

**Dangerous Femininity: Looking into the Portrayal of Daphne Monet as a
Femme Fatale in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress***

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Abstract

The phrase “femme fatale” is a well-known figure in the literary and cultural representations of women. Associated with evil temptation, the femme fatale is an iconic figure that has been appropriated into folklore, literature, and mythology. In the twentieth century, the figure finds space in literary and cinematic endeavours, particularly in crime fiction and noir thrillers. The progenitors of the hard-boiled genre of detective fiction popularised the figure of a sexually seductive and promiscuous woman who betrays men for material gain. Walter Mosley, an African American detective fiction writer, adapted the hard-boiled formula popularised by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, but altered it to address socio-political issues concerning the condition of African Americans in the post-World War II era. Mosley followed Chandler’s lead in weaving a quest narrative around femme fatale Daphne Monet in his first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990). The purpose of this paper is to look at Mosley’s treatment of the femme fatale figure in this novel. The methodology employed is a close analysis of the text, as well as an analysis of the figure of the femme fatale in its function as catalyst for men’s behaviour. The purpose of this study is to examine how the femme fatale was created, specifically what elements contributed to Daphne Monet’s transformation into a femme fatale.

Keywords: crime, femme fatale, racial identity, sexuality, transgression

A femme fatale is the epitome of feminine power and sexuality, often disdained and disrespected for using her sexual charm and embracing her primordial sexuality, which she uses for personal gain. She has the capacity to attract and enamour men with her charm, hypnotising and seducing them and leading them astray with her enticing physique. The figure has always been part of Western mythology; moreover, it has been frequently reinvented to fit changing historical and cultural mores and keep admonishing men against unbridled forms of feminine sexuality. It has featured prominently in the Western cultural tradition at least since Biblical times, starting with Eve, who is popularly regarded the first seductress. Eve is also a foundational figure in the rise of the temptress myth in Christian and Jewish tradition and culture. According to *Genesis*, when God created Adam and Eve, He warned them against eating the Forbidden Fruit from the tree of knowledge. Satan, in the guise of a serpent, lures Eve into tasting the Forbidden Fruit, after which she entices Adam to do the same, causing their expulsion from Paradise.

In the Middle Ages, women who broke cultural conventions were labelled as witches and succubi who took the form of attractive women to seduce men and drain their strength. During the Romantic era, the sensual capabilities of the femme fatale were equated with the death of the male. Geraldine, Coleridge's poem "Christabel", is one of the best-known femme fatales in Romantic literature. Geraldine is a serpentine woman embodying the darker side of human nature, who seduces Lionel, Christabel's father. The femme fatale found prominent representation in hard-boiled crime literature in the twentieth century, where they were depicted as possessing a highly seductive visual appearance, crossing discursive barriers, and appearing at the crossroads of Western racial and gender anxieties.

"Cherchez La Femme": Femme Fatale in Crime Fiction

Since its inception, the crime fiction genre has been dominated by men. Despite the presence of women authors, they, too, have operated within standard masculine norms. The portrayal of women has been similarly stereotyped—they were helpless victims or dangerously seductive femme fatales, who act as catalysts for men's behaviour. Women, moreover, often threaten men with identity erasure, causing outcomes that often lead to their downfall. As an archetype for the transgressing woman, the character appears in folklore and literary traditions across cultures. She is portrayed as sexually irresistible, a temptress, a prostitute and a murderer who preys on men, threatening them with humiliation and death.

The figure of the femme fatale is a stock component in the hard-boiled tradition, a sub-genre of detective fiction initiated by Dashiell Hammett. In hard-boiled novels, the detective's masculinity is put in jeopardy by the femme fatale. Hammett's narratives express the underlying tension between the detective's masculinity and the dangerous femininity of the femme fatale, represented by women such as Dinah Brand, the "gold digger" of his first novel *Red Harvest* (1929). Raymond Chandler, who followed Hammett's example, began publishing almost a decade after Hammett, but unlike Hammett's detective, who is betrayed by corrupt officials, Chandler's betrayals are always personal and originate in a woman. While Hammett depicts the health issues of his femme fatale—the morphine addicted Gabrielle in *The Dain Curse* (1928) and the psychopathically criminal Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) – Chandler was in the habit of consistently depicting clear-headed, lethal women who stand as a foil to his detective Phillip Marlowe and attempt to destabilize his heroism.

