

Child Abuse and Self-abjection in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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Abstract:

Flynn's *Sharp Objects* is filled with images of abject brutality toward children such as teeth-pulling, strangulation, rape and child poisoning. This study investigates the notion of child abuse in this novel in light of Kristeva's notion of maternal abjection. Examining the acts of deviant behavior such as self-cutting, self-objectification and child murder in the novels indicates the female characters' entrapment in a state of pathological dependence on the mother. This sense of attachment blocks out the subject's healthy passage into adulthood and leads to the splitting off of the identity. Using Kristeva's views regarding the different stages of child development, it will be argued that, in *Sharp Objects*, the female characters' criminal behaviour, in-between-ness and the resultant identity crisis reflect their symbiotic attachment to the mother.

Keywords: abjection, objectification, Munchausen syndrome by proxy, self-harm, child abuse

1. Introduction

Gillian Flynn's crime fiction is noted for its bleak portrayal of physical and emotional abuse and its lifelong impact on the mind of her disturbed characters. In *Sharp Objects* (2006), Flynn blends the generic form of crime-thriller with the psychological account of a cycle of child abuse in the two generations of a well-to-do American family in Wind Gap, Missouri. The novel's narrative structure features a constant shift between the standard plot of a whodunit murder mystery and the narrator's familial problems including her tumultuous relationship with her mother and her step-sister. The story is narrated from the first-person point of view of Camille Preaker, a crime reporter working for the *Daily Post* in Chicago. Urged by her editor, Frank, Camille departs for her hometown, Wind Gap, to write a story about the recent case of missing and murdered children in the town. As the story unfolds, we find out that for Camille who had left the town eight years ago with no intention of ever going back, this return entails something more than a job mission with the prospect of a breakthrough in her career. Camille's effort to investigate the mystery of child-murder in the town culminates in two

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shocking discoveries. The first one is her horrifying discovery that her own mother, Adora, who suffers from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSP), intentionally makes her children sick by feeding them on poison. The second discovery, revealed in a final plot twist typical in crime-thrillers, indicates that Camille's thirteen-year-old step-sister, Amma, is the real killer of the children. Therefore, Camille's fateful return to her hometown leads to a painful narrative of revisiting and struggling with childhood trauma through entanglement with the case of the murdered children.

The idea of abuse in the novel is closely associated with the question of abusive mothering. It is not incidental that Adora who is socially celebrated as the symbol of ideal motherhood in the town suffers from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSP), a psychological disorder in which the caregiver, often the mother, intentionally makes her children sick to prevent them from becoming independent and thus acquire the social reputation of an ideal caregiver. Consequently, the present research concentrates on the way the idea of abuse in the novel is reflected in mother-daughter's abject co-dependence. Using Kristeva's notion of maternal abjection, this study argues that the acts of self-abuse such as self-cutting and self-objectification committed by the female characters in the novel reflect their pathological entrapment in the labyrinth of an engulfing maternal presence. It aims at illustrating that Camille and Amma's self-sexualization and identity crisis reflect their inner struggle to break free of their symbiotic attachment to their mother.

2. Kristeva and the Maternal Abject

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva proposes her psychoanalytical theory of language and its link to subjectivity. Language is primarily a signifying system through which the subject as a "speaking being" is formed. This is what she calls the "signifying practice" which denotes the way our "bodily drives and energy are expressed, literally discharged through our use of language" (McAfee, 2004: 14). This "signifying process" consists of two stages: the "semiotic" and the "symbolic". The former refers back to the pre-verbal stage when the infant, rather unconsciously, expresses its feelings and its "bodily drives" through sounds and not through a "sign system" or language (McAfee, 2004: 14). The later which partly corresponds to Lacan's idea of the "symbolic" is the "conscious way" through which the speaking subject strives to give expression to his/her thoughts and communicate in social terms. Thus, "significance" or "signifying process" is the result of the interaction between the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" (Moi, 1985: 12). At the moment of birth, the baby has no sense of distinction from the environment. Kristeva refers to this state of

“oneness” with the environment in terms of existing in the “semiotic chora” (McAfee, 2004: 45). With the infant’s entry into the “mirror” phase which, according to Lacan, refers to the time when the infant experiences some notion of a separate identity, a “thetic” break occurs. Kristeva uses the term “thetic” to refer to the primary stage in the developmental process of subjectivity when the child is at the “threshold of language”, i.e. starting to become a speaking being (1984: 44). The sense of identity that the child begins to develop at this stage, though fictive and unstable, is necessary for his/her progress into the “symbolic” realm.

