



P.D. JAMES (AN UNSUITABLE JOB FOR A WOMAN) - A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

SOMYA

Ph.D Research Scholar & Assistant Professor of English
Department of English, University of Delhi



SOMYA

Article Received:30/06/2020

Article Accepted: 04/08/2020

Published online:09/08/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.3.156](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.3.156)

Abstract

My paper will examine and critically analyze P.D. James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* from the feminist lens, and thereby deal with the questions on gender and sexuality as raised through the novel. Although the figure of female detective is widespread enough in detective fiction, this paper looks at ways in which the protagonist, Cordelia Gray breaks quite a few stereotypes of this genre that renders her an unconventional detective figure. The irrationality of the crime in this novel pushes the reader into inquiring about the existing gender and generic norms. The novel successfully promotes the line of argument as taken up in my paper that the novel is set in a world that does not ascribe to the conventions of Golden Age Detective fiction, rather subverts and questions them. A feminist deliberation thus springs up about the oft-cited P.D. James' title: Is detection an unsuitable job for a woman? Or does the introduction of a female detective signal a redefinition of the genre itself? My paper will be an attempt to grapple with such conundrums, that define the text and render it subversive for its times.

Keywords: **Gender Studies, feminist perspective, Golden Age detective fiction, Culture and Crime**

I shall be looking at P.D. James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*¹ through a feminist lens and thereby discuss the infiltration of a female detective into a man's job or the issue of a woman's novel infiltrating the hard boiled male genre by

examining the strategies for subverting the familiar "masculine" norms. To study the text through a feminist perspective, we need to examine how the Hard-boiled detective fiction survived the Second World War and still retains its popularity in a way that classic Golden Age fiction has not. One reason for its survival can be the uncertain or bleak post world war scenario that threw both the readers and writers in a situation to which the calm certainties of the whodunit did not correspond well, and were therefore, useless. The second reason can be the fact that the hard boiled genre is an appropriate mode for cultural, ethnic and gender appropriation.

The traditional pattern of representing men as subjects and women as objects has in general

¹ P.D. James, or Phyllis Dorothy James White, Baroness James of Holland Park, was born August 3, 1920 in Oxford, Oxfordshire. She gained popularity as a British mystery novelist most renowned for her fictional detective Adam Dalgliesh of Scotland Yard. Her deployment of classic mystery conventions/devices earned the sobriquet "Queen of Crime". She wrote fourteen Dalgliesh novels, with the last, *The Private Patient* which was published in the year 2008.

posed great difficulties for those writers who have wished to create strong and positive women protagonists. Because of the specific demands of the genre, this is even more true of Detective Fiction. Thus, in spite of the great number of women writers in this genre, it is a fact that the overwhelming majority of detectives have been men. Now, considering the scarce number of heroine predecessors, the hard-boiled mode, probably the most misogynistic of the various sub-genres of crime fiction, would seem to be an unlikely mode to support a feminist reworking. However, the hard-boiled fiction unlike the Golden Age crime novels, is both open ended and permeable, and its meanings are not fixed. According to Ralph Willett, the general tendency of hard-boiled fiction to replicate, explore, and even interrogate its own conventions allows this entire sub genre to be appropriated for a variety of ideological, formal, and generic purposes. (Willett 1992: 7) The development of a clear feminist pattern from the hard-boiled mode can be viewed as an example of how this sub genre, ironically the most defensively masculine branch of detective fiction, can be successfully appropriated. The hard-boiled Private Investigator, that is, the detective as the urban hero is, by definition, both male and a loner.

Many feminists believe that the detective novel is always already a masculinity genre, and the protagonist, always male. Such a rigid, formulaic genre espousing a patriarchal world-order, according to most feminists who critique this form, can hardly be used to effectively subvert the rigid gender norms. The question arises -- How can an author then, succeed in doing anything distinct which runs counter to the expectations of the traditional norms and against many of society's views about a gender that is deemed second-class? The 'feminist counter tradition' that began with the development of feminist theory in the 1970s, is the foremost form of ideological appropriations of hard-boiled fiction. It was also the decade that witnessed the publication of P.D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972), establishing the foundation for future development in the 1980s. The 'female private eye novel' can thus be

considered a clear feminist appropriation of an overtly 'masculine' mode.

A feminist debate thus springs up about the oft-cited P.D. James' title: Is detection an unsuitable job for a woman? Or does the introduction of a female detective signal a redefinition of the genre itself? Though the critics agree that it effectively destabilizes the genre, yet the question as to whether this destabilization constitutes a significant reformation of the form or a challenge to its foundational ideology remains unanswered. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, which is not cast in the same setting (the mean streets for instance) and tone as the other hard-boiled novels that preceded it, the most crucial aspect here is the central figure of the novel, Cordelia Grey,² who is a private detective. The title of the book both contests and ultimately reinforces or endorses the private eye novel which is essentially male dominated. Cordelia Gray who enthalls most readers as the archetypal feminist heroine, literally inherits the masculine job of the private eye from Bernie, her late employer in the form of a private detective agency he established, and the gun that he taught her to use. According to a critic, John Scaggs, "a gun becomes an obvious metaphor for masculine potency, and it is significant that Grey never fires it, and her reluctance to do so might be