For his part, Walter Mosley followed the hard-boiled tradition, but he also gave expression to the complexities of African American history, including the socio-political and economic

realities that confronted African American communities. By creating a counter-discursive Black detective persona, he incorporated elements from traditional Black culture. Mosley's novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), introduces the protagonist Ezekial (Easy) Rawlins, a military veteran who emigrates to California during the post-World War II era looking for work. He is approached by a white man, DeWitt Albright, a morally suspect lawyer who has been hired by the wealthy Todd Carter to locate Carter's elusive fiancé Daphne Monet. Albright must enlist Easy's help in ascertaining Monet's whereabouts because he cannot enter places she is known to frequent in the Black neighbourhood, places such as Black jazz clubs. The novel presents Daphne Monet in classic femme fatale character, a transgressing figure negotiating the racial divide and flaunting accepted social norms in pursuit of personal gain.

Dangerous Femininity: Stereotyping the Femme Fatale

In recent years the feminist movement has questioned gender roles and caused an increased demand for political rights for women and for an expansion of their engagement in the economy. Women's increased participation in the WWII wartime economy led to the formulation of a repressive ideology towards women. This is reflected in the post-war portrayals of the underlying concerns and anxieties in the figure of the femme fatale figure, depicted as a symbol of unbridled female power and lawless agent of female desire. Feminist literary criticism is concerned with this prejudiced portrayal of the femme fatale, focusing its attention on how cultural artefacts like literary texts and movies uphold this prejudiced patriarchal view and maintain the binary between the "virtuous" and "dangerous" woman. Feminist criticism argues that the femme fatale figure was constructed as a result of male apprehensions regarding women obtaining power and freedom and removing themselves from the domestic sphere. The femme fatale is an articulation of the male ego's fears surrounding the loss of self-stability because of women's desire to embrace newfound freedoms. This led to women being villainized and discriminated against for not adhering to men's wishes and control.

Scholarship on the construction of the femme fatale follows two trends. The first is concerned with the historical construction and representation of the femme fatale figure, while the second focuses on the figure's cinematic depiction, looking into how the figure is positioned as a spectacle for the male gaze and fantasy. We can find diverse studies that are based on the historical representation of the femme fatale across various epochs, but Mary Ann Doane points out that the nineteenth century proved to be an important era for the increase in the representation of the character in literature and the fin-de-siècle era due to the "confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction (photography and cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution" (Doane, 1991, p. 9). The formulation of Laura Mulvey's theorization of the "male gaze" in 1975 in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" turned the focus of the critics towards the sexual objectification of women in media, and it proved to be a crucial aspect of the research on the femme fatale character.

Mulvey claims that women are bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning, implying that women are cast in their roles by men so that a male audience can see them as passive objects of desire, robbing the woman of her sense of self-identity. One trend among studies of cinematic representation of femmes fatales is the feminist critique of the long-held view of the misogynistic portrayal of the character as the projection of post-war male desire and anxieties. In recent years, we also observe a new trend among feminist scholarship on the femme fatale, which interprets the character as an archetype representing a mysterious power of women.

Maysaa Husam Jaber's work, *Criminal Femmes Fatales in American Hard-boiled Fiction* (2016), focuses on how women are portrayed as criminals; it also describes the medical and legal criteria that bolster this classification. The woman is always considered the "other", and the condition of being a woman always implies a certain level of insanity. This misogynistic construction is rooted in a long sociocultural and intellectual tradition, "History and literature provide numerous examples of "madwomen" who have been locked up in asylums, mistreated, and classified as "dangerous" (Jaber, 2016, p. 26). While terms like "witch" and "witchcraft" were formerly used to justify the mistreatment and control of women, the diagnosis of madness has become even more common today, which reflects the anxiety and fear that women are capable of committing dangerous crimes and resist white patriarchal order and masculine hegemony.

