

SCHOLARLY ESSAY

Masking Masculinity Crisis with Gender Performance in Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*

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Abstract

This essay analyses Tom Watson from Paula Hawkins' 2015 domestic noir novel *The Girl on the Train*. Tom is an example of male protagonists in domestic noir who struggle with their fragile masculinity due to the pressures of having to conform to patriarchal ideals of masculinity. Characters like Tom try to solve their masculinity crisis by engaging in a gender performance of hegemonic masculinity that attempts to regain dominance over their female partners. Using Raewyn Connell's gender order theory and concept of multiple masculinities in conjunction with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this essay argues that Tom engaged in this gender performance to maintain his self-image as a man that embodies hegemonic masculinity as he felt ashamed by his authentic expression of masculinity (a subordinated masculinity). He thus used male coping strategies such as violence against women and infidelity to mask his subordinated masculinity and to sustain his gender performance. However, he was ultimately unsuccessful as he is murdered by his female victims in retaliation for his violence, thereby proving that fragile masculinity caused by restrictive patriarchal gender norms can be dangerous for women as well as for men.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity, fragile masculinity, domestic noir, gender performance, male violence.

Despite its focus on women's lived experiences, domestic noir as a crime fiction subgenre offers insight into men and masculinities as well. Delving into the dangers within the domestic sphere, domestic noir explores how the power dynamics between women and men can negatively impact all those involved. In fact, patriarchal gender norms of femininity and masculinity are at the heart of domestic noir, and most of the conflicts are borne out of men struggling to cope with their fragile masculinity. This often has ripple effects in the domestic sphere, always resulting in violence. Tom Watson from Paula Hawkins' 2015 novel *The Girl on the Train* is an example of a male protagonist in domestic noir struggling with fragile masculinity, and this essay examines how he engaged in a gender performance of hegemonic masculinity to solve his masculinity crisis.

Domestic Noir

Domestic noir is a relatively new subgenre of crime fiction that deviates from the practices of traditional crime fiction. Often starring male characters, traditional crime fiction relegates women to a limited number of roles, such as the victim/corpse or constantly-mistreated law enforcement officers (Crouch, 2018; Joyce, 2018; Miller, 2018; Reddy, 1988, 2003). This has changed with domestic noir, where the storylines reflect women's lived experiences (Crouch, 2013, 2018; Joyce, 2018; Kennedy, 2017). The subgenre became popular with the commercially successful and critically acclaimed *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012) (Joyce, 2018). Noted for its twisted storyline about a devolving marriage between a wife and husband, *Gone Girl* has become the epitome of this new era in crime fiction (Kennedy, 2017). Unlike in traditional crime fiction, in domestic noir, men who abuse their female partners due to their fragile masculinity are often punished (Crouch, 2018).

The term "domestic noir" highlights the focus of the subgenre: the *domestic* sphere (Crouch, 2013, 2018). Situated within the larger genre of crime fiction, domestic noir explores dysfunctional families and the complexity of human relationships. The subgenre is mainly concerned with women's relationships within the home, dealing with themes such as "family, motherhood, children, marriage, love, sex and betrayal" (Crouch, 2018, p. vii). With the heavy focus on family dynamics, domestic noir novels are both explorations and critiques of the concept of "home as sanctuary" (Crouch, 2018, p. vii). While the home is commonly considered a safe space, domestic noir challenges this assumption by presenting

subversive stories (Anzaldúa, 2002; Crouch, 2018). Delving into abusive marriages and parent-child relationships, domestic noir emphasises how the perceived safety of the home can also be dangerous to its inhabitants (Crouch, 2013, 2018). The statistics of domestic violence and child abuse are evidence of how the “[h]ome can also be a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence” (Crouch, 2018, p. vii).

While domestic noir features women and their lived experiences, these novels also offer a study of men involved in long-term romantic partnerships. As the subgenre’s focus is on how the patriarchy and its gender norms affect women and men, domestic noir offers insight into how both sexes are negatively impacted. Therefore, the home is an unsafe space for not only women but for men as well, as men too must navigate restrictive gender norms while attempting to maintain their dominance and masculinity in their marriages and communities.

Despite the significant role played by men and masculinities in domestic noir, little research has been conducted on these aspects as much of the focus has been on the female protagonists. Furthermore, much of the existing research on domestic noir’s male protagonists and their masculinities are primarily focussed on Nick Dunne from *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012).

