

REDEFINING DIFFERENCE IN WOMEN'S DETECTIVE FICTION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE TREATMENT OF RACE IN MARCIA MULLER'S SHARON MCCONE SERIES

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ABSTRACT

Women's detective fiction is one of the most popular forms of fiction today. Detective fiction, as a genre, provides the opportunity for women as writers, protagonists, and readers to engage with their problems, concerns, and anxieties. From the 1980s onwards, the genre has demonstrated diversity and inclusiveness in terms of plots, themes, characters, and concerns. Women writers like Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky began to write their novels with a conscious feminist perspective. Their novels addressed feminist concerns and aimed for social change. The 1990's saw the emergence of feminism which became a more broad-based movement that sought freedom for all oppressed groups. It is with this understanding of feminism as a multicultural, multi-issue movement to end all forms of oppression that this paper examines the treatment of race in selected novels of Marcia Muller in the Sharon McCone series.

Keywords: *Women's Detective Fiction; Feminism; Intersectionality; Diversity; Racism; Antiminority sentiment*

INTRODUCTION

Women's detective fiction or detective fiction written by women writers and featuring women protagonists, is not only one of the most popular forms of fiction today, but it is also one of the most versatile and flexible. After the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, writers like Marcia Muller, Linda Barnes, Liza Cody, Sara Paretsky, and Sue Grafton entered the area of hard-boiled detective fiction and transformed it with a feminist agenda. Since then, detective fiction by women writers has continued to focus its attention on issues concerning women, reflecting the complexity and diversity of all the various facets of contemporary feminism. The 1990s saw the emergence of feminism which transitioned from a movement about women's issues to a more broad-based movement that sought freedom for all oppressed groups. Therefore, the novels written by women writers also began to address issues related to difference, diversity, and inclusiveness.

Marcia Muller is one of the most popular writers of women's detective fiction and is regarded as the founding mother of the contemporary female hard-boiled private eye. She is the recipient of the Private Eye Writers of America's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Mystery Writers of

America Grand Master Award. Muller has also co-edited many anthologies of detective fiction and written introductions on popular fiction, in general, and detective fiction, in particular. Muller's novels demonstrate a strong feminist agenda and faithfully reflect the changing facets of feminism. Her most famous character is Sharon McCone and the McCone series is one of the oldest and longest-running series in women's detective fiction. The present paper examines the treatment of race in Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone series, with specific reference to three novels: *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977), *Till the Butchers Cut Him Down* (1994), and *The Colour of Fear* (2017).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

From the 1980s onwards, the feminist movement began to change in terms of its focus and politics. When Walker (1992) declared, "I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third wave" (41), she was heralding a major change in the course that feminism would take over the next decades: a feminism that was influenced by women of colour who were critical about what they perceived as the blindness of second-wave feminists to the concerns of minority groups within women. According to Rhode (2014), feminists of the 1980s and 1990s were "individualistic, inclusive, and conscious of the intersectionality of identities across race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation" (15).

Lorde (1984) stated that society is conditioned to see "human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior" and in such a society "there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior" (Lorde 114). The most vulnerable of such groups are those that are made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.

The idea that categories like race, class, and gender overlap, and make visible the multiple oppressions to which some individuals are subject, was explored by Crenshaw (1991), in a groundbreaking essay that introduced the term "Intersectionality" to feminism and was a seminal work on violence against women, Crenshaw analyses how both the experiences of such violence and the effects of institutional and political responses were structured in distinctive ways by the intersection of race and gender. With this discussion, the words "intersectionality" and "identity politics" came to be identified with third-world feminism, which included Black feminism, Chicana feminism, postcolonial feminism, etc.

Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) observe that women of colour and lesbians "responded to their marginalization by the mainstream, white, middle-class women's movement" and "extended the insights of second-wave feminism by theorizing about their experiences." They called for a recognition that "identity is intersectional – in other words, (that) gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are interlocking and (that) oppression is not experienced simply along one axis" (Dicker & Piepmeier 9).

Accordingly, it was inevitable that changes in feminism would influence and be influenced by popular culture. Rakow (1998) points out that "women have a particular relationship to popular

culture that is different from men's" and that "understanding how popular culture functions both for women and for a patriarchal culture is important if women are to gain control over their own identities and change both social mythologies and social relations" (Rakow 278).