² The main character of the story is Cordelia Gray, a twenty-two year old who inherits a private investigator agency from her own boss named Bernie Pryde. Bernie had cancer and hence committed suicide to avoid any kind of pain. Cordelia lost her mother when she was born, and she was raised in foster homes, but later her father pulls her out to travel along with him. Cordelia finds a job as secretary for Bernie. She is a calm and composed young woman who is capable of thinking rationally and clearly about what needs to be done when a tragedy strikes. She is considerate and efficiently follows the advice she has received from her mentor, Bernie, as she embarks on her first detection case all alone. Most people in the novel assume that running a detective agency is not a suitable job for a woman but she proves them wrong with her shrewd understanding of her job. She possesses the knowledge and intellect required to do the so called masculine job.

read as a reaffirmation of the division between the masculine and feminine spheres of activity suggested by the title of the novel.”(Scaggs 2005: 78)

Despite being written by a woman author, detective fiction remains a genre supportive of patriarchy. The distinguished crime novelist Dorothy L. Sayers in her introduction to the first *Omnibus of Crime* (1928) complained that the depictions of women detectives in fiction have been few and not very successful and that they were all too young, too beautiful and too interested in marriage. Though Sayers acknowledged a few exceptions to this case, she believed nobody had really been successful in creating a brilliant woman detective. Since the early consciousness raising seventies however, this highly conservative and formulaic genre has undergone a number of transformations in the hands of women novelists. For instance, P. D. James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* fits perfectly within this atmosphere of change as Cordelia Gray, a protagonist who is estranged from society becomes the first female detective to be read as an icon of feminist independence. She actively participates in the centre of power, and despite her role as a detective being contested time and again, her determination to reestablish order by solving all mysteries turn her into an emblem of feminism. The repeated challenges to Cordelia's job derive specifically from her gender, as the title underlines. This is apparent from the very beginning of the text when Cordelia's partner commits suicide and leaves her the unique proprietorship of Pryde's Detective Agency. When she is first questioned by a policeman about her partner's death, he simply conceives of her as Bernie's secretary. Female characters in the text are equally skeptical about Cordelia's chances to handle and succeed in the 'male' job. When she breaks the news of Bernie's suicide to the owner of a pub, the landlady remarks: "You'll be looking for a new job, I suppose? After all, you can hardly keep the Agency going on your own. It isn't a suitable job for a woman".

The title appears several times in the novel, uttered by both male and female acquaintances who view Cordelia's job as a violation or

transgression of the boundaries allocated to her gender. Cordelia, a twenty-two year old orphaned, inexperienced woman who undertakes an assignment that was originally intended for her partner, tries to probe into and reveal the motives that led Mark, a 21 year old Cambridge dropout, to commit suicide as allocated to her by Sir Ronald Callender, his father. The fact that Cordelia starts identifying with Mark as the plot moves forward and becomes his avenger can definitely be seen as a disruptive bend of the classical formula wherein an emotional detachment from the victim is essential. On discovering the actual murderer to be Mark's father, who is later murdered by Mark's real mother, Cordelia conspires with her to hide the fact from the police. This way she realises the strength of female allegiance, an instance that bears the spirit of feminist seventies of female solidarity. Upon closure the text establishes the suitability of women in the role of a detective as Cordelia manages to successfully solve the mystery and keep the agency going. Thus, the text can be read as a 'bildungsroman' that celebrates woman's achievements in her development from an amateur to a professional detective.

P.D. James abandons Cordelia Gray as an independent detective in the only other novel in which Gray appears, *The Skull Beneath the Skin* which is disappointing to both her readers and feminist critics. After such an undaunted start, Cordelia Gray is revived ten years later where she is seen in a surprisingly traditional role, both incompetent and unsuitable for her job. At the end of the second novel, Cordelia is hired to find a lost kitten, "...she had a job waiting for her...she didn't despise its simplicities; almost she welcomed them. Animals didn't torment themselves with the fear of death, or torment you with the fear of their dying. They didn't burden you with their psychological problems...They didn't try to murder you." (James 1982 :441) As a conclusion this seems to prove that investigating crime is definitely an unsuitable job for a woman. Therefore, while in the first novel, Cordelia subverts the rigid formulaic demands of the genre wherein she traverses many spheres, from being a victim (when in danger), to a detective and a criminal all at once; everything seems

ultimately undercut by Adam Dalgliesh's involvement at the end, a subplot that seems to shadows the main one. P.D. James makes sure that Gray meets up with Dalgliesh during the course of her role as a detective, an encounter that eventually reinforces the stereotypes between the male and female abilities or competence. Quite like Lady Molly³, Cordelia does not apply for or choose her job as a detective. She inherits the detective agency unexpectedly and reluctantly decides to continue with the job - perhaps out of a sense of loyalty to Bernie. She is pressed into accepting a man's job that puts her into the category of women who, in the absence of a male authority figures or protectors, must fend for themselves.

