Focus—Crime / Criminal / Criminality

Research Article:

The Female Detective: Apologetic or Emancipatory?

Debasree Basu
The Female Detective: Apologetic or Emancipatory?

Debasree Basu

Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, India

The apparent subversion of gender roles demands explanation if not expostulation. Genres are not so lightly diverted; the momentum of tradition could make it difficult to reshape the formula in a drastic way. The genre fiction has the ability to absorb the world and transform into literature in every possible way- political, social and/or cultural while holding onto its past literary conventions and traditions.

Rearranging or creating a home environment, the genre of female detective fiction suggests the place as refuge even when violated- domestic space as central to the self and as expression to sensibility. The agency of the female detective dictates a change but also breathes life into home, a place of origin. Cooking, taking care, recovering from within are the frequent aspects of the modern female detective than the male. By allowing them to retain their feminine space, the genre perhaps successfully combats patriarchy but also ironically runs the risk of becoming the victims of propaganda. Clear cut discrimination of gendered roles and gendered response towards detection primarily violence problematizes the emancipation of female detectives. A genre at whose inception lies a monolith of dominant masculinity, how far has the emancipation of female detective been un-gendered? She gets “she’d” differently but at the end of the day she still somehow exists within the binary.

Instead of avoiding or advocating violence, the feminist hard-boiled fiction writers sought to uncover the stories that have been silenced by social violence. Their ability to give voice to and portray the customarily ignored negative consequences of social violence opened an avenue for the female detective. Now they could explore these pathways for women to prepare for violence, survival violence, and take up violence as a tool of their own for establishing order. They displayed violence as a powerful political tool and rescued the power of the forgotten or silenced voices in these confrontations exploring a variety of
relationships with violence and power. What got created by the character of the feminist hard-boiled detective was a paradox. A woman is holding a position of masculine authority and retaining her gender and establishing an order that often challenges the politics of mainstream American society. This tenuous position of authority requires the feminist hard-boiled author to constantly subvert the social expectations of gender, role, and authority.

The most powerful tool the author can use for this kind of subversion is bringing the suppressed voices of the minorities and border dwellers to the center of the narrative. Recovering the oppressed voices, as well as her own, may be seen as a socially approved act of violence for the feminist hard-boiled detective. Violent policing by mainstream society targets those on the fringe whose politics, beliefs, or actions threaten the status quo. Traditional masculine hard-boiled detective fiction supports this process. The protagonist is usually heterosexual, male, and white. The suspects are characterized as individuals of excess and deviance, either through emotional excess, addictions, sexual deviance, or lack of self-control. Because these individuals were seen as a threat to the hierarchy of mainstream society, they exist on the fringe and then are removed from any position of power by death or imprisonment. Since boundary crossing is a powerful act that can lead to subversion of mainstream social order, these individuals must be contained and limited.

What society really fears, according to Vanessa Friedman in “Over His Dead Body: Female Murderers, Female Rage, and Western Culture,” is the violent woman. The idea of women using violence shatters patriarchal society and forces society to recognize women as subjects rather than passive objects. Since society has denied voice and authority to those who threaten to change its structure, it is unarticulated female rage that society fears. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar investigate this idea in Madwoman in the Attic, an exploration of how society conceptualizes women in extremes- either as angels or as monsters, and denies their voices. Like sexuality, the right to wield the power of violence is carefully socialized and regulated by law and made the domain of men. Society has rights of passage set up to ensure that only a selected few are privileged to use violence.

Feminist detectives inflict and endure violence to show that women can perform their roles as detectives in the face of threats. They also use the act to reveal internal conflicts, social prejudices, the power of the constructed image, and different strategies for avoiding the label of monster woman. These strategies of avoidance allow them to voice the concerns of the oppressed class they represent. They draw strength from the tools of their trade in such situations. In Volatile Bodies, Elizabeth
Grosz explains that items which are used regularly become a part of a person’s mental self-image. Feminist hard-boiled detectives use items such as clothing and handcuffs to help them construct a strong and able image for themselves as well as the reader. These women detectives remake the traditional masculine hardboiled detective’s use of violence.