Women's detective fiction, therefore, shows the resultant changes in its choice of themes and plots. The present paper which examines the treatment of race in Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone series, uses Lorde's definition of racism as " the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance."(Lorde 115) as the working definition of racism. The paper is informed by the observations made by Della Cava and Engel (1999) on the way antimorality sentiment is depicted in contemporary detective fiction. According to Della Cava and Engel, most detective stories by women writers structure their themes and plots in three basic patterns:

In some, the issues are no more than the subject of incidental commentary, while in others the themes are more pronounced in that they affect the racial, religious, or gender group with which the sleuth identifies. In a third set of novels, antimorality sentiment is a major plot element crucial to the mystery (Della Cava & Engel 39).

When the three novels of Marcia Muller selected for the study were analyzed in the light of Della Cava and Engel's study, they demonstrated a definite line of development in the way racism is depicted.

EDWIN OF THE IRON SHOES (1977):

The novel, the first of the series, introduces Sharon McCone as being one-eighth Shoshone. She was brought up by Scotch-Irish parents. At a time when there were very few detectives of non-white origin in fiction, Sharon McCone's Native American origin distinguished her from the others. In most of the early novels, her strong ethnic features are remarked upon with the occasional racial slur like the term "papoose" which Greg Marcus uses (Muller *Edwin* 68, 135, 149, 152). What is significant is that even though Marcus addresses her as "papoose" four times in the novel, Sharon objects only once - the third time - to the racism in it. Since Sharon's biological connection to her Native American heritage is presented as being minimal, in the first few novels, she identifies with her ethnic origin only to the extent of raising an occasional objection to insults or comments.

Therefore, the novel and its early successors depict race as merely the "subject of incidental commentary," without any serious engagement with the issue. It is in the next phase, from the late 1980s through the 1990s, that there are many changes in the way race and ethnicity are depicted in the series, like the change in her self-concept and the introduction of diversity.

TILL THE BUTCHERS CUT HIM DOWN (1994):

In this novel, Sharon McCone demonstrates a decided change in her self-concept. She begins to identify more strongly with her ethnic origin and shows an interest in connecting with Native Americans. This is proved when she comes face-to-face with Anna Gordon, T.J. Gordon's wife,

who is Sharon's doppelganger. The back story reveals that T.J. was Sharon's former classmate at the University of Berkeley. He had been attracted to Sharon in the past, maybe even in love with her. Both T.J. and Anna imply that he was initially attracted to Anna because of her resemblance to Sharon, a likeness that Sharon describes as "unsettling" (Muller *Butchers* 106).

Anna is a full-blooded Native American, a Kashia Pomo, who grew up on a tiny reservation in Mendocino County. The reservation is isolated from the rest of the county and Anna is brought up in a closed community. She turns into a rebel, dabbles in drugs, and runs away to live on a dope farm, where she is found by T.J. When T.J. falls in love with her and proposes marriage, Anna is not sure whether she can trust him. She accepts his proposal when he promises to give her half the amount that he has got for turning around a dope farm run by her family that is on the verge of ruin. When they get married, he gives her the other half, too. She goes on to finish her studies and then returns to her people at the reservation. When Sharon asks why she did that, Anna replies, "To make peace with my parents and my ancestors. To take a long look at my people." She tries to help her people, especially the young people, who are of great concern to her because she points out that:

The reservation wasn't going to be able to hold them, but they weren't any more prepared for the outside than I'd been. Naturally, there wasn't anything I could do for them up there; their families didn't want me to encourage them to leave. So I hunted up and down the coast and found this house . . . The kids from the reservation know that they can come here anytime, and stay as long as they want. While they're with me, I help them develop their survival skills – and their talents (Muller *Butchers* 111).

Sharon, and the reader along with her, realize what life on the reservation is like, more from what Anna has left unsaid than from what she has said. Alienated on their land, relegated to the reservation, deprived of education, marginalized, and treated as inferiors in society, the Native Americans get very few opportunities to better their lives. This is the life that Sharon (who is a full-blooded Shoshone as it is revealed in a later novel) would have led if the McCones had not adopted her and taken her away from the Shoshone Reservation.

The fact that Anna and Sharon are look-alikes may be read as the opportunity given to both to imagine an alternate life through the other. Therefore, Anna's insights into her life are crucial to the understanding of Sharon's developing interest in her ethnicity. This is also a technique used by the author to present an alternate version of reality, by asking the reader to imagine that Sharon is Anna, making her a poor Native American among all the white, middle-class detectives, much before the truth comes out in a novel published in 2000.

