

GILLIAN FLYNN'S *SHARP OBJECTS*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CO-RELATION
BETWEEN MEMORIES AND DREAMS

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Abstract:

In her novel *Sharp Objects*, the American Crime Fiction writer Gillian Flynn presents the story of a young girl named Camille who returns to her hometown to investigate the mystery behind the disappearance of two small girls, and in course of action what follows is the unraveling of her own past. Being a part of a dysfunctional, without proper parental identity, Camille had unresolved issues of abandonment and rejection since childhood, she grew up with haunting memories of her sister Marian's death and had weird dream sequences which were horrifying and made no logical sense but recurring effects. However a close and critical psychoanalysis of the co-relation between the consolidated memories and dreams, the reason lies deep within the human psyche which largely resides unrecognized in the subconscious mind and surfaces when triggers occur. This paper intends to critically analyze the correlation between memories and dreams, and how the consolidation and reconsolidation of autobiographical memories are related to the occurrence of dreams, through a study of the dream sequences mentioned in this particular novel with reference to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of Interpretation of Dreams.

Keywords: consolidated memories, Dreams, psyche, psychoanalysis, female detective, dysfunctional family, self-identity

American writer Gillian Flynn is a popular name in the contemporary Crime and Detective Fiction genre. She is widely known for her darkly entertaining narratives entwined with tales of murder and deceit with an altogether different take on portraying the female protagonists. She defies the objectification of women by creating more complex female characters, and gives an insight by throwing light into the workings of the psyche, and thus significantly breaking the stereotypical norms.

Sharp Objects is a crime thriller, which is basically a tale of a young girl named Camille who worked for a newspaper and was assigned to cover the report of two young children, small girls of Wind Gap who went missing under mysterious circumstances and were later found dead with their teeth removed. This horrifying incident had sent chills across the province and the police were also looking for the murderer and Camille came there to investigate the case on her own, as Wind Gap was also her hometown, it was the place where the mother still lived with her family and where Camille had spent all her childhood, but this place had bittersweet memories and Camille initially refused to accept the job proposal as she says:

" the story of my home town, a topic I preferred to avoid ... It's one of those crummy towns prone to misery... (and there lived) Mom. Stepdad. A half-sister born when I was in college, her existence so unreal to me that I often forget her name. Amma. And then Marian, always long-gone Marian." (Flynn, *SO* 4)

This hints at a probable traumatic past and that she is out of love with her hometown and the people there. But on Curry's persuasion and being a professional at work she agreed; though at the back of her mind the past incidents were already replaying and those past memories made her feel claustrophobic. As she finally decides to leave for Wind Gap to solve the murder mystery she thinks to herself:

" My mother was the only person in Wind Gap with whom I had even a limited connection...I had no pets to worry about, no plants to leave with a neighbor... a photo of preteen me holding Marian at about age seven" (*SO* 6)

These introspective thoughts on part of Camille hint at the strained relationship with her mother, how detached a life she was living and that her long-dead sister still held a significant place in her heart,

and that Camille was tightly holding on to the memories of the past, which already had a deep psychological impact upon her life as a whole.

Camille was born and brought up in Wind Gap by her mother Adora, who was abandoned by the father. Adora soon married Alan, with whom she had daughters - Marian and Amma. Marian, was long dead and Amma was thirteen by then. Thus visiting Wind Gap meant meeting her mother who was always cold and distant and had never seemed affectionate towards her: " It's the politeness that I find most upsetting" (SO 7) and it also meant reliving the memories of a dead sister whom Camille had loved dearly and missed till the present day and meeting the half- sister Amma with whom she had no interaction and had not even seen her. And also met Alan, who had always faithfully been the submissive husband to Adora and had never tried to be her father or even the foster father.