The reader’s possible negative reaction to a violent female character is an uncomfortable factor that arises from this appropriation of violence by the feminist hard-boiled detective writers. Many feminist critics of the hard-boiled genre have expressed this concern about women characters using violence. In The Woman Detective and “Habeas Corpus: Feminism and Detective Fiction,” Katherine Gregory Klein does not see innovation in the mainstream popular genre of hard-boiled detective fiction. Instead, she sees too much compromise by feminism for the sake of formula, which makes the feminist detectives appear to be Marlowe in drag (“Habeas” 202). Other critics such as Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple in “Tracking Down the Past,” feel that the hard-boiled genre is inhospitable to feminism and that Paretzsky and Grafton’s violence offers no interrogation of social gender norms because there is no critical contemplation of the ramifications of the violent acts (52). In this view of the feminist hardboiled detective as copying masculine genre conventions, the protagonist is like a child mimicking her elders’ actions, but having no real conception of the power that propels those actions.

Feminist hard-boiled detectives are created to do more than parrot their masculine predecessors. Feminist hard-boiled detective authors create their protagonists to represent groups who experience social oppression. The feminist detectives have an awareness of the power that violence provides for enforcing and protesting society’s edicts, practices, and suppositions. In Sisters in Crime, Maureen Reddy theorizes the potential subversive power of violence when she writes that feminist hard-boiled detective fiction is a genre less a part of an existing tradition and more a part of a counter tradition where traditional tools can interrogate the hierarchy they once upheld (174). The counter traditions Reddy discusses utilize mainstream tools, such as violence, but for different political ends. The feminist hard-boiled detective is taking part in protest and rebellion by seizing careful control of violence and leaving behind the uncontrolled havoc found in Al Halper’s The Foundry. Banished is the image of the untamed masses rushing chaotically forward in a riot of violence and freedom. In its place, feminist-hard boiled detectives present a precise replacement and redirection of authority.
In *Dissenting Fictions: Identity and Resistance in the Contemporary American Novel*, Moses carefully describes rebellious fiction as “contemporary novels that critically engage existing political and cultural structures, creating fictional worlds that simultaneously indict and rewrite the power relationships they define” (x). Feminist hard-boiled detectives are aware that they have the power and authority to use violence to complete their professional tasks. They are also aware of the fact that violence gives them the power to oppress others and to inscribe an authority that is more in keeping with their political beliefs. But since there is a social stigma connected to violent women and the threat of violence to women, the narrative pushes the figure of female detectives to construct themselves as survivors.

Hard-boiled detective fiction is filled with violent crimes. Generally, detectives encounter at least one murder in the course of their investigation. In feminist hard-boiled detective fiction, especially in the case of Sara Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski, murder is often connected with larger political concerns (Walton and Jones 145). Walton and Jones see Paretsky using a corpse to represent an oppressed, abused, or neglected class. This extrapolation from the individual to one or more greater concerns is a common trait in feminist hard-boiled detective fiction and allows the detectives to address a social injustice by solving the mystery connected to the plight of a single individual. In this way, feminist hard-boiled detectives use violence to reveal an idea or further a cause. One victim, for feminist hard-boiled detectives, becomes the poster child of an oppressed group.

Apologizing is another way that Paretsky’s Warshawski deals with the potential negative reaction of the reader to her violence. Warshawski treats violence as a necessary tool she must use, yet one she does not relish. In *Killing Orders*, the reader finds Warshawski exchanging gunfire with a hit man, Walter. While she does apologize for her actions, it is but a one-page apology in a text of many graphic renditions of violence:

He [Walter, the injured hit man] still didn’t say anything. I pulled the Smith & Wesson from my jeans belt. “If I shot your left kneecap, you’ll never be able to prove it didn’t happen when you attacked me at the door.”

“You wouldn’t” he gasped.

He was probably right; my stomach was churning as it was.