Methodology

This paper aims to undertake a close reading of the text while examining the portrayal of Daphne Monet as a femme fatale, a transgressive figure who leaves many dead in the wake of her greed for material gain and power over men. This paper also aims to analyse how the figure of the femme fatale was exploited and manipulated, even as it was offered as an embodiment of male fantasy. The paper also aims to examine how Daphne came to embrace the femme fatale role, and what factors contributed to her becoming one.

Discussion

The figure of the femme fatale has circulated in folklore, mythology and in literature, referring to sexually alluring and ravenous women, who threaten to bring ruination upon the all-powerful male and the male-centric societal order. They successfully mobilise their skills in a male-centric social environment, often causing men to do their bidding. In her book *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991), Mary Ann Doanne argues that the figure of the femme fatale can be regarded as the articulation of anxieties about the male ego's loss of control, because the woman leverages her sexual appeal to exercise control over it and fulfil her ambitions.

Thanks to studies in Freudian psychoanalysis and the introduction of new technologies such as film and photography, the nineteenth century saw an increase in the femme fatale's portrayal in literature. In the twentieth century, proponents of the hard-boiled crime fiction tradition portrayed criminal femmes as transgressors of the law. Hammett initiated the tradition starting with his first novel *Red Harvest*, where he portrayed the voracious femme fatale, Dinah Brand as, "money-mad, all right, but somehow you don't mind it. She's so thoroughly mercenary, so frankly greedy, that there's nothing disagreeable about it. You'll understand what I mean when you know her" (Hammett, 1989, p. 21). She is part of the anarchic world of Personville and promises trouble for men who come her way:

Then, without being able to say how or when it happened, you'll find you've forgotten your disappointment, and the first thing you know you'll be telling her your life's history, and all your troubles and hopes.

He laughed with boyish shyness. "And then you're caught, absolutely caught". (Hammett, 1989, p. 21)

Mosley, who emulated the hard-boiled predecessors in formulating his detective fiction, focuses on the themes of black male heroism, black domesticity and black masculinity, at a time of increased Black male incarceration and Black-on-Black crime. His first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), is a search for a missing woman where the object of the quest is Daphne Monet, who initially appears in the book as a mysterious white woman with a French accent. Like Hammett's femme Brigid O'Shaunessey in *The Maltese Falcon*, whose physical appearance is described often in the book, Mosley, too, puts great emphasis on Daphne's physical attractiveness. Protagonist Ezekial (Easy) Rawlins describes her when they meet for the first time, giving the reader a glimpse into the depiction of women through the gaze of men:

Her face was beautiful. More beautiful than the photograph. Wavy hair so light brown that you might have called it blond from a distance, and eyes that were either green or blue depending on how she held her head. Her cheekbones were high but her face was full enough that it didn't make her seem severe. Her eyes were just a little closer than most women's eyes; it made her seem vulnerable, made me feel that I wanted to put my arms around her—to protect her. (Mosley, 1990, p. 98)

Daphne is said to stray periodically from the white world and enter the ghetto for the forbidden pleasures of jazz clubs, Black food, and “dark meat”. As Easy accepts Dewitt Albright's offer of locating Daphne for the sole purpose of keeping his house, he is well aware that he is meddling in the corrupt business of elite forces—including the government and the Los Angeles Police Department—in his quest for locating the evasive Daphne Monet. Easy goes about inquiring about her whereabouts, visiting the clubs she is known to frequent and learning that she associates with a violent black gangster called Frank Green, who hijacks liquor trucks and cigarette shipments in Nevada and California.

Easy learns that Daphne has stolen thirty thousand dollars from her lover Todd Carter, the city's mayoral candidate, and has gone into hiding in the ghetto leaving a trail of dead bodies in her wake, including that of Frank Green, that of the corrupt white businessman Albright, and Joppy's, the bar owner who introduced Albright to Easy. Easy becomes entangled in the chaos surrounding Daphne when his friend Coretta, who is also an acquaintance of Daphne and the girlfriend of Dupree, an emigrant from Houston, is found dead and Easy is suspected of the murder. He is held by the police and is worked over by two LAPD policemen, Mason and Miller:

“That's hard to say.” I sat down again. “I was out drinking and then I helped carry a drunk friend home. I could'a been on my way home or maybe I was already in bed. I didn't look at a clock.”

