

## **Women, Power, and Hidden Truths: A Feminist Reading of Contemporary English Mystery Fiction**

**Bhavna**

Ph.D., Scholar, Dhamma Dipa International Buddhist University, South Tripura, India.

Email id: [bhavana.mds8@gmail.com](mailto:bhavana.mds8@gmail.com)

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### **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary English-language mystery fiction increasingly places women at the centre of investigations, not merely as victims whose suffering motivates a male detective. This article examines how gendered power and the politics of hidden knowledge shape four novels: Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015), Sujata Massey's *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018), and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018). Drawing on feminist literary criticism, intersectionality, and theories of gender performance, the study uses comparative close reading of characterization, narration, institutional authority, domestic space, and disclosure. It argues that the mystery form exposes the social procedures through which women are classified as credible, respectable, unstable, desirable, or dangerous. The novels also resist a simple equation between female agency and moral goodness: manipulation, complicity, care, and resistance coexist within their heroines. Differences of race, place, class, profession, and historical setting complicate any universal model of female experience. Ultimately, hidden truth becomes a political question about who has the authority to describe events and whose testimony receives recognition.

*Keywords: Feminist Criticism; Contemporary Mystery Fiction; Female Agency; Narrative Reliability; Patriarchy; Intersectionality; Gender and Power.*

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### **Introduction**

Mystery fiction conventionally organizes a story around a crime, an absence of knowledge, and a promised explanation. This apparently neutral structure also depends on social judgments: whom investigators question, whose behavior appears suspicious, and which experiences remain invisible. In fiction focused on women, such judgments are often gendered. A disappearance may expose a marriage's competing narratives; a witness may be disbelieved because of addiction; an inheritance dispute may conceal women's exclusion from legal power; and a family secret may test the limits of sisterly loyalty. Each case joins the search for factual truth to the struggle over interpretive authority. The central claim of this article is that mystery works as a feminist form when it makes the production of truth itself visible. The issue is not whether every female character is admirable.

Rather, the novels ask how institutions and intimate relationships regulate women's choices, and how women may reproduce the very structures that restrict them (Flynn; Hawkins; Massey; Braithwaite).

### **Research Problem, Objectives, and Method**

**Research problem.** Much discussion of popular thrillers concentrates on plot twists and unreliable narrators, while historical detective fiction is frequently assessed through its reconstruction of an era. These emphases can obscure a shared question: how do women negotiate systems that decide what counts as truth?

A comparative feminist analysis can connect domestic suspense, criminal complicity, and professional detection without assuming that all four novels express the same politics.

The study has three objectives: to analyze representations of female agency and constraint; to investigate how secrecy, testimony, and narrative unreliability shape the distribution of power; and to compare the effects of class, culture, and institutional position on women's access to justice. It asks whether knowledge offers emancipation, whether women's resistance can become ethically troubling, and how far genre conventions permit a critique of patriarchal assumptions.

**Methodology.** This is a qualitative, interpretive study based on comparative textual analysis. The novels are treated as primary texts, and feminist theories serve as analytical lenses rather than as hypotheses tested statistically. Close reading focuses on the organization of viewpoints, moments of disclosure, reputational language, women's relationships, and the settings in which claims are accepted or rejected. The analysis also distinguishes narrative events from critical judgments about those events. Because quotations and page numbers differ across print and electronic editions, the discussion uses author-only MLA parenthetical citations for paraphrases and does not invent page-specific evidence.

The corpus is purposively chosen to create meaningful contrasts. Flynn and Hawkins feature contemporary domestic suspense in which marriage and credibility are central. Massey positions a woman legal professional in colonial Bombay, allowing the study to connect detection to historically specific restrictions. Braithwaite relocates suspense to Lagos and foregrounds kinship, beauty, work, and moral complicity. This range supports thematic comparison but does not establish conclusions about every English-language mystery novel.

The argument remains literary rather than sociological: fictional patterns can illuminate cultural assumptions, but the novels cannot independently prove how often analogous injustices occur in real societies.

### **Feminist Framework: Representation and Intersectionality**

Feminist literary criticism examines how texts represent women and how conventions of authorship, genre, and interpretation are connected to gendered authority. Gilbert and Gubar's account of constrained female self-expression is useful for considering why women in suspense fiction can be depicted as either idealized angels or threatening monsters. These labels are inadequate to Flynn's

Amy, Hawkins's Rachel, Massey's Perveen, and Braithwaite's sisters; each character exceeds an easy opposition between innocence and danger (Gilbert and Gubar).

