AN ANALYSIS OF REALITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH CONFLICTS IN GILLIAN FLYNN’S GONE GIRL

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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.

**Methodology**
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.

**Finding and Discussion**

**Confictive 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 conflicts.

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.

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. 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.

Later on, the 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.

Conclusions
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.

References