“What friend is that?”

“Pete. My friend Pete.”

“Pete, huh?” Mason chuckled. He wandered over to my left and before I could turn toward him I felt the hard knot of his fist explode against the side of my head. (Mosley, 1990, p. 77)

When Easy and Daphne eventually meet, she starts a passionate affair with him. He is so infatuated with her that when he learns about the money that she stole from Carter, he makes no efforts to report the crime because he seems to enjoy the notion of physically possessing her. As an apparently white woman, her appeal rests upon the fact that she is a dangerous,

forbidden fruit that he must obtain. His yearning for her, to be associated with her, also stems from her association with the upper echelons of society. As Easy falls in love with Daphne, he describes her as someone he desires to own, even willing to risk his life for her. She uses this to her advantage, manipulating him as she portrays herself as a damsel in distress, imploring him to help her, “But I need ’elp.” She looked down at the knot of hands and said.... I am afraid” (Mosley, 1990, p. 99).

Daphne figures as a temptress, having enchanted numerous men to fall in love with her, manipulating them, imploring them to do her bidding, “When she looked up at me I had the feeling that she wanted to reach out to me, not out of love or passion but to implore me” (Mosley, 1990, p. 215). Easy is pulled to her on an emotional level. He is enamoured with her beauty, failing to recognise the difference between his sentiment and his work, thereby exposing himself emotionally. She thus acts as a catalyst for his problems, causing chaos and putting him under police suspicion. She throws his life into disarray and threatens to wreck it: “If she wanted me to hurt, I loved to hurt, and if she wanted me to bleed, I would have been happy to open a vein. Daphne was like a door that had been closed all my life; a door that all of a sudden flung open and let me in. My heart and chest opened for that woman” (Mosley, 1990, p. 230).

When Easy unearths her true identity, that in reality Daphne is a mulatto, feigning to be an upper class white woman, he confronts her and she confesses the truth:

“I am not Daphne. My given name is Ruby Hanks and I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I’m different than you because I’m two people. I’m here and I’m me. I never went to that zoo, she did. She was there and that’s where she lost her father. I had a different father. He came home and fell in my bed about as many times as he fell in my mother’s. He did that until one night Frank killed him.” (Mosley, 1990, p. 215)

She reveals to Easy her history of sexual abuse at the hands of her own father, that he molested her as a child. This results in her developing two distinct personas as a coping mechanism, which she switches between depending on the situation. The Daphne persona still loved her father, but the other persona Ruby Hanks detested him. Daphne says that her father abandoned the family, but Ruby tells Easy that her half-brother, Frank Green, murdered him. She dispassionately reveals to Easy that Ruby, her alter ego, is responsible for the death of Matthew Teran:

I pulled the trigger, he died. But he killed himself really. I went to him, to ask him to leave me alone. I offered him all my money but he just laughed. He had his hands in that little boy’s drawers and he laughed.... And so I killed him. (Mosley, 1990, p. 214)

Teran is a local politician who uses Daphne to intimidate her lover Todd Carter, Teran’s political rival. Teran is a paedophile and Daphne witnessed him buying a young Mexican boy from Richard McGee. She tells Easy that she killed Teran for what he had done to the young boy. Her loathing towards sexual predators originates from her own history of sexual harassment. Maysaa Husam Jaber says that the criminal femme fatale’s behaviour is linked to her diagnosis as a medicalized woman, implying that her criminal deeds are tied to a psychological condition or mental illness. The “bad-mad” woman dichotomy has been used in medical discourse to pathologize criminal women, labelling them as neither rational beings nor active agents, based on the general assumption that when men commit crimes, they are “bad” but “normal,” but when women do the same, they are “mad” and “abnormal.” Daphne’s

pathologization as a person suffering from dual personas and the trauma from her history of sexual abuse, calls into question her agency and her ability to be held accountable for her acts.

