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Avenues of Agatha Christie's Gendered Criminal Exuberance

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Abstract:

The paper highlights that women also have potentials to portray and to be portrayed as detectives, criminals and protagonists in crime writing which is traditionally dominated by male community of writers and characters and has the capability to overcome the superiority of male-domination in this field. It also attempts to trace the factors instrumental for the presence as well as the absence of women as sleuths, criminals and protagonists in crime writings. The chosen text for the study is *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie that serves as a module to explore the criminal ingenuity on the part of female characters in a genre dominated by male.

Keywords: Crime, Women, Patriarchy, Criminal Ingenuity.

A look into the history of crime fiction directly takes us to Edgar Allan Poe, who has been viewed as the father of detective writing and this urges us to look into the origin of crime writing. Detective writing has paved a path for the emergence of crime writing in English Literature. Detective writings have played a pivotal role for erecting an enormous kingdom of crime writing. As a pioneer figure Edgar Allan Poe has considerably contributed to the maturation of crime writing. He provided abundant source for the classic 'locked room' stories. Later, with the help of detective writing crime writing got an abode of its own in English Literature. Some of the significant literary crime slices of Poe are *The Murder in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Mystery of Marie Roget* (1842) and *The Purloined Letter* (1844). In addition to Poe, Wilkie Collins's (*The Moonstone*, 1868) stood as the first complete embodiment of detective writing in English.

Crime writings also parallelly emerged in France. In France, Emile Gaboriau has been regarded as the first crime writer, his remarkable creation is *The Widow Lerouge* (1865) and *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869). His works stood witness to cop investigations in terms of crime writing. Besides, Gaston Leroux is viewed as a significant figure of locked-room mysteries in France, whose notable piece of work is *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (1908) forever. The next in line is Arthur Conan Doyle who took two solid decades to rise as the omega figure in crime writing, who intellectually crafted 56 short stories. He triumphantly marched into the Golden age of crime writings. His literary sleuth Sherlock Holmes has left tremendous impact on both the new

as well as established authors. Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) and *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) laid a perfect foundation for constructing his own realm in the world of crime writing. Within the same time there has been considerable number of authors who came up with their works from a divergent world such as G.K Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Alfred Hitchcock.

G.K Chesterton's amateur sleuth Father Brown is unlike Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. The character Father Brown appeared first in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911) and finally appeared in the last collection of Chesterton's *The Scandal of Father Brown* (1935). Agatha Christie is an emblematic cornerstone in crime writing and is seen as the Queen of crime writing. She rapidly gained the image of doyen in crime writings. She successfully accomplished her vocation as author with 66 novels and 14 short stories and has created two famous literary detectives as follows Hercule Poirot as male and Miss Marple as female. Some of her notable pieces are *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*(1926), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *The ABC Murders* (1936) and *A Murder is Announced* (1950). Through *Whose Body* (1923), Dorothy L. Sayers has her hand in climbing up crime writing to a considerable extent, in which she has draped her male sleuth with the characteristic attire of a female. Alongside, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler had unshakable hold in the American hard-boiled writings for a temporary period. On the one hand, the works of Hammett like *Red Harvest* (1929) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), while on the other the literary pieces of Chandler - as follows *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953) have carved a sizeable skeleton of hard-boiled writings. Beside all these, yet another important, late author as well as the queen of crime writing after Agatha Christie is PD James. She is best-known for her fictional detective characters like Adam Dalgliesh and Cordelia Gray in several of her masterpieces.

To briefly trace women crime writers in the history of crime writing there is a sizeable number of authors that are found. They have played a vital role in reaching the saturation point of crime writing. An American, Anna Katharine Green has been broadly recognized as the first woman author who daringly ventured into the domain of crime writing. Anna Katherine Green's first detective fiction is *The Leavenworth Case* (1878). Although Green's masterpiece *The Leavenworth Case* is quite often referred to as first, before her Seeley Regester had published her first detective fiction *The Dead Letter* (1866). If Green was not there, Seeley Regester is viewed more as the first founding mother of detective fiction in crime writings. To show the significance of women in crime writing from A to Z, the paper enumerates some prominent women crime authors. To list down the works of women authors are Dorothy L. Sayers's *Whose Body?* (1923), Margery Allingham's *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929), PD James's *Cover Her Face* (1962), Sara Paretsky's *Indemnity Only* (1982), Ruth Rendell's *From Doon With Death* (1964), Ngaio Marsh's *Artsists in Crime* (1938), Helen Eustis's *The Horizontal Man* (1946), Sue Grafton's *K Is for Killer* (1994), Tess Gerritsen's *Harvest* (1996), Megan Abbott's *Bury Me Deep* (2009) and Sophie Hannah's *Lasting Damage* (2011) etc...

