

## **An Analysis of Reality Construction through Conflicts in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl***

Monica Prilly Aditya  
English Language and Literature  
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia  
monsprilly@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The complexity of *Gone Girl* evoked wide aspects to explore. The current study focused on the issue of reality construction in the novel. It was aimed at answering the question of how the male and female central characters constructed the versions of reality through conflicts which were a result of multiple narrative perspectives used in the novel. The data were analyzed by using Bartley, Blanton, and Gilliard's (2005) three aspects of marital relationship. The findings indicated that the reality in the novel was dominantly constructed through the conflictive marital relationship between the male and female central characters. The conflicts were found in the aspects of marital relationship particularly in the decision-making process and the attitude towards gender roles and stereotypes. In terms of decision making, the conflicts resulted from the process and the outcomes of major decision-making including the decision to move to a new city, decision to have children, decision regarding career choices and the decision of getting a divorce. Meanwhile, from the aspect of attitude towards gender roles and stereotypes, the male and female central characters appeared to demonstrate double standards and hypocritical attitudes which led to conflicts in the novel. Therefore, from the findings it could be concluded that the text indicated a tendency for men and women to be involved in conflicts since they had different presumptions, interests, and egos in constructing their version of reality.

**Keywords:** *reality construction, marital relationship, marital conflicts, decision-making, gender role attitudes, double standard*

## INTRODUCTION

What was considered as reality or something real had been an issue for a long time. Constructivism believed that instead of being discovered, reality was invented by human beings (Watzalwick, 1982, cited in Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1984 p. 455). Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1984) stated that rather than passively observing reality, humans were involved in the construction of meaning that formulated and organized their perception and experience of life. This led to an idea that human's understanding of reality was representation or a re-presentation, not a replica, of what was out there (p. 455-456).

Since reality was constructed through language, the work of fiction could be one of the examples of its realization. As explained by Waugh (1984), "If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself" (p. 3).

In relation to this, men and women possessed different characteristics or values when it came to constructing reality. Gilligan (1982, cited in Hoffman, 1990) stated that while men valued the system of independence, autonomy, and control, women tended to show a contrasting aspect of values which are relationship and connection (p. 7). These characteristics appeared to produce different versions of reality from both genders since they had different aspects of value in life.

In literary works, different values that tended to influence the points of view between men and women could be found in multiple narrative perspectives used in contemporary fiction. Koss (2009) stated that "today's multiple narrative perspective novels are characterized by multiple voices, narrators, points of view, structures, and perspectives" (p. 74). Furthermore, Itkonen (2012) explained that fictional text produced a social reality that could only be accessed by the reader through the influence of the perspective he or she was allowed within the narrative since the external consciousness of the

reader put him or her in the outsider position (p. 3). Therefore, this multiple narrative perspective could lead to a different way of reality construction in fiction that would also influence how the reader interpreted the reality in the novel.

*Gone Girl* was a work of fiction exemplifying the use of multiple narrative perspectives. The story was told from two points of view which were Nick Dunne's and Amy Elliot Dunne's. The complexity of the novel evoked wide aspects of issue to explore and the current study focused on the reality constructed by the male and female central characters. Amy and Nick Dunne were given the position as the first-person narrator which led to two different versions of reality offered in the novel.

*Gone Girl* indicated the difference between men and women in a number of aspects including the way they viewed certain events and issues considered as reality constructed in the novel. Both Amy and Nick had their own ways of thinking, behaving, and responding to a situation that oftentimes led to

conflicts and disagreements between them. Thus, this study focused on these different values between Nick and Amy and how these triggered conflicts which influenced the versions of reality constructed in the novel.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Reality Construction in Fiction**

Reality was constructed through language and one of the examples of its realization is the work of fiction. As explained by Waugh (1984),

“If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself.” (p. 3)

Bruner (1991) also noted the importance of language in reality construction by saying that “language and other symbolic systems mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (p. 3).

The term reality was related to a literary movement called realism which was described by Phillips (1987 as cited in Maxwell, 2012) as

“the view that entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them” (p. 3). In addition, Schwandt (1997 as cited in Maxwell, 2012) supported this idea by saying, “in scientific realism, ‘Reality’ refers to whatever it is in the universe (i.e., forces, structures, and so on) that causes the phenomena we perceive with our senses” (p. 3). From this point of view, it could be said that reality was something which was already there for human to perceive or in other words an independent universe.