This unnatural and unfathomable dynamic between the mother and daughter is highlighted by their awkward meeting and the conversations that followed, the mother was visibly not happy to see her daughter after a long period of time but rather was disturbed at having her privacy intruded by an unnecessary caller at an odd hour, as: " She opened the door and stood in the doorway, didn't seem surprised, and didn't offer a hug at all, not even the limp one " (SO 29) Thus the mother doesn't show the least affection towards Camille, the daughter who had always been neglected and yet had craved for her mother's love and affection, and these peculiar interactions serve as one of the key elements of the novel as the real reason behind this lies deep in the psychological traits of the characters concerned and in the experiences that they had encountered over the period of time. Camille further noticed that Adora, the mother "sat away from me, next to Alan" (SO 31) who expressed superficial pleasure at the meeting, then she further notes how :

“Alan, Adora, and Amma were all gathered in the living room ...the scene was startling, it was so much like the old days with Marian...I was about to linger near my mother, waiting for her to put an arm around me, too... My mother didn't even look up at me, just muzzled Amma in closer to her, and cooed into her ear." (Flynn, SO 74)

These strikingly similar repetitions of the past events made her recollect and go through the same volatile emotional grounds, resulting in the trigger of the past nightmarish incidents which were buried deep inside the subconscious mind, became re-activated in the form of memory reconsolidation. The distant feelings made her further revisit her childhood trying to understand where she irked her mother and how she was never cared for:

" When I was a child, I remember my mother trying to prod me with ointments and oils...that was the last time I had her full attention as a mother. I suddenly wished I'd been easier. " (SO 74)

This shows how deeply Camille was affected by the lack of their mother's love and affection, how she suffered from the identity crisis, and had always been battling abandonment and rejection issues and yet persisting in life. In this context, it can be mentioned that a significant contribution to the psychoanalytic understanding of rejection and abandonment was made by Rochlin's paper titled, "The Dread of Abandonment: A Contribution to the Etiology of the Loss Complex and Depression" which was written in 1961. Rochlin thought that the child's emotional development, wherein the formation of meaningful relationships is the most crucial psychic process, there rests the matrix of the dread of abandonment. Thus, Rochlin as a consequence considers the dread of abandonment as an organically natural method and also discusses why loss should have such a profound impact throughout life. He says:

“The external and the inner influences which discernibly evoke despair prove to have a common denominator- the experience of loss...A loss here refers, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, to object loss, the desired relationship with another person who had to be abandoned. The object may represent or be substituted by some abstraction or may even be represented or substituted”(Rochlin)

The psychologically rejected and abandoned children, after attainment of a certain age, are cognitively aware of the truth that they were undesirable and/or rejected and thus discarded. This awareness has a serious consequences. Not only do their egos have to deal with the impact of the loss but additionally the real abandonment itself. The specific personality characteristics of those abandoned children are deeply rooted in their complex past and are the observable symptoms of their ego's attempts to deal with both the loss and /or consciousness of having been deserted. Abandoned children are also at a high risk of psychological disturbance, Childers in his observations has noted the fact that abandoned children are relative "more hypersensitive" because of the lack of confidence, self-esteem, lack of tracing the roots, and because of being overburdened with the insecurity of no longer belonging to a permanent setting. Additionally, the aggressive behavior in these abandoned children are usually associated with psychological rejection and abandonment issues which further results in their acts of rebelliousness, disobedience, and mood tantrums. In this context, Symonds found in his observation that psychologically abandoned and rejected children had a certain extent of uncommunicative hostile behavior and showed significant bewilderment about life in general. He says:

"The child who is wanted by his parents and grows up in a home atmosphere that is characterized by understanding and affection, loving care, and protection, has every chance to develop into a well-balanced, emotionally stable adult. The child who is neglected or brutally treated by either parent or even the child who is rejected in more subtle ways-by criticism, hostility, submerged under a cloak of insincere care and affection-is destined on average to show strong aggressive traits, to be hostile and antagonistic toward those with whom he must have dealings and to develop tendencies which may lead to delinquency." (Symonds)

Also recent studies on consciously rejected and abandoned children speak about how the complicated symptoms of aggression, negativistic attitudes to everything, and encopresis in their behavioral patterns are interrelated and are a result of the past trauma of abandonment issues faced by them.