Men and Masculinity in Domestic Noir

Domestic noir’s male protagonists are constantly attempting to assert their masculinity and dominance, which is often the cause of their marital conflicts. The male protagonists often feel emasculated by the female protagonists and the men respond to this by subjecting their female partners to abuse, in their attempts to reassert their masculinity and regain their lost dominance. These ongoing conflicts to maintain and gain authority over the other is a direct result of patriarchal gender norms as the patriarchy entitles men to embody hegemonic masculinity while women are forced to perform an “inauthentic’ model of femininity” (Osborne, 2017, p. 20). Therefore, when women attempt to perform their authentic femininity, which often incorporates aspects of hegemonic masculinity, they simultaneously threaten and challenge the patriarchy, men and masculinity. To maintain the existing social order, women must be controlled by men and forced to enact a

hyperfemininity/ hegemonic femininity so that the patriarchy, men and masculinity are no longer threatened.

This is evident in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, where Nick Dunne constantly feels emasculated by his wife, Amy Elliott Dunne, and so attempts to reassert his masculinity and dominance in their marriage by subjecting her to abuse (e.g., infidelity). Meredith Jeffers (2015) and Patrick Osborne (2017) explore how Nick battles with his loss of dominance and the power imbalance between him and his wife. Nick, a working-class man originally from Midwestern United States, felt emasculated by Amy's wealth and affluent family from New York City, which was exacerbated when they both lost their jobs and Amy financially supported both of them when Nick was unable to do so (Jeffers, 2015). Nick and Amy's marital conflicts began shortly after Nick's loss of employment during the 2008 global economic recession (Osborne, 2017). His unemployment fuelled his dissatisfactions with himself and subsequently his marriage as he "perceives himself as obsolete and believes that only his career can bolster a sense of wholeness and self-actualization" (Osborne, 2017, p. 13). As neoliberalism dictates that one's worth is tied to one's wealth, Nick's inability to achieve these goals, and thereby the American Dream, made him become increasingly resentful. He then directs this anger at his wife, Amy, "who now maintains financial superiority over him and [he] ultimately falls into a state of depression because of his loss of masculine status" (Osborne, 2017, p. 13).

However, while this wealth disparity and Nick's own finances were a major cause of his "masculine anxieties", Nick's father played a significant role in bringing up these insecurities (Jeffers, 2015, p. 31). Even after borrowing money from Amy to open a bar in his hometown, Nick was insistent upon repaying Amy "with interest" as "he would not be a man who borrowed from his wife" (Flynn, 2012, p. 7, cited in Jeffers, 2015, p. 31). Nick was heavily influenced by his father's misogynistic ideas and his patriarchal notions of masculinity, therefore his financial reliance on his wife was an emasculating act for him. Nick's father believed that a man must be financially independent and that relying on his wife for financial support meant that Nick was not really a man. Therefore, "Nick is tested, then, by both his financial reliance on Amy and his inability to be the "right" kind of man his father wanted him to be" (Jeffers, 2015, p. 31). This indicates that Nick made attempts to be the type of man his father expected him to be but consistently failed at this expected role and that "Nick's constant fluctuation between typically masculine identities—and his frustrations at not filling out these roles naturally" all only served to complicate the power

dynamic between Nick and Amy and further fed into Nick's feelings of emasculation (Jeffers, 2015, p. 31). However, their power imbalance in terms of wealth was not the only factor that emasculated Nick. Their annual romantic treasure hunt held on their wedding anniversary continued to remind Nick of how Amy held more power in their marriage, thereby relegating him to the "feminine" role as Amy assumed the dominant, "masculine" role in it: "It was what [Amy's] dad always did for her mom on their anniversary, and don't think I don't see the gender roles here, that I don't get the hint" (Flynn, 2012, p. 18, cited in Jeffers, 2015, p. 30). Therefore, this treasure hunt only further highlighted the power imbalance within their relationship to Nick.

