



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Unreliable Narrators and the Blurred Line between Fact and Fiction:

A Post-Truth Analysis of Paula Hawkins's 'The Girl on the Train'

Neha Bano

PhD (research scholar)

Department of English & MEL

University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India

Abstract:

This research paper will delve into the intricate relationship between unreliable narrators and the concept of post-truth within Paula Hawkins's novel, "The Girl on the Train." In a future where personal beliefs and emotional appeals are anticipated to potentially eclipse objective facts, this psychological thriller will continue to provide a valuable lens for examining the complexities of truth, perception, and narrative manipulation. The paper will analyse how the novel's narrative structure, featuring multiple unreliable narrators, will blur the boundary between reality and fiction, echoing the expected challenges posed by a post-truth society. It will scrutinise the anticipated unreliability of the narrators, including Rachel, Megan, and Anna, as they present their perspectives on the central mystery, which is expected to frequently contradict one another, akin to the anticipated multiple sources of information in the post-truth era.

The paper will also explore how the narrators' subjectivity, influenced by emotions, biases, and personal motivations, will align with the anticipated post-truth idea that personal beliefs will mould one's interpretation of information. The novel's portrayal of blurred reality, where characters are expected to grapple with distinguishing truth from perception, will mirror the expected intricacies of navigating a post-truth landscape. Moreover, it will analyse the novel's challenges to objective truth, reflecting the expected post-truth phenomenon's coexistence of conflicting narratives and the contentious nature of objective truth itself.

Keywords: *Unreliable Narrators, Post-Truth, Subjectivity, Deception, Blurred Reality, Scepticism, Narrative Manipulation, Perception vs. Reality.*

Introduction:

In the world of literature, the use of unreliable narrators has long been a captivating storytelling device. Unreliable narrators are characters or voices within a narrative whose accounts of events, perceptions, or emotions are characterized by distortion, omission, or subjective bias. These narrators challenge readers to navigate a narrative landscape where discerning the boundary between fact and fiction becomes a complex endeavor.

Simultaneously, in the broader sphere of contemporary discourse, the post-truth phenomenon has emerged as a defining characteristic of our era. Post-Truth coined as the "Word of the Year" by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, it refers to a sociolect-cultural and political landscape where objective facts hold less

influence over public opinion than appeals to emotion, personal beliefs, and subjective interpretations of reality.

While seemingly distinct, the worlds of literature and contemporary discourse intersect in intriguing ways, particularly when exploring the theme of unreliable narrators. It is within this nexus that Paula Hawkins's psychological thriller, *The Girl on the Train*, becomes a captivating case study. This bestselling novel unfolds through the perspectives of multiple unreliable narrators, each presenting their version of events, emotions, and perceptions. The resulting narrative puzzle challenges readers to unravel the truth amid conflicting accounts, mirroring the complexities of navigating a post-truth society.

This research paper embarks on a journey to unravel the connections between unreliable narrators in *The Girl on the Train* and the post-truth phenomenon by analysing the unreliability of the characters, Rachel, Megan, and Anna as narrators and examining how their subjectivity, deception, and blurred reality reflect the dynamics of post-truth. I try to highlights on the intricate interplay between literature and contemporary discourse. In doing so, we uncover the significance of this analysis not only for literary studies but also for understanding the broader implications of a world where perception often holds more sway than objective fact.

Paula Hawkins (born on 26 August 1972) is a Zimbabwe-born British author, best known for her best-selling psychological thriller novel *The Girl on the Train*. Hawkins' debut novel was published in 2015 and it became a global bestseller. The book won the 2015 Goodreads choice award in the category Mystery and Thriller. It deals with themes of domestic violence, alcohol, and drug abuse. Around 2009, Hawkins began to write romantic comedy fiction under the name Amy Silver, writing four novels. She did not achieve any commercial breakthrough until she challenged herself to write a darker, more serious story. *The Girl on the Train* is a complex thriller, with the themes of domestic violence, alcohol, and drug abuse. The novel was adapted into a film starring Emily Blunt in 2016. It deals with the life of Rachel, who is an unreliable narrator and whose credibility has been seriously compromised.

The term 'unreliable narrator' was coined in 1961 by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. While unreliable narrators are almost by definition, first-person narrators, an argument has been made for the existence of unreliable second and third person narrators. Sometimes the narrator's unreliability is made immediately evident. For instance, a story may open with the narrator making a false or delusional claim or admitting to being severely mentally ill or the story itself may have a frame in which the narrator appears as a character, with clues to the character's unreliability. Booth's classic definition of the unreliable narrator has survived in nearly all narratological textbooks, "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms) unreliable when he does not." (158-59)

The novel employs multiple narrators, including Rachel, Megan, and Anna, each with their unique perspectives, biases, and unreliable recollections. This multiplicity of viewpoints blurs the line between subjective reality and objective truth. In a post-truth society, where personal beliefs often overshadow facts, the characters' unreliability reflects the idea that individuals construct their own versions of reality based on their emotions and motivations.