Judith Butler's discussion of gender as socially reiterated practice helps interpret the performance of wifehood, beauty, professionalism, and femininity in the novels. Such identities are not merely personal qualities. They are expectations imposed by others and enacted, resisted, or strategically exploited by characters (Butler). Amy's capacity to manipulate familiar scripts of ideal marriage illustrates the coercive force of these scripts even when a character turns them to her advantage. Perveen's professional conduct similarly registers the pressure to demonstrate competence in a field that questions women's public authority (Flynn; Massey).

Bell Hooks define feminism as a political challenge to sexism and domination rather than simply the celebration of individual women. This distinction is essential when reading violent or deceptive protagonists. Agency becomes feminist in a strong sense only when examined alongside its consequences for others; the success of an individual woman is not automatically the defeat of oppressive arrangements (hooks).

Crenshaw's model of intersectionality challenges any treatment of women as a homogeneous group. Perveen's opportunities are shaped by religion, legal status, education, and the colonial city, whereas Korede and Ayoola occupy a contemporary Nigerian setting structured by family expectations and judgments about femininity. Those contexts differ from the Anglo-American domestic worlds of Flynn and Hawkins. Comparing them therefore requires attention to specific institutions and relationships rather than a claim that patriarchy takes one identical form everywhere (Crenshaw).

Together these approaches frame power as relational: it operates through law, marriage, media, employment, cultural ideals, and the authority assigned to narrators. Secrets matter because access to information can disturb these unequal relations, but disclosure alone does not guarantee justice.

### **Gone Girl: The Manufacture of the Ideal Woman**

In *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne's disappearance initiates a seemingly conventional investigation into possible marital violence. The alternation of voices and documents, however, makes the act of telling the story part of the mystery. The reader initially evaluates Nick and Amy through apparently competing records before the novel reveals the strategic construction of much of that evidence. The resulting suspense concerns not only what happened but who can successfully organize public belief (Flynn).

Amy's self-fashioning is central to a feminist reading. Expectations of the accommodating girlfriend, competent wife, and desirable woman are shown as elaborate performances. Amy understands the disciplinary power of these identities and exploits them. This does not establish her as a straightforward liberatory heroine. Her willingness to deceive, punish, and endanger others exposes the troubling difference between acquiring control and dismantling a gender hierarchy. Butler's concept of gender performativity helps explain why the novel's images of femininity seem both familiar and unstable (Butler; Flynn).

The investigation reveals the mutually reinforcing powers of marriage, policing, and mass media. Television commentary rapidly turns fragments of information into a moral verdict. Nick is judged through recognizable scripts of suspicious masculinity, while Amy's public image draws strength from culturally legible ideas of the endangered wife. These images circulate before the full story is known. Truth is therefore shown to have a social life: facts are selected, dramatized, and consumed.

Flynn also resists an interpretive shortcut in which female violence is automatically an act of resistance. Amy's revenge reuses coercive logic, treating intimacy as a battlefield rather than a relationship of equals. Her intelligence makes her powerful but does not make her just. The novel is feminist in its capacity to expose the burdens of ideal femininity, yet its moral ambiguity asks the reader to distinguish criticism of restrictive expectations from approval of a character's response to them.

The most revealing secret in *Gone Girl* is not merely a hidden act. It is the ease with which shared social stereotypes can be transformed into apparently persuasive evidence (Flynn).

### **The Girl on the Train: Credibility, Memory, and Gaslighting**

Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* places the problem of female credibility at the centre of detection. Rachel's daily observations from a train offer an apparently partial view of other people's lives. Her alcohol use and uncertain memories make her a narrator whom characters and readers are encouraged to doubt. But the fact that her account contains gaps does not mean that her perceptions have no value. The novel distinguishes imperfection as a witness from the systematic dismissal of a witness (Hawkins).

Rachel's vulnerability is social as well as psychological. The loss of her marriage, her precarious domestic position, and the stigma surrounding addiction combine to weaken her claims to authority. Her former husband Tom's manipulation of events intensifies this weakness. The gradual reconstruction of what Rachel remembers becomes a struggle against an externally imposed version of herself. Her route to knowledge depends on reconsidering both evidence and the men who have controlled its interpretation.

