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SEXISM, PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN'S DETECTIVE FICTION: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MARCIA MULLER'S SHARON MCCONE SERIES

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ABSTRACT

Detective fiction, which was traditionally dominated by men as writers, protagonists and readers, was one of the first genres to be appropriatedby women after the second wave of feminism. It provided the opportunity for women to focus attention on issues concerning women, reflecting the complexity and diversity of all the various facets of contemporary feminism. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, writers like Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton took up the masculinist and misogynist American hard-boiled detective novel of the 1930s and 1940s and rewrote it for feminist ends. This paper analyses the treatment of sexism and patriarchy in women's detective fiction with specific reference to Marcia Muller's Edwin of the Iron Shoes (1977) and There's Something in a Sunday (1989).

Keywords: *Women's Detective Fiction;Sexism; Patriarchy;Feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Marcia Muller (b.1944) is one of the earliest and most popular writers of detective fiction. She is described by Sue Grafton, her contemporary, as "the founding mother of the contemporary female hardboiled private eye" (qtd. in Bedore, Howe & Jackson 50).When Marcia Muller's female detective, Sharon McCone, first arrived on the scene in 1977, both women were entering "unsuitable" jobs for women. While Muller, as a woman writer, was attempting to gain a foothold in the traditionally male-dominated domain of hard-boiled detective fiction, Sharon McCone, as a woman detective, was doing the same in a profession that was almost exclusively for men. Muller had to face many difficulties to get her book published as there were very few publishers ready to take the risk of publishing a book by a woman writer featuring a female detective. Paralleling Muller's experiences, Sharon McCone, as a female protagonist of the novels of the hard-boiled genre, faces sexism and prejudices, in her professional and personal life. The present paper analyses the depiction of sexism and patriarchy in two of Muller's most popular novels:*Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977) and *There's Something in a Sunday* (1989).

SEXISM & PATRIARCHY

The discussion of sexismin the novels selected for this paper is informed by the simple definition put forth by Audre Lorde in her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" published in the book *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). According to her,sexism is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance"(Lorde 115).

Patriarchy, on the other hand, is a social and ideological construct which considers men as being superior to women. According to Sylvia Walby in *Theorising Patriarchy*(1990) it is "a system of social

structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women"(Walby 20). Patriarchy is based on a system of hierarchical and unequalpower relations in which women's production, reproduction and sexuality are controlled by men. These power relations are strengthened and perpetuated by the imposition of stereotypes of masculinity and femininity on society.

ANALYSIS OF *EDWIN OF THE IRON SHOES* (1977):

Edwin of the Iron Shoes(1977) contains many scenes in which sexism and patriarchy are depicted. According to Maureen T. Reddy, in her book *Traces, Codes and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (2003), feminist writers deliberately use such scenes to make the reader aware of the deep-rooted bias that the woman investigator has to face and also the commitment and courage that she has to develop to fight this bias. Reddy refers to these interactions as "scenes of instruction." According to her,

Most of the feminist series featuring white female detectives incorporate commentary on gender bias into the texts, a feature that distinguishes these novels from those with male protagonists and conservative politics. The detective's authority, ability, and right to investigate are repeatedly called into question by other characters in what amounts to "scenes of instruction" on gender for readers (63).

One such "scene of instruction" occurs very early in *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, when Muller brings Sharon face-to-face with contemporary sexist attitudes in the persona of Greg Marcus. In a style typical of most people who find it hard to believe that the women detectives are professionals, Marcus asks Sharon, "Do you really have an investigator's licence?" (Muller *Edwin* 20). His disbelief and rudeness intimidate Sharon. In another 'scene,' a few chapters later, he orders her to back off once her work involving the inventory of Joan Albritton's shop is over. He warns her, "I'll see that you never work again in any investigatory capacity. You will go back to guarding dresses in department stores, where, in my opinion, you belong!" Sharon, though angry, takes "a step backwards, still speechless" (Muller *Edwin*71).