The first narrator and protagonist Rachel Watson is a 32-year-old, lonely, recently-divorced, alcoholic and brokenhearted woman. She rides the train back and forth from London every day, going past her ex-husband's house who left her for another girl Anna. The protagonist is an unreliable narrator who gets depressed after her ex-husband's new marriage. She portrays the sadness and depression in the life of a woman in order to show what is happening in the society. Rachel shows unreliability in many ways. She takes the same commuter train every morning and night for no purpose. Every day she looks at the life of her ex husband from the train. The train stops at the signal Witney, where she used to live with her ex-husband. She says:

That was my first home. Not my parent's place, not a flat-share with other students, my first home. I can't bear to look at it. Well, I can, I do, I want to, I don't want to, I try not to. Every day I tell myself not to look, and every day I look. I can't help myself, even though there is nothing I want to see there, even though anything I do see will hurt me. Even though I remember so clearly how it felt that time I looked up and noticed that the cream linen blind in the upstairs bedroom was gone, replaced by something in soft baby pink; even though I still remember the pain I felt when I saw

Anna watering the rose bushes near the fence, her T-shirt stretched tight over her bulging belly, and I bit my lip so hard it bled (Hawkins 21)

She felt pain when she saw Anna in place of her. She feels that Anna snatched everything from her, her husband, her lovely home and her happiness. She gets more frustrated and becomes an alcoholic. Her life became worse because of Anna who is living her life: “She’s a cuckoo, laying her egg in my nest. She has taken everything from me. She has taken everything and now she calls me to tell me that my distress is inconvenient for her?” (55) She daily watches Megan and Scott (the couple lived in Witney) from the train. She has become obsessed with the beautiful young couple living there, whom she names “Jess” and “Jason”. Rachel looks out for the pair every day from the train, daydreaming about their perfect lives. She wanted to be like them, a perfect life and also imagined other people living outside the train. One day she comes to know that Megan has been missing. The novel revolves around the disappearance of Megan whose blissful life might not have been idyllic. After all this, Rachel has a chance to become a part of the lives she only watched from afar. On that same night, Rachel drank a lot but she knew she was around their house. She saw Megan and Tom. Tom beat her brutally. Her mind completely washed up by Tom, she only remembers that she woke up bruised and bloody the day after, following a fight with Tom the night before. Since she was present there, she becomes a material witness – even though a highly unreliable one – and this feeds into Rachel’s lack of self-esteem, fueling a spiral of self-destructive behaviour. Rachel involves herself in Megan’s missings case because she is the only eyewitness of that night when Megan went missing but she could not remember anything because of a blackout:

I am when I drink. Drunk Rachel sees no consequence, she is either excessively expensive and optimistic or wrapped up in hate. She has no past, no future. She exists purely at the moment. drunk Rachel – wanting to be the part of the story, needing a way to persuade Scott to talk to her – she lied. I lied. (145)

Rachel was also suspected of Megan's disappearance. She struggles to tell the truth to the police or anyone because no one would have trusted as she had lost her memory of what had happened that night. She only remembers that she wakes up in her room and her hand and head is injured and she is unable to recall the events. She faces a mental disorder to recover her memory, “I don't remember things. I said, I blackout and I can't remember where I've been and what I've done. Sometimes I wonder if I've done or said terrible things, and I can't remember. And if ...if someone tells me something I've done, it does not even feel like it was me who was doing that thing.” (249)

The narration is reliably unreliable as the protagonist doesn't undergo all the experience and the past events are just included as a part of the imagination of the protagonist. It is an accumulation of several incidents of the past and the present involving the protagonist's personal and historical trauma. Despite the physical condition, the pre-war or post-war period, the action unfolds the mentally anguished interior mental landscape of the protagonist. Thus the narrative of the protagonist's memory trip acts as a covering of his repression that finally breaks out. This sort of narration makes it impossible for the readers to find out the real truth behind the narration until the narrator leaves behind some witness like additional information or characterization being provided in one or the other way unconsciously. Bruno Zerweck describes the “narrator's unintentional self-incrimination.” As an essential part of unreliable narration which the readers sense out of the intended way. As such the narrator extends to picturise himself through long monologues that reveal the facts unconsciously to highlight the positive side and bury the other side unintentionally. Stevens also warns of the unintentional memory as “this may be a case of hindsight colouring my memory”. Giacomo defines memory as, in terms of two features as, a) practice or activities of many shorts, which b) aim at building at present a relation to already occurred events, to what we call, in everyday language the past. (Crocchi 16) A profound truth lying beneath the mind of the narrator is purely shadowed by the memory just upbringing the ideological perspectives unintentionally, hiding behind the rest. Rachel's life after the divorce with Tom became worse. She was also depressed that she could not be a mother and these things took her to the dark side of her life and the result is she started to hate Anna and her newborn baby, Evie. She has lost all her hope to have a child and to become a mother; she also lost her beloved husband. She felt very depressed and lonely. She thought that alcohol was the only option to forget all her problems. She wants to be loved and cared for:

I felt isolated in my misery. I became lonely, so I drank a bit, and then a bit more, and then I became lonelier because no one likes being around a drunk. I lost and I drank and I drank and I lost. I liked my job, but I didn't have a glittering career, and even if I had, let's be honest: women are still only really valued for two things – their looks and their role as mothers. I'm not beautiful, and I can't have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless" (112)

Rachel felt so lonely and miserable that she took to alcohol. She drank a little, a little more and in the end, she became drunk. She just follows her lust without regard to the norm in her environment that being a drunkard is less acceptable in her environment and it is so rude. She did something even though she knows that is not true but still does that. And after becoming a drunk she becomes lonelier because she is drubbed by people because of her bad habit. She is unable to communicate and as a result misbehaves with others and is sometimes offensive towards them. With the feelings of anxiety, she becomes an alcoholic. Rachel also often lied to cover the fact that she was jobless. She lied to Cathy about her job where she had been fired but she pretended to go to work every morning and come home in the afternoon. And she covered her lies for months. She calls Tom almost every midnight and makes them disturb and wake his daughter Evie from the continuous ringing of the phone. She lied to the police and Scott about her friendship with Megan, even though she didn't know Megan as well. She wanted to be part of his story. She ignored the moral values in the society. Rachel just follows her desire even if it is not acceptable in society. When she wants to drink, she just drinks even on the train. That breaks the moral value in her society since drinking alcohol in public places is not acceptable.

Rachel becomes the victim of Tom's harassment. Tom always blames all the evil and bad luck in his life. He gaslights her from the beginning of the novel and the situation made her unreliable and irresponsible and she started living in guilt. Rachel is a character-heavy with loss and guilt, for not being able to conceive a child, for having destroyed her marriage, for having done things she can't remember. When she binge drinks, she has blackouts. She knows she harasses Tom, his new wife and once even threatened their baby – although she barely recalls those action

The character perceives events and people in a curtain way which may not align with objective truth. This disconnection between perception and reality mirrors the post-truth era where public opinion and personal beliefs can over shadow verifiable fact. In the novel when Rachel try to explain to the police that she saw Megan and Tom together on that night when Rachel got an accident and forget her last night memory on the second day, she just believe what Tom have said to her, even she didn't not remember anything, Rachel explain her situation in the novels as,

I don't know what I have done. What did I do? Between five o' clock and ten fifteen, what was I doing? Why was Tom looking for me? What did I do to Anna?

Unreliable narrators frequently manipulate facts, either intentionally or due to their own psychological states. In the novel Rachel, struggling with alcoholism and memory gaps, often cannot trust her own memories. she feels lonely after her divorce with Tom she was totally dependent on tom what he was saying was quite right for Rachel. This manipulation of facts mirrors the way in which the post-truth phenomenon involves the distortion or selective presentation of information to fit one's agenda or narrative.

In another startling turn of events, Rachel finds herself in a harrowing situation when she witnesses Megan in the company of Tom, only to face a brutal attack from Tom himself. This leaves her in a state where she's unable to articulate what she witnessed. Her attempt to report Tom's involvement in Megan's murder, especially after Megan's announcement of pregnancy by Tom, is met with disbelief by the police. This exacerbates her inability to explain the chain of events. Adding to the complexity is Rachel's struggle with alcohol-induced memory lapses. Her trust in Tom's version of events further complicates matters, leading to a tumultuous period post their divorce. Despite realising that her actions create tension between Tom and Anna, Rachel finds herself unable to shake off her lingering feelings for Tom.

These misunderstandings and false accusations significantly strain the relationships among the characters, painting a poignant picture of the post-truth phenomenon. Relying on emotions and others' beliefs rather than objective realities contributes to societal strain, underscoring the dangers of trusting unreliable individuals.

Moreover, the manipulation of thoughts and accusations deepens the trauma experienced by these unreliable characters. Rachel, grappling with her own trauma, struggles to reconcile her past experiences and the effects of alcohol abuse in a world where truth is elusive. Individuals like her, plagued by memory gaps and unreliable recollections, inadvertently suppress traumatic events, blurring the lines between factual events and personal narratives.

