

A Detective in Search of Black Aesthetics: Glimpses of Self in Barbara
Neely's *Blanche on the Lam*

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Abstract:

The paper intends to analyze and evaluate Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* as a feminist detective fiction that serves as a counter discourse to Sherlock Holmes's tradition of mystery genres. The history of detective and mystery genres has been evaluated in order to fix Barbara Neely within the field of Detective genres. Barbara Neely presents the protagonist Blanche White to subvert the stereotypical images that are attached to black women. The theory of Patricia Hill Collins is used in order to analyse the novel and to establish that black women are capable of being intellectuals to resolve mysteries surrounded in a murder. Blanche's self and consciousness are re/formulated to re/presented new images of black women by maintaining the predicament of African American women writers.

Key Words:

Detective Fiction, Black Women's Self, Barbara Neely, Black Motherhood

Detective Fiction is a sub-genre of Crime fiction and Mystery fiction and in which an investigator or a detective – either professional or amateur – investigates a crime, often murder or murders. Crime stories have been with us since Cain killed Abel in the Bible, yet Sherlock Holmes era is considered as the "Golden Age" of English murder mystery. The general critical consensus is that the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, the father of the detective genre.

A Mystery or Detective novel, according to Dennis Porter, “prefigures at the outset the form of its denouement by virtue of the highly visible question mark hung over its opening” (Porter 86). The question mark hanging over the opening of the mystery or detective is always the question of "Whodunit"? –in other words who committed the crime. The term "Whodunit" was coined in the 1930's to describe a type of fiction in which the puzzle or mystery element was the central focus.

In Sherlock Holmes, there is a fictional representation of criminal cases in which the detectives solve the crime and identify the perpetrator. Sherlock Holmes is known as a walking calendar of crime. The Holmes stories illustrate the self-reflexivity and sophistication that have made investigative crime literature interesting to theorists. Doyle had been attentive to racial issues in English society during his time. Doyle's critics have been willing to credit him with the ability to see beyond the cultural values that he prominently represented and championed. Sherlock Holmes series reflect the values of his culture repeatedly and persistently. Doyle's crimes in common threaten the dominant bourgeois ideology of esteemed Victorian England and the perpetrators of these crimes who are anarchistic enemies of order, or aristocratic villain.

Looking back on Holmes stories from the perspective of late twentieth century engagement with crime fiction, critics have observed that they elude simple categorization, undermining rational confidence by representing inner division, seriality, the ineradicable effects of past crimes and the impossibility of imposing lasting order. Among Doyle's numerous imitators many mix-matched the formula and established different character types of detective figures with new tensions and contradictions that emerged to disrupt the neat pattern of Death-Detection-Resolution formula.

The "Golden Age" of the whodunit, is the period between the First World War and Second World War. This "Golden Age" includes female authors like Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, and Dorothy L. Sayers. The term "Mystery Fiction" encompasses the "whodunit" gothic adventure stories. Fair play is the notion that a mystery or detective story should, in principle at least, be capable of being solved by a careful and observant reader.

The idea of the mystery or detective novel as a kind of game in which the reader participates, and the corresponding clue-puzzle structure of novels invite and empower the careful reader to solve the problem along with the detective. Crime fiction, the engaging feature of detective plot has made itself more interesting to theorists of language, form, and representation, Narratology, Structuralism, and Postmodernism.

In detective fiction, the readers are always provided with numerous clues to help them to solve the mystery. The crime in detective novel was not an end in itself. It was only a means towards the goal-detection. The crime was seen as the work of an individual. The mystery that arose due to the crime could be solved by the application of logic and reason. Detective novels, in its beneficial value, provide the reader with a sort of catharsis or purging of his fears and self questionings.

Detective fiction emerged with the detective novels of Arthur Conan Doyle and his Sherlock Holmes has become a successful archetype. Detective novels are seen in terms of three varieties, one is the "Classic Puzzle", which was popular during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, and Agatha Christie was chief exponent of this type. The next category is "Hard-Boiled" that gives the stories of private eye and American type associated with Raymond Chandler. The Third category is the "Procedural" story that shows policemen at work.

