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FAMILY, SEXUALITY, AND CRIME IN PD JAMES' *AN UNSUITABLE JOB FOR A WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine PD James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* through the many questions of gender and sexuality raised in the novel. While the woman detective is common enough in detective fiction, this paper looks at ways in which Cordelia breaks several stereotypes of the genre to become an unconventional detective figure. The absurdity of the crime in the novel pushes the reader into questioning existing gender as well as generic conventions. The ending of the novel further attests to the line of argument taken up by this paper that the world in which the novel is set is far too complex to uphold the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction. Instead, the reader is confronted with a world in which institutions of family, systems of justice, and other societal structures fall short of restoring harmony to a morally bankrupt world. The novel forces the reader to glimpse into the darker reality underlying societal structures, and the inadequacy of given institutions to successfully grapple with the crisis.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, Sexuality, Golden Age detective fiction, crime, power structures, family.

PD James' novel, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, published in 1972, coincides with a new, emerging strand of feminist thought. Not surprisingly therefore, several of the concerns of the text starting from its very title, were some issues raised by the feminist movement of this period. In my paper, I'll be examining the crime(s), criminals, and the detective in the novel in the light of not only generic context but also against the dominant feminist thought of the time.

The novel opens not with a crime but the suicide of Bernie Pryde, Cordelia's partner at the detective agency, and who, as the reader discovers, would have headed the investigation of Mark Callender's suicide. As Kate Watson points out in an essay titled, "Family Discord: Challenging the Choreography of Crime Fiction in PD James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*", that the death of the detective, at the very beginning of the novel, instils an element of instability into the text owing to generic conventions, and also, by placing a young, inexperienced woman as the figure of the detective in charge. The reader, at this point, is confronted with his/her own uncertainties regarding Cordelia's 'suitability' for the job. These doubts and uncertainties are voiced by Sir Ronald Callender a little later in the novel when he says, "You must forgive my discourtesy; it's a little disconcerting to expect a burly ex-policeman and to get you (32)." While amateurs and women detectives

are both common enough in detective fiction, the nature of the genre replete with violence, bloodshed, and crime, which are traditionally considered 'male' spheres, makes the presence of women as detectives more an exception than the norm.

This question, regarding the 'natural' tendencies, behaviours of women, which makes certain professions suitable or unsuitable for them, was a pertinent one for the feminist movement of this period. Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*, writes, "Important new research not only suggests that the possibilities of innate temperamental differences seem more remote than ever, but even raises questions as to the validity and permanence of psycho-sexual identity. In doing so, it gives fairly concrete positive evidence of the overwhelmingly cultural character of gender i.e. personality structure in terms of sexual category (29)." James' novel, a cultural product of this period, reflects these feminist concerns closely.

The main crime in the novel, Sir Ronald's murder of his own son Mark Callender, provides another instance of how the novel reflects and pursues prominent questions of the feminist movement of the time. The heteronormative family, with the figure of the father having an almost priestly role to play in protecting and nurturing his unit, came under severe censure from feminists during this period. The institution of family as accepted and propagated by the religious bodies as well as formal and informal education systems began to be recognised as tyrannical and abusive and a symbol of patriarchal violence. Millet, in the same work, writes, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient... Even in patriarchal societies where women are granted legal citizenship, they tend to be ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state (33)."

In the novel, the ideal of the heteronormative family is pushed to a dystopic end, where the father instead of protecting his child murders him, and the mother is actually a pathetic parody because she is only *performing* the role of a biological mother. As is revealed in the novel, Evelyn who was considered to be the birth mother is not so, having faked a pregnancy by wearing a loose corset. Miss Leaming, the secretary turns out to be the biological mother of the victim. The birth mother isn't allowed to perform the role of the mother because of the nature of her relationship with the father of her child: it is not one that is recognised by the law. This is a family that comes into existence primarily for monetary purposes. At the core of this family therefore, in place of love there is greed and lust. In the place of a mother the reader is confronted with a vacuum; in place of a father – a cold-blooded criminal. In this horrific inversion of the 'family' the writer lays bare for the reader the violence and abuse that underlies this institution.

In the second crime in the novel, Miss Leaming's murder of Sir Ronald, the reader witnesses an instance of a woman reclaiming agency within this patriarchal set-up, albeit in a self-destructive way. Like Clytemnestra, Miss Leaming kills the man (who is incidentally also the father of her child) who killed her child. Sir Ronald, in sacrificing his child for a larger cause, and in his greed for glory becomes a figure akin to Agamemnon.