What kind of person kneels in the snow threatening to destroy the leg of an injured man? Not anyone I would want to know. I pulled the hammer back with a loud click and pointed the gun at his left leg. (235)
Warshawski’s threats and actions are repulsive on many levels. With the click of the gun, she places herself in a position to violate the same moral norms she, as detective, is designed to uphold. Nonetheless, she remains the hero because Paretsky allows Warshawski to meditate on her actions in ways her masculine counterparts generally do not. Warshawski’s transgression of those gendered social boundaries, and the battle to retain her agency, is one fight many women readers understand. In the world of the reader, the dangers of transgression, as well as the motivations of subversive acts, are of primary concern in political fields. Chandler’s Marlowe takes it as his right to instigate violent actions without pondering their political ramifications. Marlowe violates no boundaries, because he is the one setting the boundaries in the text; therefore, he has no need to justify or mediate his actions. Warshawski’s acknowledgement of the horrific implications of her acts lets the reader know she is aware of how close she is to social boundaries, and that she is still in control of herself. She is not irrational, and does not react purely on an emotional level; rather, she is constantly thinking about the situation and the role she is playing. These processes allow Warshawski to show the far-reaching, yet personal, scope of violence, which gives a voice to aspects of violence long ignored.

Alison Littler in “Marele Day’s ‘Cold Hard Bitch’: The Masculinist Imperatives of the Private-Eye Genre” notes Warshawski’s comments about her repulsion to violence, even as she endows them with a referential quality that cites the job of detective as the validation for the action. In this case, the role of detective forces Warshawski to be in the present confrontation (128). Warshawski’s comments, such as her internal acknowledgement of the “stomach churning” aspects of her confrontation with Walter, do have a referential quality, as Littler states, but the referent is not the job of detective, but the idea of an alleged preexisting moral code (235). Part of hard-boiled detective fiction centers on the idea of a preexisting ethical or legal code, which is a comfort to the reader (Evans 163). The code brings order and sets up the hardboiled detective (masculine or feminine) as the link to a code of behavior that appears eternal and stable. In acknowledging such a code, Warshawski draws attention to the fact that she has the power to produce the morality in the text, simultaneously showing her subordination to her political/ethical code and her power to manipulate it. The reader is also reassured by the revelation that Warshawski has not abandoned her beliefs. If she were to appear morally deviant, such as Ann Jones’ irrational castrating woman in Women Who Kill, then the boundary that separates hero from criminal would be transgressed, and no order could successfully be inscribed.
Warshawski’s rhetorical remorse has disturbing qualities. Its power to soothe the audience’s objections (if any that is) is problematic. Social gender expectations demand Warshawski to apologize for defending herself and for doing her job. Yet this need to apologize is a basic uncertainty that plagues her position of authority and causes Paretsky to constantly qualify Warshawski’s actions. Warshawski’s job and position of detective endangers her life in the course of the investigation. As part of the hard-boiled genre, Warshawski the detective must confront the harsh and violent aspects of criminal life. That she must apologize for doing her job can be seen as reductive to her overall power as an effective female character and detective. Is she apologizing for the violent attributes of her profession, or is she paying lip service to patriarchal order? The graphic transgressive image of violence that attests to Warshawski’s subversion of order is firmly planted in the text and in the reader’s mind. The self-reflection allows the reader to reinitiate Warshawski back into the good graces of society. Warshawski’s connection to violence extends to receiving physical injury as well as inflicting it. Her role as detective places her in danger and does not guarantee that she will emerge from the confrontation without damage simply because she carries a gun. She often suffers from both verbal and physical abuse. When Warshawski is on the receiving end of physical confrontations, Paretsky opens up and explores the threat that her detective will be reduced to a victim and lose power as a detective. On the one hand, Paretsky must avoid creating a violent amoral monster as a protagonist. On the other hand, she must create a protagonist that will not give up her role as detective simply because she has been hurt in the line of duty. Warshawski must avoid the passivity that is connected to the idea of the victim. The question arises that shouldn’t Paretsky’s transgression be accepted without being apologetic because she does so in order to uphold ethics and restore justice? Why should the author have to dilute the intensity of the violence in the female detective’s characterization and justify it by giving it a social colour?