Camille had already faced abandonment by the parental figures and had endured rejection and neglect, and had to continue life battling all those issues, further she had to encounter incidents when the family sat apart from her declaring: "We Crellins run a bit delicate". (SO 74) And later her half-sister also reminded her: " If you are, get my name right: Amity Adora Crellin" (SO 98), and this fact of Amma, the half-sister having Adora, the mother's name as her middle name jolted Camille. She had always suffered from an identity crisis; denied the knowledge about her biological father, deprived of her mother's love, she envied Marian as she was above the bondages, and "I should add that I was also feeling jealous of Amma" (SO 99) as she had all that Camille had desired, a happy family a proper life, a father's name and a mother's love. This confession on the part of Camille provides psychological insight into her mind, how lonely she was, how sad she was at having been deprived of the love of a mother and a proper happy childhood and how this psychological abuse in the form of abandonment and rejection that she faced since a child, and thus, traumatic past affected her life and the impact is significantly visible in the present day as well. Home is a concept. A search for the soul-self and self-identity. Camille lacks a home. Though Ellen and Curry prove to be her home more than her real mother yet Camille always feels the void, as she says: " I'll never have a home" (SO 297), it shows her state of dismay. Yet, she continues to pursue her professional commitments, even on the verge of mental breakdown, which shows her mental strength and tenacity.

However, the present hostile atmosphere at her house, recurrence of past incidents which were causing her triggers and resulted in activation of the past memories as well as fresh accumulation of new memories through the freshly experienced incidents, resulted in the weird disparate dream sequences, that Camille recollects after getting up from sleep unnerved. Recollecting the dreams, she speaks to herself:

" I dreamt I was packing for a trip, then realized I'd laid out all the wrong clothes, sweaters for a summer vacation. I dreamt I'd filed the wrong story for Curry before I left: Instead of the item on miserable Tammy Davis and her four locked-up children, we'd run a puff piece about skin care.

I dreamt my mother was slicing an apple onto thick cuts of meat and feeding it to me, slowly and sweetly, because I was dying. (Flynn, *SO* 34)

These dream sequences provide a psychological insight into the mind of the character as well as provide the basis for the study of the correlation between the consolidation and reconsolidation of specifically the autobiographical memory in this particular case and its impact on dreaming and the significance of it.

The Psychoanalytic theory of dreaming was developed by Sigmund Freud, the neurologist, at the beginning of the twentieth century and his theory of the human mind comprises mainly the hypotheses about the rules of selection and organization of the representations that constitute dreams. For Freud, the dream is a highly meaningful mental product that is the outcome of particular mental processes under the circumstances of sleep. The meaning of the dream is not apparent in the “manifest content”, which is the dream as recalled by the dreamer, but is to be found in the “latent dream thoughts”, some of which are unconscious; the latent thoughts have to be uncovered by processes of association to the manifest elements of the dream, as the latent dream thoughts are transformed into the manifest dream by what are called primary process mechanisms, a primitive form of thinking that is predominant in dreams. Primary process mechanisms include condensation, the combining or fusing of two or more elements into a single one, and displacement, a shifting of emphasis from one element to a different one. The primary process mechanisms also subserve the need for disguise, or censorship, of the conflicting wishes to avoid arousing excessive anxiety and disturbing sleep. (Zhao et al., “Relationship between Dreaming and Memory Reconsolidation”)

" The dream is the liberation of the spirit from the pressure of external nature, a detachment of the soul from the fetters of matter," says Freud in his seminal treatise "The Interpretation of Dreams. (1900)" He further says " The Interpretation of Dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" and thus has been an important Psychoanalytic technique and that the unconscious is the real psychic; its inner nature is just as unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is just as imperfectly reported to us through the data of the consciousness as is the external world through the indications of our sensory organs. In the Introduction to his seminal treatise Freud says :

“ Every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state.” (*Classics in the History of Psychology -- Freud (1900) Chapter 1, Part a*)

He further adds:

“That all the material composing the content of a dream is somehow derived from experience, that it is reproduced or remembered in the dream – this at least may be accepted as an incontestable fact. Yet it would be wrong to assume that such a connection between the dream content and reality will be easily obvious from a comparison between the two. On the contrary, the connection must be carefully sought, and in quite a number of cases it may for long while elude discovery. The reason for this is to be found in a number of peculiarities evinced by the faculty of memory of in dreams.”(Popova)

