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'An Unsuitable Job for a Woman'? : Woman as Writer and Protagonist in Detective Fiction

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Abstract:

Crime fiction is one of the most popular forms of fiction in the world today. From its early beginnings in the nineteenth century till the late 1960s, the genre was generally regarded as consisting of male writers and their male detectives. Most authoritative histories of the genre ignored women writers and their women detectives. The feminist project of recovering lost works of women writers, ushered in by the Second Wave of Feminism, brought to light the contribution of women writers in the genre of detective fiction. P. D. James introduced the first female private investigator in her novel *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972). Soon, many women writers began to write novels with a feminist awareness. These writers appropriated the conventions of the genre and subverted them for feminist purposes. This paper traces the development of the woman detective from the beginnings of the genre in the nineteenth century to the present, in order to examine the role of women writers and their women detectives in a genre traditionally seen as being masculine and reactionary.

Keywords: Detective Fiction, Feminism, Gender Stereotypes, Women Writers.

> No detective is needed to identify the vigorous life and remarkable diversity of crime fiction. The statistics are dramatic - over a billion Agatha Christie's novels sold, American feminist detectives expanding

from 40 to 400 between 1980 and 2000, even a global estimate that a third of the fiction published in English belongs to the genre.

(Stephen Knight *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity*).

INTRODUCTION

Society has always been interested in crime, its perpetrators and victims, as well as its causes and consequences. This interest resulted in the emergence of a new genre of fiction during the nineteenth century which quickly became immensely popular. This genre called crime fiction, can be loosely defined as a narrative that features a crime, a criminal, a victim and a detective. In contemporary times, the sheer popularity of the genre is evident in its sales figures, in its ubiquitous presence in the best-seller lists, on the shelves of bookshops and libraries, and in films and television. However, it is precisely this very fact which had, until recently, prevented literary critics from considering it as a genre worthy of academic study. As popular literature, it was generally regarded as being ephemeral, accessible and non academic, leading to contemptuous and acerbic attacks by academicians like Edmund Wilson whose essay "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?"(1945) targeted Agatha Christie's most famous novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). Incidentally, the book is a best-seller, even today, ninety years after its publication. Wilson's question seems to be answered by Knight's statistics that people do care and by the fact that the Academy is interested in all forms of popular culture as artefacts that reflect the culture of the time. Crime fiction has increasingly become an area of vibrant academic interest with critics like Tzvetan Todorov, Ernest Mandel, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Frederic Jameson, John G. Cawelti, Umberto Eco, Catherine Belsey and others, turning to it to illustrate and explicate their theories. This interest is largely due to the fact that all popular and accessible literature has to respond quickly to change, so that it can incorporate cultural and social shifts into its texts (Worthington ix). Crime fiction, thus, is a genre that reflects the anxieties, morals and values of the contemporary society.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GENRE

Though the genre developed into a recognizable literary genre in the nineteenth century, its origin can be traced to the early crime narratives of the eighteenth century,

especially *The Newgate Calendar* which is "the archetype of pre-detective crime stories" (Knight 3). The first known collection of crime stories, it was an account of the crimes and punishments of major criminals. These factual criminal biographies had moral prefaces that served as a warning against transgressions of prevailing social rules and regulations (Knight 2004; Worthington 2010). The lack of a reliable system of policing or detection of criminals led to great instability in contemporary notions of justice and *The Newgate Calendar* reflected the social and political realities of the times.

The nineteenth century witnessed two of the most important events that were to have bearings on the history of crime fiction. The first was the passage (in the British Parliament) of the Metropolitan Police Act in 1829 and the second was the establishment of a Detective Bureau in 1842 to decipher clues and investigate crimes. Dorothy L. Sayers points out that "the detective story had to wait for its full development for the establishment of an effective police organization in the Anglo-Saxon countries" (56). Therefore, it was only after these two events that crime fiction, or detective fiction, as it will henceforth be referred to in this paper, emerged as a distinct genre. It is generally considered that the genre originated in the United States, with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" (1841), which was quickly followed by three other 'tales of ratiocination': "The Mystery of Marie Roget", "The Purloined Letter" and "The Gold Bug". This earned him the distinction of being called the 'Father of Detective Fiction'. Almost fifty years later, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes arrived on the scene in England in the story "A Study in Scarlet" (1890). Popularly known as the Great Detective, Holmes was the quintessential sleuth who used his skills of logic and deduction to solve crimes.

