

## Re-Imagining Family and Community in Women's Detective Fiction: A Critical Study of Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone Series

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### Abstract:

After the Second Wave of feminism in the late 1960s, women writers of detective fiction re-imagined the hard-boiled genre with a feminist agenda. One of the major conventions of the genre that was addressed was that of the hard-boiled detective hero as a loner, without any ties to family or community. The dominant ideology of liberal feminism present in the novels of these writers resulted in giving importance to personal relationships. The present paper traces the development of the female protagonist through the re-imagining of family and community in the Sharon McCone series by Marcia Muller.

**Key Words:** Feminism, detective fiction, family, community

### Introduction:

Detective fiction, one of the most popular genres of fiction, underwent significant changes after the Second Wave of feminism in the late 1960s. Women writers like Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky rewrote the hard-boiled genre with their female protagonists, and came up with strategies to negotiate both gender and genre. Their detectives had to contend with the long-prevalent attitudes of society which generally assigned women to the domestic sphere and defined them by their relationships to others. The writers also had to deal with the conventions of the genre which projected the hard-boiled detective hero as a loner, without any ties to family or community. The present paper argues that in keeping with the dominant ideology of liberal feminism present in the novels of these writers, the values of family and community play a crucial role in the development of the female protagonists.

### The feminist story of development:

Rita Felski (1989) states that the feminist story of development narrates a journey "towards coherent self-hood through a moving into a wider community" (*Beyond* 140). She states, "the feminist novel frequently integrates a narrative of individual self-development into a panoramic representation of the broader social world" (*Beyond* 141). That is, the feminist narrative places a lot of significance on engagement with society and more often than not, feminist fiction charts the development of the female protagonist through urban spaces and the public sphere to which access had been traditionally denied to her.

### The Woman Detective as the Hard-boiled hero:

Since one of the most important conventions of the hard-boiled formula is the loner status of the detective hero, these women writers established their detectives as cut off from their families of origin. Accordingly, when their respective series begin, Grafton's Kinsey Milhone and Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski are orphans, while Muller's Sharon McCone is almost cut off from her family because they cannot understand her choice of life or career. In addition, they do not have any permanent romantic relationships in the series. Both Kinsey and V.I. are divorced: the former, twice; and the latter, once. Sharon McCone is the only one who is

different because not only does she have a family, but she is also happily married in the most recent novels. However, all three writers set out to question the traditional male hard-boiled notion of isolation and separation by situating their women detectives within a community.

Lewis D. Moore (2006) comments on the changes brought about by the introduction of female detectives into the hard-boiled genre. According to him, since women detectives differ from their male counterparts in the need for some kind of community, most of them begin with full blown communities that sustain them throughout their lives. Instead of being a true loner like the male hard-boiled detective, the woman detective is very much a part of the community (Dilley, 1998; Maida, 2008). For the woman PI and her author, “creating and maintaining relationships”, is of utmost importance as “The woman PI is created with a past, present, and future that go beyond the pages of the novel. Each person she meets leaves his or her mark” (Dilley 23). The present paper analyses the ‘re-imagining’ of family and community in the Sharon McCone series with a focus on the three types of relationships delineated by Muller: family, lovers and friends.

#### **Family in the Sharon McCone series:**

Marcia Muller is described by Sue Grafton as “the founding mother of the contemporary female hard-boiled private eye” (qtd. in Bedore, Howe & Jackson 50). Along with Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky, she is responsible for rewriting the genre. Her Sharon McCone series which began with *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, in 1977, is one of the most popular detective series, even today. This series situates the female protagonist within a very large immediate and extended family. Family is not only very important, but also a value for her (Dilley, 1998; Maida, 2008). Muller’s detective, Sharon McCone, is one of the very few detectives with living family members. Her family is a constant presence throughout the series and there are at least a few occasions in every novelistic installment for interaction. While some interactions are physical encounters, there are also many instances when Sharon recollects earlier interactions. It is through these interactions or what Kimberly J. Dilley calls “discussions of family” that these novels attempt to explain why the woman detective has chosen to move away from society’s expectations of feminine behaviour and become independent, daring, strong, and self-sufficient. According to Dilley, Sharon “continually interacts with family members, adapting to new situations and re-evaluating her own sense of self” (Dilley 23). Each and every novel charts the development of her relationship with these family members.

When the series began in 1977 with *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, Sharon introduces herself as a member of a large Scotch-Irish family. She is the only one in her family with black hair and Native American features, while all her brothers and sisters are fair and blond. It is obvious that she is different from the rest of the family, in more ways than one. While one sister gets pregnant in her teens, and a brother becomes a drug addict, Sharon is always focused and committed to achieving her goals. She is portrayed as being different not only in looks, but also in temperament and behaviour. It is only in *Listen to the Silence* (2000), that Sharon comes to know that she is actually a full-blooded Shoshone and has been adopted by the McCone family. She seeks out her birth family and establishes a warm and secure relationship with her parents and step siblings.

