

Female Sleuths and Edwardian New Woman: A Critical Study of Agatha Christie's Women

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Abstract - The traditional gender roles assigned to women in literature were crushed by many women writers who depicted women in unconventional roles and a major writer among them is Agatha Christie. In detective fiction, majority of leading characters have always been men and women used to be the victims of the crime. But Agatha Christie broke away from this conventional trend in crime fiction and created intelligent female detectives. She gave heroic attributes to women characters and proved that they are also capable of achieving the goals like men. She fought Victorian literary conventions, which depicted women as weak and dependent on men, to bring out females with sharp and brilliant minds. But she was strongly criticized by her contemporaries for her stereotypical female characters. This paper analyses the effective portrayal of the strong and independent female detectives and new women of 1920's in Christie's work. This paper also aims at finding the feminist traits in Christie's women characters and their role in shattering the conventional stereotypes of women in crime fiction.

Index Terms - detective fiction, female detectives, 1920's new woman, gender revolution, gender, feminism, flapper, sleuth, stereotype, surplus woman, spinster.

INTRODUCTION

Agatha Christie, popularly known as "Queen of Mystery or Queen of Crime", is a best-selling author of detective fiction. She, along with Arthur Conan Doyle, is regarded as one of the chief exponents of Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Agatha Christie is remembered for her creation of extraordinary unconventional and innovative characterization of detectives. Though she was a prolific author, popular among the literary circle and admired by both male and female readers, the critics undervalued her works as ones with no literary merit. But, during 1990's, critics started studying her as a serious and genuine writer of fiction and one of the major figures of popular literature. Even if her female characters

entertain the readers, she was criticized for anti-feminist characters in her writings. But a close reading of her works reveals very strong and independent female characters that were capable of breaking the norms of Victorian society.

The 1900's witnessed a drastic change in the condition of women and with the right to suffrage, inherit property and earn wages brought freedom into their then restricted lifestyle. The Post World Era which strengthened their willpower saw the emergence of the iconic new woman of 1920's. The roaring twenties saw a sudden change of society into modern consumerism and hot gender debates. The new empowerment was evident in the way of dressing and style. The image of a flapper with a bob hairstyle and short skirts or the androgynous look with shirt and trousers became a symbol of Edwardian new woman. This image of the modern woman created a gender revolution and negotiation. Agatha Christie who started her writing career around this turbulent period was evidently influenced by the social scenario of the time and mended her characters accordingly.

In her works, one can find a wide array of women characters ranging from submissive wives, compassionate mothers, naïve young women and intelligent sleuths to ambitious career woman, inquisitive spinsters, modern flappers, unmarried mothers, charming mistresses, and malicious murderers. She was often criticized for the traditional gender stereotypes and villainous women characters in her novels. Critics targeted her for overt sexism and her for being not a feminist. The diverse characterisation of Christie revealed an audacious notion that women are capable of doing anything and no way inferior to men. The virtuous and vicious women of Agatha Christie were a realistic portrayal of the innate ability of the women in a patriarchal society. Consciously or unconsciously, Christie created some marvelous bold characters who, when analysed

through the feminist lens, broke away the societal norms and stopped acting as the angel in the house.

There are many examples for new women in Christie's works like Lady Eileen "Bundle" Brent, Ann Beddingfield and Henrietta Savarnake. They are adventurous, free-spirited women who are not ready to be tamed by the conservative society. They are always ready to embark on an adventure all alone. The iconic flapper of 1920's was notorious for smoking, drinking alcohol, driving cars, and having affairs with men. But not all of them went to this extreme to celebrate their newfound freedom and selfhood, and those kinds of women are depicted in Christie's novels. Bundle Brent who appeared first in *The Secret of Chimneys* is a brisk and energetic young woman who with her courage and intelligence helps in solving mysteries. Like most of the new women she is a lover of driving and likes to ride her Hispano-Suiza car so fast to be called as a terrific rider. Likewise, Henrietta, an antagonistic mistress to a murder victim, in *The Hollow* is very fond of driving alone so that she can enjoy her escapades to the fullest. She is a self-made woman, who is a professional sculptor and lives a life on her own way. Anne, the protagonist of *The Man in the Brown Suit* is a fearless young woman who makes a daring quest to a strange foreign land to unite with a man she loves.

All these young woman shatters the concept of marriage prevailed at that time. Anne and Bundle Brent reject the socially elite proposals of marriage which were the ultimate goal of young women of the Edwardian conservative society to find their own self and identity. They smash the Victorian concept of women being weak. There is an instance where Anne remarks that in the beginning the nomadic men and women were strong alike and she believes that innately women are as strong as men. Although these representative flapper figures are not portrayed as reckless, they are highly opinionated clever women with a zest for life.

There are some characters who entered or want to enter in a successful married life, rejects the idea of being submissive in a liaison. They don't succumb to the age-old ways of domesticity like acting as a good caretaker of a house, tending a garden or even cooking scrumptious meals. The young wife, Griselda of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, being a Vicar's wife is supposed to be a woman who follows the traditional ways of looking after a household. On the other hand,

she is a jaunty young woman who doesn't want to please or follow the customs of being a good housewife and is not afraid of constant criticism from the older ladies. Mrs Summerhayes of *Mrs McGinty's Dead* is another example for woman who enjoys a happy married life but not entangled by the societal norm of being a good custodian of the household. Joanna Burton of *The Moving Finger* is a lively young woman who is eager to get into married life but doesn't get along the traditional way of being a gentle, submissive prospective bride. She is a sprightly young empowered modern woman who rides cars, criticizes the chauvinistic men around her and cannot be disciplined according to the ways of a conformist lifestyle.