The detective genre has numerous territories that include the Newgate novels, the Sensation novels, Classical Puzzlers, Hard-Boiled Detections, Noirs and The Psycho- Thrillers. Edgar Allan Poe is the fountainhead of both the Classical "locked room" puzzle and Crime Caper of dual wits. Doyle was the critical synthesizer of entire mystery fictional tradition. In between 1860 and 1890 Wilkie Collins gave a decisive turn toward puzzle oriented, book length detection by including the deepest sexual and class anxieties of the era. Frankie Bailey, a mystery writer, attempted to trace the literary origins of the black sleuth by changing the cultural, political and

socio economical contexts. The historical roots of African American Detective and Crime fiction run deeper and spread wider than those of any other ethnic or racial subset of the genre. African American characters appeared early in American crime and detective fiction as Edgar Allan Poe presented a black servant "Jupiter" in his work.

Stereotypes of Black people in early crime and detective fiction were limited in early phase of detective fiction era. In Golden Age of detective fiction, black characters generally appeared in minor roles as servants. Few black protagonists of this era were created by Octavos' Roy Cohen. Writers like Hopkins and Bruce initiate the use of Mystery and Detective fiction in African American literary field to expose social issues. Fisher's novels marked the emergence of the black sleuth into mainstream genre.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* changed the landscape of African American Literature. It was during post war period that several white writers created African American characters that deviated from the stereotypes of the 1920 and 1930. The post war saw the rise of the police procedural as a subgenre of crime fiction. African American writer Hughes Allison wrote the first story featuring African American police detective. The late 1980 is the turning point in African American mystery literature when women writers, such as Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, and Sara Paretsky began to contribute significantly to mystery genres. In 1992, African American Women Writers included the themes and concepts of "Female Sleuths" in their works. The prominent writers are Eleanor Taylor Bland and Barbara Neely who have created "Homicide Detective" and "Amateur Detective" respectively.

Lady detectives are independent, confident, and clever individuals who use their knowledge and observational capacity in domestic environments and attempt to understand the human behaviour through their female intuition. Their capacity has been unnoticed and often been underestimated in solving crimes. Female Sleuth work to restore masculine honour and generally cease once they solve their cases or get married. Old spinsters, widows and female investigators created by women authors often, implicitly have longer detective career. Writers like Collins and Mary Bradden represent females as criminals and sleuths who subverted gender expectations.

The inter-war years saw the development of daring and active girl sleuths images and the rise of male hard-boiled detective fiction in which the primary female role was "female fatale." Golden age Female detective fiction is often concerned with human relationships, social and cultural concerns, and women's position. Dorothy L. Sayer's *"Gaudy Night"*(1935) has been termed as "the first feminist detective novel."

Since 1990, African American women writers like Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, Eleanor Taylor Bland, Anthony Gar Haywood, Nichelle Tramble and Valerie Wilson Wesley have chosen to write not just one detective novel but a series of detective novels. A brief sampling of the crime and detective novels published over the past hundred years give impression of the huge diversity of the tradition that evolved during 20th century.

Barbara Neely introduces her black detective Blanche White who steps inside the world of family secrets and murder, as an unsuspecting heroine and calls upon her intuitive spirits that are strongly grounded in her Blackness. The Protagonist Blanche White, an amateur detective, usually renders her service as a cook, house keeper and a laundress. Moreover, she does not fit herself in any low wage job offered to her by companies. She works as a domestic servants and simultaneously functions as a detective and investigates the murders took place in Carter's family.

In mainstream Literature and Popular Culture black women were misrepresented to form stereotypical images about the black women. Patricia Hill Collins pinpoints the black female stereotypes thus:

From the mammies, jezebels and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes and ever present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African- American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression.(7)

All black women writers work to reform and reformulate those images as they work towards the oppression of black women. Following the tradition of African American writers, Barbara Neely re/presents Blanche White to subvert the stereotypical "mammy" and "Jezebel" images of a black woman and traces the transformation and evolution that happened in Blanche

White intuitive self that traverses from the status of a domestic servant to attain the status of Doyle's heroes by becoming a hardcore intellectual detective.

Blanche White lends a refreshing African-American female twist to the mystery tradition, as she turns from domestic worker to insightful-but reluctant-sleuth. Blanche becomes an unlikely yet ingenious sleuth when murder disrupts the wealthy household of her employers. Such a profession may seem like an ill fit for a proud, independent, strong-willed, outspoken woman, but Blanche sees no disgrace in the work that she does. She enjoys being in places where she can see how people in power really act and talk behind closed doors. However, this often causes Blanche to become embroiled in the social and political scandals that surround those with whom she comes in contact.