Other women's perspectives complicate Rachel's account. Megan's story exposes the pain beneath an apparently attractive life, while Anna's viewpoint demonstrates how defensiveness and conventional judgments can limit solidarity. The women do not begin from a shared understanding, and differences among them matter to the unfolding crime (Hawkins). The novel thus explores the fragmentation of women's experience rather than presenting sisterhood as an automatic solution.

From a feminist perspective, the text dramatizes epistemic inequality: some people are granted the presumption of rationality while others must continually prove they are trustworthy. Rachel's recovery of a coherent account disrupts that unequal distribution of credibility. Nonetheless, the narrative should not be read as suggesting that women who drink or experience emotional distress are naturally unreliable. The force of the story lies instead in asking why social prejudice so easily supplies a basis for dismissing their testimony.

Compared with *Gone Girl*, Hawkins's novel offers a different relationship between narrative uncertainty and power. Where Amy intentionally exploits assumptions to manufacture a false story, Rachel must struggle to escape assumptions that make her true observations difficult to hear (Flynn; Hawkins).

### **The Widows of Malabar Hill: Law, Space, and Professional Agency**

Sujata Massey's *The Widows of Malabar Hill* changes the setting and texture of the inquiry. Its protagonist, Perveen Mistry, is a woman lawyer in 1920s Bombay whose professional work leads her into a troubling inheritance matter involving secluded widows. The novel makes legal documents, access to private rooms, and women's restricted contact with male officials essential components of the mystery (Massey). Detection is consequently tied to an everyday question: who can enter a space, ask questions, and represent another person's interests?

Perveen's legal training provides a means of agency, but her position cannot be detached from the gendered obstacles she has encountered. Her knowledge is meaningful precisely because professional recognition remains uneven. She may be able to communicate with women whom male investigators cannot easily approach, yet access does not erase asymmetries among women. Education, economic security, religion, and family position shape who can speak and under what circumstances.

The widows' situation emphasizes the feminist significance of consent and representation. A document can appear authoritative while concealing whether the affected women understood or freely endorsed its implications. Perveen reads legal procedure alongside embodied circumstances and personal vulnerability. This approach turns the classic detective's attention to overlooked details toward the social relations that make certain details invisible (Massey).

An intersectional approach is essential here. The cultural practice of seclusion must not be reduced to a timeless stereotype about Indian women. The historical setting contains specific religious, colonial, educational, and legal arrangements. Perveen's investigation reveals differences within a community rather than treating culture as a single explanatory force. Crenshaw's insistence on multiple structures of disadvantage provides a conceptual warning against such flattening (Crenshaw).

The domestic thrillers, Massey's novel gives sustained space to competent professional investigation as a method of enlarging women's possibilities. Yet its optimism is measured: individual success matters, while the wider distribution of institutional power continues to require scrutiny. The hidden truth is not only an answer to a crime but also the discovery of who was denied meaningful legal voice.

### **My Sister, the Serial Killer: Loyalty and Complicity**

Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* presents a striking challenge to familiar arrangements of victim, detective, and offender. Korede, a nurse, repeatedly conceals the violent acts of her glamorous sister Ayoola. Because the reader knows much of the central wrongdoing early, suspense shifts from the identification of a killer toward questions of loyalty, exposure, and moral consequence. The hidden truth survives because a woman who recognizes it helps maintain silence (Braithwaite).

The sisters are positioned differently within the economy of beauty. Ayoola receives attention and indulgence, while Korede is frequently treated as the responsible but less desirable sister. This contrast reveals beauty not simply as a personal asset but as a social resource that can redistribute protection and suspicion. Korede's competence becomes the mechanism through which familial damage is managed. Her care work, both professional and domestic, is expected to absorb risk without equivalent recognition.

A feminist reading therefore cannot simply celebrate female solidarity. Korede's loyalty protects Ayoola while potentially endangering others; care and complicity become difficult to separate. hooks's account of feminism as opposition to domination helps assess why female-centred action alone does not amount to an emancipatory politics (hooks). The novel confronts readers with an uncomfortable possibility: gendered expectations of self-sacrifice can keep destructive relationships intact as effectively as explicit male authority.

The narrative also questions how women are judged by appearance. Ayoola's attractiveness facilitates forms of social trust that Korede's steadiness does not secure. Their different treatment exposes the injustice of evaluating women through visible femininity while overlooking responsibility. Yet Braithwaite resists reducing Ayoola to a symbolic monster. Familial history and the sisters' connection complicate the reader's judgment without cancelling the significance of violence (Braithwaite).