Nowadays, in crime writing, women detectives, protagonists and criminals are on par with men. There are writers who use both genders as detectives, protagonists and criminals without any discrimination. Crime writings swell with many women writers as well as women sleuths. To assess the importance of women, there are fewer male and female crime writers who produced many mentionable women detectives in their literary slices such as Wilkie Collins's Valeria Woodville, Catherine L Pirkis's Loveday Brook, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Tuppence Cowley, Dorothy L Sayers's Harriet Vane, Carolyn Heilburn's Kate Fansler, PD James's Cordelia Gray, Carolyn Keene's Nancy Drew, Gladys Mitchell's Adela Bradley, Kim Smage's Anne-kin Halvorsen, Alexander McCall Smith's Precious Ramotswe, M.F Beal's Kat Guerrero, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sara Paretsky's V.I Warshawski, Liza Cody's Anna Lee, Laura Lippman's Tess Monaghan, Erle Stanley Gardner's Bertha Cool and Val McDermid's Kate Brannigan.

The act of writing itself was a major forbidden act for women authors in the earlier times. But still, there are a few writers who emerged and broke the shackles that bound them down from any intellectual activity by the society. At that time writing and gaining recognition for women seemed very difficult as the literary field was dominated by male authors. For writing crime fiction, generally one should have an expertise in constructing plots in a shrewd manner as well as thorough knowledge about criminal sensibilities, maintenance of suspense until the end. These were crucial to gain readers attention and awe.

There have been some considerable reasons which seem to validate the presence and absence of female as detectives, criminals or protagonists in crime writing. An obvious reason is patriarchy. Pressurized under patriarchal system and society, the women crime authors were reluctant to use women as sleuths or detectives. The impact of patriarchalism heavily blighted the growth of women crime writings. And also justifiable reasons do exist to explain the presence and absence of female detectives or protagonists in crime writings. The eminent crime author PD James states in one of her interviews.

It is certainly true that women do excel at the carefully clued, traditional detective story, although less successful with the hard-boiled, fast-action, and violent crime novel, which is still largely the domain of male writers. One reason why women are good at writing detective stories may be our feminine eye for detail; clue-making demands attention to the detail of everyday life. George Orwell said that murder, the unique crime, should raise only strong emotions, and we are interested in those emotions rather than in weaponry. It may also be that women find that the ordered structure of the form is supportive, enabling us to deal with horrific events that we might find distressing outside the constraints of the genre.

(PD James, *The Art of Fiction* No. 141)

It seems to be logical and a strong statement for presenting female as sleuth in crime fiction. In addition to substantiate the study furthermore an outstanding crime author Ruth Rendell's observation on Wexford, one of her own characters Rendell conceived him as detective during the period of feminism around 1960s. It was clearly noticeable as the literary field predominantly dominated or mastered by the infinite air of patriarchalism. In Ruth Rendell's observation women were victimized so harshly that one could say how they suffocated under the pressure. The character Wexford had born today, by all means he would have been a woman. She got caught up with the web of men, where everything was about men, everything was done by men. Moreover men were considered as the people and the rest were simply others. Rendell was trapped up with in that in 1963, whatever it was to be a man in 1963. Every academic and non-academic field was infused with the aroma of men. Fields such as medicine, judicial and administration etc...

Male writers create less female as detectives, criminals and protagonists because either they are used to patriarchal mindset or they are unaware of both the criminal potentials and detective potentials of women as such a study would be interesting or it could be the usual resistance of women's entry into the field of crime detection. It could also be that women are incapable of crime because she is supposed to be gentle as well as incapable of being detectives - for they lack the intricate knowledge that men are supposed to have. However, this too is a male construct. The female as detectives, protagonists and criminals in crime writing by women writers are Catherine L Pirkis's Loveday Brook, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Tuppence Cowley, Dorothy L Sayers's Harriet Vane, Carolyn Heilburn's Kate Fansler, PD James's Cordelia Gray, Carolyn Keene's Nancy Drew, Patricia Wentworth's Miss Maud Silver, Gladys Mitchell's Adela Bradley, Kim Smage's Anne-kin Halvorsen, M.F Beal's Kat Guerrera, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sara Paretsky's V.I Warshawski, Liza Cody's Anna Lee, Joan Smith's Loretta Lawson Laura Lippman's Tess Monaghan, and Val McDermid's Kate Brannigan. Comparatively, the usage of female as detectives, criminals and protagonists by male writers is obviously low. To list down the female protagonists by male writers are Wilkie Collins's Valeria Woodbille, Erle Stanley Gardner's Bertha Cool, Alexander McCall Smith's Precious Ramotswe and Hugh C Weir's Miss Madelyn Mack. The penetration of women as detectives, criminals and protagonists in crime writing reflects the effective growth of women in the present time.