However, this idea of reality had been rejected by both positivists and constructivists during the twentieth century. One of the forms of rejection was contemporary metafictional writing that Waugh (1984) described as both a response and a contribution to the idea that reality is an independent or permanent universe but instead it was a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. She explains,

“More novelist have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the

well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters ‘do’ and what they ‘are’, the causal connection between ‘surface’ details and the ‘deep’, ‘scientific laws’ of existence).” (Waugh, 1984, p. 7)

In other words, the conventional rules of order in reality construction in fiction had changed into more complex ones. All in all, contemporary world viewed reality as socially constructed and therefore literary fiction could be a significant model of learning the reality construction itself.

### **Multiple Narrative Perspectives**

The effect of reading a work of fiction in which the story was told from different perspectives was different for the readers. As explained by Gillis (2002),

“When more than one character tells the story (or stories), the effect is somewhat different. Our loyalties are not to one but to the whole. And while we become aware of how each character sees and responds to events, we are also aware

of how the events affect the characters' relationship. We acquire a kind of intimate omniscience by viewing the world through multiple lenses." (p. 52)

In her article, Gillis (2002) also identified the emerging trends in the use of multiple narrative perspectives in popular fiction specifically in the realm of young adult literature which were; he said, she said narrative perspective in which more than one character tells a story (multiple narrators) through first-person point of view, he thought, she thought: over-the-shoulder narratives in which a story (or stories) is narrated in third-person point of view by more than one character, and they said narrative perspective which involves both people and various kinds of writing such as a diary or newspaper article that relate to a particular event or setting.

### **Marital Relationship and Equity**

Since fiction can be considered as a model to study reality, social issues happening in real life such as marital relationship and equity can be explored through fiction. In *Gone Girl*

one of the apparent issues that trigger conflicts between the main characters was the relationship and equity within their marriage. Thus, this study focused on the exploration of aspects of marital relationship based on a study conducted by Bartley, Blanton, and Gilliard in 2005.

Bartley et al. (2005) had conducted a study on the aspects of marital relationship on husbands and wives in dual-earner marriages. The aspects examined include the differences in perceived decision-making, gender-role attitudes and division of household labor. Likewise, they also investigated the impact of these aspects on perceived marital equity (Bartley, et al., 2005).

#### Decision making

Marital power had a significant role in influencing the process of decision making within a family. It was defined as the ability possessed by one partner to impose his/her will on the other spouse that was manifested particularly towards the ability to make major decisions (Blood and Wolfe 1960 as cited in Mirowsky, 1985).

From the perspective of conflict theory, Sprey (1979 as cited in Bartley et al., 2005) explained that marriages were about a competition for power and control of resources between two persons through negotiation, bargaining, and conflict management. Power that became the focus of conflict theory was viewed as the ability to control the outcome of decision making process (Sprey 1979 as cited in Bartley et al., 2005).

Furthermore, Steil and Weltman (1991 as cited in Bartley et al., 2005) stated that in contemporary marriages the division of decision-making was based on the traditional gender lines, with wives making decisions concerning day-to-day household details and husbands making the major decisions, such as those concerning career choices and resource allocation.

### **Gender role attitude**

West and Zimmerman (1987) described gender as certain behaviors or conducts based on prescriptive conceptions of attitudes and activities that were appropriate for one's sex category while roles were described

as "situated identities-assumed and relinquished as the situation demands" (West & Zimmerman, 1987 p. 127-128). Furthermore, Fischer and Arnold (1994) defined gender role attitude as "attitudinal differences regarding the roles, rights, and responsibilities of women and men" (p. 164). Bartley et al. (2005) also made a similar definition by referring gender roles to "behaviors and attitudes prescribed and assigned to males and females by the broader culture solely on the basis of gender" (p. 72). From these definitions, it can be said that gender role is attributes, roles, rights, and responsibilities adhered to men and women based on what society thinks is appropriate for them.

Furthermore, the traditional gender roles imposed the realms of expertise of men and women, with men holding the power in the outside world and women holding the power at home (Beavers 1982 as cited in Bartley et al., 2005). In line with this statement, Rogers and Amato (2000 as cited in Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010) explained that gender-role attitudes can range from traditional to

egalitarian (nontraditional). While the focus of traditional gender-role attitudes was on the interdependence of partners and the distinction in power between the husband as a breadwinner and the wife as a homemaker, nontraditional gender-role attitudes prioritized egalitarian power relations and less gender-differentiated roles. This then allowed both partners to give equal contributions to the family both economically and in child rearing.