Although desperate to reclaim both his masculinity and his dominance in his marriage, Nick is still unable to fully assert himself with Amy as she was more dominant than him. As a result, Nick pursued other traditionally masculine traits and behaviours to reassert his masculinity to himself. Therefore, while the novel presents Nick's unemployment as a "catalyst for anxiety and rage" (Osborne, 2017, p. 13) that leads to the devolution of his marriage, his affair with the young Andie Hardy and the opening of his bar are his attempts to "reclaim his masculinity and loss of identity" (p. 14). Osborne notes that these "male coping strategies" are "in line with discourses concerning America's crisis of masculinity" (p. 14), with excessive consumption of alcohol enabling "men to reclaim power in a culture experiencing a crisis of masculinity" (p. 15). Therefore, alcohol abuse "allows [men] to prove their manhood and hold onto their boyhood all at the same time. All the freedom and none of the responsibility" (Kimmel, 2008, p. 109).

Performing Hegemonic Masculinity

Defining Masculinities

Masculinity ideology is defined as "an individual's internalization of cultural belief systems and attitudes toward masculinity and men's roles" (Levant and Richmond, 2007, p. 131). It includes certain expectations of boys and men that they must conform to, referred to as traditional masculinity ideology or hegemonic masculinity (Levant, 1996; Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Levant and Richmond, 2007). This masculinity ideology asserts the heterosexual male's dominance over women and other minorities (e.g. racial, ethnic, sexual, etc.) (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Traditional masculinity ideology dictates that boys and men should be the opposite of what it constitutes to be female (David and Brannon, 1976 cited in Levant and Richmond, 2007; Connell, 2005; Levant and Richmond, 2007). This is reflected in the various aspects of hegemonic masculinity, with the “four norms of traditional masculinity” being: that men must avoid “feminine things”, “strive for success and achievement”, “should not show weakness” and “should seek adventure, even if violence is necessary” (David and Brannon, 1976, p. 131).

Most cultures believe that masculinity is fixed and this is reflected in the use of terms such as “true masculinity” and “real men” (Anders, 2013; Berger et al., 1995; Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 2007; Connell, 2005; Kray et al., 2017; Moynihan & Alderson, 1998). This belief is based on a type of biological-reductionist theory of masculinity that assumes that true masculinity is natural as it is a product of evolution and that men’s genes make them naturally prone to violence, territoriality, promiscuity and that they are less likely to engage in child care (the latter is considered a strictly women’s activity) (Anders, 2013; Connell, 2005; Kray et al., 2017).

Raewyn Connell’s gender order theory and concept of multiple masculinities offers a framework with which to analyse masculinities and how they interact with femininities. This theory discusses the dynamics between men and women in society, focusing on gender hierarchies that put men in a position of dominance and actively oppresses women and other marginalised groups (Connell, 2005). The theory introduces the idea that there are multiple types of masculinities, with some being more dominant than others, leading to the oppression of women, minorities and more subordinated men (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept of “‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves [in relation to other men] through discursive practices” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841).

The concept of multiple masculinities refutes long-held assumptions about gender and masculinity, asserting that there is no fixed type of masculinity, that men do not always commit to a particular “pattern of masculinity”, rather, that men “make situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behaviour” for their benefit (Connell, 2005, pp. 77–78, xviii–xix; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). This is a markedly different approach to gender norms from theories of biological determinism which suggest that masculinity is fixed from birth (Anders, 2013; Goldberg, 1993). Instead, Connell suggests

that gender is shaped by social structures (e.g. patriarchy/matriarchy and religious views) and that the relationships between various types of masculinities are remarkably complex, affected by everything from socio-economic class to colonialism (Connell, 2005).

The most dominant form of masculinity is termed 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005). Connell describes this as the predominant "configuration of gender practice" that keeps men in a dominant position while subordinating women (Connell, 2005, p. 77). While it is often practiced by a minority of men, it is normative and requires other men to "position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). However, hegemonic masculinity is not fixed and does not manifest in the same way in every society (Connell, 2005). As "[h]egemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole", when one type of masculinity is dominant, other masculinities are automatically subordinated to it (Connell, 2005, p. 78). The subordinated masculinities include sexual and gender minorities, races, religions, and classes, among others. Connell (2005) also stresses on the importance of recognising that gender intersects with race, class, nationality, and geopolitical positionality.

While their authority and position of power mark a particular masculinity as hegemonic, very few men actually meet normative masculine standards (Connell, 2005). However, they are able to become so powerful because patriarchy is geared towards benefitting men more than women or minorities (Connell, 2005). Complicit masculinity occurs when men do not actively engage in behaviour that openly oppresses women and minorities but still benefit from hegemonic masculinity practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Although these men may not be violent towards women and share household chores with their partners, they still serve to gain from their position of power as men (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Despite a tendency to view these complicit masculinities as "slackers", factors such as "[m]arriage, fatherhood and community life" result in more complex relationships with women, thus affect men to become complicit instead of hegemonic and it allows them to benefit from the "overall subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 79).