Where masculine hard-boiled detectives find strength in their solitude, feminist hard-boiled detective fiction authors find family ties to be empowering and bewildering. Warshawski, Millhone, and McCone are women who must create a balance between the communities they identify with and their professional associations to successfully maintain their roles as ‘women’ detectives tied to the sense of community, home, the traditional domain of woman.

Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone has a few close friendships that define her involvement with her community. Her ties to her community and its ethnic diversity are shown through her interactions with food. Like Warshawski, Millhone’s tie to
her landlord, Henry, provides her with a caring male figure who does not threaten her on a personal or professional level. Millhone’s favorite eatery is Rosie’s Tavern. Rosie, the proprietor, offers Millhone food, company, and ties to ethnic communities. The tavern is close to Millhone’s home, which allows her to bring friends as well as business associates to dinner.

Marcia Muller has created a small community of reformers in Sharon McCone’s world. Her friends Hank Zahn, Anne-Marie Altman, Hy Ripkinsky, her nephew Mick and his wife Charlotte, share McCone’s desires for social reform. Their acquaintanceships are based on a common drive to help those who cannot help themselves. The chosen professions in the group—lawyers, detectives, and computer experts—allow them to work effectively together. McCone’s life is shaped by her need to be with people who allow her to feel as if she is contributing to the social and political causes she believes are valuable. Her friendships further her goals and provide her with a strong political base. Her drive to help the oppressed inspires her to become a member of fringe communities, so that she and her friends can directly interact with those in need.

Like Warshawski, McCone’s friendships are an expression of her larger political beliefs and needs. McCone’s relationships are primary examples of the way women proletarian writers envisioned productive friendships. Feminist hard-boiled detectives rely on personal, political, and professional connections. Where traditional masculine hard-boiled detectives used their isolation as a validation of their power and right to make judgments, feminist hard-boiled detectives engage in a delicate balance of roles designed to validate their self-images and political beliefs in order to be professionals and members of social borderlands.

Sue Grafton’s first novel, A Is For Alibi, ends with a memorable violent confrontation between Millhone and her ex-lover, revealed murderer Charlie Scorsoni. Scorsoni chases Millhone, who finds a hiding place in a trash bin. The build up to the final confrontation reveals a different reaction to life-and-death situations than Warshawski’s introspection. Millhone gives the reader the pure emotion of the time:

Was I just imagining everything? He sounded like he always did. Silence. I hear his footsteps moving away. I eased up slowly, peering out through the crack.

He was standing ten feet away from me, staring out toward the ocean, his body still, half turned away. He started back and I ducked down. I could hear footsteps approaching. I shrunk, pulling the gun up, hands shaking. Maybe I
was crazy. Maybe I was making a fool of myself. I hated hide-and-seek. I’d never been good at that as a kid. I always jumped right out when anyone got close because the tension made me want to wet my pants. I felt tears rising. Oh Jesus, not now, I thought feverishly. The fear was like a sharp pain. My heart hurt me every time it beat, making the blood pound in my ears. Surely he could hear that. Surely he knew now where I was.

He lifted the lid … I blew him away…. (278)

Millhone’s reaction to the violence is not the self-assured claim of the traditional masculine hardboiled detective, nor is it the introspective and slightly apologetic meditation of Warshawski. Instead it is ripe with her emotions of the moment and filled with doubt. Millhone’s emotional upheaval is a signal of the seriousness with which she handles the violent situation. She knows that the encounter is potentially fatal for either her or Scorsoni. If she is going to take a life, she wants to be as sure it will be a case of self-defense rather than an error in judgment. Her ultimate goal is to defuse confrontation in the least violent way.

