

The 'Masculine' Female Serial Killer: Monstrosity in Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing*

Maryam Binth Salim & J.S. Jahangir

Abstract

Scottish writer Val McDermid through her *The Mermaids Singing*, the first book in the Tony Hill and Carol Jordan series talks about the trauma of young men in at the hands of a female serial killer thereby presenting new insights into gender perceptions and sexuality. This study pursues the question of the possibility of divergence from patriarchal expectations and is conveniently divided into three sections. The first section deals with how women crime writers and investigators have been an integral part of the history of crime writing and how they set about challenging the existing detective fiction. The second section opens up discussions about women possessing the so-called 'masculine' characteristics of serial killers taking up the example of 'Angelica' who appears in *The Mermaids Singing*. The final section takes the study into further discussions about the question of the gender and sexuality of the killer. It concludes with how *The Mermaids Singing* opposes the traditional male-centered idea of male transgression and female victimization.

Keywords: Female Serial Killers; Femininity; Gender Perceptions; Male Transgression; Masculinity; Serial Killer Fiction; Victimisation.

"I was conditioned to perceive the serial killer as a 'he' and 'she' as 'his' victim" (Vronsky11).

Does being a 'he' or a 'she' really matter when a human being is erased from the world? This study is intended to address some fundamental questions about female serial killers and to indicate some of the areas that remain unmapped. After all, it could just have been 'serial killer' and not 'male serial killer' or 'female serial killer'. Now the question arises – what lends serial killing the essence of masculinity or femininity? Why is the gender of the killer a crucial factor when it is a human being that is be-

ing butchered, one who becomes just a number among the huge pile of corpses that lends an individual the label of a serial killer? Before we dive deep into investigating this question, it is imperative to know how crime fiction sets about violating the basic generic conventions and opposing the existing discourse.

The Beginnings of Monstrous Femininity

The constant appearance of females as dead bodies in serial killer fiction has been a subject of debate lately. Women are sexually subjugated and presented as the object of voyeurism who are silenced by the investigators throughout the course of the investigation. And this has been normalized by the writers and readers alike. Women being equated to violence and dominance are still considered unnatural. Is that because patriarchal society cannot fathom the idea of men ending up in the hands of a female killer?

The dichotomy between females and males arose primarily because of the ability of women to give birth. This accounts for the demotion of women to unheard spaces. Their reason for existence is nourishing and upbringing children. As men are biologically incapable of birthing children, the capability of women to handle certain roles of men certainly invites conflicts. This is why there are definite roles and characteristics associated with the concept of masculinity and femininity and any deviation from the roles assigned to individuals deems them unfit in society. This is just one among several issues of female concern and these issues were brought to the limelight by several female writers.

Crimes have always taken up their fair share in society from time immemorial. And even crimes have been deemed masculine and feminine by their approaches and behaviors. However, this belief has also been shaken and this digression must have upset some readers as well. Matters of female concern, exploitation, and abuse have been addressed by female writers, and their introduction of female investigators into crime fiction has now found a place in the pages of history. Their presence has always been felt and has surprised the readers.

While discussing the evolution of female detective fiction, Gavin opines,

“as female detective fiction passes from Victorian originators through twentieth-century godmothers of crime such as Agatha

Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and P.D. James and on to rebellious goddaughters like Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Patricia Cornwell, a female and feminist version of crime became a clear norm. Both male and female authors created fictional female sleuths in the nineteenth century. These “lady detectives” are independent, confident, clever women who variously use knowledge and observation of domestic environments and human behavior, female intuition, and their capacity for going unnoticed or being underestimated in solving crimes” (258).

Pyrhonen observes that in the 1930s when crime fiction began taking its roots, the inclusive features of the narrative started receiving conflicting treatment. Critics maintain that this emerged as a discourse that deliberately breaches the basic conventions of traditional crime narratives opposing the practice of weaving the whole story around the heroic qualities of the detectives. By limiting the focus on detectives and their heroic deeds, crime fiction directs its lens to the offender’s intentions and deeds (44). The substantial rise of the feminist crime investigation narratives and its emergence into public awareness in the 1980s and 1990s dovetailed the process of solving crimes with a feminist point of view and thus lead roles began to be essayed by female investigators. Taking up lead roles doesn’t mean that women always exhibited heroic qualities, rather women characters began expressing the darkness inside of them, the immense capability to commit violence, and thirst for monstrous endeavors. This could have been a major blow to the patriarchal system and the readers who were familiar with the victimized picture of women.