Hegemonic masculinity often overlaps with toxic and fragile masculinity (Connell, 2005; Dimuccio & Knowles, 2020; Schippers, 2007). Although hegemonic masculinity is primarily used to refer to toxic masculinity practices, it includes both positive and negative

male behaviour as “violence and other noxious practices are not always the defining characteristics, since hegemony has numerous configurations” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840). Therefore, while physical violence is a negative toxic masculinity practice, hegemonic masculinity also includes positive masculinity practices such as being a supportive partner and father (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, when men are fearful of having their social status as real men revoked if they fail to fulfil certain standards of masculinity, their resultant anxiety is termed “fragile masculinity” (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020). This fragility surrounding masculinity has some basis in toxic masculinity (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020; Gökarkısel et al., 2019; Rubin et al., 2020). Furthermore, men struggling to cope with fragile masculinity may engage in toxic masculinity practices to reinforce their masculinity and safeguard their manhood (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020; Gökarkısel et al., 2019; Rubin et al., 2020).

Gender as a Performance

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity describes gender as “an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a ‘masculine’ man or a ‘feminine’ woman” (Salih, 2007, p. 56). Gender itself is formed by the repetition of a set of acts “within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (Butler, 2006, p. 45) or a “gendered self” (Butler, 2006, p. 33). In fact, gender performativity, which is a stylised repetition of a set of acts, is also an imitation of the dominant (and often, oppressive) gender conventions (Butler, 2006). Society’s conception of gender dictates what constitutes a “man” and a “woman” as well as what it means to be masculine and feminine, which Butler terms the heterosexual matrix.

According to the heterosexual matrix, gender is a binary that is socially constructed and has men and women classified as two different types of people with distinct physical and personality traits as well as desires and behaviour that neatly match up to each category (Butler, 2006; Schippers, 2007). Both the categories of man and woman have a set of symbolic meanings that seek to explain the difference between the two (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2005; Schippers, 2007). These symbolic meanings help to form and dictate social ideals of masculinity and femininity to which everyone must adhere. Gender is essentially an act of role-playing; “[w]e act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an

impression of being a man or being a woman” by following the social ideals of masculinity and femininity within our respective societies (Butler, 2011, 00:33).

This suggests that, while hegemonic masculinity in itself is a performance, it is also possible for men who embody complicit or other subordinated masculinities to engage in a performance of hegemonic masculinity. Functioning as a masculine form of Joan Riviere’s concept of womanliness as a masquerade (1929), engaging in a performance of hegemonic masculinity or hypermasculinity allows men to mask their complicit or subordinated masculinity, enabling men to “reclaim” their masculinity and reassert their dominance over women and other minorities as well as other men. By doing so, they are also able to reassert their masculinity to themselves to resolve their masculinity crisis directly caused by the patriarchy (Osborne, 2017, p. 15). This is the lens through which Tom Watson from Paula Hawkins’ 2015 novel *The Girl on the Train* will be analysed to examine how he enacted hegemonic masculinity to mask his subordinated masculinity and how he used violence and misogyny to support and legitimise his performance of hegemonic masculinity.

Tom Watson’s Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Girl on the Train*

While *The Girl on the Train* (2015) features three female protagonists (Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell and Anna Watson), Tom Watson and his fragile masculinity are at the centre of the novel. Struggling under the pressure of social expectations surrounding masculinity and unable to conform to social ideals of masculinity, Tom felt that his authentic expression of masculinity was a failed one, and therefore felt forced to engage in a performance of hypermasculinity/ hegemonic masculinity to avoid censure for his subordinated masculinity. Although his capacity for violence, lack of empathy, strong desire to be admired and anger borne out of entitlement signal a narcissistic personality (Di Pierro et al., 2019), the patriarchal expectations of him to embody a hegemonic masculinity and his failure to do so were the major sources of his frustrations, resulting in his low self-esteem that ultimately led to his fragile masculinity where he felt the need to constantly prove his worth to others and to himself to gain acceptance.