Millhone’s reaction is emotionally visceral. Her ability to make connections between experiences and events is usually logical and rational. Here, her jump back into childhood games is irrational and unexpected. The lack of a careful, calm and rational examination of the situation allows the reader to see that Millhone is reacting to the situation and not carefully planning the execution of her ex-lover. With her terror, she banishes the idea that a grudge motivates the violent act. Her fear works with her doubt to keep her from being transformed into the Jones’ monster woman who is an untamed killing force.

Millhone’s emotional and physical reactions to gunplay elicit her reader’s sympathy and demonstrate her ability to maintain her role; her reactions to hand-to-hand conflicts are more problematic. These conflicts give her a rush:

There’s something about physical battle that energizes and liberates, infusing the body with an ancient chemistry--a cheap high with a sometimes deadly effect. (195)

Millhone’s admission about feeling high and admitting the possible fatal outcome gives the reader a glimpse of the untamed monster woman. Her admissions allow for the possibility of the monster woman to enter the text. Millhone would be violating professional and social codes, and deriving a physical pleasure from violence.
In itself the admission of the rush is not enough for Millhone to cross over into the land of monster woman. It is her emotional reactions to the rush during the fight that raises the most problems for the detective. In *N Is For Noose*, a drugged Millhone confronts the murderer, Brant:

He [Brant] left the den, hollering my name as he went. Now he was mad. Now he didn’t care if I knew what was coming…. I was suddenly larger than life, far beyond fear. Luminous with fury. As I turned right out of the den into the darkness of the hallway, I could see him moving ahead of me…. I began to run, picking up speed, my Reeboks making no sound on the carpet. Brant sensed my presence, turning as I lifted myself into the air. I snapped a hard front kick to his solar plexis, taking him down with one pop. I heard his gun thump dully against the wall, banging against wood as it flew out of his hand. I kicked him again, catching him squarely in the side of the head. I scrambled to my feet and stood over him. I could have crushed his skull, but as a courtesy, I refrained from doing so. I pulled the handcuffs from my pocket. I grabbed the fingers of his right hand and bent them backward, encouraging compliance. I lay the cuff on his right wrist and snapped downwards, smiling grimly to myself as the swinging of the cuff locked into place. I put my left foot on the back of his neck while I yanked his right arm behind him and grabbed his left. I would have stomped down on his face pulverizing his nose if he’d as so much as whimpered. (319)

Millhone’s power and fury endow her with a cruelty that barely is restrained when she subdues Brant. This uncontrolled violent person is Millhone at her most terrifying. She gains partial leeway by virtue of being drugged and feeling more detached from her moral code than usual. While she gains a modicum of sympathy for being in a drugged state, in other texts such as *F Is For Fugitive*, Millhone’s comments about the rush of fighting and her desire to continue beating her opponent even when the conflict is over, threaten reader allegiance. Millhone’s wild desire to continue to crush those with whom she fights is mediated by the fact that no matter what her emotional response is to the combat or how powerful she feels while the rush is going on, she remains in control and does not cross the boundary into brutality. While in the grasp of the emotional urge to continue hurting her assailant, Millhone contents herself with the active resistance advocated by self-defence instructors. Her self-control is what establishes her in the role of detective.

Millhone also jeopardizes the hard-boiled detective’s reliance upon a code of behaviour. Warshawski’s values remain strong and unchanging, but Millhone has a
problem with the clear cut images of right and wrong: “If bad guys don’t play by the rules, why should good guys have to?” (Grafton 322) Millhone’s moral ruler slides to accommodate the situations she encounters. The unstable code gives her the room she needs, ethically speaking, to undertake actions that might seem unsavory in stricter guidelines. It gives her the right to mislead and conduct illegal searches with a clear conscience. Her use of the sliding code does not distract the reader from understanding that this give in Millhone’s code applies to her and not to the criminals she is investigating. Millhone’s code of justice does not slide when it is applied to others. Her sliding code also shows that Millhone is not as open about her political beliefs as Paretsky’s Warshawski, but she does have a belief system she tries to communicate through her actions and judgments.