There was something about women's clumsiness that reminded Blanche of Deke Williams, the stunt man for whom she'd once worked. She used to love to listen to Deke explain things like how to take least painful fall, and how Charlie Chaplin had raised falling to an art form.(Neely 17)

With her quick wits and her fearlessness, she is able to maneuver dexterously through a hostile white-dominated world. An integral aspect of Blanche's persona is her curiosity and her innate ability to put together the bits and pieces of a mystery.

Barbara Neely, in the process of representing the black woman as a detective, does not deviate from the predicament of African American women writers. Blanche White, a restructured symbol of Black Motherhood, is far away from all stereotypical images. She takes care of dead sisters children Taifa and Malik along with her mother and proves to be saviour of black lineage and reinsures the continuity of Black race in racially prejudiced White America. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) words are the testimony for Blanche White's contribution to the African American society. According to Collins mothering is an empowering experience for many African American women. She adds that motherhood in all forms that includes blood mother, othermother and community othermother can be invoked as a symbol of power of African American women engaged in Black women's community work. Black women's status within women centred networks stems from their important commitments and contributions to serve their society.

The Carter family in New York is a well established upper middle class family and it is known for its financial prosperity. Mumsfield, a mentally retarded person, is the sole owner of Carter's possessions, who has made to surrender or give all properties to Grace and Everett. Neely clearly depicts both Blanche White and Grace to remain hidden from crime from the beginning till the climax. As the readers suspect, Blanche White too suspects Everett as the murderer of Emmeline. Barbara Neely reflects the thought process of the protagonist and the readers and goes on to assert Everett as murderer based on rational analysis along with intuitive skills thus: "As it was, the last thing she'd heard Everett utter was a threat against the sheriff. Then Everett goes out in the middle of the night and the sheriff is dead in the morning". (119)

Neely's Blanche White with her pure detective qualities observes and analyses events and people in and around her. Blanche White gets tactfully the help and emotional support of people like Nate and Ardel even without their knowledge. Nate, the Uncle Tom becomes the main source of information to Blanche, he who tell about Carter family to kindle the detective passion in Blanche. After his death in a fire accident, Blanche emerges herself fully as "Detective agent." She does not submit to any restriction rather enjoys life thoroughly. This reminds the readers about the benefits of the chances that take place in black women's lives:

Change can also occur in the private, personal space of an Individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also empowering. If a Black woman is forced to remain "motionless on the outside," she can always develop the inside of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. (Collins 111)

Blanche has been groomed by the female members of her community like Murphy. Murphy, her cousin, encourages Blanche White when she worries about her dark complexion by stating that "But it's only them that got night can become invisible, People what got night in em' can step into the dark and proof disappear!" (59). Murphy's role is used by the novelist to highlight the role of female bonding and female net working in black community. As Collins (1990) states that "[H]er participation in a Black female sphere of influence gave her different tools to resist, and she stimulated institutional transformation by undermining the rules governing her work". (143)

Barbara Neely's novels explore the nature, indeed the very possibility of black community at a time when the idea of unified blackness has been discredited. Neely has created a body of work that narrates the evolution of a black female protagonist who is continuously growing into her own self – mentally, physically and spiritually.

Blanche has pushed aside the idea of white feminist theory from their lives while confronting the irony of the colorline within black culture. Neely uses folk traditions such as proverbs, african divination, and spirituality that bring empowerment to black people. The author uses first person narration to reveal black women's detective experiences in patriarchal systems on both crime and justice, and despite their detective success their vulnerability is kept intact.

Blanche serves as one of the classic human trickster figures and she is being the detective who is not a detective, the investigator who is not an investigator, and the criminologist who has no degree. Neely disguises Blanche in order to break the stereotyped image of the Black domestic workers that has not yet rewritten in American culture. She, as an anthropologist, studies her employers and her surrounding environment in order to know to maneuver around them.

Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* helps to make a traditionally conservative genre of vehicle for exploring social ills especially those with racial implications and for analyzing American cultural attitudes and practices. It focuses on different social issues with the impact of racial stereotypes and class prejudices. Neely's Blanche White was a landmark character when she first hit the scene for not only being one of the few female African American protagonists in a mystery series, but also for being one of the few sleuths who reflected a working-class perspective.

Through *Blanche on the Lam* Barbara Neely reaffirms the importance of identifying one's self in life to uplift one self and community.

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black

women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as Human subjects. (106-7)

Barbara Neely's discourse matches with Collin's views on oppression and empowerment of black women. Barbara Neely unlike other female writers has chosen to work on detective genre through which she has established that genres have blurring boundaries and any genre can be used to work for the empowerment of black women.

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