By the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, two strands of detective fiction had evolved: the classical puzzle story and the hard boiled story. The analytical or "classical" puzzle story flourished in the works of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, Margery Allingham, Josephine Tey, Ngaio Marsh, etc. As a backlash against the "classical" style which is understood to be essentially British with its accent on intricate mental puzzles, a challenge was issued from across the Atlantic by the "hard-boiled" style of Dashiel Hammet and Raymond Chandler in the *Black Mask*. These American writers, marked off hard-boiled detective fiction as the "domain of men"- writers, readers and characters – striding down American mean streets with a gun and a quick left jab (Klein *Women* 4).

Women were restricted to playing the roles of *femme fatales* or virtuous helpmates in the hard-boiled detective stories and novels.

THE FEMINIST REVISIONING OF THE GENRE

Maureen T. Reddy points out that until quite recently, the story of the development of crime fiction was most commonly told as a movement from man to man, beginning with Edgar Allan Poe, then Arthur Conan Doyle, followed by Dashiell Hammett and so on (191). It was only in the late 1980s that this distorted and partial history was revised by the feminist project of recovering and rediscovering works written by women writers from the past. Feminist critics like Kathleen Gregory Klein, Maureen T. Reddy, Gill Plain, Sally R. Munt, Glenwood Irons, Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones and others, began to re-examine the genre in order to discover the presence of women writers. This revision of the history of crime fiction established that women crime writers and investigators have been an integral part of it, and that they have as long a history as do their male counterparts (Reddy 2003; Gavin 2010).

'HERSTORY'- HISTORY OF THE FEMALE DETECTIVE

Even though the Metropolitan Police Act was passed in 1829 and the Detective Bureau was established in 1842, it took more than four decades for women to enter the Bureau as employees. When they did enter in 1883; it was to perform the most menial of police jobs – the searching of female prisoners upon their arrest. It was only as late as 1918 that the London Police hired the first women as officers. Therefore, it follows that when the first stories about female detectives appeared in the 1860s, the fictional detective was almost twenty years ahead of reality (Sims xii). The creation of a female detective provided a number of narrative possibilities that were unavailable to male detectives. The very fact that she was a woman could work to her advantage. The authoritarian men in the case would naturally assume that she lacked both intelligence and courage, and underestimate her abilities. All she needed to do was to remain silent and merely be observant, in order to pick up clues. In addition, a female detective would be welcome behind doors closed to her male counterparts (Sims xiii).

THE 'LADY DETECTIVES' OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The first professional women detectives in fiction made their debut in 1864: Andrew Forrester Jr.'s Mrs. G. in *The Female Detective* and William Stephens Hayward's Mrs. Paschal in *The Revelations of a Lady Detective.* Both women work for the British police and

narrate the stories in their own voices. Among the female detectives of the late Victorian period the most notable are Catherine L. Pirkis's Loveday Brooke, whose cases were collected as *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1894) and George R. Sims's Dorcas Dene, who appeared in *Dorcas Dene, Detective : Her Life and Adventures* (1897). One of the few female detective writers created by women in the 1890s, Loveday Brooke "draws on "female" knowledge of such things as servants, love, and domestic environments in solving cases…and is admired for her detecting ability by her employer, clients and the police" (Gavin 260). Similarly, Dorcas Dene, a former actress, who undertakes detective work when her artist husband becomes blind and the burden of running the household falls on her shoulders, reminds the reader of Sherlock Holmes in "her talent for impersonation and tireless pursuit of an antagonist, her attention to footprints and inconsistencies" (Sims 178).

Almost all the "lady detectives" of the Victorian period took up detection either because fate has made it necessary for them to find employment or, in order to clear the name of a male relative. This was a very clever strategy employed by the early authors of stories with female detectives, in order to placate outraged readers who would then see these women's transgressions beyond Victorian norms as nobly heroic efforts to preserve the sacred family (Sims xiii). Adrienne E. Gavin very aptly categorizes these "lady detectives" as being "independent, confident, clever women who variously use knowledge and observation of domestic environments and human behavior, female intuition, and their capacity for going unnoticed or being underestimated in solving crimes (259).

