennui and malaise manages to creep into every aspect of their lives, which predictably fosters a kind of cathartic repudiation of social norms.

The lack of self-control is not just confined to the American mentality around the economy, but also bleeds into the quotidian. This is evident in two aspects: Amy Dunne's unhinged plan to frame her husband for her falsified murder, and Moshfegh's narrator's desire to ignore her responsibilities and social life by sleeping through an entire year. In this abandonment of restraint and societal expectations—framed in both books as a not entirely negative desire—both Flynn and Moshfegh promote the idea of giving in to one's socially unacceptable desires. Culminated with the events of 9/11, Reagan's economic policy and conservatism fueled the already-fraught concept of girlhood and womanhood with an inherited feeling of boredom and disaffection—two sensations that foster the insanity portrayed in both novels, and is best exemplified by nonchalantly insane narration from both women. Amy says after returning to her traumatized, framed husband:

“He won't sleep with me yet. He sleeps in the downstairs guest room with the door locked. But one day I will wear him down, I will catch him off guard, and he will lose the energy for the nightly battle, and he will get in bed with me. In the middle of the night, I'll . . . press myself against him. I'll hold myself to him like a climbing, voiling vine until I have invaded every part of him and made him mine” (Flynn 537).

Moshfegh writes in her novel, “Things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleepy—reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually . . . as a dream” (Moshfegh 4). In both cases, the two women convey a kind of detachment from their actions that can be traced to a lack of self-restraint and over-consumption post-Reaganism.

9/11 and Marketed Overconsumption

The events of 9/11's peculiar effect on the American economy further emphasized and intensified the already-inherited desire for consumerism since the Reagan administration in the 80s, ensuring that the next generations would never know a world that wasn't dominated by images of the American flag on T-shirts or the general dread of terrorism. In the wake of a national tragedy and the irreversible effects it would have on future immigration, the American capitalists saw a new shining possibility: a chance to profit and revive the staggering economy. Navigating through a post-9/11 world, the understanding was that, “once safe [from the events of 9/11], it's a duty to spend the way to recovery” (Stewart). The tragedy would ultimately lead to the understanding that “the way for Americans to move past the tragedy and overcome their fears was to spend money and spur the economy” (Stewart). Conflated with a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism as a consequence of the acts of terrorism, the United States became fixated on the consumption of patriotism in material goods. Ads appealed to the new enthusiasm for patriotism, quickly publishing slogans such as: “We will roll up our sleeves. We will move forward together. We will overcome. We will never forget” that encouraged “consumers to

believe that [General Electric was] on their side, supporting the country in a time of need” (Maboloc 37).

Not only did the events of 9/11 further encourage mass consumerism, it engendered in American society a strange amalgamation of fear that, mixing with consumerism and hedonism, would transform into a kind of apathetic lifestyle unique to the United States. To assuage fear, one was expected to turn to consumption of material goods. The consumption of material goods, in turn, became a way to distract from the powerlessness the public had in relation to the 9/11 terrorism attacks. As detailed in Morris Rosenberg’s examination of apathy, he writes that the effects of the “feelings of futility . . . inhibit participation” (Rosenberg). Or, in other words, apathy in a society is a significant progression post-9/11. Apathy in the post-9/11 world is essential in the construction of Insane Girl Literature. The ubiquitous feeling of living in a world irrevocably changed, riddled with tragedy—and yet feeling mildly or severely apathetic—further solidifies the genre’s characteristics while also creating a relatable foundation for the construction of a female protagonist.

Further, another consequence of the lack of self-restraint introduced from Reagan’s economic policies and 9/11’s enticement to consume material goods is how desire in the construction of American identity leads to transformation that is akin in its own way to a Bildungsroman narrative. Kenya Wolff writes in her paper, “When More is *Not* More: consumption and consumerism within the neoliberal early childhood assemblages”:

“We are always poised between two possibilities: a life that can speed up its rate of change in order to become fundamentally different, and a life so accustomed to its approach that it ceases to become or even to live (Colebrook, 2006). The process of *becoming* begins with a desire for movement. It is more directional than calculated (Massumi, 1992). In its most basic form, becoming is a tension between modes of desire, the desire to become and the desire to remain the same. Becoming can be an escape from something that it perceives to be a constraint (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) . . . In other words, a desire is often brought about because one is uncomfortable, anxious or unhappy with the current state of being. It is a system in crisis, searching for equilibrium or balance. But beyond simple change from one thing into another existing thing, becoming is about the desire for transformation . . . it is the creation of a completely new entity. The act of becoming utilizes difference rather than clinging to the same . . . Massumi (1992) conceptualized desire within capitalism as a ‘straight- jacketing of desire (desire turned against itself)’” (Wolff 330).