In contrast to Perveen's movement toward exposure and Rachel's movement toward recovered testimony, Korede inhabits a plot in which possessing truth does not necessarily lead to its disclosure. The central ethical question becomes what a woman owes to family, strangers, herself, and justice when those obligations cannot all be satisfied.

### **Comparative Discussion: Who Controls Truth?**

Across the four novels, knowledge is distributed through institutions and intimate bonds. Amy controls an evidentiary performance, Rachel contests a defamatory account of her memory, Perveen uses legal competence to investigate disputed decisions, and Korede withholds knowledge to preserve a sister's safety. These positions form no simple progression from victimhood to empowerment. Instead, the novels offer competing models of how a woman can acquire, lose, protect, or misuse interpretive authority (Flynn; Hawkins; Massey; Braithwaite).

The settings of secrecy differ significantly. *Gone Girl* positions marriage and publicity as linked theatres of judgment. *The Girl on the Train* makes fragmented observation and psychological manipulation central to detection. *The Widows of Malabar Hill* places the mystery within professional barriers, property relations, and women restricted legal access. *My Sister, the Serial Killer* locates hidden knowledge in the routines of familial care and the cultural value assigned to beauty. In every case, an apparently private secret has public or institutional consequences.

These contrasts also clarify the uses and limits of narrative unreliability. Not all uncertainty originates in a narrator's dishonesty. It may result from coercion, unequal evidence, imperfect recollection, or choices to remain silent. A feminist account asks who benefits when a woman is

declared unbelievable and when an individual narrator herself manipulates that declaration. The novels consequently complicate the familiar assumption that the uncovering of facts is politically neutral.

The comparison reveals a second tension between representation and emancipation. Ambitious, forceful, or violent women can challenge the demand that fictional heroines remain pleasant and selfless. Nevertheless, a portrayal of female power cannot be assessed only by its reversal of male dominance. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of polarized female images and hooks's attention to structural domination help keep both representational complexity and ethical consequence in view (Gilbert and Gubar; hooks).

Intersectionality additionally marks the boundaries of comparison. Perveen's work in colonial Bombay and Korede's life in Lagos should not be treated as exotic counterparts to Euro-American domestic conflict. Each novel draws on a particular social landscape. Reading across them is most productive when it identifies comparable questions—credibility, consent, risk, visibility—without erasing differences in cultural and historical circumstances (Crenshaw).

### **Findings, Limitations, and Conclusion**

First, the investigated novels present truth as a social achievement rather than a merely factual discovery: to establish what happened, characters must confront the norms governing evidence and reputation. Second, femininity is repeatedly performed and evaluated through ideals of marriage, attractiveness, self-sacrifice, and propriety; these ideals can constrain women and become resources for strategic action. Third, women's relationships are neither naturally solidaristic nor inevitably antagonistic. They may create routes to protection, but they can also intensify complicity or silence (Flynn; Hawkins; Braithwaite).

Fourth, institutions matter. Police procedures, media coverage, legal professions, inheritance arrangements, and healthcare or domestic work determine whose knowledge is recognized. Perveen's investigation foregrounds how professional skill may expand access to justice, whereas Rachel's case shows the harm of a credibility deficit (Massey; Hawkins). Fifth, a woman's ability to exercise control is not identical with freedom from domination. This distinction is crucial in the ethically troubling plots developed by Flynn and Braithwaite.

This article analyzes four selected novels and does not claim a comprehensive history of contemporary crime writing. It focuses on English-language primary texts and conceptual interpretation rather than reader-response studies, adaptations, or publishing-market evidence. Differences in genre, period, and geography are analytically useful but also limit direct generalization. Further research could compare translation and reception, examine queer and trans representation in mystery fiction, or investigate how female detectives negotiate digital surveillance and algorithmic evidence.

Contemporary mystery fiction offers a productive space for feminist critique because its central concern—how a hidden truth becomes knowable—exposes struggles over social authority. In *Gone Girl*, female performance destabilizes the ideal marriage without guaranteeing moral progress. In *The*



Girl on the Train, a dismissed witness slowly reclaims credibility. In *The Widows of Malabar Hill*, legal inquiry gives visibility to women excluded from ordinary channels of representation. In *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, knowledge generates an unresolved conflict between loyalty and responsibility. Together these novels suggest that the strongest feminist question is not simply whether a woman possesses power, but how power is structured, justified, and exercised. The mystery is solved, or refused resolution, within a world where truth and gender are inseparably political.

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