THE WOMAN DETECTIVE IN AMERICA

Across the Atlantic, Metta Victor's *The Dead Letter* (1866) is generally accepted as "the first full-blown American detective novel" (Nickerson xiii). The novel, which integrates dime-novel formulas with the structures of the domestic novel, is narrated by a male detective figure. Anna Katharine Green, who more fully blended the detective novel and the domestic novel, published her first novel *The Leavenworth Case* in 1878. The book, which featured Ebenezer Gryce, a New York police detective, went on to become a best-seller and sold over a million copies. Interestingly enough, the first American woman detective was a detective's wife called Clarice Dyke who assisted her husband in Harry Rockwood's *Clarice Dyke, The Female Detective* which was in print in 1883. This book was published as a companion volume to the exploits of her husband *Donald Dyke, the Down-East Detective* (1882). It was

in 1897 with the publication of Green's *That Affair Next Door*, that the first American spinster sleuth, Miss Amelia Butterworth, made her appearance. Miss Buttersworth is considered to be the direct ancestor of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, even a "more three-dimensional and believable character" (Sims xv). While nineteenth-century detective fiction is generally seen as conservative and conventional, with cases neatly solved and moral order restored, Adrienne E. Gavin notes that "female detectives of that period operate subversively; when they solve a case, moral certainties may be re-established but gender role expectations are broken down" (261).

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN DETECTIVES

The first two decades of the twentieth-century saw both British and American detective fiction of this period keeping their female sleuths single. The question of whether the woman detective could successfully manage both marriage and career is still unanswered in this period. Prominent examples of novels featuring women detectives are *Joan Mar, Detective* (1910) and *Lucille Dare, Detective* (1919) by Marie Connor Leighton, *The Amazing Adventures of Letitia Carberry* (1911), *Miss Pinkerton* (1932) and *Haunted Lady* (1942) by Mary Roberts Rinehart, and *Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective* (1914) by Hugh C. Weir. *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910) by Baroness Emmuska Orczy is an exception as it is eventually revealed in the novel that Lady Molly's motive for entering upon detective work is to clear her husband of murder and she gives up detecting when she succeeds (Gavin 262). Anna Katharine Green also created a younger detective, Violet Strange, who appeared for the first time in *The Golden Slipper and Other Problems* in 1915. Strange is an aristocratic young woman sleuth who helps the New York police with society cases and possibly served as a model for the teenage sleuth of the twentieth century, Nancy Drew.

WOMEN DETECTIVES DURING THE GOLDEN AGE

The Golden Age of detective fiction is generally taken as the period between the two world wars. Despite the earlier feminist wave and appearance of fictional female detectives, all four of the most popular Golden Age writers were women and all had male detectives: Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn, P. D. James's Adam Dalgleish and Ruth Rendell's Reginald Wexford. The 1920s and 1930s saw major changes in the socio-cultural fabric of life. The World War I had resulted in a diminished male population and a corresponding increase in the population of women. Since women have always excelled in the domestic novel, Golden Age detective

fiction with its dominance of women writers is an extension of this. These writers wrote stories which featured detectives who needed to show a shrewd application of common sense and a quick eye for informative details like changes in household routine, diet, or the behaviour of children. This led to the emergence of the intuitive or psychological detectives of twentieth-century detective fiction who were called the "cosy" murder mystery detectives.

It was during the inter-war years, when the classical formula was at the peak of its popularity, the old lady sleuths of Britain, especially Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple and Patricia Wentworth's Miss Maud Silver, captured the popular imagination. Adrienne E. Gavin observes that "traces of Green's prototypical Amelia Butterworth can be found in these golden age female sleuths" (263). Wentworth's Miss Maud Silver is an older, single woman who knits and solves. She is dowdy, inconspicuous, and uses gossip to her advantage (Gavin 263). Christie's Miss Jane Marple first appeared in the early thirties and continued the tradition of Holmesian elucidation and deduction. She has "moral force, intelligence, an inquisitive nature, excellent knowledge of human behavior, and pays attention to details (Gavin 263). Though these spinster sleuths seem unassuming and deferential, in the end, they solve the crimes that had baffled the police, read men. Without being overtly feminist, Christie and Wentworth tried to subvert the conventions of the genre by providing readers with women detectives who were intelligent and astute and who succeeded at all costs, even while operating within the restrictions of the times.