#### Division of Household Labor

According to Lavee and Katz (2002), there were at least three ways of how gender ideology influenced the links between the division of labor, perceived fairness, and marital quality. First, the division of labor itself is dependent on the spouses' orientation towards gender role. Second, gender role ideology tended to influence the perception of fairness or injustice of the division of labor. Third, gender role ideology might influence the association between perceived fairness and marital quality.

However, they also pointed out that gender ideology changed gradually without clear dividing

points, making the dichotomy of ideological concepts – traditional and egalitarian- somewhat arbitrary since some individuals neither were neither purely traditional nor egalitarian (Lavee & Katz, 2000).

According to previous researches Bartley et al. (2005) also concluded that the increasing amount of time for men and women involved in low-control, feminine, repetitive types of family work contributed to lower marital quality, psychological distress, feeling of inequality, as well as the increase of marital conflicts. It was suggested that equal division of household labor does not guarantee an increase of marital quality. Instead, what contributed greater to the marital satisfaction was the perception of fairness between couples (Greenstain, 1996).

#### **RESEARCH METHOD**

In doing the analysis, the study employed a qualitative descriptive method. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen in this study since it was the most suitable method to serve the purpose of revealing the conflicts that occurred in detail and

how it related to the construction of reality in the novel.

The data were taken from a novel entitled *Gone Girl* which was written by Gillian Flynn and first published in 2012. In this study, the first step in collecting the data was by doing an intensive close reading. Then, the most relevant textual evidence was highlighted with regard to some considerations: (1) from whose point of view a conflict was narrated; and (2) the setting in which a particular conflict occurred.

This textual evidence was later on categorized into the table consisting of conflicts based on Bartley, Blanton, and Gilliard's (2005) three aspects of marital relationship: (1) decision making; (2) gender roles attitude; and (3) division of household labor. However, due to the close relationship on the idea of gender role attitude and division of household labor, the current study combined these two aspects into one category which was the attitude towards gender roles and stereotypes.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Conflictive Marital Relationship**

The analysis showed that the versions of reality in the novel were dominantly constructed through the conflictive marital relationship between the male and female central characters. It was found that Nick and Amy viewed the same issue through the lens influenced by their own egos, interests and presumptions towards gender roles and stereotypes. Furthermore, the versions of reality constructed through the conflictive marital relationship were specifically elaborated based on: (1) the conflicts on the decision-making; and (2) the conflictive attitude towards gender roles and stereotypes.

### **Conflicts on The Decision Making**

The explanation of conflicts based on the decision making was emphasized on the conflicts in major decision making including moving to a new city, having kids, career choices, and getting a divorce since these appeared to be the primary causes that triggered the conflict between the male and female main characters in the novel.



After examining how Nick and Amy made a decision, it was found that both of them were involved in the making of these major decisions within their marriage. There were at least four major decisions made by Amy and Nick. They were the decision to move to a new city, having kids, career choices, and finally the decision of getting a divorce.

In the beginning of the novel it was found that Nick made a major decision to move back to his hometown in Missouri after he lost his job as a writer in New York. He decided to do so after he got a phone call from his twin sister, Margo, informing that their mother was dying from cancer. Nick remembered about the occurrence of him making the decision in the morning before his wife went missing. Without talking to his wife first, Nick made the decision to move back to his hometown. However, he appeared to admit and realize that the decision was based on his optimism that everything would be okay when he moved and brought his wife to a new city whose life was completely different from New York.

The excerpt showed that he was filled with remorse because of the decision, "I did not yet understand how foolish, how optimistic, how, yes, just like Nick I was for thinking this. The misery it would lead to." (Part 1 p. 6). Later on, it was found that the misery was their changing emotions and attitudes towards each other.

On the other hand, Amy had her own version of how Nick made the decision to move back to his hometown. It was found that there was no compromise or conversation between them before the decision was made. It could be seen that Amy did not partake in the process of making this decision. Nick appeared to think that to move back and help his dying mother were the right thing they needed to do. However, Amy considered the way Nick told the decision as something that triggered a conflict.

The finding showed that Nick plays a pivotal role in deciding to move to a new city. As the one who made the decision, Nick did not realize that there was other's feeling or opinion to consider. Therefore, it could be said that this abrupt, one-

sided and inconsiderate decision had become one of the triggers that led to conflicts and unpleasant relationship between Nick and Amy in the future.