Kristeva believes that the attempt to distinguish the self from the environment occurs even before Lacan’s “mirror stage”. She situates this process of starting to form a separate identity in the “semiotic” through a process she calls “abjection”. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), she describes abjection in this way:

an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has an impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility to do so (135).

For Kristeva, the notion of abjection signifies rejecting what is other to the self. She describes abjection in terms of “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982: 4). Since the continuation of the “symbolic” order depends on the maintenance of borders, abjection poses a threat to the order of the “symbolic” as it constantly challenges those borders. Culture and religions as the representatives of the “symbolic” order have developed rituals to preserve the borders and ward off the threat posed by abjection. Yet, what is abjected cannot be fully repressed and the rituals ultimately signify the fragility of the “symbolic” order. To illustrate the ambiguous nature of the abject, Kristeva uses a metaphor: it is like “a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered. Once upon blotted out time, the abject must have been a pole of magnetized covetousness. But the ashes of oblivion now... reflect aversion, repugnance” (1982: 8).

Among the different instances of the abject, Kristeva refers to the religious and cultural prohibitions against incest, fear of corpse and the sense of disgust for bodily discharges such as vomit, blood and excrement. The typical reaction to abjection is repulsion at proximity to what is considered unclean and hence should be avoided. As Creed explains, Kristeva’s notion of abjection offers “a means of separating the human from the nonhuman and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject” (2015: 38). Put in this way, the most primal

instance of abjection happens at the moment of the child's separation from the maternal body. According to Kristeva, the first experience of separation happens at the moment of birth and as Oliver has put it, "this primary separation" can be considered the "prototypical abject experience" (1993: 57). Hogle describes the moment of birth as the "most primordial" instance of in-between-ness, "the multiplicity we viscerally remember from the moment of birth, at which we were both inside and outside of the mother and thus both alive and not yet in existence" (2002: 7). During the earliest stage of life, the infant still identifies with the mother's body; even the mother's breast appears to be part of itself. Yet, to be a self, it must reject this primordial sense of oneness with the maternal body. Separation from this state of plenitude where all the infant experiences is love and gratification of its needs, however, exposes it to the extreme feelings of desire and horror: "a longing for narcissistic union with its first love and a need to renounce this union in order to become a subject" (McAfee, 2004: 48). As Oliver explains, for the child, the mother's body, her sex, is "reduced to a birth canal" which threatens the child's desire for autonomy precisely because it reminds the infant of that initial state of blissful unity (1993: 55). The attraction-repulsion feeling that the subject feels toward the abjected maternal body, nonetheless, accompanies him/her all through life as it vaguely reminds the subject that his/her separate entity has been made possible through the painful process of "jettisoning" or cutting off the maternal body. As Kristeva explains, this separation is "a violent clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (1982: 13).

As can be seen, the idea of the abject can be used to explain the way identity is constructed, both on a personal and social level. However, considering the problematic nature of establishing clear-cut boundaries between the subject in the process of becoming "I" and the object as abject, all instances of abjection entail acts of violence and emotional and physical aggression. As Kristeva has pointed out, "the abject has only one quality of object – being opposed to I" (1982: 1). In the case of mother-infant relationship, this opposition is revealed in a sense of hostility toward the mother and at times, the mother's refusal to sanction the child's independence. To use Oliver's words, "abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother" (1993: 60), as well as the impossibility of such denial for the very reason that it keeps haunting the subjects all through their lives.