Dorothy L. Sayers's Harriet Vane is another significant female sleuth of the Golden Age. Vane is independent, around thirty, has studied at Oxford, and is herself a writer of detective stories. In *Gaudy Night* (1935), Vane agrees to marry Sayers's male series detective Lord Peter Wimsey after having refused his marriage proposals for a long time, fearing it may damage her independence. Sayers regarded work as an essential part of a woman's existence, and the novels which feature Vane reveal the difficulties women face in balancing professional and private life. The 'girl sleuths' or teenage sleuths who emerged on the scene during the 1920s and 1930s were extremely popular with young schoolgirls as they provided an alternative fantasy to that of romantic heroines whose goal in life was love and marriage or that of male heroes whose endless pursuit of thrill and adventure was projected as universal experience. The British sleuth Sylvia Silence, created by John W. Bobin under the pseudonym Katherine Greenhalgh, and Americans like Carolyn Keene's Nancy Drew, Margaret Sutton's Judy Bolton and Julie Campbell's Trixie Belden were the most important

of them. The women writers of detective fiction who followed, especially those who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, grew up under their influence.

However, the other important development of the Golden Age, the rise of hard-boiled detective fiction in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, led to far-reaching consequences on the genre. Its eventual dominance in critical opinion ensured that female detectives would be relegated to the ranks of amateurs and seen as marginal in the development of the crime fiction genre (Reddy 193). Writers in this subgenre "appropriated the dominant culture's icons of masculinity, anti-intellectualism, capitalism and chauvinism" (Klein 1995 4). Raymond Chandler in his "The Simple Art of Murder" provides his famous definition of the hard-boiled detective, as a man who walked the "mean streets", but who is "not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man" (20-21). The above definition excluded the woman detective, very effectively, from the domain of detective fiction. She had to wait on the sidelines for a few decades before emerging triumphantly in the role of the feminist detective.

WOMEN DETECTIVES BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

P. D. James's Cordelia Gray and Amanda Cross's Kate Fansler are generally regarded as the precursors of the feminist detectives of the 1970s and 1980s. The advent of Kate Fansler in the book *In the Last Analysis* (1964) by American feminist academic Carolyn Heilbrun writing as Amanda Cross, coincided with the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement, marked in the United States with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Thematically, the novels, most of which are set in the academic world in which Kate works as an English professor, tend to focus on feminist concerns and to include feminist critiques of culture, with particular attention to the significance of work and friendship in women's lives - a direct challenge to other popular fiction's centralization of romance. Kate becomes more active as a detective as the series progresses and more confident of her own authority.

In 1972, P. D. James published the first modern novel to feature a female private detective, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman.* The title of the novel is a direct reference to the gender biases that fictional female detectives face as they conduct their investigations. Cordelia Gray is twenty two, independent, lives alone, and inherits a detective business after the suicide of her partner Bernie Pryde. The novel combines a mystery plot with the structure

of (female) *bildungsroman*, as the novel interweaves the story of Cordelia's development into an adult professional detective with the investigation she is hired to handle. The fiction of Cross and James is very significant as their characterization is completely from a feminine perspective. Their detectives represent a transitional stage between the conventional female detective attached to stereotyped attitudes towards their gender and the competent and autonomous women detectives of the next stage - the hard-boiled detective of the latter part of the twentieth century, who could be portrayed as being a competent and professional detective without putting aside her femininity.

ADVENT OF THE FEMINIST DETECTIVES

The second wave of feminism in the late 1960's and the Civil Rights Movement influenced all walks of life. The socio-cultural environment altered the way woman was represented in literature. Women like Amanda Cross, Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, Linda Barnes, and Liza Cody began to write stories about female detectives in the hard-boiled tradition. As Kathleen Gregory Klein points out, some of these writers, especially Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky "attempt to integrate gender awareness into the most resistant form, the hard-boiled novel" and their female protagonists are "conscious of gender as a way in which the social system categorizes, judges, and responds to people" (*The Woman Detective* 202).

These writers created women who jogged for fitness, took firearms practice, tackled criminals, and walked down mean streets into worlds – professional and social – previously reserved for men. They were attracted to the genre, especially the hard-boiled variant, by the possibilities inherent in it. Marcia Muller who is called "the founding mother of the contemporary female hard boiled private eye" (qtd. in Walton and Jones 15) introduced her heroine, Sharon McCone, in *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977). An avid reader of novels featuring private investigators in the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonald, etc., Muller recalls how she realized that there was not a single female private eye (Qtd. in Walton and Jones 20). So she decided if she wanted to read about such a character, she would first have to write about her and created McCone. Muller and her contemporaries began writing in the private eye genre during the 1980s, because: "We wanted to write about people like us, like the women around us. The time was ripe" (Qtd. in Walton and Jones 21). The novels and short stories written by these writers quickly became

very popular, a fact that is evident in the statement by Stephen Knight quoted at the beginning of this paper.