These two incidents are examples of the sexist behaviour that women encounter in their interactions with other people: at home and the work place. Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson (2001) argue that it is not uncommon for women as they go about their daily lives, to encounter some form of sexist behaviour. Sexism is not just an annoyance, it is a serious issue with negative psychological impact (Swim et al. 2001). This scene also shows how Sharon loses her self-confidence and is almost ready to give up her job as an investigator.

The scene is also significant for the way Sharon is hurt and intimidated but does not react or respond to Marcus's misogynist behaviour. A brief comparison with a similar scene from a novel by Sara Paretsky, titled *Indemnity Only* (1982), would bring out the different ways in which women respond to sexist and patriarchal behaviour. Paretsky's feminist detective, V.I. Warshawski, meets a prospective client, Mr. Thayer. Though he has come to the agency to hire someone to find his missing son, he is reluctant to entrust the job to V.I. as she is a woman. He says, "This really isn't a job for a girl to take on alone . . . I'm not questioning your honesty, . . . But you are a girl, and things may get heavy" (Paretsky*Indemnity* 5). An angry V.I. Warshawski is quick to correct him that she is not a girl, but a woman, and takes him to task for his prejudices:

I'm a woman, Mr. Thayer, and I can look out for myself. If I couldn't, I wouldn't be in this kind of business. If things get heavy, I'll figure out a way to handle them – or go down trying. That's my problem, not yours (Paretsky*Indemnity*5).

The difference in the waySharon McCone and V.I Warshawski react to sexism is indicative of the different ways in which women in real life react to such situations. As Swim and Hyers (1998) assert, when women encounter sexism, they are faced with the choice of either confronting such behaviour or choosing the other alternative of remaining silent. They elaborate further that even though most women want to confront and even believe they would speak up in the face of sexism, research has shown that the majority of them choose to keep silent.

Midway through the novel, Sharon becomes the brunt of sexist and patronizing treatmentfrom another man - Ben Harmon, a bail bondsman. When Sharon begins to ask him uncomfortable questions in the course of her investigation, he tells her angrily, "I don't like being badgered by little girls playing detective"

(Muller *Edwin* 90). This time around, she is not silent and does not back down. She says, "I'm not playing, Mr. Harmon. This is for real". These references to her gender expose the sexist attitudes of people towards a professional woman and provide an insight into Muller's feminist consciousness.

In the same novel, Muller incorporates a discussion on the way patriarchal attitudes within the family deprive women of opportunities and stunt their growth. Sharon meets Cara Ingall, a highly successful businesswoman, "one who made her way on her own steam and refused to be held back" (Muller *Edwin* 106). Cara tells her how her father had cancelled his life insurance just before his death only because all his sons had finished their expensive education by then. He had not thought it necessary to provide either for his wife or daughter with any kind of financial security It is only through sheer hard work, grit, and determination that Cara has achieved her success. When it turns out that Cara is Joan Albritton's killer, the reader is left with the sense that prevailing attitudes of sexism and prejudice against women have been responsible, at least in some part, in making Cara the person she has become. As Sharon says, she has left behind "a part of her humanity," (Muller *Edwin* 108). The implied message in the novel is that Cara's crime is the result of the ills inflicted over her by unfair and unequal patriarchal attitudes.

ANALYSIS OF *THERE'S SOMETHING IN A SUNDAY* (1989):

In*There's Something in a Sunday* (1989), Muller delves deeper into the thesis that sexist and patriarchal attitudes inhibit and prevent women from exercising their right to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. She presents her argument through the lives of three women: Irene Johnstone who suffers rape and domestic abuse; Jane Wilkinson who is trapped in the drudgery of housework and child-rearing; and Rae Kelleher who struggles between career and a possessive husband. All of them are examples of the way sexism and patriarchy undermine the potential of women. These novels show that Muller is trying to address many feminist issues under a single umbrella, mirroring the attempts of second-wave feminism which was intent on identifying and rectifying social evils perpetrated upon women.