3. Literature Review

Flynn's portrayal of abusive female characters in her novels (*Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*) points to the psychodynamics of female abusive

behavior and violence against her own self and others. In the case of *Sharp Objects*, violence is depicted in the notion of child abuse and self-harm. This has led some critics to suspect the author of siding with the traditional misogynistic discourse (common in popular crime fiction and film noir) which stereotypes women into either angelic or evil. C. Iannone, for instance, describes *Gone Girl* as the “unmistakable subtext subversive of feminism” (2020: 172). Recent critical reception of Flynn’s novels, however, points to the psycho-social implications of acts of violence committed by her female characters. Jaber, for example, argues that Flynn’s recurrent use of the themes of monstrous women and missing daughters serves to challenge “the constructions of normative femininity” (2022: 172). Gardner has analyzed the characters of Amy in *Gone Girl* and Camille in *Sharp Objects* in terms of the “anti-heroine”, a character whose liminality or in-between-ness serves to defy the cultural norms of patriarchal societies. As Gardner has explained, the acts of deviancy in these characters “challenge traditional notions of ‘femininity’ via their evocations of violence against themselves and others and through their links to the monstrous-feminine, abjection, and the femme fatale” (2022: 46). According to Murphy, Flynn’s portrayal of female characters “challenge conventional notions of female identity, media representation and victimhood” (2018: 160). However, in response to the charge of antifeminism, Flynn has openly asserted that what frustrates her is the traditional idea that “women are innately good, innately nurturing” (qtd in Murphy 160). In an interview with Cara Buckley, (published in *New York Times*), Flynn asserts: “a theme that has always interested me is how women express anger, how women express violence. That is very much part of who women are, and it’s so unaddressed”. In *Sharp Objects*, she presents a female perspective into the idea of domestic abuse by creating characters who respond to maternal abuse by self-abjection, self-objectification and criminality.

4. Discussion

Sharp Objects abounds in the images of abject brutality against children such as poisoning, strangulation, mutilation and rape. Wind Gap is described as a “town that murders its children” (Flynn, 2007: 32). At the beginning of the novel, the body of a missing child, Natalie, is found, her “lips caved in around her gums in a small circle”, her teeth pulled out (Flynn, 2007: 35). Amma abuses other girls and bullies them into showing their privates to older boys. At the age of 13, Camille allows herself to be gang-raped by four older boys. In fact, Camille and Amma’s propensity to violence is a result of the abuse they suffer at home.

Sharp Objects features a socially idolized maternal figure (Adora) who poisons her own children under the pretense of devoted maternal

care. As it turns out later, Adora had been a victim of child abuse at the hands of her own mother, Joya. It is with pain that she shares her childhood memories with Camille, her eldest daughter whom she believes resembles her own mother in terms of emotional withdrawal. Once, when she was a child, Joya took her to the forest and left her there. Adora had to find her way back home, “barefoot”, her feet “ripped into strips” (Flynn, 2007: 305). She was “overly mothered”, Joya “couldn’t keep her hands off her” (Flynn, 2007: 258). Adora suffers from the psychological disorder, Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. McClure, et al. define MSP as an instance of child abuse in which “an infant or a child is presented to doctors, often repeatedly, with a disability or illness fabricated by an adult, for the benefit of that adult” (1996: 57). In most cases, the adult is a nurse or the mother as the child’s primary care-giver. In a similar way, Adora attempts to block her children’s healthy separation from herself by feeding them on poison. This leads to the death of one child, Marian whose life-long sickness has a traumatic effect on Camille. The idea of a sick child necessitates the constant presence of a devoted care-giver, reinforcing Adora’s role as a sacrificial mother. In the town, she is defined as a mother who has lost a child. As Camille says, after Marian’s death, grieving became “a hobby” for Adora (Flynn, 2007: 97). However, by secretly poisoning her daughters, she turns into a monstrous figure because she refuses “to relinquish her hold” on her children and thus prevents them from finding their “proper place in relation to the Symbolic”, to put it in Creed’s terms (2015: 44). Adora has an insatiable urge to control and discipline children. As Camille says about her mother, she “hated little girls who didn’t capitulate to her peculiar strain of mothering” (Flynn, 2007: 284).