As overconsumption drives our desires, the same desire creates a transformation and conflict within us. This is the fundamental in the narrative of womanhood—change, friction, crisis, anxiety, unhappiness, and constraint. Thus the economic narrative is directly tied to the female narrative in our society, and inevitably our literature. Novels such as *Gone Girl* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are an acknowledgment of this connection.

The Rise of Conservatism in a Post-Reagan, Post-9/11 Society

The rise of conservatism during both Reagan's presidency and the post-9/11 world has further shaped the way we consume, perceive, and relate to our literature. Reagan's conservative administration was not just fiscally conservative, but interpersonally so. Reagan's presidency focused on core American family values, emphasizing the image of the traditional, nuclear family from the 1950s. This all-American family was oriented around the father as a breadwinner and the mother as the housewife. Conservatism and right-wing Christianity "[establishes] the family as an institution instrumental to America's success" thereby defining womanhood through the woman's role as a "stay-at-home mother" (Dowland 607-608). This desire to remain faithful to the old, accustomed way of life was not confined to nor made extinct during Reagan's administration. In a rapidly changing world—particularly in relation to 9/11's effect on national security, anxieties of terrorist attacks, and lasting generational fear—conservatism's ties to tradition, the patriarch, and the familiar was a feasible and almost inevitable safety line for the American people to depend on. The fear of the unknown—the United States' history forever split between a pre- and post-9/11 world—inevitably fostered a desire for the safe: a society they could recognize and acknowledge as their own, all-American community. Thus, conservatism—not only politically or economically, but societally—ingrained itself in the American psyche, just as consumption and particularly overconsumption had.

The pervasiveness of this ideology is naturally reflected in our literature—both consumption and production—making an appearance in the way we recognize feminine roles. The rejection of these roles of traditional womanhood is evident in both novels. Flynn's portrayal of the murderous and vengeful Amy Dunne *Gone Girl* and Mosfegh's depiction of her narrator's blatantly unfeminine, unsympathetic character is a repudiation of the confines of the traditional woman.

Gone Girl

Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* centers around the investigation of Amy Dunne's disappearance, and her husband's role in her assumed death. The introduction of her character in the beginning of the novel portrays Amy as the amalgamation of the previously established societal effects of overconsumption and conservatism: A beautiful, intelligent woman—but first and foremost defined as her relation to Nick (3). Her repudiation of this restrictive role, as consequence of the socio-political and economic influence, becomes made increasingly clear in the latter half of the novel, in which the integration of her perspective rather than Nick's confirms to the reader that she framed him for her murder. Her narrative captures the claustrophobic confinement of being a woman, defined by the boundaries made for her by men. In her "Cool Girl" monologue, she says of her identity:

"That night at the Brooklyn party, I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*. Being 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 . . . Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl . . . And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be . . . [men want] Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain" (Flynn 299-301).

In her deconstruction of the Cool Girl role pressed upon women in her society, she inherently examines the effects of consumerism and conservatism. The Cool Girl, in all ways according to Amy, is trapped by the rigid, conservative desires of men—a faint echo of the sidelined stay-at-home mother in the nuclear family, but still similar in their subservience to men. The desire to fit into a desirable box in order to be consumed by men is another effect of our hyper-consumerist society. The bitterness and renunciation of the Cool Girl role is not just Amy's rejection of her husband, a perpetrator of this stock character, but the rejection of the society that produces it.