Munt argues that the female victims occupy the pages of feminist crime detectives. On a mundane level, it may be that the reader’s interest in an investigation in which she is constructed to connive with the feeling that the murder is justified will inevitably dwindle. Perhaps the murder of patriarchs might not be a convincing spectacle. However, the never-ending occurrence of the death of female victims in these novels demands some explanation (145). Since the 1990s, the image of an angry and fierce woman hero has become frequent in crime thrillers, and they appear in the garb of female officers and secret agents mostly in the pages of women writers (Korte 186). Interestingly, women also stepped into the garb of human monsters who killed serially which could have traumatized the readers even more.

Female serial killings could be traced back to ancient Rome when Emperors Caligula and Nero reigned. Agrippina, best known as the “she-wolf”

is the notorious female serial killer to cite here. Having been the subject of her younger brother Caligula's sexual aggression and pushed into incestuous relations with him, she developed her homicidal career. The motive for her killing was her desire for power. Elizabeth Bathory, best known as the "female Dracula" who was killed for sexual pleasure also tops the list. Tofania is believed to have killed at least 600 males through poisoning (Korte 101).

By the 1840s, female serial killers driven by the lust for material gain emerged. Jane Scott is believed to have killed her father, mother, child, and niece to gain financial freedom. Sarah Freeman and Sarah Chesham, Mary Ann Milner also occupy the lengthy list. This lust for murder began to be reflected in crime fiction as well, opening the eyes of the readers to what a woman could be. With women characters, crime narratives effected a change in traditional notions of gender in the real world. It is expected to bear in mind that the portrayal of female serial killers influences the readers as well. This could be instrumental in effecting a change in the mass opinion that femininity requires empathy, compassion, and tenderness towards fellow beings and, not contempt and monstrosity.

Existing literature on female crimes does provide some profiles of serial killer women, but a bulk of literature is centered around male serial killers, most of which scarily glorifies their work. This glorification can be scary and opens up discussions as to how it would be a dangerous way to give birth to human monsters who crave fame. The American crime writer Patricia Cornwell found out through her extensive research that the eminent English painter Walter Sickert was a serial killer who goes by the name Jack the Ripper. What she earned in her attempt was massive skepticism and rejection. This fascination with serial killers is indicative of male dominance. Almost in all cases, we can trace their dark past and more importantly, then the blame falls on the shoulders of the women who raised them. Jack the Ripper is not only declared as the first serial killer in history. He is also celebrated and considered a national icon. The fact that he was psychopathic and bloodstained is deliberately ruled out it seems. Indeed, male crimes in all forums tend to be frequently articulated, studied, and even celebrated.

The 'Masculine' Female Serial Killer

Crime fiction brings to the forefront the stereotypes and gendered perceptions which compels readers to ponder on issues that are often ignored. Val McDermid's series has a profiler and clinical psychologist and their

combined work aids in the investigation of gruesome crimes. *The Mermaids Singing* stands as a prominent example of the discontinuation of traditional male-centered themes of male transgression and female abuse.

It is undoubtedly a serial killer-focused narrative in that the serial killer is given considerable emphasis. On the one side, the serial killer is a victim and on the other side, she is a villain, driven to violence by her intense desire to be praised and worshiped by others. Angelica targets men who lead a single life for they are easy to manipulate and who have nobody to come to their rescue. She contacts them through phone calls and tries to seduce them.

Angelica's actions on her male victims challenge the more typical construction of women as meat (Watson 202). It is the victimhood, the representation of women as vulnerable that filled all the discourses. Even if the killer happens to be a woman, the hetero-patriarchal society functions to deny her power and control over the act and twists the entire act as a result of her traumatic past. That could be true to some extent but there is no denying the fact that she is also capable of gruesome acts such as murder. In prioritizing victimhood, intentionality or agency is often ignored. The fact is unbearable and catastrophic for society when the murder is initiated by women. The underlying reason could be the fear of women's power to give birth and to snatch it away in male-centered societies. Angelica challenges and traumatizes the mainstream legal discourses and also exhibits the greatest potential of women. She seeks recognition and accountability for her crimes.