The family then as explored in the novel is far removed from the 'ideal' heteronormative unit. In the crimes committed in the text, including Evelyn's silent abuse at the hands of Sir Ronald, the defrauding of her father, the reader is confronted with the imbalance of power within this institution. The attribution of almost absolute powers to the male head, Millet argues, is in fact how the institution of the family has been structured. She writes, "Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale (33)."

Much of Cordelia's independence and agency comes from not being part of such a conventional family set-up. At one point in the text a bartender asks Cordelia if her mother would approve of her choice of profession, to which she says that she had a mother only for the first hour of her life. While Cordelia herself would like to believe that her mother would approve, repeated insinuations about the "unsuitability" of her job from various sections, indicate the opposite. Cordelia's father too, like her mother, is more of an absent presence in her life; a figure she looks up and is grateful to, but not someone she is answerable to. Bernie's death right at the beginning of the novel in that respect serves an important function to reinforce Cordelia's

independent status. Had Bernie been alive, Cordelia, despite a partnership in the firm, would have been reduced to a sidekick. After his death, her independent status becomes more prominent. It is interesting to note that despite no real domineering, overshadowing, male presence in her life, Cordelia does have to negotiate with ghost presences of these characters. For instance, she has to repeatedly return to everything Bernie has taught her in order to solve the case. Bernie's gun, left to her after his death, becomes a symbol of his metaphorical presence in her life. The gun is what gives her a sense of security and indeed it is with the gun that she closes her first case (Watson).

Superintendent Dalgliesh is another such ghost presence in the text. Though for the large part of the text Cordelia hasn't met him, she goes by his dogmas when confronted with difficult situations. Literally absent, these characters perform the paternal role of guiding, mentoring, and protecting her. The point here being that such metaphorical presences can be balanced with one's sense of self; accepted and rejected as the situation demands. These are not the same as, or equivalent to, having an actual superior male figure, one whose terms *must* be obeyed and commands followed. The absence of a family in the conventional sense thus plays an active part in allowing Cordelia to become the character that she is.

To return to the main crime at the centre of the novel, I would like to draw attention to the *nature* of the crime being investigated against Mark Callender. Mark is not simply murdered, but murdered in a way to make his death look like it was a result of an accident during an experiment in auto-eroticism. The murderer works with the assumption that such an act would de facto place him in a 'disgraceful' situation and his death, instead of drawing curious sympathy, would have aroused disgust and indignation. Interestingly, that is precisely the reaction that Mark's corpse receives from the people who see it dressed in women's underclothes, with lipstick smeared on his lips. The sight of his body dressed and painted thus, is horror inducing. The nature of Mark's death is a comment upon not only the patriarchal power structure of the family, but also (intentionally or not) upon the society that is so fixated upon codes of masculinities and femininities, and has internalised these codes to such an extent that such a feminisation of the male body, and sexual experimentation becomes a grotesque body, capable of inducing horror or laughter. Miss Leaming's attempt to dress Mark up in his "regular" clothes is also relocating his body within the gendered sphere, where his death will be read as "normal" and evoke sorrow and pity. The nature of murder is an indication of the viciousness of the murderer who sought to ostracize his son by presenting him as a sexual deviant, but also upon the society, his friends and well-wishers who see it precisely in that way – as deviant sexual tendency. They believe that it is their moral responsibility to protect him from further humiliation. What the reader sees through this process is the intolerance of a society (even in kind, sympathetic ways) towards ambivalent gender roles and non-conformist sexual behaviour.

In the final section of my paper I shall be examining the role of the detective as seen in the novel and discussing the differences in the modes of detection from the earlier models.

What appears most striking in the novel is the conclusion without any real resolution. The resolution that is achieved at the end of the novel, is an artificial one and problematic at that. The detective is working in a world where coherent, seamless resolutions are no longer possible. This is a world where the very definitions of truth and falsehood are being questioned. The detective at the end of the novel, despite stumbling upon the truth "solves" nothing. The resolution can only be achieved by murdering the murderer and covering up a crime by another crime. The restoration of order at the end of the story by delivering justice, that characterised golden age detective fiction, is jettisoned completely. The detective realises that she cannot bring the criminal to justice despite recognising his guilt. Like Poirot in *Curtain*, she realises that the only way of delivering justice is to eliminate the criminal. Thus the detective has to participate in a crime in order to dispense justice, blurring the lines between the two sides of the law. Her act also highlights the inadequacy of the legal systems. The crime scenes are reworked in the case of Mark's murder as well as Sir Ronald's to camouflage the truth. The question of the 'truth' itself becomes suspect and unsound.

James' novel comes at a point in time when various established structures of governance, systems of thought, and their veracity is being questioned at fundamental levels. The novel through the figure of its

detective, nature of the crimes, lack of resolution, brings out the complexities several of these contemporary questions.

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