

From Self-Doubt to Self-Recovery: The Psychological Consequences of Gaslighting in Paula Hawkins's Novels

(A Literary-Psychological and Feminist-Epistemological Study)

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Abstract-The research paper gives the gist of the psychological consequences of gaslighting in Paula Hawkins' novels "The Girl on the Train" (2015) and "Into the Water" (2017). It argues that Hawkins does not portray gaslighting merely as a series of lies or disagreements; in her fiction, manipulation gradually erodes an individual's confidence in their own memory, perception, judgment, and identity. Kate Abramson's philosophical discussion on gaslighting is useful for understanding the harm inflicted on a victim's own judgment. Paige L. Sweet's sociological perspective explains how unequal gender relations and social norms can make it easy to discredit a woman. Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice—specifically testimonial injustice—provides a framework for understanding the unequal distribution of credibility. Rachel McKinnon links gaslighting to epistemic injustice. Judith Herman's model of trauma and recovery is employed here as a framework for literary interpretation. The study demonstrates that psychological manipulation operates through both personal relationships and broader social narratives. Hawkins also keeps readers in a state of uncertainty through fragmented chronology, shifting perspectives, withheld information, and delayed revelations. In conclusion, recovery is not merely about uncovering a hidden fact; it involves rebuilding trust in one's own capacity to understand, verifying

memories against evidence, securing reliable support, and reclaiming the right to narrate one's own experience.

Keywords: Gaslighting, self-doubt, self-reclamation, epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, gender, memory, trauma, narrative authority

Introduction-Gaslighting has emerged as a significant concept for literary analysis, as it allows for the simultaneous examination of issues such as psychological manipulation, power dynamics in personal relationships, credibility, and self-knowledge. While the term is often used in the general sense of lying or emotional conflict, the process depicted in Hawkins's novels is far more protracted. Its key feature is the gradual undermining of a person's confidence in their own interpretation of their experiences. Denial, contradiction, minimization, blame-shifting, selective disclosure, and the manipulation of others' perceptions can combine to create a situation where the individual begins to doubt their own memory.

Paula Hawkins' fiction is well-suited for this study. Her psychological thrillers revolve around themes of memory, domestic relationships, mystery, addiction, betrayal, and trauma, as well as the precarious boundary between what actually happened and what the characters believe occurred. Rachel Watson, in "The Girl on the Train", stands at the heart of this uncertainty. Her divorce, alcohol dependence, loneliness, and memory lapses

make her vulnerable to being dismissed as unreliable; however, these vulnerabilities do not, in themselves, prove that her perceptions are false. What matters is how her ex-husband, Tom, and the social environment around her perceive and portray her vulnerabilities.

This study views gaslighting not only as a psychological process but also as a struggle for the right to define reality. Its central argument is that Hawkins depicts a journey through three interconnected stages: the erosion of self-belief, the fragmentation of identity, and the gradual reclamation of agency and autonomy. These are not clinical medical stages; rather, they reflect the characters' evolving situations. The discussion focuses primarily on "The Girl on the Train", using "Into the Water" as a comparative text. The second novel moves beyond the private realm of marriage and domestic violence to a community where memories, rumors, intergenerational stories, and suppressed histories vie for authority. Through comparison, one can understand who is permitted to speak, whose words are trusted, and which interpretation of the past is socially accepted.

Research Questions

How does Paula Hawkins portray the psychological consequences of gaslighting, particularly its effects on memory, self-confidence, identity, and emotional well-being? How do Hawkins's female characters transition from self-doubt to self-recovery, and how do they regain trust in their judgment and their agency/autonomy?

Methodology and Scope of the Study-This study employs qualitative, comparative, and interpretive methodologies. Aspects such as characterization, narrative voice, chronology, memory, dialogue, repetition, concealment, and the distribution of information have been examined through close reading. The analysis is grounded in literary-psychological and feminist-epistemological concepts rather than clinical diagnosis. The characters have been viewed as fictional constructs, and psychological terminology has been employed not for diagnosis, but to understand the portrayal of experience within the narrative.

The primary texts are *The Girl on the Train* and "Into the Water". "The Girl on the Train" has received greater attention because Rachel's relationship with Tom offers a clear depiction of manipulation, the loss of credibility, and recovery. "Into the Water" has been read comparatively through the lenses of community memory, contested history, and the interpretation of women's grief.

Theoretical Framework

1. Gaslighting and the Loss of Self-Trust-Kate Abramson's philosophical perspective is useful for understanding the distinction between gaslighting and ordinary deception. Gaslighting becomes significant when the manipulation interferes with an individual's ability to trust themselves as the interpreter of their own perceptions. The problem is not merely receiving incorrect information; the individual is gradually taught to doubt the very process by which they evaluate information. Rachel's problem is not simply that Tom lies to her. The explanation is compelling because Rachel has already reached a point where her memory can be called into question. Alcohol-related memory gaps become evidence against her, and her emotional reactions are cited as proof of instability. Consequently, she is forced to question whether she can trust her own recollection of what actually happened.