Sharon is the only one in the McCone family to pursue higher education. The chaos in the family motivates her to rebel in the only way she knows how - by becoming independent, rational, and dependable. She retains these qualities even in her latest novel, *The Color of Fear* (2017) as they have become so ingrained in her that her personality is defined by them. Sharon is always around to help out any family member who needs her. As Dilley observes, “McCone is a product of her family and constantly re-evaluates what growing up in her particular family has meant to who she is as she experiences the world as a mature woman” (23). Her opinion about marriage is influenced by the marriages and divorces in her immediate family and so, she is scared of commitment for a very long time.

In *Till the Butchers Cut Him Down* (1995), she steps in again to help out her family, when she takes in Mick – her sister, Charlene’s seventeen-year-old son and a computer expert – who had been suspended from school for hacking into its computers. Mick is very impressed with Sharon’s work and wants to become an investigator, too. In spite of many attempts by Sharon and others to convince him to go to college as his parents want him to, Mick is adamant and succeeds in staying back. Owing to her discreet wisdom and guidance, he turns out to be a brilliant computer expert and soon becomes indispensable to Sharon’s agency. In *The Color of Fear*, her birth-father, Elwood, is attacked by a white Supremacist gang and beaten up badly. Sharon’s sorrow and fear coalesces into rage and she promises the comatose Elwood, “What I’m out for is revenge, plain and simple.” (*Color* 123-124). She fulfils this promise at the end of the novel, when she fights with Jerzy Capp, the man who was responsible for Elwood’s condition. However, she leaves him alive but with a cracked skull. Sharon loves both her families and is loved by all of her family members. That she is fiercely protective of all of them and will go to any lengths for them is proved time and again. Muller challenges the conventions of the hard-boiled genre - twice over - because she took the convention of the detective as a loner without a family or connections and turned it on its head, by giving her female detective not one but two families. Muller proves that the woman detective has a strong commitment to family and by extension with the community, a strong characteristic of a feminist consciousness.

#### **Love and Marriage in the Sharon McCone series:**

The traditional detective had no time at all for a family and therefore, the male detective novel is distinguished by these lonely and detached heroes. However, it is a very different scenario for the woman detective. Since the feminist text is “a clear narrative of female emancipation through separation from a male-defined context,” according to Felski (1989), the novels featuring feminist detectives portray love and marriage very differently from the other genres.

This section argues that Sharon’s love life parallels the course of her developing feminist consciousness. In *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, she is young and inexperienced. When she meets Lieutenant Greg Marcus, she is attracted to him though he is much older and also a divorcee. This type of a pairing of the female detective and the male policemen is a strategy used by the woman writer as it gives her the method for plotting the course of the story. Kimberley J. Dilley observes that “the police officer’s mistrust of a woman investigator spurs the woman PI to try to beat the man to the solution” (27). Sharon is racing against time to solve Joan Albritton’s murder before the police, represented by Greg, can do so. In the end, when

Sharon succeeds in cracking the case, it is definitely a big victory for her professional skills, which Greg had been making fun of throughout the novel.

There is another very significant aspect to this relationship, too. As Winter S. Elliott points out, Sharon's interactions with Greg Marcus "reflects a familiar version of authority that results in an equally as familiar patriarchal relationship" (16). Greg keeps referring to Sharon as "papoose" and when she demands to know why he is using that derogatory word, he responds, "That's what they call little Indians, isn't it? Or would you rather I called you 'squaw'?" (Muller *Edwin* 68). After this rocky start, they get into a relationship that is problematic right from the beginning. Even though both share similar interests in classical music and art, Greg is inclined to be very patronizing and protective towards Sharon, often treating her like a child. Just as she outgrows the patriarchal set-up of *All Souls*, Sharon outgrows this relationship and they break up. However, they remain good friends over the course of the series.

Sharon's next important relationship is with Don Del Boccio, a disk jockey. Just like in her previous relationship, Sharon shares common interests with her boyfriend: this time, it is a love of music and food. However, Don is not her intellectual equal and they soon separate. When *There's Something in a Sunday* opens, their relationship has been over for six months. Sharon has an established career by now, and she is no longer the naïve young woman she had been in her relationship with Greg. Her disregard of danger and her assertive personality puts Don off, who begins to seem weak and too self-protective to her. However, her single status does not mean that she is prickly, independent and does not need anyone.

