
Post-Feminism and Corporate Patriarchy: Female Subjectivity in *The Girl on the Train*

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Abstract

The paper examines *The Girl on the Train* through the lens of post-feminist theory to explore how female subjectivity is constructed, destabilized, and re-negotiated within contemporary corporate and domestic spaces. While post-feminism often promotes the rhetoric of empowerment, choice, and individual freedom, the novel exposes the fragility of these promises within a culture still structured by patriarchal control and gendered surveillance. Rachel's unreliable narration, shaped by addiction, gaslighting, and internalized misogyny, reflects the psychological consequences of a society that commodifies women's bodies and emotions while denying them epistemic authority.

Drawing on theorists such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, the paper argues that the novel critiques the illusion of post-feminist autonomy by revealing how corporate modernity reconfigures, rather than dismantles, patriarchal power. The suburban setting and commuter train become metaphors for regulated movement and constrained agency, underscoring the limits placed on women's self-fashioning. Ultimately, the novel reclaims narrative voice as a site of resistance: Rachel's act of storytelling becomes a means of reconstructing fractured identity and challenging the structures that render women invisible or unbelievable. Through this analysis, the paper demonstrates how *The Girl on the Train* exposes the contradictions of postfeminism and foregrounds the ongoing struggle for authentic female agency in neoliberal society.

Keywords: Post-feminism, corporate patriarchy, female subjectivity, gendered surveillance, gaslighting

Published in 2015, *The Girl on the Train* emerges at a cultural moment often described as “post-feminist,” where women are presumed to have achieved equality and are encouraged to view empowerment as a matter of personal choice rather than structural change. However, beneath this rhetoric of autonomy lies a persistent framework of corporate patriarchy, gendered surveillance, and epistemic control. The novel situates its female protagonist, Rachel Watson, within this contradictory landscape, exposing how contemporary neoliberal culture reshapes—rather than eradicates—patriarchal power.

Rachel’s characterization as an unreliable narrator is central to the novel’s feminist significance. Her alcoholism, social isolation, and emotional instability are not merely personal flaws; they are symptomatic of a society that systematically undermines women’s credibility. The narrative dramatizes gaslighting as both a personal and structural phenomenon, revealing how women are rendered doubtful witnesses to their own experiences. Through shifting perspectives and fragmented narration, the novel mirrors the fractured nature of female subjectivity in a culture that simultaneously demands self-management and denies authority.

This paper argues that *The Girl on the Train* critiques post-feminist ideology by exposing the illusion of empowerment within corporate and domestic spaces. By foregrounding narrative voice as a site of resistance, the novel ultimately reclaims storytelling as a means of reconstructing agency. Through a feminist theoretical lens, this study examines how the text interrogates the politics of credibility, surveillance, and identity in contemporary neoliberal society.

This study draws upon post-feminist theory to examine how female subjectivity is constructed and destabilized in *The Girl on the Train*. Post-feminism, as articulated by Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, refers not to the end of feminism but to a cultural sensibility that assumes gender equality has already been achieved. Within this framework, empowerment is redefined as individual choice, self-surveillance, and consumer freedom rather than collective political struggle. Women are encouraged to view success and failure as personal responsibility, masking the persistence of structural inequalities.

Rosalind Gill’s notion of the “self-policing” female subject is particularly relevant to Rachel’s characterization. Rachel internalizes blame for her failed marriage, unemployment, and addiction, embodying the post-feminist emphasis on self-regulation and emotional discipline. Her crisis of credibility reflects what Miranda Fricker terms *epistemic injustice*—a condition in which a speaker’s testimony is dismissed due to identity prejudice. In the novel, Rachel’s unreliability is not merely psychological but socially produced through gaslighting and patriarchal manipulation.

The paper also engages Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to analyze how femininity in the novel is performed through ideals of domestic success, beauty, and emotional stability. Megan and Anna represent contrasting performances of ideal womanhood, yet both remain confined within patriarchal expectations. The suburban and corporate settings function as regulatory spaces that discipline female behavior while appearing neutral and modern.

By integrating post-feminist cultural theory, feminist narratology, and the concept of epistemic injustice, this framework enables a reading of the novel as a critique of neoliberal patriarchy. It positions narrative voice as a contested space where credibility, authority, and agency are negotiated rather than naturally possessed.