2. Gaslighting by Sweet's Perspectives-Paige L. Sweet considers gaslighting as social perspective.

Gender discrimination, economic inequality, class discrimination, influences the manipulation in victim's mind. In the novel "The Girl on the train" by Paula Hawkins, Tom take the advantage of the vulnerability of Rachel and uses jealousy as a tool to create self-doubt in her mind. By using this trick tom implied Gaslighting theory more effectively by linking personal manipulation to societal perspective.

3. Theory of Epistemic Injustice by Fricker - According to Miranda Fricker's theory, testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is accorded less credibility than they are actually entitled to due to prejudice. This is useful for Hawkins, as her novels question why certain voices are believed while others are dismissed. Rachel's testimony is not evaluated in a social vacuum; her history of alcohol dependence and emotional distress influences how others react to her. Once a woman is deemed socially unreliable, a manipulator does not need to refute her every claim individually; her credibility has already been undermined. In this sense, gaslighting becomes a struggle over when to acknowledge an individual as someone who possesses knowledge and can speak for themselves.

4. Epistemic Injustice theory in Gaslighting-Rachel McKinnon illustrates the relationship between gaslighting and knowledge. Epistemic injustice refers to wrong things faced by a person based on their status as a 'knower'. It happens when the Victim's words, experiences or wisdom is undervalued because of his/her identity based on gender, class, caste or race.

This theory is easily seen in Paula Hawkins' works. For instance, in the novel "The girl on the Train" the round character 'Rachel' faced this discrimination based on gender inequality.

5. Trauma, Memory, and Recovery-The theory of Judith Herman on trauma and recovery suggests to us how a person moves on from disconnection to remembrance, connection, and towards renewed engagement. Here, Herman's framework is used as an explanatory framework and not as a clinical diagnosis. Recovery is not just about facing the music by bringing the hidden events or inner views to the front; for this, it is essential to remove or convert sad memories into acceptance and move on. It is also important to understand self-identity. Additionally, it is important for a person to rebuild relationships and have faith in them, and it is also important to redevelop a sense of control over one's life. That is why, according to Hawkins, just solving the mystery is not recovery. After exposing the latent truth, it is not necessary that self-doubt will leave the character or person. It is a long-term process; the effects will take longer to disappear. The character needs to restart trusting herself/himself.

Rachel Watson and the Construction of Self-Doubt-The round character "Rachel Watson" of "The Girl on the Train" presents the vulnerabilities that create self-doubt in her mind regarding being unreliable and untrustworthy. Her marriage has deteriorated, and she has become miserably addicted to alcohol, and her past stability has been ruined. Hawkins presents the incidents in such a way that the circumstances can be used as arguments against Rachel's credibility. Tom's influence has been created through small effects of cumulative results. Tom has left Rachel in such a miserable condition that she starts to feel as if Tom's behaviour is not the issue but she herself is the problem. Reversing responsibility is a part of manipulation. In this situation, the victim starts to feel that he/she is the only creator of the problem.

Comparative Discussion-Both novels talk about women's vulnerability, but one novel, "The Girl on the Train", has depicted personal suffering, and the other novel, "Into the Water", has depicted social manipulation at the communicative level. Both novels depict that gaslighting can be personal or social. When a character learns to trust his/her memories and experiences, then gaslighting starts to vanish from the character's mind.

Key Findings- Hawkins has illustrated gaslighting theory as a continuous psychological process that

destroys self-belief, questions memory and breaks emotional state. The author points that manipulation starts to rule the mind of victim when it takes the support of social issues, as it includes the society i.e., the group of people who impose stereotype beliefs in victim's mind.

Hawkins suggest that knowing the truth and believing it is not the recovery. While dealing with gaslighting phase, victim loses self-trust, so recovery is all about gradually building that self-trust, being able to recognise or differentiate between manipulation and concern and instead for seeking validation via others, victim should start developing self-trust and should keep control of his/ her life to himself/ herself.

Conclusion-Thus, the portrayal of 'gaslighting' in literature offers a compelling and intellectually rich exploration of the complexities surrounding emotional abuse and psychological manipulation. Through nuanced character development and psychological depiction, authors shed light on the subtle ways in which gaslighting operates. Literary works employ gaslighting as a central theme to examine aspects such as power dynamics, the nature of truth and memory, character transformation, and social critique. Such stories prompt readers to reflect on their own beliefs and misconceptions, while also fostering empathy for those who have endured psychological abuse and encouraging them to consider behaviors that can cause harm.

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