Angelica even maintains control over the text. A copy of her writing pervades half the book. She wants to be known for her acts that she considers praiseworthy. The celebrity status that this act imparts to individuals is dangerously high and fills the huge vacuum that a traumatic childhood left behind in their lives. Angelica's family is dysfunctional and emotionally abused. She always attempted to run from her past. She managed to get her hands on her aunt's cottage where there were hardly any human visitations to execute her murder acts. She was relieved to see that the place didn't trigger any old memories in her. "There was nothing here that could trigger off memories that would interfere with what I had to do. It was a blank tablet, with all humiliations, embarrassments, and pain erased. Nothing of my past lurked to surprise me" (McDermid 28).

Her body disposal sites demonstrate her superiority. She is letting the world know that she can come and go among them and yet nobody can

capture her. She deliberately chooses sites like the gay trade area and she tricked the investigators into believing that the murders are carried out by a homosexual. She is well-read and frequents the Central Library to gather ideas about the case of famous serial killers. She criticizes them for the blunders they had made leading them to their incarceration.

“The only mistake Nelson made was in the disposal of the bodies. It’s almost as if subconsciously he wanted to be caught. Chopping them and cooking them was fine, but flushing them down the toilet? It must have been obvious to a man as intelligent as he was that the drains wouldn’t be able to handle that volume of solids. . . . I had planned too well, every risk minimized and balanced against the benefits it would bring” (McDermid 76-77).

She tactfully diverts the whole investigation process knowing very well how the forensic scientists operate. “I checked and rechecked every choreographed move, making sure I hadn’t missed some vital detail that would endanger my freedom” (McDermid 26). Angelica’s breaching of the cultural norms and her sexual orientation makes her unique.

Female serial killers tend to select powerless victims while male serial killers render their victims powerless. This is a widely accepted fact that Angelica proves wrong. All victims she chose had excellent musculature and were sound and fit. All the victims Angelica targeted belonged to the low-risk category. To keep it simple, they all led lifestyles that didn’t make them vulnerable or physically unfit to fight back. The interesting fact of this is that the serial killer has to take risks to conquer and murder them (McDermid 221). Tony tries to win his argument against Carol that the killer could be a female. He undermines the physical strength of women when he says,

“You’re fit. You’re probably quite strong for your height. I’m only a couple of inches taller than you. But how far do you think you could carry me? How long would it take you to pick my body up from the boot of a car and dump it over the wall? Could you throw me over your shoulder and carry me through Carlton Park to the shrubbery? Now bear in mind that all the victims have been taller and heavier than me” (306).

The practice of using internal focalization techniques or first-person narration by the offenders influences the readers, causing them to scrutinize their reactions to being made complicit in the ethical dilemmas presented

(Pyrhonen 53). The audience sees what Angelica

sees. In that way, the reader could experience the angst of the character more deeply. More importantly, it forces readers to identify themselves with the narrator. It doesn't matter if the narrator has major flaws, if the narrator is capable of felonious behavior, or even if the narrator sets into a fit of psychopathic rage (Silver and Ursini 69). The pages of *The Mermaids Singing* are littered with Angelica's thoughts which she writes in her diary, harboring hopes of being published someday celebrating her deeds she thinks to be something worthy of appraisal. What garners attention here is that her thoughts are penned in a non-gender-specific narrative. Nevertheless, the readers tend to perceive them as the thoughts of a male. The profile of the killer does not in any way show even an ounce of doubt that the killer could be a female. Tony Hill in his profile says, "Our killer is probably a white male, aged between 25 and 35. He is likely to be at least 5ft 10ins tall, well-muscled, with considerable upper-body strength" (McDermid 269). He also argues with Carol Jordan saying that he is convinced that the killer is a male. "This killer's an obsessive, and that tends to be a male trait" (305).

Throughout the text, Angelica shuffles her role as victim/victor. Surprisingly, Tony Hill, the profiler who is supposed to track down the killer's profile becomes the victim. He becomes vulnerable at the hands of Angelica. He plays the role of both the victim and the hero. A vast majority of serial killers went through traumatic childhoods that took the form of both physical and sexual abuse. This is also not gender-centric. It applies to males and females. Angelica writes, "I remembered all those years of desperate hope, praying that this would be the year my mother would buy me presents like other children got. But all she'd ever done was let me down" (McDermid 297).