The Girl on the Train presents a world that outwardly reflects post-feminist ideals—economic independence, sexual freedom, and lifestyle choice—yet subtly reveals the persistence of patriarchal control beneath these surfaces. Rachel, Megan, and Anna appear to inhabit a modern social order in which women can define themselves freely. However, their identities remain deeply entangled in male validation, marital status, and domestic success.

Rachel's initial self-perception is shaped by her role as wife and aspiring mother. When her marriage collapses, she internalizes failure as a personal inadequacy rather than recognizing the structural expectations imposed upon her. This reflects the post-feminist emphasis on individual responsibility: success is self-made, and failure is self-inflicted. Rachel's unemployment and alcoholism further isolate her, reinforcing the neoliberal logic that productivity determines worth. Her lack of economic and emotional "success" renders her socially invisible.

Megan, by contrast, appears sexually autonomous and professionally active. Yet her supposed freedom is circumscribed by objectification and secrecy. Her body becomes a site of surveillance—desired, monitored, and ultimately violated. The novel critiques the illusion that sexual agency within a post-feminist culture necessarily translates into genuine empowerment. Instead, it exposes how desire is still structured by patriarchal control.

Anna, who seems to embody the "successful" woman—wife, mother, homeowner—also exists within a fragile identity dependent on male approval. Her security is contingent upon maintaining domestic perfection. The suburban setting, often associated with stability and aspiration, becomes a symbolic space of containment where women are observed and judged.

Through these characters, the novel dismantles the myth that contemporary society has transcended patriarchy. It reveals that post-feminist culture repackages old hierarchies in the language of choice and empowerment. Female subjectivity remains precarious, shaped by surveillance, credibility politics, and emotional labor.

In *The Girl on the Train*, the erosion of female agency operates most powerfully through gaslighting and the systematic denial of women's credibility. Rachel's unreliability is not merely a narrative device designed for suspense; it reflects a broader cultural condition in which women's testimonies are routinely doubted, trivialized, or dismissed. Her alcoholism becomes the convenient justification through which male authority invalidates her perceptions.

Tom's manipulation exemplifies intimate gaslighting as a mechanism of patriarchal control. By repeatedly questioning Rachel's memory and emotional stability, he reshapes her understanding of reality. This private psychological abuse mirrors a larger social pattern:

women are often perceived as overly emotional, irrational, or unstable, particularly when they challenge male narratives. Rachel internalizes this doubt, demonstrating how gaslighting functions not only externally but internally, producing self-surveillance and self-censorship.

Miranda Fricker's concept of *epistemic injustice* illuminates this dynamic. Rachel suffers testimonial injustice—her word is discounted because she is seen as unreliable, intoxicated, and emotionally unstable. Her identity markers undermine her authority as a knower. The police initially dismiss her statements, and even she questions her own recollections. In this way, the novel reveals how credibility is gendered and socially constructed.

Megan's storyline further underscores this theme. Her attempts to articulate dissatisfaction and trauma are mediated through male authority figures, including her therapist. Even within a supposedly safe space of confession, her narrative is filtered through structures of power. The text thus critiques the assumption that modern institutions automatically guarantee female voice or safety.

By foregrounding fractured memory and multiple perspectives, the novel stylistically enacts epistemic instability. However, this instability gradually transforms into reclamation. As Rachel reconstructs the truth, she reclaims interpretive authority over her own experience. The act of narrating becomes an assertion of epistemic agency, challenging both personal manipulation and broader patriarchal disbelief.

This section demonstrates that gaslighting in the novel is not incidental but structural. It is a key mechanism through which corporate patriarchy sustains control while appearing neutral or modern.

In *The Girl on the Train*, the fragmentation of narrative voice initially signals instability, but it ultimately becomes the foundation for reclaiming agency. The novel's tripartite structure—shifting between Rachel, Megan, and Anna—creates a layered account of truth that resists singular, authoritative interpretation. This multiplicity of voices challenges patriarchal control over narrative and knowledge.

Rachel's unreliable narration, once a marker of weakness, gradually transforms into a site of resistance. As she pieces together her memories and confronts the distortions imposed upon her, storytelling becomes an act of self-recovery. The reconstruction of memory is not merely about solving a crime; it is about restoring self-trust. By reclaiming her version of events, Rachel contests the structures that have silenced and manipulated her.