Millhone is marked by the violence she experiences. It is not something that disappears at the end of the novel. Her ordeal with Scorsoni haunts her for several novels afterwards, making her wonder what kind of person kills, even in the line of duty, as seen in this discussion between Millhone and her long time friend Henry:

“I mean it. I am tired of feeling helpless and afraid,” I said. … He said, “So defend yourself. Who’s arguing with that? But you can drop the rhetoric. It’s bullshit. Killing is killing and you better take a look at what you did.”

“I know,” I said. … “Look, maybe I haven’t dealt with that. I just don’t want to be a victim anymore I am sick of it.”

He said, “When were you ever a victim? You don’t have to justify yourself to me. You did what you did. Just don’t try to turn it into a philosophical statement, because it does not ring true. It’s not as if you made a rational decision after months contemplating the facts. You killed somebody in the heat of the moment. It’s not a political campaign and it’s not a turning point in your intellectual life.”

I smiled at him tentatively. “I’m still a good person, aren’t I?”

[Henry replies] “What happened to you doesn’t change that, Kinsey, but you have to keep it straight. Blow somebody’s brains out and you don’t brush that off.” (367)

Regardless of how she bends the rules to complete a case, Millhone sees herself as a “good guy,” protecting the rights of others and correcting injustice. She cannot easily accept her actions for several reasons. Her reflection upon her actions underscores the seriousness of the violent acts. She does not take for granted her right to hurt others. This line of thought suggests that while Millhone can get out-of-hand in
physical fights, she understands the power of violence to harm all parties and is not an advocate of a violent solution in all cases. In this manner, she is not a threatening, out-of-control monster woman seeking to hurt society. Millhone is not an official of the mainstream authorized by society to use violence to maintain order. That privilege is left for the official border keepers, such as soldiers. Instead, Millhone is left wondering how to treat the situation.

Muller’s McCones provides a third and more diverse response to the violence she encounters. She carefully outlines the possible outcomes of the situation for the reader in seemingly objective terms, moves to the possible solutions, and then takes her action, be it violent or non-violent. Like Warshawski, McCones presents overt political beliefs throughout Muller’s novels. McCones’s actions, like those of the characters created by women proletarian writers of the 1930s, are designed to bring about an alternative order to the designs of mainstream society. Violence is a tool McCones uses to do this. In Wolf in the Shadows, McCones sees a sniper, Marty Salazar, waiting for her and her friends. She quickly plots what the sniper intends to do: “He’d wait to identify his quarries, had them clearly in sight, then spray them with bullets. A person coming out of the pipe would never see Salazar. Would never know what hit him” (358). McCones then couches her decision to shoot Salazar in third person: “But he [Salazar] was clearly visible to a person up here. Only yards away—easily within range of her gun. If she was a good shot. And she was—very” (258). This movement reads like an equation, with Salazar equaling the death of friends and McCones’s shooting of Salazar equaling the safety of friends. Faced with this logic, the reader cannot object to the use of violence to stop Salazar. McCones’s third person reference to herself creates a separation between perpetrator and violent act. The sharp breakdown is similar to what the reader finds in Grafton’s work. This distance between the necessary action and the female detective, McCones, must be bridged. If McCones stops referring to herself in the third person, ceases to talk about what needs to be done, and proceeds to action, the gap between direct action and responsibility is bridged. In this movement from theory to application, the socially feared image of the violent woman becomes tangible in the text.

While Muller does not have McCones directly apologize to the reader, the character of McCones does acknowledge the conflict between the idea of the violent woman and the demands of her job: “Everything I believed in told me this was wrong. Everything I cared about told me this was right...” (Muller, Wolf 358). Muller ends the confrontation with McCones taking the shot. Any graphic display of Salazar’s death is left for the reader to imagine. In this gray area between belief and
action, there is an almost apology wrapped in the logical language of cause and outcome. The reader understands that McCone sees no alternative to the act of violence and the necessity to follow through, thus her role as detective is secure in the reader’s mind. She must protect those who are persecuted and about to be silenced permanently.