Among the major sources of consciously inaccessible memories, Freud is of the opinion that, it is our childhood which leaves vestiges of experience and fragments of memory that provide lifelong materials for our dreams. And this is true in the case of Camille, as the experiences that she had endured as a child, one that had searched for an identity of her father, craved for the unadulterated love of a mother, and had been in pain witnessing her beloved sister undergo treatment for being sick all her life until she passed away, all these horrifying incidents had always stayed with her and she had recurring dreams in the most distorted bizarre forms , and she could not understand as to why her dreams were weird, but diving deep into the understanding of the working and deciphering the process of dream

formation and decoding it with reference to the psychoanalytic understanding of the correlation between memory and dreams, the apparently weird and disparate dreams of Camille can be analyzed.

Counterbalancing the deeply ingrained memories is the freshly accumulated recent experiences which are also consolidated in the dreams. And this consolidation is only possible after a certain distancing from the immediacy of the experience. Freud says that impressions that have captured the waking mind intensely do not appear in the dream until they are to some extent removed from the day's mental activity.

According to Freud, the sources of dreams include stimuli from the external world, subjective experiences, organic stimuli within the body, and mental activities during sleep that:

" The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish" and that " dreams with a painful content are to be analyzed as the fulfillment of wishes. Nor will it seem a matter of chance that in the course of interpretation one always happens upon subjects of which one doesn't like to speak or think. The disagreeable sensation that such dreams arouse is simply identical with the antipathy which endeavors - usually with success - to restrain us from the treatment or discussion of such subjects, and which must be overcome by all of us, it despite its unpleasantness, we find it necessary to take. But this disagreeable sensation, which occurs also in dreams, does not preclude the existence of a wish; everyone has wishes which he would not like to tell others, which he does not want to admit even to himself. " (Freud 22).

Freud thus states that the wish fulfillment aspect of dreams is often so distorted as to be unrecognizable, and he is also of the opinion that these distortions are a reflection of the individual's tendency to defend against a dream which seems morally unacceptable or practically unattainable. However, these dream sequences play an important role in analyzing the psychological traits of the mind in keeping with Freud's theory of interpretation of dreams and the more recent studies made in this field.

The thoughts and feelings underlying the subconscious take form in the dream sequence and studying these from a critical viewpoint help in analyzing the working of the subconscious mind of the particular characters concerned. Here for instance Camille dreaming of packing wrong for the trip means an unstable and undecisive state mind of Camille, she was not sure if she was willing to come to Wind Gap for investigating the case or because of not having any other option she had to oblige to the orders of her boss, and that when she finally came for it in a hurry, she was unsure of it still. Then dreaming about filing the case wrongly for Curry means that in the workplace also she was in constant pressure to prove herself, her worth, her capability and that the newspaper was to be made an overnight success and she tried her best but had failed to excel as of yet. And lastly, the dream of her mother cutting slices of apple, and trying to force feed her the slices that turn into meat and that she is dying is something disparate, bizarre, and also horrible at the same time. Camille had never shared a great bond with her mother even though she always craved her affection and love but it was only when she was ill that her mother was there with her forcefully tending her and instead of getting well and recovering from the illness, she felt was about to die.

This bizarre and distorted dream that Camille had can also be analyzed concerning Freud's concept of the wish fulfillment aspect of dreams. Freud states that "Wish fulfillment is the meaning of every dream" (Freud 217) Deep down Camille longed for her mother's love and affection, and after witnessing her mother's loving nature toward the younger sister, the memories are activated as well and yet she knows that it is practically impossible for her to get her mother's love and thus all the amalgamation of the reasoning of the waking mind and the consolidation and reconsolidation of the past memories has given form to a distorted dream where her mother cuts slice of an apple and force feed her raw meat which implies that she is dying. This can also be analyzed from the context of the emotional aspect of visual memories. The emotional aspects of visual memories (scenes) can be decoupled from their broader contexts and selectively consolidated during sleep (Payne et al., 2008) So experiences can be broken down into fragments, each perhaps evaluated on the basis of emotionality

or arousal and activated individually. It consists of mainly the fragmentation of autobiographical memory in episodic experiences. Camille had always searched for the emotional connection with the mother but had always been denied for reasons unknown to her. She had always been ignored initially for Marian and later Amma had all the love and affection of the mother, this has impacted her mind as a child and had triggered her as an adult also on witnessing the repetition of the strikingly similar incidents, thus the fragmentation of her autobiographical memory in the sleep caused the activation of the hyperassociative cognition and it resulted in the bizarre dream contents.