Later, it is in Hy Ripinsky that Sharon finds a relationship of equals, a relationship that allows Sharon to be herself, a relationship that is defined by mutual love and respect. *The Dangerous Hour* (2004) finds Sharon deeply involved with Hy, a partner in a shady international corporation that is involved in hostage negotiations, kidnappings and terrorism. Hy is a loner and for many years, Sharon knows very little about his early life, other than that he had been happily married to Julie Spalding, a disabled and wheelchair-bound environmental activist. When Julie had succumbed to cancer, Hy lost control of himself and plunged into environmental activism, leading protests and courting arrests, uncaring about the consequences. It is only after he gets involved with Sharon that he changes and mellows down. After a lot of indecision and many years of dreading the word 'marriage', Sharon finally accepts Hy's proposal, telling herself, "You've risked your safety time and again. You've risked your life, too. Why not risk happiness?" (Muller *Dangerous* 290).

At present, Sharon and Hy have a happy marriage and a successful professional partnership based on mutual love and respect. Their marriage and partnership in their organization – McCone and Ripinsky International – has taken their relationship to new levels, both personally and professionally. By portraying Sharon as a happily married woman, Muller has redefined the image of the tough hard-boiled detective, who debunks the very idea of marriage and commitment.

#### **Friendship in the Sharon McCone series:**

Other than the relationship with Hy Ripinsky, some of the best relationships that define Sharon McCone as a person are those that she shares with her friends and colleagues. A few of them like Hank Zahn and his wife Anne Marie, Ted Smalley and Rae Kelleher are

friendships that have survived the test of time. Hank Zahn is a friend from her college days and their friendship has been a much-needed support for both of them. It was Hank who had given her a job at All Souls, a law firm, and they have been friends through thick and thin. In *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, he mediates between Sharon and Greg and tries to smooth their relationship, paving the way to their romantic relationship. When Greg is unable to reconcile his growing attraction to Sharon with his previous experiences with strong, professional women, it is Hank who tells him, “Strength in a woman didn’t necessarily indicate ruthlessness or indifference to others” (Muller *Edwin* 176). Similarly, when Hank has his share of problems in his marriage with Anna Marie, another good friend, Sharon is always there for him. As Sharon says, Hank had “always viewed me as a sort of substitute little sister, to be chided and guided but never leaned upon” (Muller *Something* 150).

Rae Kelleher, is one of the most important characters in the novels. When she joins as Sharon’s assistant at All Souls, she had been the emotionally abused wife of a ‘perpetual’ student. Soon, Sharon becomes her mentor and friend, and influences her to leave the marriage. Later, when Sharon leaves her job to set up her own agency, Rae is one of the first employees. As the series progresses, their friendship deepens and ultimately, they become family when Rae marries Rick Savage, Sharon’s former brother-in-law. The relationship is still as strong as ever in the latest Sharon McCone novel, *The Color of Fear*. Ted Smalley is the third most important friend who has become an important part of Sharon’s world. Originally starting out as a secretary, he becomes the manager at All Souls. Like Rae, Ted also leaves All Souls and becomes Sharon’s employee when she starts her agency.

The others important group of friends and colleagues are from later on in her life – Adah Joslyn, Craig Morland, Julia Rafael, Derek Ford and Patrick Neilan. Adah and Craig are former law enforcement officers who have left their jobs – Adah had been in the San Francisco Police Department, while Craig had been an F.B.I. operative. They had met through their friendship with Sharon, fallen in love and are now a happily married couple. Sharon is in constant touch with them. Julia Rafael is a young woman with a troubled past – a child prostitute, a juvenile delinquent and an unwed mother – who turns out to be one of Sharon’s most trusted operatives. In *The Dangerous Hour*, when she is wrongly accused of a crime, Sharon stands by her and ultimately clears her name. Patrick Neilan is a father with two sons who had actually been tracked by McCone Agency when his estranged wife had hired them to do so. He joins the McCone Agency in *The Dangerous Hour* and is happily settled, both in his personal and professional life in *The Color of Fear*. With every one of them, Sharon is always friendly, supportive and genuinely interested in their welfare. Musing on whether it is good luck or mutual respect and trust that has sustained these relationships, she says, “I’ve always been fortunate in my friends, as I have been in my family members and employees” (Muller *Someone* 94). However, it is not merely good fortune that has resulted in the happy and committed relationships around her. Sharon has consciously worked to create and sustain a warm and supportive community.



**Conclusion:**

The detailed analysis of the different kinds of relationships that are woven into Sharon McCone's personal and professional life demonstrates that "seeing the world through community affects character" (Moore 180). The importance given to family can be seen as the feminist response to the loner status of the hard-boiled detective. According to Sally Munt (1994), the world of the hard-boiled detective is now "invaded by obligations which demand overt engagement and responsibilities" (44). Similarly, the importance given to friends and colleagues, what Munt refers to as "a progressive definition of family," is in line with the liberal feminist philosophy that informs Marcia Muller's oeuvre. Therefore, by tracing the development of the woman writer's feminist consciousness and her self-definition, this paper has attempted to prove that Marcia Muller has successfully negotiated both gender and genre.

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