The concept of the unreliable narrator has been a focal point in literary studies. Rachel Watson, the primary narrator, is a troubled alcoholic who frequently experiences blackouts and memory lapses due to her addiction. Her unreliability stems from her alcoholism, leading to moments of confusion and unreliable recollection of events. Rachel becomes fixated on observing a couple she sees from the train, sparking a series of events that intertwine with her own troubled reality.

Conclusion-

The novel intricately explores the complexities of the post-truth phenomenon, illuminating how subjective interpretations, manipulation of truth, and personal experiences can blend the boundaries between reality and fiction. These themes deeply resonate with the challenges inherent in navigating a post-truth society. Rachel, subjected to manipulation and gaslighting by her husband, becomes emotionally and psychologically dependent on his words. The narrative technique of unreliable narration challenges the traditional role of an omniscient narrator, providing a subjective lens through which characters' realities unfold. These narrators, influenced by personal biases, psychological states, or other factors, deviate significantly from an objective reality. Within the novel, the blurred line between characters' perceptions and the actual truth mirrors the societal challenge of discerning objective interpretations in our post-truth world.

"The Girl on the Train" not only delivers a captivating psychological thriller but also serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the complexities of the post-truth era. As readers navigate the distorted narratives of Rachel, Megan, and Anna, they confront the difficulties of discerning truth in a world where personal beliefs often overshadow objective facts. This analysis contributes to our understanding of the intricate interplay between literature and contemporary discourse and emphasises the broader implications of living in a post-truth society.

Bibliography

<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-unreliable-narrator>

Croci, Giacomo. "A Plea for Spatiality in Thinking Memory. Non-linear Time and Sigmund Freud's Taste for Topography." *The Place of Memory and the Memory of Place*, edited by Olena Lytovka, pp. 13-31. IRF Press, 2016.

Ackerman, Courtney. "Psychoanalysis: A Brief History of Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory." *Positive Psychology*, 2018, www.positivepsychology.com/psychoanalysis/

Booth, Wayne C. "A Rhetoric of Irony." *Oxford UP*, 1974.

DeSimone, Gabriella. "Novel Analysis: The Girl On The Train (Paula Hawkins)." May 21 2018, www.bulbapp.com/u/novel-analysis-the-girl-on-the-train-paula-hawkins~5

Ferry, James. "The Unreliable Narrator: Simplifying the Device and Exploring its Role in Autobiography." *University of Massachusetts Amherst*, 2017, www.scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2/463

"Finding Inspiration: The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins." *Crime Fiction & True Crime*, 22 Jan. 2015, www.writing.ie/interviews/finding-inspiration-the-girl-on-the-train-by-Paula-Hawkins

Fauziah, Kun Maratul. "Psychological Dynamic of Female Characters towards Marriage Problem in Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*." 19th Oct. 2018.

Giovanelli, Marcello. "Something happened, something bad": Blackouts, uncertainties and event construal in *The Girl on the Train*." *Sage Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1, 9 Feb. 2018, www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963947017752807

González, Carla Rodríguez. "Geographies of Fear in the Domestic Noir: Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*." *Miscelânea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 20 Dec. 2017, www.miscelaneajournal.net/index.php/misc/article/view/348

Hawkins, Paula. (2015). *The Girl on the Train*. Black Swan edition, 2016.

Jatin, maslin. "Another Girl Gone in a Tale of Betrayal." *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2015/01/05/books/the-girl-on-the-train-by-paula-hawkins.html, Jan. 2015.

"Psychodynamic Perspectives on Personality, Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory of Personality." www.courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-psychology/chapter/psychodynamic-perspectives-on-personality

Rahayuni, Meria Indah. "Struggle to Tell the Truth: An Individual Psychological Studies on *The Girl on the Train* Novel." 2017.

Rena, N. "The Unreliable Narration and the suppression of Emotions in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol. 5, no. 7, Jul. 2015, www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-0715/ijsrp-p4376.pdf

Tamara, Raisha Hani, "The Influence of Rachel's Motives to Help Megan on her personality Development as seen in Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*." 16 Oct. 2017.

The Book Smugglers. "Writing Women: *The Girl on the Train* by Paula." July 20, 2016, www.thebooksmugglers.com/2016/07/girl-on-the-train-paula-hawkins.html

Wiharyanti, Harik. "Behavior Disorder of Rachel reflected in Paula Hawkins "*The Girl on the Train*" (2015): A *Psychoanalytic Approach*." 2017, www.eprints.ums.ac.id/54835/14/PUBLICATION%20ARTICLE.pdf

Zerweck, Bruno. "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction." *Penn State UP*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2001, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.35.1.151