FEMINIST DETECTIVE FICTION AND POPULAR CULTURE

The Second Wave feminists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millet and others recognized the power of popular culture in influencing society. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) studied the growing despair of women in middle-class American women – "the problem that has no name"(10) - and found that it was directly related to the messages of popular culture. That message was what she called the 'feminine mystique': the fulfilment of femininity through women's roles as housewives. Friedan concluded that the popular culture of the times portrayed images of women which glorified marriage and housekeeping as the highest achievements in a woman's life. Other feminists who worked in this area focused on the fact that most of these images of women in films, television and literature were men's images of women. In a similar vein, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) targeted the misogyny embedded in the images of women portrayed in the works of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer.

The feminist approach to popular culture focuses on readers and viewers of popular cultural products, their experiences and perceptions, according to Lana F. Rakov (284). Janice A. Radway's ethnographic study of a group of women readers of romances, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), tried to provide an understanding of the popularity of the genre, and the ways in which it functions for women within the context of their own lives. Popular culture, thus, offers the opportunity to feminists to understand how women function within patriarchy. It also encourages them to respect other women's understanding of their own lives. It is only through this respect and understanding of other women that the central objective of feminism, activism and change, can be achieved. Since one of the most important activities of the Second Wave was consciousness-raising, in which women were encouraged to open up what was personal, share it with other women and discover that "the personal was political", most forms of popular culture assumed great significance. Women began to realize that they needed to recover their own culture and assume control over their world. Many women appropriated the various forms of popular culture and subverted them to further the feminist agenda. Detective fiction, being a genre that has always been popular with women readers, was soon recognized as a genre with tremendous potential.

TRIUMPH OF POLITICS OVER CONVENTIONS

Since detective fiction, like all popular forms of literature, is bound by certain rules or conventions, many feminist scholars like Kathleen Gregory Klein consider the feminist appropriation of the genre as a failure. According to them, when the mystery is resolved at the end, there is a movement from disorder to order, that is, the restoration of status quo. This is at odds with the feminist agenda, because this would mean that the genre endorses the oppression of women by patriarchy. In her comprehensive study of female detectives *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (1988), Klein observes that in the struggle between gender and genre, the formula of the genre wins over the feminist ideology, as it is based on a world whose "sex/gender valuations reinforce male hegemony" (223). However Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones argue that it is precisely through those very conventions of the genre that feminist agency is possible (86-87), because of the very nature of feminist detective fiction which is a "*practical* application of *political* tenets expressed through a *popular* form" (Italics in original 87).

Writers like Muller, Grafton and Paretsky actively engage with the conventions of the genre and talk back to it. For example, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone talks tough and wisecracks throughout the series, a characteristic feature of hard-boiled detective fiction. Scott Christianson refers to such language as "a form of power to articulate a complex understanding about and attitude towards experience" (133). Milhone uses this language as a way of exercising 'language as power' – over one's self in violent situations, and over one's antagonists as the threat or overture to violence" (Ibid.). Another important example is the importance given to personal relationships. Though Milhone and Warshawski are orphans when their series start, both women have nurturing relationships with friends and neighbours. This is very unlike the typical hard-boiled detective who is always a loner. Similarly, Muller's Sharon McCone, Grafton's Kinsey Milhone and Paretsky's V.I. Warshawki defend themselves in danger and use violence when necessary. However, the woman detective does not glorify in violence, but is shown to be tormented by its consequences. As Kimberley J. Dilley points out, for the woman detective, guns are "not the traditional metaphor for male power, but simply a tool of violence" (44).

CONCLUSION

That the genre of detective fiction has been enriched by the contribution of women writers and their women detectives, is now widely acknowledged. From the lady detectives of

the nineteenth century, through the amateur sleuths of the early twentieth century to the feminist detectives of the late twentieth century till today, women have played an important role in the genre. By choosing to create women detectives, female authors have changed the genre in such a way that their detectives speak from the woman's perspective and address problems faced by real women in contemporary society. Woman's position within patriarchy is challenged in the stories written by feminist writers and a more egalitarian society is envisaged where men and women can co-exist as equals. The success achieved by these writers provides ample evidence of the fact that the profession of writing detective stories is a suitable job for women, and one can hope that the profession of detection will be suitable for women in the near future, for there are many more miles to go before we sleep.

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