The theory of the female criminal postulated by Lombroso that Lisa Downing elaborates could be instrumental in our study. Lombroso says that normal womanhood includes a woman who is feminine in a physical way, maternal, passive, and immune to sexual desire (83). According to Lombroso, a criminal woman is disturbingly masculine (84). The modus operandi of Angelica's murders was 'masculine'. The profile that Tony Hill creates clearly hints at the fact that the killer undoubtedly was raised in an environment where masculinity was celebrated and praised and homosexuality was considered a sin, backed by religion. This penchant for carrying out murders in a 'masculine' way signifies a kind of power. According to Young, theorists of gender believe that the images of the body

are of extreme importance for a man's identity (70). After having drugged a dog to test her torture apparatus, Angelica recalls "He was heavy, but I keep myself in shape, and it wasn't too hard to manhandle him into the back" (McDermid 84). It might be because of the power associated with masculinity that forced Angelica to adopt methods mostly followed by men. She killed alone, her methods didn't match with the *modus operandi* of most female killers. She didn't poison her victims or just strangulate them. Instead, she tortured them sexually, killed them brutally, and feasted on their fears. Lisa Downing while commenting on the case of serial killer Aileen Wuornos says,

"it may have been the method of killing that earned her the label of "the first female text-book case of a serial killer" Wuornos' crimes, then, are unusual because they defy the norms established for the way in which members of the sexes murder... The difficulty in defining Aileen Wuornos, seems to lie in the fact that the *modus operandi* of her multiple murders was problematically "masculine": she killed alone, she killed strangers, in public spaces, using a gun (rather than the "feminine" methods of poison or smothering); and her habit of hitchhiking as a means of soliciting clients for paid sex was interpreted as a predatory method of hunting for victims" (183-184).

Angelica is an organized serial killer who carefully plans her crimes. She disposes of the bodies at unknown places and the bodies are semi-hidden to cause a short delay before discovery. Even if she disposed of the body in an open area, she makes sure the area is unattended until a specific time. Angelica kills men because in her mind it is loud and clear that the victim deserves it. "I too respect the need for punishment after betrayal" (McDermid 4). She also confesses in her records "Perhaps because he had deserved so much more than

Adam, perhaps because I had had higher expectations of him in the first place, or perhaps simply because I was getting better at what I had to do" (210).

Above all, it might be hard for the readers to digest the fact she killed not for revenge, but for the pleasure associated with it. Angelica pays a visit to the torture museum before becoming a killer. She describes the experience and overwhelming scenes she witnessed there in her writings. "How can I begin to describe the experience? The physical reality was so much more overwhelming than photographs or videos or books had ever prepared

me for”

(McDermid 3). The hardened belief that male serial killers carry out their acts only to satisfy their sexual desires and that they target only strangers is a story of old times. Serial killers also desire power, wealth, and belief, and some may kill their spouses, kids, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and relatives. Moreover, female serial killers are equally hungry for the same things as males (Vronsky 31).

Conclusion: The Puzzling Question of Gender

One cannot expect the female killer here to be a passive, dupe of a male killer. The constraints of social construct and the idea of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and how they are presented in discourses surrounding killers invite criticism.

Exhibiting violence has always been associated with masculinity. It is something natural if men step out of boundaries but it becomes unnatural when women tend to cross them. Dominating the victims, trapping them, and physically torturing them could also be imagined as the traits of a male serial killer. Nowhere in *The Mermaids Singing* do the investigators except Carol Jordan who happens to be a female come up with the suggestion that the killer could be a female. Being a female serial killer also has gendered dimensions.

Angelica deconstructed the age-old belief of subject and object relations of Western societies, which most commonly hold men as subjects and label women as objects.

Throughout the entire course of the text, she sees herself as the subject and her male victims become vulnerable objects in her hands. She is in control of the entire act of killing. Her victims are relegated to just numbers and nothing more. By keeping the female serial killer as the central focus, McDermid has contributed to ending the invisibility of female offenders and also opens up a whole lot of questions regarding the skyrocketing number of crimes, the vulnerability of victims in the torture space, and investigators’ approach to the victims that remain vague. This study also aims to open up possibilities in the field of gender studies and vulnerability studies that yield fruitful discussions about the unending burden of gender that is cast on individuals and the burden which fuels the formation of delinquent behavior which in turn tramples the very essence of humanity.

Despite the development of forensic techniques every single day, we do not see any drop in the number of crimes. One is not unaware of the chances of being handcuffed, yet they venture into monstrous acts. So it becomes necessary to go back to the question of ecstasy and pleasure equated with the act of murder rather than ruminating about the gender of the killer which happens to be insignificant in that it is a huge pile of corpses that crowd the morgue every year. The matter of serial killers should not be studied in the context of gender roles alone. In the end, the victim is a potential 'human' more than being a 'he' or a 'she'.

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