The second most important change in the Sharon McCone series from this novel till the series reaches the most recent novel *The Colour of Fear* (2017), is the remarkable diversity in terms of the people of various minorities who are part of Team McCone, as Sharon's employees are fond of calling themselves. There is Derek Ford, an Asian American; Adah Joslyn, a Black woman, and former police officer; Ted Smalley, an openly homosexual person; Julia Rafael, a Latina; and Roberta Cruz, the newest employee who could also be a Latina, from her Spanish last name. As

Della Cava and Engels (1999) observe, "The redefinition of self by the sleuth and the changing composition of the office staff lend support to the idea that authors of mystery fiction are paying increasing attention to minority status" (41).

THE COLOUR OF FEAR (2017):

It is in this novel that Muller presents a story in which racism is the major plot element and not merely incidental commentary or a subplot. The novel begins in the early hours of the nineteenth of December and ends with the ringing in of the New Year. The whole action of the novel is encompassed within a span of less than a fortnight. Sharon and Hy are fast asleep when a knock on the door wakes them up with the horrifying news that Elwood Farmer, Sharon's birth father, has been the victim of a brutal attack and is in a coma at the hospital. When they arrive at the hospital, they are told that Elwood is still not out of the woods. Though the police are already investigating the case, a grieving and vengeful Sharon moves into action. This time it is personal.

When she begins the difficult task of informing her adopted family, her birth family, friends and colleagues, and Elwood's relatives, she imagines a scenario in which all the members of the Lemhi Shoshone come to the hospital and lobby for Indian rights. She shares an acute observation about her people, the Shoshones, who are normally "a gentle people, skilled in coping with adversity and hostility, but they've been pushed around enough by white society and the US government to go into explosive mode when circumstances warrant it (Muller *Colour* 14).

Though Sharon is still not aware of the fact that the attack on Elwood is motivated by racism, the passage quoted above is an indication of the discontent and anger of people who have been removed from their rightful land and forced to live on reservations. The "pushing around" by the white men's society and government is a reference to all the atrocities that have been perpetrated on these "gentle" people who have had to use their coping skills, through adversity and hostility. The history of atrocities committed on subordinated groups is always silenced by the dominant group in any society. Racism does not recognize equality between the races, and therefore racists do not find anything wrong in perpetrating crimes upon those who are considered "inferior" or the "other".

In *The Colour of Fear*, it is precisely such a group of racists, White Supremacists, that assaults an old man without any mercy. All the while, they keep throwing insults and abuses as they rain blows and kicks on the helpless man. The last words Elwood hears before he lapses into unconsciousness are, "You're lucky we don't kill you, Geronimo. The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Muller *Colour* 6). Sharon's investigation reveals that the attackers had spent some time at a local bar and the bartender tells her they had used some of the "ugliest talk ever . . . Racist stuff . . . nigger, wop, injun, slant, Jew-boy" (Muller *Colour* 79). Later, as she goes through the information on hate crimes, she finds a host of hate groups: Counter-Currents Publishing; Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan; The Society of Men; the Sisterhood; Women for Equality; Invalids and Others; Equalizers Anonymous, etc. (Muller *Colour* 99).

When Sharon goes through the list of people who are filled with hate, she finds thousands of them. A local reporter had divided the hate groups in the area into five categories: White Nationalist; General Hate; Black Separatist; Anti-Muslim; Neo-Nazi (Muller *Colour* 101). These groups are scattered all over the city and they are everywhere. It is their anonymity that is frightening. As Sharon tells another character in the novel, "There's a lot of hate in our city – against Indians, blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, LGBT people, and any other minority you can think of" (Muller *Colour* 165). Towards the end of the novel, after she has solved the case, she wonders, "What kind of people are we harboring in our society, so full of hate, so lacking in empathy, so soulless?" (Muller *Colour* 225).

The Colour of Fear is one of the most important books in the Sharon McCone series because this is the first time that she takes up the cause of the Native Americans as well as the first time that she identifies completely with them. Because she had been adopted by the McCones, she had never lived the life of a Native American, not even after she realizes that she is a full-blooded Shoshone, since she already has a life as an established professional woman. It is only after Elwood is the victim of a racist attack and she is being targeted for being a Native American that she realizes how racism dehumanizes both the victim and the perpetrator. When one of Elwood's attackers says, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Muller *Colour* 6), it is a racist saying that has come down from the early days of the white man's expansion into the West, when the Native American, the original inhabitant of the land was regarded as the enemy. The novel is important because Muller has provided a sustained critique of racism with its attendant intolerance and hate that is still prevalent in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

The examination of the treatment of race in Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone detective series follows the developments in feminism from the second wave to the third wave and proves that the series visits the issue of race in her novels. The study demonstrates what Anne Cranny-Francis referred to as "an awareness of the way the individual subject is constructed through the negotiation of several ideologies, including race and class as well as gender" (Cranny-Francis *Feminist* 176).

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