Next, another major decision in their marriage was whether they would have children or not. From Nick's point of view, it could be seen how Amy decided not to have kids even though Nick really wanted to. For Nick, having a baby was very important to him because the baby would be the proof that he could love someone unconditionally. He wanted to make sure he was capable of raising a kid that was far better than him. His desire was also based on the fact that he did not want to be like his father who abandoned his family and was not able to raise him and his sister properly.

Surprisingly, Amy never appeared to talk about her thoughts on having a baby throughout the novel. She never mentioned about whether she wanted to have children or not or the reason behind it. All information about her not wanting to have children was found in Nick's side of the story. However, in the end of the novel, she mentioned that she needed

to take one more spectacular precaution to make Nick stay in their marriage. The precaution turned out to be her getting pregnant. For Amy, getting pregnant was an action that must be taken so that Nick would stay and stop asking for a divorce as well as to prevent him from publishing his book about the dreadful truth behind Amy's missing case. She thought that it must be done to protect her against her husband instead of getting pregnant because she really wanted to.

Furthermore, career choices were another major decision that triggered the conflict in the story. When the couple moved back to Missouri, Nick decided to buy a bar by using his wife's money. As the story went on and it was discovered that Nick had an affair with another woman for more than a year, he never had the courage to tell Amy about it and asked her for a divorce. His reason was because the bar was financed by his wife and thus it was essentially hers. Nick could not lose the bar because he as well as his twin sister would lose their jobs too.

From Amy's point of view, it was found that Amy did not show a disagreeable reaction towards Nick's decision to open a bar in a significant way. She did not see this as a big problem at first. However, when Amy secretly discovered that Nick had an affair with a younger woman, the fact that she had given Nick everything she had while Nick always took and took from her became her justification of framing Nick for her murder and running away.

Thus, choosing a career was not an explicit trigger of the conflict between Nick and Amy. However, it appeared to have a significant impact on their reasons of taking certain actions. The fact that Amy had a pivotal role in supporting Nick's career by giving her money to finance the bar indirectly became the reason why Nick did not ask Amy for a divorce. Amy, on the other hand, chose to disappear and framed her husband for her murder because she was furious with Nick who always took and took everything from her.

The last major decision was whether the couple would end their marriage in divorce or not. In the end

of the novel, Nick and Amy got into a dispute which ended with Nick trying to strangle Amy. Nick demanded Amy to tell him what was actually going on or the truth behind her missing case and was finally brave enough to ask Amy for a divorce. The finding showed that Amy's megalomaniac nature or her strong desire of power and domination was irritated by Nick's reasons of refusal to stay in the marriage as well as his insistence to get a divorce. Later on, she kept convincing Nick to stay by telling Nick the ugly truth about himself through harsh and hurtful words. This later on led to physical conflict when Nick tried to strangle Amy.

From the findings, it could be seen that in the making of a decision both Nick and Amy prioritized their own needs and egos. However for Amy her decision was also a reaction towards Nick's action. Both of them appeared to take each other for granted. The decisions were made with their own presumption about their partner. This indicated that there was no consideration of each other's

feelings, needs, or the effect of the decision on their relationship.

Moreover, it could be interpreted that Nick and Amy viewed the same issue in different ways. Both of them appeared to carry their own presumptions about gender roles and stereotypes. For example, in deciding to have children or not, while Nick focused on the values he would give to his children, Amy focused more on the daily routine she would endure as a mother. These different views led to different versions of constructing the reality or what really happened in the novel. Later on, these different views became the trigger of the conflicts that caused damage to their relationship. It was also evident that there was a competition of power within their marriage. Both of them tried to dominate and control each other which could be seen through the decision-making process. This was in line with the conflict theory stated by Sprey (1979) used in the study by Bartley et al. (2005) that marriages were about a competition for power and control between two persons over the outcome of the decision making process.

### **Conflictive Attitude Towards Gender Roles and Stereotypes**

The conflict in the novel was also built through the attitude of the male and female main characters towards gender. After analyzing the novel it was found that both Amy and Nick often talked about gender stereotypes which led to their expectations towards each other. These expectations eventually triggered conflicts between the two although it appeared that most of the time they did not explicitly express their contradictory views to each other or, in other words, the conflicts happened in their own minds. The findings covered three important points of attitude towards gender that appeared to trigger conflicts in the novel: (1) Nick's double standards towards gender roles (2) Amy's double standards on relationship and marriage (3) Nick and Amy's hypocrisy and gender stereotypes.