This particular dream sequence has other major significance in the plot of the story as well as it hints at the sinister implications that the mother figure is associated with death imagery in Camille's subconscious mind and that it will be revealed along the storyline that how the questions that Camille was searching for she had always known the answers and it was the present hostile relationship between them that had taken the form as a bizarre dream content.

Dreams reflect a biological process of long-term memory consolidation, serving to strengthen the neural traces of recent events, integrate these new traces with older memories and previously stored knowledge, and to maintain the stability of existing memory representations in the face of subsequent experience. (Payne and Nadel)

Memory consolidation can be defined in the most abstract sense of post-encoding processes which contribute to the stabilization of long-term memory. Memory consolidation involves the enhancement of traces that represent the episodic details of an experience with previously acquired semantic knowledge.

Memory consolidation also refers to the process of stabilization and consolidation of information into the networks of long-term memory. The process of consolidation means that memories can be placed in relatively stable structures, and it is widely accepted that such memories can change and undergo improvement or refinement over a period of time. It also involves the integration of multiple experiences and the extraction of generalities. In dreams, the intermingling of memory fragments into a novel and sometimes bizarre combinations could reflect this adaptive process. The process of memory reactivation and consolidation in the sleeping brain appears to influence the conscious experiences during sleep, contributing to the fact that sometimes the dream content are recalled on awakening as well. Memories are again reactivated in the sleeping brain, and during sleep are thought to lead to the consolidation and enhancement of post-sleep memory performance. The content of dreams reflects memory activation which serves the purpose of developing the context memory. Whereas episodic memory refers to knowledge about the past that incorporates information about where and when particular events occur. (Payne and Nadel)

Dreams can be extremely fragmentary, but they are seldom experienced as random sequences of related images. Rather they show variation in the degrees of thematic and narrative coherences. The series of dreams that Camille had were not interconnected with associative images, yet they were a whole on their own with a different set of meanings and significance while being disparate and bizarre at the same time as well.

The bizarre and apparently dissociative dream content gives rise to the suggestion that we dream in order to forget false associations, or that the content of dreams is determined in the most random way. In this context, it can be stated that Hughes says, "the more bizarre, dramatic and absurd is the cue, the more resilient is the memory to which the cue has been associated." (Hughes 1997)

So it can well be said that memory fragments and internally constructed narrative themes constitute in the formation of the contents of the dreams. Dreaming is a ubiquitous phenomenon in human beings, Domhoff and his colleagues proposed that dreaming is what occurs when the mature brain is adequately activated and disconnected from external stimuli without self-reflection. (Zhao et al., "Relationship between Dreaming and Memory Reconsolidation")

Dreams are narrative simulations of autobiographical episodes (Montangero 2012) and it has been suggested that narratives are the “basic manner in which the brain organizes experiences”. (Pace,Schott,2013,p2) The activity of autobiographical memory during sleep and awakening can provide insight into the nature of dreams. Activated memories in the sleeping brain reflect an individual's life history. They can be highly fragmented and differ from the usual signs of episodic memory.