Strategizing while immersed in potentially violent situations is McCone’s hallmark. In sharp contrast to Millhone’s frantic emotional responses and Warshawski’s careful introspection, McCone is focused on the situation and weighs the best options. In a careful game of cat and mouse, McCone, in *A Walk Through Fire* tries to outmaneuver Matthew, a killer. She displays her well-honed skills in on-the-spot strategy. When the time for the confrontation comes, a weaponless McCone shows her planning skills at their best:

> It [a flashlight she has] was the right color, would gleam like gunmetal in the moonlight. And if I positioned my hands on the bulb end in a certain way, it might resemble a handgun. (309)

McCone is the epitome of aggressive resistance. Her cool thoughts and abilities to defuse potentially violent situations allow the reader to see her careful consideration of all the options. Her choices then appear to be logical. The reader can validate her reasoning and does not question her choices in such situations. Her authority as a detective and her right to utilize violence when she feels she must remains intact.

In the end, feminist hard-boiled detectives pick up the tool of violence and wield it with tenuous and problematic authority. While 1930s women proletarian writers revealed the stories suppressed by social violence, feminist hard-boiled detective writers go further by using violence to ensure that their characters’ clients, representatives of traditionally repressed classes, are given a voice. These women writers bring a new point-of-view to the social violence found in traditional masculine hard-boiled detective novels, which allows for the voices of the oppressed and victimized to be heard in the text.

Through violent conflicts, feminist hard-boiled detectives like Warshawski, Millhone, and McCone confront social fears, expectations, and requirements. They manage to perform their roles regardless of the violence they encounter or the violence they inflict. But through careful rhetorical navigation, Paretsky, Grafton, and Muller keep the reader from seeing them as violent monster women. Paretsky gives the reader an introspective Warshawski, who integrates social expectations of the reader with what she feels her violent actions say about her. Grafton presents an emotional Millhone, who brings the immediacy of the violent moments to the reader
while still managing to control her often aggressive impulses. Finally, Muller’s McCone creates a logical series of outcomes that show what her actions and non-actions will render in violent situations, which creates the image of the cool-headed detective in place of the out-of-control violent woman.

Traditionally, men have been the approved dispensers of aggressive social justice. The masculine roles approved for such acts include detectives. Historically, women have not been allowed the same free access to violence and positions of authoritative justice as men. This denial sets up an interesting contradiction for feminist hard-boiled detectives, who must deal with violence as part of their jobs without being deposed from their role of detective and without invoking fear in the reader with the image of an uncontrolled violent woman.

The figure of the female detective emphasizes the feminist orientation of detective fiction. The subject matter, the reasons for writing, the desire to document as well as to explain all these, are marks of political commitment, self-conscious and unabashed position as feminists. Yet there are some signs of politics that I have tried to understand in the course of this study which have given me reasons to believe that often the so-called objective research in the name of giving agency to the female detective has unwittingly been sexist beginning from ‘partisan’, ‘feminine’ assumptions and presenting their equally ‘partisan’ conclusions as the ‘truth’. Interpreting the gaps and hidden agendas, made me a bit suspicious of the emancipation of the female detective which leaves her “transcendence” and “transgression” questionable because without major changes in the power structure and new possibilities encoded in the culture, emancipation can only become depressingly predictable. (Given that we live in a power structure where men are dominant and women are subordinate; a thought which has been hammered home for ages now, it hardly seems that the role reversals might have been unassumingly carved!) The moment we believe in definitive interpretations we will privilege essentialism even through the figure of female detective.

ENDNOTES:

1. Emphasis is mine.
2. The sentence is an observatory remark on my part.
3. The comment is a subjective remark on the thesis of the text.
WORKS CITED:


AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Debasree Basu is assistant professor in English at Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, India. Her articles appeared in a number of edited volumes and in such journals as Akademos, Muse India and Lapis Lazuli. In the year 2011 she presented a paper at the 3rd Global Conference at Mansfield College, Oxford University. Her areas of interest include crime and literature, gender studies and film studies.