Nick double standards were found in his attitude towards gender roles. While gender role attitudes were divided into traditional and egalitarian, the finding showed that it was hard to decide whether Nick's

attitude towards gender was traditional or egalitarian. While his attitude towards men's role appeared to be strongly traditional, he showed both egalitarian and traditional attitudes towards women's role.

While in the first part of the novel Nick often talked about his career, Amy appeared to be more interested in her views towards relationship and marriage. There were a number of events in which she discussed about what she expected from men and relationship. The findings showed that Amy had double standards on women and men in relationship. While, she did not want to be like other women who made their husbands do what they wanted them to do, she actually did make her husband do tasks to prove his love to her. This could be an indication of Amy's hypocrisy. Moreover, the findings also showed that in the first few years of their marriage, both Amy and Nick were not themselves. They tried hard to hide their real wants and personalities. Instead, they appeared to please each other by doing things that both of them did not like and

pretending to be a person that was not themselves.

### **Conflicting Construction of Reality Between Men and Women**

From the discussion above, it was concluded that the text indicated a tendency for men and women to be involved in conflicts since they have different ways of constructing reality. The factors that caused these conflicts included the different views towards particular issues which were represented through the process of making major decisions as well as the double standards they applied to one another. The findings indicated that both men and women had their own egos and interests that appeared to be their main consideration of taking major decisions. In terms of double standards, the text implied that men and women had their own expectations towards the respective gender which were influenced by the norms and attitudes that society built around them. These expectations later on became the trigger for conflicts when a man or a woman met their partners that provoked the essence of

relationship between men and women.

Moreover, the text indicated that these conflicts had significant effects on both men and women's senses of identity and their relationship between one another. More importantly, the text showed that the effect was more evident on women that the main female character finally decided to leave her partner that has broken both her expectations and her sense of identity. From all the conflicts shown above, it implied that in the end men ruled. Therefore, it could be interpreted that the title, *Gone Girl*, was appropriately chosen because it implied that the sense of identity of a girl had disappeared and in the end she became a woman who got into the man's world and needed to follow the man's standard of becoming a woman.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study was aimed at answering a research question on how the male and female central characters construct their reality in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. From the findings and discussion in the previous

chapter, it was revealed that the reality in *Gone Girl* was constructed through the conflictive marital relationship between the female and male central characters, Nick Dunne and Amy Elliott Dunne. The findings were based on the three aspects of marital relationship from a study conducted by Bartley et al. in 2005. These aspects were decision-making, gender roles attitude, and division of household labor. However the current study only focused on the conflicts which were based on decision making and gender roles attitude since division of household labor was still part of the aspect of gender role attitude.

In terms of decision making, the conflictive marital relationship could be seen from the process as well as the effect of major decision making which included the decision to move to a new city, decision to have kids, decision regarding career choices, and finally the decision to get a divorce. The findings showed that in the process of making a decision, both male and female characters did not consider each other's feelings, interests, or the effect of the decision

on their relationship. Also, it appeared that the decisions made in their marriage were based on their own egos, desires, and interests and therefore led to conflicts within the marriage.

Furthermore, gender roles attitude also became the trigger towards the male and female characters' conflictive marital relationship. After analyzing the novel it was found that both Amy and Nick often talked about gender stereotypes which led to their expectations towards each other. The findings also indicated that there were double standards applied by Nick and Amy that affected their marital relationship. While Nick's double standard was on the roles of men and women, Amy had her own double standards on relationship and marriage. It was also found that both Nick and Amy showed hypocritical aspects in their views towards gender.

In conclusion, the text indicated a tendency for men and women to be involved in conflicts since they have different ways of constructing reality. It signified that these conflicts had an incredible

effect on both men and women's senses of identity and their relationship between one another. More importantly, the text showed that the effect was more evident on women that the main female character finally decided to leave her partner that has broken both her expectations and her sense of identity in the novel.

After conducting the study, it is suggested that the research in the future will relate the reality constructed in a novel to the construction of identity of the characters since the reality itself has an influence on the changes of characters' identity in the novel. In addition, it is hoped that the study may contribute to the development of formal literary analysis that focuses on the reality construction particularly through the relationship between main characters in the novel and how it relates to the life of people in general.

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