Adora’s behavior with her children disrupts their normal passage into the symbolic stage. Her pathological dependence on her daughters leads up to their unhealthy attachment to their mother. Both Amma and Camille are caught up in a painful struggle as to whether remain locked up in a blissful (ironically poisonous) relationship with their mother or establish a separate social identity. As their emotional state indicates, they are both terrified of separation. Amma is characterized as “wildly needy” (Flynn, 2007: 312), “very clingy” (Flynn, 2007: 83). A scene in their living room describes Amma and Adora “on the couch, my mother cradling Amma – in a woolen nightgown despite the heat- as she held up an ice cube to her lips. My half-sister stared up at me with blank contentment” (Flynn, 2007: 73). The idea of maternal attachment is also visible in Camille’s emotional state. Although she is over 35, she still craves her mother’s love and attention: “I turned back over, let my mother put the pill on my tongue, pour the thick milk into my throat, and kiss me” (Flynn, 2007: 248). It is always easier to give in to the comfort

of maternal care which is a reminder of Kristeva's semiotic "chora", the state of oneness with the maternal body when all infantile needs were taken care of by the mother.

An important instance of abjection is the disruption of boundaries particularly with regard to the notion of a stable identity. In *Sharp Objects*, the cycle of matrilineal abuse in the family leads to the crisis of identity in the female characters. This is most evident in the characters of Adora and Amma who seem to be stuck in the state of child-adult. Camille describes her mother as "a Wendy Darling all grown up" (Flynn, 2007: 31). "She was like a girl's very best doll, the kind you don't play with" (Flynn, 2007: 30). Her Wendy-like appearance indicates her entrapment in a state of in-between-ness: a child trapped in a state of abject dependence on her mother and a mother stuck in a state of abject attachment to her children. This sense of duality is also visible in Amma's character and appearance. At home, she plays the role of a little girl to preserve Adora's undivided attention; she wears the clothes of an eight-year-old, plays with a doll-house and throws horrible tantrums. At her mother's presence, she is compliant, sweet, needy" (Flynn, 2007: 128). Out with her friends, she wears tank-tops, minnie-skirts and push-up bras, "a girl barely in her teens...but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman" (Flynn, 2007: 14). She leads a gang of bad girls, skating all over the town streets in an evil seductive pose. However, there is a hidden side to this second identity: a murderous. She externalizes abuse and kills children whom she considers a threat to her symbiotic oneness with her mother. She kills Ann and Natalie simply because Adora took an interest in them. And later on, she killed Lily because Camille was nice to her. Amma's ritualistic treatment of the dead bodies of her victims indicates her own entrapment in childhood: she paints their nails and pulls out their teeth. In response to the abuse she suffers at home, Amma establishes a dual subjectivity: at home, she plays the role of a child who is not capable of forming individuality due to the symbiotic attachment to her mother and outside she attempts to build up a separate identity by sexualizing her body.

The idea of abuse in the novel takes different forms. Amma sexualizes herself and uses her body as a sex weapon, her "sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression. Long skinny legs and slim wrists and high, babied voice, all aimed like a gun" (Flynn, 2007: 194-195). She has a morbid fascination with death; "when you die, you become perfect" (Flynn, 2007: 85). There are frequent references to Amma's doll-house which is a replica of Adora's house. Amma is particularly obsessed with Adora's room which is tiled with "pure ivory" (Flynn, 2007: 88). Later on, Camille discovers the dead girls' teeth in the miniature doll-house, "the floor of my mother's room. The beautiful