Autobiographical memory elements are rebound in dreams, and occur as a result of the hyperassociative nature of sleeping cognition (Stickgold et al., 1991, Llewellyn, 2013)

It is also evident that memory de-fragmentation and re-binding occur during sleep and that the autobiographical recall process further encourage the synthesis of fragmentary dream elements upon awakening (Hobson and Mc Carty, 1977, Horton 2014)

The selective fragmentation of memory elements during sleep is largely seen to be the state during which memory consolidation takes place, and it is also followed by the re-binding of memory elements which results in a holistic experience of dreaming, despite the re-bound elements often being disparate, implausible or seemingly impossible, and bizarre.(Horton and Malinowski) Such odd or novel associations in dreams result from the hyperassociative nature of sleeping cognition. The term hyperassociativity refers to the increased activation of weakly semantically related concepts and networks following the activation of a specific concept or memory. (Stickgold et al., 1999) And this hyperassociativity accounts for the discontinuities of form, context, time, or location and it is often referred to as “bizarreness”. And it is said that bizarreness arises out of the joining together of disparate elements (Revonsuo & Tarkko, 2002; Levin & Nielsen, 2007) which is also indicative of hyperassociativity.

This clearly explains the dream sequence of Camille which were actually a result of the hyperassociativity and had formed apparent dissociative images in the dream content.

Freud says: “That the dream actually has a secret meaning, which proves to be a wish-fulfillment, must be proved afresh in every case by analysis”. (Freud 225) Thus although Freudian notion holds that dreams have a “hidden meaning” disguised in symbolic language, and it is even quite popular in folk psychology, but, in the memory research field, consolidation has been defined as a time-dependent stabilization process that eventually leads to the permanent stage of newly acquired memory. Reconsolidation is hypothesized to be an important component of long-term memory processing. (Zhao et al., “Relationship between Dreaming and Memory Reconsolidation”) Flynn also mentions: “Everyone has their own version of a memory.” (GG 68) and a large part of the novel deals with the human psyche and subconscious mind’s working with reference to the co-relation between memory and dreams, the consolidation and reconsolidation of memory in various forms and its impact in the process of formation of the dream content, which is experienced in the sleep state. Flynn also speaks about gender discrimination and other issues related to woman empowerment, specifically through the character of Camille, who, while battling past trauma and dealing with triggers related to abandonment and rejection issues, searches for an identity in her personal and professional life. Curry, the owner who time and often addresses her as a kid: " Where are you on the story, kiddo?" (Flynn, *SO 2*) this sly remark "kiddo" in a workplace shows how women face discrimination based on gender and are taken for granted as unsuitable for these professions, which are essentially considered to be the male-dominated arena. And at times Camille too thinks to herself that: " I'm a soft touch. Might be because I'm a woman". (*SO 2*)

The societal tendencies of subjugation of women further continue as the police inspector Chief Bill Vickery, investigating the case refuses to help Camille with information and sternly says: " But I still don't want you here" (*SO 12*) and to that Camille had a befitting answer: " I don't want to make your job any harder. But I need to do mine."(*SO 12*) and with clear determination to solve the case, fighting against categorization and discrimination she decides to investigate the case on her own and resolves to meet the families of the victims and interrogate them.

Initially, she is called a “kid” and “a soft touch” but she emerges as a strong character, solving the murder mystery and unraveling the truth while simultaneously dealing with her crisis as her immediate family is involved. Thus sometimes a detective’s life is equally difficult to navigate as the assigned case. Yet Camille emerges as a strong character and falls back on life with kindness: “Lately, I’ve been leaning toward kindness.” (SO 321) and even after enduring many obstacles and hardships she is finally successful in establishing an identity of her own in the professional field as well.

Thus in this novel, Gillian Flynn with her innovative style perfectly portrayed the life of a female detective, who comes to her hometown to solve the mystery behind the murder of two small girls, and gets herself caught amidst the unforeseen turn of events. She struggles with her personal crisis, battles her mental stigma, and the recollection of the nightmarish past makes her relive those moments of trauma, but this time linking the past with the present that she is finally able to unmask the truth and get to the reason of the actual cause and effect of the incident. Thus Camille, the main protagonist, a female character, after withstanding all the odds and overcoming the obstacles, having solved the mystery, decoding the motive, comes out as a brave, and much stronger person, with kindness towards herself and develops an optimistic outlook towards life. Flynn here, through portraying a broken and disjointed family, also speaks of issues related to mental illness, and at the same time provides with the much psychological insights into the minds and workings of the characters, and thus definitely provides with the facts regarding the existence a strong correlation between memory and dreams.

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