As Ann Foreman argues in her book *Femininity as Alienation: Women and the Family in Marxism and Psychoanalysis* (1977), human beings lose their sense of self-worth and get no satisfaction when they do work that is repetitive, deadening and a drudge. For women, this state of affairs is even worse when compared to men because they are restricted to the sphere of the home, while men have access to the outside world of business and industry. Foreman argues that

The effect of the alienation on the lives and consciousness of women takes an even more oppressive form. Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women, there is no relief. These intimate relations are the very ones that are essential structures of her oppression (102).

Muller provides a powerful comment on Foreman's concept of "femininity as alienation" through the character of Jane Wilkinson, the lonely and neglected wife. For Jane, the traditional stereotype of gender roles for women is stifling and frustrating. She has had enough of being confined to the concept of women as wives and mothers; as child-bearers and child-rearers; as forgiving Mother Earth figures; etc. Forever pregnant and with six children, she is stuck in a marriage that no longer has any love, affection, or intimacy. As she tells Sharon, bitterly,

Nobody here ever tells me anything. Plain Jane – that's what they think of me. The broodmare who only cares about her kids. I'm Frank's wife, Rand's mother, and so on and so on. But take Frank and Randy and the rest of them away, and I'm nobody at all. So nobody ever tells me anything (Muller *Something*81).

Jane's problem is very similar to "the problem that has no name" that Betty Friedan referred to in her path-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Jane's words echo Friedan's description of the voice that rose from within the women of the 1950s and 1960s: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (Friedan 32). Even though Muller had written the present novel in 1989, the problem still finds resonance among women. At the end of the novel, Jane reveals to Sharon, the reasons why she had killed her husband. Forced to have many kids, Jane was sick and tired of having to live a life that was devoid of love, affection, respect,

and even intimacy. Frank had become alienated from her after his affair with Irene, his boss's wife. Later, when he comes to know that Irene has a child, he mistakenly believes that it is his child. He becomes completely obsessed with finding Irene and bringing her home with her child. It is when he asks Jane to look after the child, that she snaps. As she says,

I'd been angry for a long time . . . being left alone like I was . . . Never even wanted all the kids I've got. Love them, but every time I'd wish . . . But Frank had this need . . . something to do with proving himself, I guess. Never cared that I had needs, too. Something for myself. Sick of giving. Getting nothing in return. After Frank had her, he didn't want me anymore. Never came near me. So I didn't have even that. And then he wanted me to give some more. . . to his bast...d (Muller *Something* 204).

Though Jane turns out to be one of the killers in the novel, and Hal Johnstone is the other, Sharon is sympathetic towards the former. The feminist subtext of the novel provides some understanding and justification for Jane's actions.Marcia Muller, Sharon McCone, and the women readers of the novel function as a jury of peers to the women in the novel, especially Jane. The empathy that binds all of them is very relevant to this paper..

The next most important woman character in the novel, Rae Kelleher, is a psychology graduate from Berkeley who joins All Souls, the detective agency, as Sharon's assistant. She is full of enthusiasm and easy good humour; has a keen intelligence; and is willing to work hard to become an investigator herself. However, her husband, Doug,a perpetual student, expects Rae to work, support him, and even finance him as he keeps moving from one course to the other, never quite finishing his studies.

In the depiction of Rae Kelleher, there is a parallel to a classic essay of the women's movement, "Why I Want a Wife" by Judy Brady, a feminist writer, and a social and political activist. It is a feminist satire that has since become one of the most widely anthologized essays of that period. Through the use of repetition and rhetorical questions, Brady focuses attention on the unrealistic roles placed on women by society. The image of the "wife" in Brady's essay is re-created in Rae, as can be seen from a reading of a few lines from the essay:

I would like to go back to school so that I can become economically independent, support myself, and, if need be, support those dependent uponme. I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And while I am going to school, I want a wife to take care of my children . . . I want a wife who takes care of the children when they are sick, a wife who arranges to be around when the children need special care, because, of course, I cannot miss classes at school . . . When I am through with school and have a job, I want my wifeto quit working and remain at home so that my wife can more fully and completely take care of a wife's duties. My God, who wouldn't want a wife? (Brady 56).