Tom engaged in a gender performance of hegemonic masculinity (a male masquerade of sorts) where he masked his true subordinated masculinity from not only

others but also from himself by convincing himself that he was in fact a “[k]night in shining armour” and that he was often victimised by others, thus forcing him to engage in abusive behaviour to save himself (Hawkins, 2015, pp. 305–306). Rachel correctly identified this, noting: “he lies to himself the way he lies to me. He *believes* this. He actually believes that he was good to me” (p. 306). For Tom, this masquerade/ performance of hegemonic masculinity was important so that he could give others the appearance of conforming to patriarchal ideals of masculinity, and in turn, convince himself of his superior masculinity.

Patriarchal ideals of masculinity dictate that men must be financially successful and should never show any weaknesses, so Tom sought to portray himself as a successful and physically strong man who never made mistakes and made great efforts to appear as if he were a devoted husband and father (David and Brannon, 1976). However, Tom did not actually conform to these ideals, and to avoid attracting censure for his subordinated masculinity, he had to create elaborate lies to portray himself as embodying a hegemonic masculinity. These lies also allowed him to avoid being deemed feminine as masculinity is constructed as the opposite of femininity, therefore not embodying hegemonic masculinity automatically labels men as embodying femininity (David & Brannon, 1976; Schippers, 2007). To give the appearance of physical strength and aggression, he lied that he had enlisted in the army and to maintain this façade, he would routinely pretend to meet his colleagues from the army at a bar (Hawkins, 2015, pp. 177, 276). To sustain his image as a financially successful man and to hide his financial failures, he severed all contact with his parents so that his wives would not find out the truth from them (Hawkins, 2015, pp. 198, 241, 278–279). However, following his death, his lies are revealed:

I [Rachel] found out that he was never in the army. He tried to get in, but he was rejected twice. The story about his father was a lie, too—he’d twisted it all round. He took his parents’ savings and lost it all. They forgave him, but he cut all ties with them when his father declined to remortgage their house in order to lend him more money. He lied all the time, about everything. Even when he didn’t need to, even when there was no point. (Hawkins, 2015, p. 319)

From the nature of Tom's lies, it is evident that he embodied a subordinated masculinity and perceived himself as a failure ("Tom's whole life was constructed on lies—falsehoods and half-truths told to make him look better, stronger, more interesting than he was") (Hawkins, 2015, p. 319). He was especially ashamed of his financial failures and being rejected from the army and consistently lied to mask these from his female partners and from society. As he was desperate to embody hegemonic masculinity, he sought to exhibit normative masculine traits such as physical strength, aggression, sexual promiscuity and dominance over women to compensate for his financial failures and his rejection from the army. Therefore, while his lies about having been enlisted in the army sufficed to portray him as a physically strong and aggressive man, his extra-marital affairs with Anna and Megan helped him sustain his image and self-image as a man embodying hegemonic masculinity. While his infidelities signalled that he was not a good husband and father, his sexual promiscuity still helped boost his self-esteem as having multiple sexual partners is a sign of virility and therefore is excused when committed by men (Connell, 2003). Essentially, male sexual promiscuity is one of the "male coping strategies" that are "in line with discourses concerning America's [and the Western world's] crisis of masculinity" which allows men to reclaim their masculinity and power to reassert their dominance over women (Osborne, 2017, p. 14).

While Tom consistently lied to maintain his façade of strength and success, he also used violence towards women to assert his dominance over them to further sustain his performance of hegemonic masculinity. A deeply misogynistic man, Tom believed that he was entitled to a certain type of treatment from his female partners and tended to lash out in anger when he felt that his needs were not being met, even abusing them when they did not conform to his ideals of femininity. His use of violence towards his female partners enabled him to exert control over them, thereby allowing him to assert his masculinity and dominance over them so that he could maintain his image and self-image as a man embodying hegemonic masculinity.

Tom's violence towards his female romantic and sexual partners is slowly revealed after his ex-wife Rachel's realisation that he had been abusing her. Following her therapy sessions, she began to recollect buried memories that signalled that Tom had been physically, verbally and emotionally abusing her during their marriage as well as after their divorce. His emotional abuse primarily consisted of gaslighting, a form of emotional manipulation and lying that is designed to alter the victim's memories in favour of the

abuser (Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Hightower, 2017). While this type of abuse caused Rachel significant trauma, both mentally and physically, the gaslighting allowed Tom to prioritise himself without any backlash or criticism from Rachel.