Both the patriarchic system and society appear to be plausible reasons for the less usage of women as detectives, protagonists and criminals in crime writings. Specifically while enlisting the female as detectives, protagonists, and criminals the main concern is to see the position and status of women in this particular field of criminal investigations, which so far has been ignored. To look at women from a traditional point of view - patriarchal society considers women as being unfit for both a skill-demanding and even for a dreadful job. Though, there is a general assumption that women are not excellent, brilliant, rational and bold as men in investigating

criminal cases, in truth it is not the case as it seems, as they are on par with male in all fields. They too have such powerful potentialities in investigating cases, plotting stories and complex minds to weave crime stories with criminal sensibilities.

It is slightly slippery and seems to be a riddle to say that whether a male or female sleuth excels during examining dangerous cases. After witnessing the potentialities of both male and female sleuths, it is difficult to find the best. The potentialities of detective can be estimated through their abilities, crime types, modes of crime and modus operandi. The strength of a detective lies in analyzing the cases in a logical and in a shrewd manner. The various methods and approaches towards handling the case are also taken into consideration. Women also have potentiality or capability to be as detectives, criminals and protagonists as men. Without the support of the physical strength of their male counterparts, female sleuths have to be more intelligent, capable to resolve a case tactically. For example, Agatha Christie's prominent detectives are Hercule Poirot as male and Miss Marple as female. Generally, the female detectives appear to be confident and independent who use their knowledge widely, keen observation of domestic environments, female intuition, human behavior and their capacities and potentialities seems to be unnoticed or being underestimated in solving crimes. The features or habits like martial arts, eidetic memory, travelling widely, using ingenious skills and psychological methods of detection all of which require more strength for being detective against male counterpart. While comparing both Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, there are obviously considerable differences between them. On the one hand, Hercule Poirot's way of investigation is more logical and mostly depends upon in patching together all the necessary facts and evidences in a clear manner. He never ignores even a small incident and domestic things. After investigation, he finally lands up weaving in together all possible threads of evidences for attaining a solution or truth. Simultaneously he puts more emphasis on the psychological aspects for examining the cases. His traits are summarized by Sally Munt as follows

he is a parody of the male myth; his name implies his satirical status: he is a shortened Hercules and a *poirot* – a clown. He is narcissistic, emotive, feline, apparently irrational, eccentric, quixotic, obsessed with the domestic, and socially “other” in that he is a Belgian. ... He is a feminine hero (quid.in Rzepka: 419).

While on the other, Miss Marple is unconventional, has an inquisitive nature, is intelligent and has more knowledge of human behavior. For examining and solving cases she is completely hinged upon her intuitive skills. She adds more attention on the trivialities of life which help her to reach the depths of human society, human psyche and human types. The female sleuth has greater power than the male in connection with watching the trivial things or activities of everyday life. The basic features of her analyzing style has been emphasized by Shaw and Vanacker as follows

What the Miss Marple novels propose is that there is a logic which is structured around the minutiae of life which can nevertheless inexorably reach into the very depths of human society and the human psyche. And they suggest that women, particularly old women, because they are attuned to the trivia of existence, are therefore endowed with logical powers which make them ideal arbiters of justice (quod .in Koseoglu: 133).

Another significant reason for Agatha Christie in creating the distinguished female sleuth Miss Marple can be to shatter the barriers of patriarchy in favor of women. She ascribed her female characters with immense power and intelligence to be on par with the male sleuths as Hercule Poirot. The standards of the patriarchal society which suppress women especially women sleuths for not allowing them to do investigation as per general sayings can be that women cannot be rational or challengeable whereas the characteristic of intelligence is only ascribed to the males.

Ruth Rendell, in the beginning had an idea to use female as detective or protagonist but she finally ends up using a male detective or protagonist in her writings. Ruth Rendell says that "he is sort of me, although not entirely" in one of her interviews. The above mentioned line reflects her intention to employ the female as detective but due to some authorial reasons she withdrew her choice. On the other side, the famous Indian author Satyajit Ray deliberately avoided using female as detective or protagonist in his writings. Probably he does not like to use female characters because of the presence of romantic elements in the stories which would pollute and spoil the young minds for his detective stories primarily were meant for the young. Therefore, he was determined not to use women characters.

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) is a story about the murder of a millionaire, Samuel Ratchett, on a moving train. The whole story revolves around repercussions following the ghastly murder of Ratchett with several stabbed wounds. Hercule Poirot has been formally arranged by the director of the train for investigating this case. While pursuing the case, Hercule Poirot comprehends that the murdered victim was actually the mastermind behind the kidnapping and killing of the three year old Daisy Armstrong. The process of investigation shows that a thin-line of mystery exists in murdering him. Hercule Poirot finally finds the culprit in this organized murder.

