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THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMME FATALE: HOW BLACK HARD-BOILED FICTION ENCOURAGES MISOGYNOIR

Monika Večeřová

Abstract

The article provides distinction between romantic and decadent depictions of women, and follows the origins of the femme fatale trope and its influence of and incorporation into the genre of hard-boiled fiction. The article examines two femme fatale figures in two African American hard-boiled novels, Chester Himes' *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990). The objective is to consider how the misogynistic nature of the femme fatale trope related to Black women characters is harmful and supports androcentric bias as represented in African American hard-boiled fiction. The article inspects how both Himes and Mosley's works reflect traditional male-oriented hard-boiled tropes while both authors depicted the environment of the novels to highlight racial and social inequity in the United States. Under intersectional theory, the article reframes the conventional hard-boiled characteristics to reveal instances of gendered racism in the novels.

Keywords

femme fatale, hard-boiled, decadence, romanticism, misogynoir, Walter Mosley, Chester Himes, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *A Rage in Harlem*, gendered racism

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IN contemporary literature and art, the archetype of the femme fatale has become allied with crime stories of hard-boiled fiction or film noir, where the trope is often classified under the title of the femme noire. The origin of the femme fatale figure dates to the Decadent period of the mid-nineteenth century France which comprised of authors such as Charles Baudelaire and Joris-Karl Huysmans before spreading across Europe by the end of the century (Ridge 1961, 352). Since its emergence, the trope has been used in varying historical and social contexts as a form of reassessment of existing notions about the suitable position and portrayal of women in society of Victorian England, and movements of Romanticism and Decadence.

For the Decadent movement originated during the Victorian period (1837–1901), which encompassed Romanticism, the Decadent authors viewed the Victorian values together with the Romantic movement as a source of revisionism and negation (1961, 353). The figure of the femme fatale, or the fatal woman, served as one of such revisions, underscoring the contrasting treatment of women in the Romantic period and the Decadent movement. While the rise of this trope positively influenced the limited viewpoints of the role of women and their place in society in the Victorian era, the femme fatale figure becoming more prominent in literature and media led to yet another form of stereotyping women.

Accordingly, Italian and French silent film, for instance, associated the femme fatale figure with "the dark forces of nature" as she "largely abjures traditional romance and passive domesticity, choosing instead to apply her sexuality to homicidal plots in the service of greed" (Boozer 1999, 20). Likewise, the United States's portrayal reacted to the sexual nuances of the figure in the 1940s and 50s to emphasize the "undercurrents of sexual, social and ideological unrest" (1995, 20). However, said Hollywood portrayals in the 1940s developed not during or after World War II but at its conception with the unrest in the U.S. mirroring European economic crisis of positioning women at the center of means of production during the war. Mark Jancovich argues that the femme fatale inclusion served to condemn women in the working force as an attempt to restore the pre-war patriarchal system (2011, 100) with women returning to their role as stay-at-home wives and mothers. While the view of the independent and thus dangerous woman may have served as an attempt to overturn the patriarchal order in European countries which might have seemed outdated, in the U.S., the antagonistic nature of the trope had been affiliated with the domestic rather than the public sphere, and classified the femme fatale as greedy and selfish by refusing to "subordinate her personal concerns" and not joining the war effort (Honey 1987, 13). It was another form of independence that the public criticized, concerned with women's indifference towards sacrificing any of their personal desires to come forward in place of men called to war; an action that the public deemed as unavoidable and expected succumbing to greater good. The femme fatale's refusal to comply with societal expectations aligned with the imagery of menacing women filled with greed and uncontrolled sexual appetites.

In literature, this stereotype became associated with hard-boiled fiction and writers such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett who popularized this figure's inclusion in literature and film. As the trope entered hard-boiled fiction, the femme fatale's ties to the "dark forces of nature" represented not only her involvement in murders through her fearlessness and deceit, but also through the underlying

meaning of her choice of clothing. As Bernard F. Dick states, "the western had long freed the villain from the obligatory black hat. Her emancipation, however, has more to do with ambiguity than equality. To appear less monolinear and capable of nonlethal moods, she frequently wears white. . . . If she appears in black, her innocence is even more dubious" (1995, 158). Demonstrating a shift from one-dimensional witches and she-devils initially supported by Baudelaire's portrayal of the woman vampire – or, the "vamp" –, this serves not only as a revelation of the character's heterogenous, multi-layered identity but also as an association of white with virtue and black with evil.

As African American male authors of hard-boiled fiction provided revisions of the genre, they challenged stereotypes of Black Americans historically presented as either victims or perpetrators of violence and public transgressions. The need to establish Black detective protagonists aimed at counterbalancing this dichotomy of white-male-oriented writings (English 2006, 773). Consequently, authors such as Chester B. Himes or Walter Mosley apply popular cultural forms of hard-boiled crime fiction to reflect on racial discrimination in the U.S., including the impact of systemic racism on social and economic conditions of their Black characters. Their inclusion of the Black femme fatale remains nearly unchanged from the hard-boiled tradition of white male authors as she is labeled just as destructive, deceitful and monstrous as her white counterpart. As Black American hard-boiled novels build upon the characters living in a corrupted society dominated by white-led organizations and dealing with police brutality, double consciousness and the legacy of slavery, the patriarchal order remains uncontested. When combined with the femme fatale trope, harmful stereotypes of African American women that date back to the forced relocation of African slaves through the trans-Atlantic slave trade have aided mistreatment and discrimination that African American women and women characters face. The notion of predictability of the white femme fatale wearing black sustains the ongoing commonality of separating the two colors as antitheses: if the femme fatale clothes in white, "it is a case of purity in color only; soon her other colors – or color – are revealed" (Dick 1995, 158). Here, white serves as a mask presented as innocence, *purity* of the character which corresponds with the decadent reaction to the Victorian paradigm of multiple masks the woman-seductress possesses.