Muller, who was actively involved in the consciousness-raising programme of the 1960s and 1970s, was aware of Brady's essay and so her portrayal of the oppressive conditions of women takes on an added significance. Through the depiction of its women characters, the novel presents a critique of the condition of women and tries to bring about a change by raising the consciousness of its readers. Sharon tries to make Rae understand that she is being exploited by Doug, but Rae is unable to realize the extent of her exploitation and oppression. As Sharon wonders,

Didn't the woman realize that she, as well as, her husband, had a way to make in the world? Didn't she know that husbands might stay or go, but a profession that would make use of the talents she seemed to possess would stand her in good stead for a lifetime? (Muller *Something* 33)

It is only when Doug confesses that he has faked a suicide attempt to make Rae feel guilty about her new job at the detective agency that Rae decides to leave him and move on in life. As the series progresses, Rae fulfills her potential and becomes a very efficient investigator. At present, in the last novels of the series, she has evolved into a very popular writer.

The third woman in this discussion, Irene Johnstone, is a beautiful and talented woman. She had been a professor of horticulture at San Jose State University before her marriage to Harlan Johnstone, a widower with a grown-up son. The seemingly happy marriage soon deteriorates as a jealous Harlan forces her to cut tieswith everyone and makes her a prisoner in her own home. Despair andloneliness lead her into an affair with Frank Wilkinson, the new manager, but

even he turns out to be violent and possessive. However, things go from bad to worse when Hal Johnstone, Harlan's son comes home. A twisted and violent man, Hal is also a misogynist who blames Irene for marrying his father and taking away his right over the ranch. When Irene realizes that he suspects the truth about her affair with Frank, she breaks it off.

One day, when Harlan is out of town, Hal submits Irene to a horrific rape and goes away the next morning. Severely traumatized, Irene has no one in whom she can confide. When she finds out that she is pregnant as a result of the rape, she keeps silent, not knowing what to do. When Hal comes back, she realizes that she cannot stay there any longer and flees the ranch. In her ground-breaking study of rape, *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), Susan Brownmiller, argues that "From prehistoric times to the present. . . rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (15). Irene's rape by Hal fits Brownmiller's definition of rape. Harlan's jealousy and suspicion, Frank's violent possessiveness, and Hal's violent hatred are all variations of the same theme – an ingrained sense of entitlement and the refusal to see Irene as an individual with the right to happiness, and to her own life. All the men use the weapon of fear to subjugate the woman - in this case, Irene.

In an important passage in the novel, Muller presents a stark portrait of the plight of a rape victim in society. When Irene reveals the terrible wrong that Hal has done to her, she is afraid that Sharon would not believe her. Sharon is filled with anger at the way the victim of a sexual assault suffers both during the assault and after it, too. She muses,

It's common for rape victims to be disbelieved; it's the only crime I know where the burden of proof is placed squarely on the victim's shoulders. Irene didn't have to prove a thing to me, though. Unless they're severely disturbed, women stand to gain nothing and lose everything by falsely accusing men of rape – no matter what the she's-framing-him or she-asked-for-it schools of thought claim (Muller *Something* 187).

Muller's narrative strategy in presenting the three stories of Jane Wilkonson, Rae Kelleher, and Irene Johnstone is to highlight the fact that there is a fundamental lack of respect for and belief in women's stories. Society's reactions and responses to women parallel those of its parts, revealing skewed and sexist notions of man's superiority and woman's inferior status. More importantly, the novel refers to one of the major claims of the women's liberation movement that sexuality is a political, and not merely, a personal matter, and that sexual relations can perpetuate patriarchal control of women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present paper has demonstrated how detective fiction by women writers with a feminist agenda have a special focus on issues related to women. The novels selected for the analysis depict various relationships that highlight the truth that women are oppressed by intimate relationships that are sexist and patriarchal in nature. By generating a discussion on sexism and patriarchy, Muller, and other women writers in the genre, contribute to bring about an end to inequality in the public and private spheres. This paper has demonstrated that Marcia Muller and other women writers are aware of the most current developments in the theory and politics of feminism and that they have specifically focused on a myriad of inequalities that exist in contemporary societies.

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