ivory tiles. Made of human teeth. Fifty-six tiny teeth, cleaned and bleached and shining from the floor” (Flynn, 2007: 315). Amma’s doll-house represents the house that Adora built: repulsive yet attractive, an object of curiosity for the visitors. The floor was so glorious and shining that it had been “photographed by several decorating magazines” (Flynn, 2007: 88). Distinguished town people such as the mayor paid regular visits while Adora received them in her room, sitting in her bed “propped up on a snowdrift of pillows, dressed in a series of thin flowered robes” (Flynn, 2007: 88). Yet, it is a house built on abuse both metaphorically and literally, since elephants were slaughtered to furnish Adora’s room with tiles made of “pure ivory” (Flynn, 2007: 88) and her daughters were poisoned to render her the reputation of Madonna at the sick-bed. The house is a symbol of the engulfing maternal authority that survives on abjecting defiance. This can be supported by the fact that in a similar way, Amma pulls out her victims’ teeth and hides them in that part of the miniature doll-house which represents her mother’s room. The act of pulling teeth suggests punishing the defiant children and restoring them to the state of infancy.

Unlike Amma who sexualizes herself to seduce and hurt others, Camille uses her own body against herself. In a way, she turns her anger against herself and internalizes abuse. Her first sexual experience was with four or five boys who “kind of passed her around” (Flynn, 2007: 139). As she refuses to take her mother’s medicine, Adora stops caring for her. Camille reminisces how she rejected the tablets her mother insisted on giving her when she was a child and how she lost her love and attention as a result of that. Adora considers this refusal a spiteful rejection of her love which is a reminder of her own disturbed relationship with her mother, Joya whom she calls “cold and distant, “so hateful” (Flynn, 2007: 190-191). In response to withdrawal of maternal love, Camille starts cutting herself. Some of the words she carves on her skin, “wicked”, “cunt”, “Equivocate. Inarticulate. Duplicious”, suggest her sense of self disgust, helplessness, and confusion (Flynn, 2007: 76-79). An interesting point in the novel is the lack of a strong paternal figure in the family. Alan, Adora’s husband, is an inefficient, infantilized man who lives in his wife’s shadow; “he’s often ill, and even when he’s not, he’s mostly immobile” (Flynn, 2007: 96). Camille never had the chance to even know her real father’s name. It is possible to say that her upbringing has not ensured her safe passage into the symbolic stage, the realm of paternal authority. The words she carves on her skin give vent to the sense of self-loathing and inadequacy she experiences in her encounters with Adora. According to Welldon, acts of self-harm during adolescence express the subjects’ “tremendous dissatisfaction” toward their mother and themselves (2004: 40). This is particularly prominent in

female perpetrators who identify with the maternal body and turn the abuse against themselves. In fact, the attack on their bodies is considered a symbolic attack on the maternal body. Similarly, Camille's self-cutting expresses her anger toward her mother. She has vague memories of physical abuse by Adora, "scratching, or biting or pinching" (Flynn, 2007: 143). At moments of extreme emotional pressure, Camille is overwhelmed by a desire to cut herself. Kristeva defines the "abjection of self" in terms of "the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundation of its own being" (1982: 5). The "inaugural loss" is in fact the separation from the mother which is a necessary step toward establishing identity. The plight of the female characters in the novel is a reminder of Kristeva's premise that "all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language or desire is founded" (1982: 5).

Conclusion

To address the issue of child-abuse in *Sharp Objects*, this study used Kristeva's views regarding mother-child relationship and maternal abject. An analysis of the three female characters in the novel including Adora, Camille and Amma, indicated how the characters' struggle to break loose of the maternal authority culminates in the acts of crime against the female body, child murder, self-harm and the splitting off of the identity. It was illustrated that due to a cycle of maternal abuse in the family, the female characters in the novel are forced to go through painful experiences that lead to their identity crisis. The mother-daughter identities merge, for example, Camille becomes a reminder of her grandmother's emotional abuse for her mother, Adora. Adora, on the other hand, dresses like a girl and leads a mother-child state of existence in which her identity is dependent upon her children. And Amma establishes a dual identity; at home she gives up her on-growing individuality by symbiotic attachment to Adora and outside home she sexualizes herself and reenacts the murderous impulses of her mother by killing children whom she considers a threat to her narcissistic unity with her mother. In response to Adora's engulfing presence, both Camille and Adora turn to self-harm in the form of self-cutting and self-sexualization.

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