Despite her scathing criticism, Amy recognizes in herself that she is a product of the Cool Girl desire—one of those pathetic women who pretended to be something a man wants, rather than her own aspirations. She says, "I'd never really felt like a person, because I was always a product" (302). In the suggestion that no woman—not even herself—is spared from the notion of the Cool Girl, Flynn suggests that the feminine desire to adhere to men's desire is a product of insanity that all women possess. However, she is able to break away from this degrading role in her plot to frame Nick for her kidnapping and murder. Only through her viciously thorough plan to frame Nick is Amy able to fulfill her own desires, the implication being that giving in to your worst and most uninhibited impulses as a cathartic release will free you from the bars of your enclosure. The outcome of this impulse, which inevitably leads to Amy getting exactly what she wants—revenge, freedom, power over Nick—is undoubtedly a source of fascination and envy for the young women consuming Flynn's novel. This reflects a desire for young women to read narratives of feminine freedom—no matter how insane—which Moshfegh's novel also captures.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Although far more subdued than Gillian Flynn's female anti-hero Amy Dunne, Otessa Moshfegh constructs a voice who is as equally as intelligent, quick-witted, and unhinged as Flynn's counterpart in her novel, "My Year of Rest and Relaxation." Her intelligence is quickly established in both her uniquely scathing criticism and her explicit confirmation that she "graduated from Columbia" with a degree in Art History (Moshfegh 27). Though she is much younger in age than her murderous counterpart, Moshfegh's protagonist displays the same kind of unhinged and self-destructive thought processes as Amy Dunne does, and both women are united in their cool, detached narration that juxtaposes the severity of their strangeness. The twenty-six year old unnamed narrator embarks on a self-imposed journey to hibernate for a year, simply because of her waning interest in the world. She "looked like a model, had money [she] hadn't

earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so [she] was ‘cultured’” (13). She is, in every sense, the byproduct of the post-Reagan, post-9/11 world: she cares little about the excessiveness of her finances and even less about fostering intimate relationships in her life. Despite the wealth and excessive beauty, the reader is encouraged to relate to her morbid desire for hibernation as well as her perspective on life as someone who also grew up in a hyper consumerist world. These emotions and sensations have always been there, introduced both through Reagan and the acts of terrorism in 2001. Yet to see a character on paper, perhaps as unlikable as she is strange, is the same breath of fresh air as Amy Dunne was for young American women.

Mosfegh’s narrator accurately embodies the sense of apathy and consumer fatigue as established earlier by the post-Reagan era, and encouraged in our post-9/11 world. Her desire to sleep is concisely explained in her uniquely aloof voice:

“Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me . . . It started off very innocently: I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body” (17-18).

The acute misery and anxiety of living in her body—and by extension, living in her society—can be attributed as the main reason she wants to be put in a self-induced coma. The “prison of [her] mind and body” in particular suggests a connection between her problem with the world and her identity as a woman. Set one decade after the end of Reagan’s administration but shortly before the attacks on the Twin Towers, Mosfegh’s protagonist exhibits the traits of living in a world fueled by consumerism, which will only be exacerbated after the attacks in September. She also exhibits the trait of a woman who is displeased with the confines of her body in its current society. Thus, the general feeling of anxiety and malaise can be attached to both a world of overconsumption and conservative roles.

Mosfegh’s narrator’s journey to her self-induced coma can be seen as her way of breaking free and rejecting these confines. One of the many things she cites as the “constant barrage” of life is most evident in her relationship with her best friend, Reva (17). Reva is a figure who embodies the post-Reagan, post-9/11 role of a woman, whereas the narrator is the rejection of it. Reva “was a slave to vanity and status” and the narrator notes that she “found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for [her] to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, ‘fitting in.’” (9). Yet, ironically, the narrator also notes that Reva’s “desire to be classy had always been the de-classé thorn in her side . . . Nothing hurt Reva more than effortless beauty like [the narrator’s]” (10). Here we see the dynamic and difference between Reva and the narrator. Reva is not just a product of conformity and consumerism, but a slave to it. Whereas the narrator might be a product of her society, but she actively rejects it in her mission to leave it behind through her hibernation. The freedom of finding a way to escape the insecurities and overconsumption that modern women, like Reva, are

plagued with is admirable and enviable. Thus, Moshfegh's novel promotes a new, unhinged female protagonist much like Flynn's.

Conclusion

The untraditional, unhinged voices of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* capture in their narratives a feminine desire to break out of molds and shed off the apathy of our indifferent lives. A direct repudiation of the traditional roles of womanhood in the form of all-American, nuclear families, both Amy Dunne and Moshfegh's narrator embody two identities: a woman created by her conservative, consumerist society; and a woman who would be despised by her conservative, consumerist society. The contradictions of both characters are an insight to womanhood and girlhood, identities that have and always will be complex or fractured. Both women are in a position of privilege economically and socially—defined, as typical to our society, by their status and wealth—as well as their physical adherence to the traditional woman: beautiful, intelligent, devoted (Amy to her husband, Moshfegh's narrator to her journey of hibernation). Yet, their ability to break from the confines of the societal norms around them creates the figure of an unhinged byronic hero—if not a role model, then a narrative of womanhood to envy. The popularity of this genre that caters to young women suggests in our own society the rapid acceptance of strange and unhinged impulses, to shed the death of affect and promote an embrace of nontraditional ideologies.

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