The abuse itself was initially borne out of Tom's frustration with Rachel's alcoholism. Unable to realise her dream of becoming a mother, Rachel became depressed and sought comfort in excessive drinking, negatively affecting all her relationships, including her marriage (Hawkins, 2015, p. 79). However, Tom quickly became angered by what he perceived was Rachel prioritising her own needs over his, which ultimately led to him gaslighting her, made easier due to her constant memory lapses as a result of her depression and alcoholism. He justified his gaslighting by centring himself as the true victim in their marriage, placing all the blame on Rachel for forcing him to behave in this way, thereby absolving himself of any wrongdoing:

“I did my best, you know. I was a good husband to you, Rach. I put up with a lot—your drinking and your depression. I put up with all that for a long time before I threw in the towel.”

[...]

He shrugs. “Do you have any idea how boring you became, Rachel? How ugly? Too sad to get out of bed in the morning, too tired to take a shower or wash your fucking hair? Jesus. It's no wonder I lost patience, is it? It's no wonder I had to look for ways to amuse myself. You've no one to blame but yourself.” (p. 299)

Tom was not apologetic of his abusive behaviour towards Rachel, firmly believing that he was justified in his actions as she refused to behave according to his expectations of her. Thus, he believed himself to be the victim, interpreting Rachel's behaviour as “disobedience” and as an act of abuse towards him. This allowed him to maintain his self-image as someone who never made mistakes. However, the combination of his self-victimisation and his self-aggrandising nature resulted in him perceiving himself as a hero to his female partners, as if him bestowing his romantic attention was a gift to them:

[Tom] “Knight in shining armour, me.”

[...]

[Tom] “Don’t you remember? 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. Then you decided to piss it all away, but you can’t blame me for that.”

[...]

“Let’s not start rewriting history. I was good to you. Sometimes ... well, sometimes you forced my hand. But I was good to you. I took care of you” (pp. 305-306)

Tom always perceived himself as the victim and never as the perpetrator of violence, having convinced himself that he had been a good husband to Rachel and that any abuse he had subjected her to was not really abuse and it was justified considering her behaviour. He justified his affair with Megan in the same way, viewing himself as a victim when Anna was focussed on caring for their infant child instead of being readily sexually available to him, essentially blaming Anna for his infidelity:

“You were so tired all the time,” [...] “You just weren’t interested. Everything was about the baby. Isn’t that right? It was all about you, wasn’t it? All about you!” [...] “And Megan was so ... well, she was available.” (p. 298)

Rachel noted his tendency to blame others, especially her, for anything that did not go as he had planned. This was his way of absolving himself when he had abused someone as he needed to believe that he was always right. Although he appeared to recognise on some level that his actions were wrong, he was unwilling to admit his faults as he needed to maintain his self-image as a man embodying hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, he always found someone else to blame for his own faults. More often than not, he tended to

place blame upon Rachel, as she was an easy victim due to her alcoholism, depression, memory lapses and unreliability:

“You have to admit it,” Tom is saying. “You’ve brought this upon yourself. Think about it: if you’d just left us alone, you’d never be in this situation. I wouldn’t be in this situation. None of us would. [...] I’d probably have just been able to sort things out with Megan. I wouldn’t have been so ... riled up. I wouldn’t have lost my temper. I wouldn’t have hurt her. None of this would have happened.”

[...] This is what he [Tom] does—this is what he always does. He’s a master at it, making me [Rachel] feel as though everything is my fault, making me feel worthless. (p. 315)

His propensity to blame others for his own abusive behaviour is also evident in how he perceived Megan’s murder. He blamed Rachel for him murdering Megan, claiming that she “fucked everything up” (Hawkins, 2015, p. 307) and insisting that “[t]he whole thing was actually *your* fault, Rachel” (Hawkins, 2015, p. 315). He also refused to take responsibility for the callous way in which he dismissed Megan and her baby, which resulted in her physically and verbally abusing him (“I shove him in the back. [...] trying to scratch his smug face [...] I insult his manhood, his boring wife, his ugly child.”) (Hawkins, 2015, p. 303). Angered by Megan’s insults, he was convinced that he had no choice but to kill her to stop her from ruining his life and then blamed Megan for her death:

“I was saying, ‘I’m not interested in your baby, it’s got nothing to do with me.’”
[...] She was screaming at me, swearing, saying all sorts of shit, telling me she’d go straight to Anna, [...] she just wouldn’t fucking shut up. [...] I just needed her to stop. [...] “She was trying to crawl away from me. There was nothing I could do. I had to finish it.” (pp. 308–309)

Even while he was attacking Megan in her final moments, he placed the blame for his actions upon her: “*Now look. Now look what you made me do.*” (Hawkins, 2015, p. 304). This tendency to blame others also applied to his numerous physical assaults upon Rachel after he realised that she was aware of his role in Megan’s death, his subsequent imprisonment of her and attempts to murder her. In the same vein, he felt no guilt for his infidelities, be it his affair with Anna or Megan, feeling that he was justified in his actions as both Rachel and Anna had not prioritised him, thus forcing him to seek attention elsewhere.

Furthermore, his constant comparisons of Rachel and Anna (and later on, Megan) and the insults he directed at them that primarily focussed on their femininities, demonstrated the fact that he subscribed to traditional notions of femininity, as he consistently complimented Anna when she was performing his preferred type of hyperfemininity, noting with disdain that Rachel was incapable of being a “good wife”. This also indicates Tom’s feelings of entitlement in terms of women, believing that they must perform his preferred type of hyperfemininity to receive his affections. With Anna, he constantly compared her to Rachel and claimed that Anna was far superior, but whenever Anna engaged in behaviour that he deemed undesirable or inconvenient, he would comment that Anna was mirroring Rachel, meant solely as an insult and designed to emotionally manipulate Anna into modifying her behaviour. He treated Megan in the same way, paying attention to her when she was engaging in a hyperfemininity of his preference but becoming abusive when she engaged in any behaviour that did not align with his expectations. Thus, when Megan began considering a future with Tom that he did not want, he subjected her to silent treatment, and when she revealed her pregnancy to him, he attacked her by insulting her ability to be a good mother (pp. 132, 304).

Clearly, while Tom was responsible for subjecting Rachel, Megan and Anna to overwhelming amounts of emotional/psychological, verbal and physical violence, he never perceived himself as the perpetrator, choosing instead to engage in a masquerade/performance where he was always the victim and innocent of any crime or wrongdoing, thus dramatically changing the narrative in his favour. This self-victimisation enabled him to justify his misogyny and violence, thereby sustaining his performance of hegemonic masculinity to assuage his fragile masculinity.

Conclusion

Tom engaged in a performance of hegemonic masculinity to appear as if he embodied hegemonic masculinity to battle his deep insecurities about himself, hoping that this performance would help him avoid censure for his previous failures at conforming to gender norms surrounding masculinity. Therefore, he presented a more “macho” version of himself that was more concerned with traditionally masculine traits such as physical strength, a strong sex drive and dominance over women. In this way, Tom was able to assert his masculinity to others and himself, thereby providing a temporary solution to his masculinity crisis. To Tom, this also helped to redress the power imbalance between him and his female partners.

While he prided himself on fulfilling the traditional masculine gender roles of being a provider for his family, a good husband and father, Tom was deeply misogynistic. His masculinity consisted of many traits of toxic hegemonic masculinity, and he engaged in extreme forms of abuse against his female partners. He subjected Rachel, Anna and Megan to significant amounts of physical, emotional and verbal abuse to protect his self-image from others and himself and felt justified in abusing them as he believed that the women were not performing his ideals of femininity, and therefore were not deserving of his respect. In addition, by abusing them, he sought to assert his hegemonic masculinity and his dominance over them.

Restrictive patriarchal ideals of masculinity and society’s expectations of Tom to conform to these ideals resulted in his fragile masculinity, which in turn necessitated his attempts to enact an idealised masculinity. Engaging in a gender performance of hegemonic masculinity, he was able to provide the appearance of conforming to gender norms, and his use of violence and infidelity as coping strategies further legitimised his performance. Although his performance of hegemonic masculinity was initially successful, maintaining this mask became increasingly challenging and he is eventually murdered in retaliation for his violence. With Tom Watson’s character, Paula Hawkins’ *The Girl on the Train* demonstrates how coping strategies meant to assuage fragile masculinity can only provide temporary relief to a masculinity crisis and highlights domestic noir’s overarching message of the damaging effects of patriarchal gender norms on both women and men.

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