Through the portrayal of Daphne's inner contradictions and paradoxes, Mosley highlights the arbitrariness of the racial barrier and the colour line. Owing to her mixed ethnicity, Daphne is the product of a transgressive relationship. She expresses apprehension about racial identification because she is of mixed heritage. The city's racial dichotomy does not allow Daphne the freedom to live with Carter, her white lover, Although Daphne and Ruby Hanks are biologically the same person, the racial markers of post-war Los Angeles prevent her from living simultaneously as both persons. The racial dichotomy pervading the city does not allow Daphne to live as a white woman, as she will be haunted by her black heritage, and she can never live as Ruby Hanks because she physically resembles a white woman.

Daphne's paradoxical existence reflects Easy's own perceptions and ambiguities. When it is revealed that Daphne is not white at all, but a mulatto pretending to be a white woman, it alters Easy's understanding of the nature of his quest and modifies his relationship with Daphne, as his yearning for her diminishes: "I had only been in an earthquake once but the feeling was the same: The ground under me seemed to shift. I looked at her to see the truth. But it wasn't there. Her nose, cheeks, her skin colour—they were white. Daphne was a white woman" (Mosley, 1990, p. 213).

Her identity is ambiguous since she is both Ruby, her mulatto self, and Daphne, the beautiful white lady who is both powerful and fragile. She embodies a state of flux, as her identity shifts in response to changes in her circumstances: "Daphne was like the chameleon lizard. She changed for her man" (Mosley, 1990, p.194). This becomes evident as Mouse, Easy's partner, explains to him how Daphne can never escape the racial barriers:

She wanna be white. All them years people be tellin' her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can't have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he think she is." (Mosley, 1990, p. 217)

Mouse further explains to Easy that he too cannot escape the dominant culture's notion of racial identity and cannot transgress their given role:

She's just like you, Easy. You learn stuff and you be thinkin' like white men be thinkin'. You be thinkin' that what's right fo' them is right fo' you. She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don't know that you both poor niggers. And a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accept what he is." (Mosley, 1990, p. 217)

Both Daphne and Easy yearn for upward mobility in a racially segregated cityscape dominated by white culture, but they will never be able to totally escape their past or their desire to be equal with whites. However, Easy must realise that in order to progress in life, he must make peace with his past and acknowledge his roots. Daphne's paradoxical existence highlights and mirrors Easy's own ambiguities and the impracticality of aspiring to achieve high a status in society. For him, she represents the consequences of the wish to transcend the steadfast racial dichotomy and of opposing the current social order by transgressing boundaries.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Mosley follows Chandler's hard-boiled paradigm in constructing a femme fatale character in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), his portrayal of the femme fatale differs greatly from Chandler's. Unlike Chandler and Hammett's heroines, who adopt a double identity to escape being tied to the criminal underworld, Mosley's femme fatale adopts a mask to obtain a position of influence in white society, as she develops dual personas as a coping mechanism for the sexual abuse she faced at the hands of her own father. She does not allow herself to be caught or to be controlled by men. Easy is enamoured with Daphne's light-tanned complexion, but it is her unattainability that draws him in, as he is enamoured with the elusiveness that surrounds her. In the end, Easy is glad that Daphne leaves him for good, commenting that "I didn't really want her to stay. Daphne Monet was death herself" (Mosley, 1990, p. 216). Her presence is a challenge to Easy in two ways: she has the potential to undermine his masculinity, and she represents a part of Easy's past that he wishes to forget: his time in Houston with Mouse.

When Easy hears Daphne's confession about her horrible history, he does not see her as a victim but is disgusted with her, even calling her "death herself" because she continued to play the part of a timid, weak woman in need of rescuing, imploring and using Easy to the point that he is willing to risk his life for her. When he learns that she is from the same social class as him, his desire to conquer her fades. He thinks Daphne's coping strategy of adopting multiple personalities depending on the scenario is evil. He considers her desire for upward mobility through manipulation of powerful men in the prevailing culture to be wicked. She represents contested territory as a tragic mulatto figure, since she is pursued by numerous men for various reasons. Rather than seeing her as a symbol of female agency in a patriarchal culture, he believes she resembles death, even comparing her to the Devil, which is befitting connotation for a femme fatale.

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