The essence of criminal ingenuity can be traced through the character of Mrs Hubbard in *Murder on the Orient Express*, who has been portrayed in such way by Agatha Christie. Before plunging into the study of the character Mrs.Hubbard further, it is indeed important to learn the descriptions of Mrs.Hubbard. She is ascribed with the traits of being loquacious, pompous and a braggart. She is also more intuitive, aggressive and intelligent. Like Mrs. Hubbard, quintessential examples are found in Irene Adler in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Mrs.Ronder in *The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger* who are all loaded with the immense potential of criminality or the substance of criminal mind.

The main analysis of this paper lies on the character of Mrs. Hubbard who dexterously plays a significant part in executing the plan of murdering Ratchett and succeeds in it using all her criminal prowess. Her way of constituting a plan, of escaping from the baits of questions from Poirot, of explaining and narrating a few incidents dramatically and of misleading him from the path of examining the case, are ample enough incidents that showcase her inherent criminal ingenuities. As Mrs. Hubbard narrates her experience of seeing the murderer in her compartment in a dramatic manner to Poirot :

Of course I'm sure! The idea! I know what I'm talking about. I'll tell you just everything there is to tell. I'd gotten into bed and gone to sleep, and suddenly I woke up- all in the dark, it was- and I knew there was a man in my compartment. I was just so scared I couldn't scream, if you know what I mean. I just lay there and thought, "Mercy, I'm going to be killed." I just can't describe to you how I felt. (130)

The critic, Otto Pollak, states that "women who committed crimes were caught less often than men due to their cunning nature" (quod. in Aviram: 234) though the critic has used the word 'cunning' in a negative sense about women where as the paper senses or perceives the word 'cunning' in terms of the skills involved and the intellectual capacity of women. Women also have criminal inclinations to perpetrate heinous crimes and acts which are often, not naturally visible to us. The word 'cunning' represents the power and potential of women in an otherwise male dominated context as crime and detection. If and when women commit crime, they know their way to get rid of it easily because generally women are considered to be soft, sober and kind-hearted unlike men who are considered more prone to committing crimes. Mrs. Hubbard deliberately makes Poirot believe that the murderer probably escaped through the windows. In the process of making Poirot believe in the exaggerated story made by Mrs. Hubbard, she exhibits clearly her criminal propensity and cleverness. Her way of evasions in answering his questions and her adroit actions imprint the knowledge of trickery and slipperiness to all of us as follows,

'I mean,' explained Poirot, 'that if the murderer intended us to believe that he had escaped by way of the window he would naturally make it appear that the other two exits were impossible. Like the "disappearing person" in the cabinet – it is a trick. It is our business to find out how the trick is done.' (92)

The quality or ability of devising plans, managing critical situations and escaping from authorities seems to be a specialty of the criminal. Similar incident is presented in this text displaying her trait of criminal ingenuity as "I was forced to the conclusion that Mrs. Hubbard was inventing an incident that had never occurred" (335). To substantiate the study further, it can be said that criminal intellectuality and instincts are evident in all the human beings yet remain hidden. Widely speaking, women's crimes are not easily visible to us (the society) because they are naturally not prone to committing crimes. Naturally an obvious perception is that "crime is and always has been a predominantly male phenomenon" (quod in Aviram: 233). But it is not the

case in this context, where women can also perpetrate crime as cleverly, or even much more than men with greater coolness and assuredness. As Poirot explains the murderer's (Mrs. Hubbard) organized mind, resourcefulness and long-sighted efforts to eliminate him skillfully in a full-fledged manner is a typical example of this:

But this – this is a different kind of crime. I have the little idea, my friend, that this is a crime very carefully planned and staged. It is a far-sighted, long-headed crime. It is not – how shall I express it? – a *Latin* crime. It is a crime that shows traces of a cool, resourceful, deliberate brain – I think an Anglo-Saxon brain. (193)

The criminality of women is a less analyzed and an unexplored area so far. In the present days, the study of women in crime writings as detectives, protagonists and criminals deserve more attention than it was before. Through the analysis of the character Mrs. Hubbard, the paper convincingly arrives to a palatable solution. Based on the study of the character Mrs. Hubbard, it is undeniable that women can also perpetrate flagitious crime when situations demand or tempt them. The purpose of the study is to show how female representations have gained momentum as detectives, protagonists and quite ironically as criminals also in crime writings on par with men. The study also attempts to capture glimpses of women's endeavors in the field of detection and their consequent success in attaining social equality with men.

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