Tuppence Beresford is one of the famous female sleuths of Agatha Christie. She is a representative figure of new woman. She is a professional woman who chose a modern career, which was not much sought after by women, to satiate an excited, eventful life. This female detective, in her first appearance in *The Secret Adversary*, is shown as a young pert side kick to the male lead investigator, later on swaps the gender roles and becomes the superior figure. She marries the male detective Tommy Beresford but continues her career even after the marriage. Her active feminine intuitive nature gets more attention than the passive masculine rationality of Tommy.

Being the active one among the detective duo she is the initiator of the investigation and finds immense pleasure and excitement in unravelling a mystery. Though she assumes the role of a mother and wife as well, she is not ready to get stuck into the home comforts. Tuppence rejects the idea of being inferior and wants to bring parity in her relationship with Tommy. Tuppence does not like the idea of Tommy looking after her; rather she wants to be self-reliant and treated as an equal so that they can solve the mystery together. Serving as a nurse and driver during the First World War made her a strong-willed woman who does not want to be inferior to man in her abilities. This helps her cross the boundaries existed between the traditional detective duo of male being the dominant and female being the subservient. Tommy and Tuppence appear in five works of Christie where Tuppence at times becomes the leading investigator by finding a fair share of clues which Tommy could not. Her spontaneous quick-witted nature and Tommy's deductive ability makes them solve the case and

complement each other as opposed to the usual power politics between a detective couple.

While creating the crime fiction writer Ariadne Oliver, Agatha Christie tried to mirror herself. In this characterization Ariadne's struggle of continuing with the character of Finnish detective Sven Hjerson reflects Christie's trouble with her most famous character Hercule Poirot, the egoistic old Belgian investigator. Through Ariadne she also exposes the mistakes she did as an author during her early writings. She created her character as a proto feminist in her ideologies. There are many occasions where Ariadne points out that women are more adept. For instance, she always asserts the idea of a woman heading the Scotland Yard for successful completion of cases. She is a friend of Poirot and appears alongside in many of his novels where she does an active role of more than a side kick. Nevertheless, Poirot degrades most of her intuitive findings on the grounds of logic and reason, finds out at the end that her assumption was right from the beginning. There is a constant struggle of intuition versus rationality and at many times Poirot admits her skills. She is presented as a humorous woman and is likened by everyone.

One of the most celebrated female detective figures of all-time is the famous old woman, Miss Jane Marple. The character shows the real craftsmanship of Agatha Christie. Deliberately, she chose an ordinary old uneducated village spinster, who rarely got out of her town, as her character and through an intelligent and creative portrayal, made the old lady appealing to all generations than any other young female sleuths. Like many of her other characters Miss Marple faced a lot of criticism for being a traditional narrow-minded Victorian woman. But the reality is that, though Miss Marple appears to be a conservative old woman, she is aware of the modern ways and exhibits subtle feminist elements.

Miss Marple is the representative figure of a social transformation occurred after the First World War. After the world war, along with the new women emerged the surplus woman. Surplus women are the unmarried old women who chose to live a single life; one reason being the shortage of male partners due to the causality of war. Agatha Christie herself was a single divorcee mother during the creation of Miss Marple. Shaw and Vanacker in their critical study addressed "the spinster's potential as both fearsome oddity and moral force" (99). The advantage of

innocent and sociable image of a surplus woman of 1920's was seen in the later detective characters such as Dorothy Sayer's Miss Climpson, Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver, Anna Katherine Green's Amelia Butterworth as well. Among all others Miss Marple stands out with her indomitable spirit.

The portrayal of stereotypic inquisitive spinster was seen as conservative, but as a matter of fact the population contained a number of surplus women and it was normal to adopt one as a character, whom many at that time can relate to. She has the benefit of hiding her detective skills under the facade of an old gossipy woman who does not know much about the way of the modern world. She, like many other sleuths of Agatha Christie, is gifted with the faculty of intuition and incorporates her experience of living in a small town named St Mary's Mead while deciphering an answer to a mystery or case. Here, she blurs the border between intuition and logic and uses both the faculties in an organised way in contrast to Ariadne Oliver who relies solely on her intuitive skills.

She has studied the traits of humanity while living her whole life in a boring small town all alone and shaped her observation and deductive skills to entertain and amuse herself in her own ways. According to her, prototypes of all human beings were available in St Mary's Mead and she always relates to those experiences once she takes up the case. She is quick witted, lively, sociable women who is welcomed by all the social circles and thus makes it easier for her to find clues and gather information to help solve the crime. According to Merja Makinen, the "ageism and the prejudice against spinsters is consistently shown to be erroneous, Miss Marple's astute shrewdness about all aspects of human life put her at the center of society, rather than at the margins" (62). As opposed to the claims of early critics, Christie did not intend to create Miss Marple as a vulnerable old lonely lady but a genius experienced female detective, who takes advantage of her image as a surplus woman without marital or filial ties, to achieve her ends and lead a life she enjoys. This way the character of Miss Marple was intentionally created conservative to give her the ultimate freedom. It is the same case with the negative characters. The Mrs. Hubbard of Murder on the Orient Express is a strong old woman who is courageous enough to face her fears and murder the person who brutally killed her grandchild. The criminals of

Christie are also intelligent masterminds who can confuse those around them.

Also, Christie portrays in many of her novels a bond between women which is much stronger than the marital bond. Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd show the epitome of female friendship and are sometimes analysed as lesbian partners. This can be seen as the “woman for woman” notion of feminism. Thus, it can be concluded that Christie’s women are incredibly unique and exhibits feminist traits of self-sufficiency and independent thinking. Instead of giving more importance to the socio-political scenario of a turbulent era, Christie focuses on individuals and their everyday life in the society and thereby making the works appealing to readers of all generation.

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