Moreover, as a ventriloquist, Bernie Pryde always stays in Cordelia's mind, offering constant wisdom, philosophy of survival, and maxims such as 'Never destroy the evidence' or 'Never theorize in advance of your facts' which are a product of his brief apprenticeship with Adam Dalgliesh, the arch-detective. Thus, whatever concrete space Cordelia carves out for herself in the text is ultimately overshadowed and impinged upon by Dalgliesh's authority. The narrative agency is thus held by the male authority who is also the main propelling force behind the woman detective's actions. When Dalgleish makes an appearance in the very final pages of the novel to interrogate Cordelia, she seems to be in awe of him and acknowledges his authoritative influence on her by wishing to confide in him. Thus we witness a definite slippage in authority as Dalgleish seems to hold the controlling perspective of the novel at the end.

³ Initially published in the year 1910, Emma Orczy's female detective Lad Molly was certainly the precursor of the lay detectives who rely more on their brain power for detection of the crime. The novel gained a lot of popularity with three editions appearing in its first year of publication. It was one of the first novels to show a female detective as the lead character. Lady Molly, quite like her fictional contemporaries, could easily detect crimes owing recognition of domestic clues, often not comprehensible to male experience.

In "Murders Academic: Women Professors and the Crimes of Gender," Susan Leonardo asserts that the feminist detective endorses or promotes patriarchy by seducing the female reader into complicity with an order that works by subjugating women that eventually makes her conform to the traditional gender roles and assumptions. For Teresa L. Ebert, "Detective fictions are narratives of crisis in patriarchy." According to Ebert, the hard boiled detective narratives act as agents of patriarchy which on behalf of the patriarchal ordering or the 'Law-of-the-Father' work to restore the hegemonic codes that are threatened or disrupted by a crime. Any crime thus, constitutes a violation of the patriarchal law or the dominant morality. It, therefore is not surprising at all to see female detectives who restore this order, as participating in and supporting the very system that oppresses them. Similarly, women writers who use this genre for feminist appropriation often fail to translate it to their own purposes.

Nicola Nixon, in her essay, 'Gray Areas: P. D. James's *Unsuited of Cordelia*', regards *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* as "a touchstone of early seventies feminism". However, *The Skull Beneath the Skin* for her, remains unsuccessful in translating Cordelia Gray into the eighties as James seems more invested in her male detective, Adam Dalgliesh by now. By turning Cordelia Gray into less of a feminist, Nixon suggests, the author starts to adopt and mimic the very conservative neo-Victorian ideology of the Thatcherite era. Thus, the author's belittling of Cordelia results from her own distancing from feminism. At the dawn of the 1970s, the issue of female empowerment or agency became extremely crucial in women's writing owing to the raised consciousness. Written by an author who, if not hostile to feminism but definitely not part of the feminist movement in the political sense, the text according to the critic Nixon, involves itself in the political degeneration of the detective genre by serving an overt political function in a woman's appropriation of the detective figure. Cordelia can surely be celebrated as an icon of feminist autonomy and independence. We can then place the novel's 'gender' question within the larger context of the seventies wherein it

was deployed to contest and question the naturalization of patriarchal forms and ideology.

Written in the eighties, James's *Skull Beneath the Skin* definitely highlights the gendered limitations of an independent woman detective that makes certain questions inevitable -- Was the author being regressive? Or was she describing a climatic shift in the feminist world from the seventies to the 'gender confusion' of the eighties? Or merely being a Thatcherite meritocrat in the second book, by correcting the anomaly of the feminist Cordelia of the first book. So while, feminist criticism often celebrates this text for introducing an autonomous, 'progressive' woman detective, Cordelia fails to instigate any 'radical' feminist epistemological debate about the subject. Cordelia as a feminist icon fails to illuminate the crafty ideological formations that are woven into the traditional genre conventions. However, the novel's contribution towards moulding a new female detective figure by providing fresh gender inscriptions to the genre helps secure its place in the feminist political agenda. The book's real mystery then, is not just Mark Callender's death but the mystery of the development of a female character in a patriarchal culture -- which is a mystery that can never be tidily resolved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ebert, Teresa. "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist

Cultural Theory." *Cultural Critique: Popular Narrative, Popular Images* 10, 1988. Print.

James, P. D. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973. Print.

James, P. D. *The Skull beneath the Skin*. New York: Scribner, 1982. Print.

Leonardi, Susan J. "Murders Academic: Women Professors and the Crimes of Gender." In:

Glenwood Irons, *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. 112- 126.

Merivale, Patricia. "Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 37.4

(1996): 693+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.

Nixon, Nicola. "Gray Areas: P.D. James's Unsuiting of Cordelia". *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*. Ed. GLENWOOD IRONS. University of Toronto Press, 1995. 29–45.

Vara, Maria. "Forms of Agency in Women's Detective Fiction in the Seventies." *Agency*. Web. 25 Nov. 2015. <<http://feministseventies.net/Vara.html>>.

Willett, Ralph. *Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction*, Staffordshire, British Association for

American Studies, Pamphlet 23. Keele, Staffordshire: Keele UP, 1992.