Importantly, the novel refuses to present empowerment as triumphant or absolute. Agency emerges through vulnerability rather than in spite of it. Rachel does not become a conventional heroine; instead, she becomes credible—to herself first, and then to others. This shift signifies a deeper feminist intervention: the restoration of epistemic authority to a woman whose voice was systematically dismissed.

The train itself functions as a metaphor for constrained movement—women are in transit yet confined to predetermined tracks. However, by the novel’s conclusion, Rachel metaphorically steps off this track of imposed identity. The act of narration allows her to reconfigure subjectivity beyond the roles of failed wife, addict, or unreliable witness.

Thus, the novel suggests that female agency in a post-feminist neoliberal society is not granted but reclaimed. Through narrative reconstruction, the protagonist challenges gaslighting, destabilizes corporate patriarchy, and asserts interpretive power. Storytelling becomes both survival and resistance, transforming fragmented subjectivity into conscious self-authorship.

In *The Girl on the Train*, corporate patriarchy does not appear as overt domination but as a subtle system embedded within everyday life. The suburban neighborhood, commuter trains, office spaces, and domestic interiors form a network of neoliberal spaces that regulate female identity. These spaces promise aspiration—home ownership, career mobility, romantic fulfillment—yet quietly enforce conformity.

Neoliberal culture equates worth with productivity, emotional discipline, and self-management. Rachel’s unemployment marks her as socially redundant, intensifying her vulnerability. Her daily train journey, though purposeless after losing her job, becomes a ritual of simulated participation in corporate life. She performs normalcy while being excluded from the economic system that defines value. In this sense, the train symbolizes both mobility and exclusion—movement without meaningful progress.

Similarly, the domestic sphere operates as an extension of corporate logic. Anna’s identity as the “perfect” wife and mother reflects the internalization of competitive femininity. Her home is not merely private space but a display of success. Megan’s body, too, becomes a site of commodification—desired, evaluated, and controlled. The female body in the novel is constantly positioned within systems of visibility, reinforcing Michel Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power adapted to gendered contexts.

Corporate patriarchy in the novel thus functions through normalization rather than force. Women police themselves, measure themselves against unattainable standards, and internalize blame for systemic inequities. The narrative reveals how neoliberal ideology masks structural inequality under the language of choice and aspiration.

By situating personal trauma within these broader socio-economic structures, the novel expands its critique beyond individual relationships. It suggests that female subjectivity is shaped not only by intimate gaslighting but also by institutional frameworks that reward conformity and punish deviation. This section therefore underscores that Rachel’s struggle is not merely personal but symptomatic of a larger cultural system.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Girl on the Train* offers a sharp critique of post-feminist culture by exposing the illusion of empowerment within neoliberal, corporate patriarchy. While contemporary discourse often celebrates women’s independence and

choice, the novel reveals how such freedoms remain circumscribed by gendered surveillance, emotional regulation, and credibility politics. Through Rachel's psychological fragmentation, the text dramatizes the consequences of internalized misogyny and systemic gaslighting.

By engaging post-feminist theory and the concept of epistemic injustice, this study has shown that female subjectivity in the novel is not inherently unstable but socially destabilized. Rachel's unreliability emerges from a context that denies women epistemic authority, particularly when they fail to conform to ideals of domestic success and emotional control. The suburban and corporate landscapes operate as disciplinary spaces, reinforcing the myth that individual resilience alone guarantees empowerment.

Yet the novel does not end in despair. Through the gradual reconstruction of memory and narrative voice, Rachel reclaims interpretive power. Agency here is not spectacular or absolute; it is fragile, hard-won, and rooted in self-recognition. The act of narrating becomes an ethical and political gesture—one that challenges patriarchal disbelief and reasserts female credibility.

Ultimately, *The Girl on the Train* unsettles the complacency of postfeminist discourse by demonstrating that empowerment without structural change remains precarious. The novel foregrounds storytelling as a transformative space where fractured identities can be reassembled and where silenced voices can resist erasure. In doing so, it affirms that authentic female agency lies not in the rhetoric of choice, but in the reclamation of voice and truth.

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