Through the femme fatale stereotype, the society confirmed the woman's dishonest nature and, thus, the inferiority in her social standing due to immoral, monstrous actions. When lust, promiscuity and violence are attached to the Black femme fatale, her masculine and aggressive features connect to the nineteenth-

century European image of the "exotic woman of color" who "represented uninhibited sexuality to be enjoyed by Western men" (Lalvani 1995, 269). As a form of gendered and racialized violence, these colonial viewpoints served as a way of othering ethnic minorities. In 1952, Frantz Fanon commented on internalizing perspectives of the white society viewing Black people in the third person but not as three-dimensional human beings. He notes that "in the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. . . . I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders . . . Yet this . . . was not my idea" (Fanon 1952). This scheme that Fanon called the Other describes the white world's influence on Black people's psyche upon colonial imagery and creation of stereotypes such as Sambo or the Brute for Black men, and the Mammy or Jezebel for Black women. As Fanon confirms the confrontation with the white gaze resulting in deep vilification of Black people and people of color under the colonial rule, the racial stereotypes embedded in white entertainment well into the twentieth century onwards intersect with gendered racism impacting Black women and their portrayal in literature and film.

The stereotype of the exotic woman entered the femme fatale trope and presented a reimagining of the Other as African American male authors described their hard-boiled femme fatales through the male lens of their Black protagonists. The Black woman symbolizing the image of the Other is "simultaneously trapped in the double bind of a colonial discourse which either objectifies her for a narcissistic gaze (eroticism) or views her as potentially threatening to the western male psyche" (Lalvani 1995, 269). In Himes's *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), the femme fatale Imabelle is granted Romantic features while defying the one-dimensional pure woman character through careful masking of her dark nature. Mosley's main antagonist in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Daphne Monet, classifies as the true personification of the fatal woman as she lures the detective into numerous traps and exits the story as an evil influence conquered by just and moral nature of the protagonist. Both Imabelle and Daphne's unquestioned objectification in both novels is encouraged by the women's lack of remorse for indirectly causing several deaths and their initial deceit influencing the novel's leading men. Both novels display the consequence of post-colonial antagonistic view of Black women whose stereotyped categorization can be found in the hard-boiled trope of the femme fatale.

The decadent movement derived its name from the process of decline and falling away, which is reflected in the sole title of Huysmans' most renowned work *Á rebours* (1884). This work, translated as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*, has

become associated with Oscar Wilde's protagonist Dorian Gray in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as it is generally understood as the "poisonous French novel" which inspired Gray's actions. Going "against the grain" was well-known to Wilde throughout his life in the Victorian era as he joined the French Decadent authors in their contempt for and departure from Romanticism. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd writes about Wilde discrediting the Romantic ideal of being true to a single self, and notes how Wilde replaced this ideal with the "darker imperative of authenticity: he [Wilde] saw that in being true to a single self, a sincere man may be false to half a dozen other selves. Those Victorians who saluted a man as having 'character' were, in Wilde's judgement, simply indicating the predictability of his devotion to a single self-image" (1995, 38). As for Victorian women protagonists, the Romantic "ideal of a unitary self" (Kiberd 1995, 38) presented them as submissive, passive and selfless in their roles of wives and mothers. With the Decadent movement, there is a shift from the natural, Victorian woman to the modern woman. George Ross Ridge states that at first, the new woman becomes the "object of man's vanity" but soon turns to represent an "unnatural sex" as she "is no longer woman as nature meant her to be" (1961, 353). The Decadent woman becomes active and vicious, losing the capacity for love as she abandons her role as a mother figure. In this regard, there is a breakaway from one single self with the weak man being consumed by the modern woman, seduced by her manners, and met with destruction. This absence of a single self can likewise be observed at first in the woman's beauty and innocence, before she reveals her dominant side. Decadent writers further explore the theme of sado-masochism by making the fatal woman sexually promiscuous, driven by lust and sexual aggression, which consequently makes them prone to immoral, monstrous and corrupt actions.

Due to Decadence emerging as a partial response to Romanticism, there are certain Romantic features found in the femme fatale figure. Himes's femme fatale Imabelle exhibits numerous signs of the Romantic heroine intertwined with Decadent temptations she supposedly uses on the novel's main character Jackson who is chased by the police. The novel starts with Imabelle bringing a suitcase full of gold with her to Harlem, New York which then leads Imabelle's former partner and other criminals to follow her. Jackson and Imabelle get separated, and Jackson's goal to find her drives the main plot forward. Jackson's infatuation with Imabelle gets entangled with Jackson's brother Goldy's objective to find the gold. For most of the novel, Imabelle presents a myth, she is a phantom whose sole existence creates havoc. Jackson, blinded by an illusion of a relationship, is critiqued by Goldy for basing his decisions on his love for Imabelle, and thus leading both brothers to doom.

As the only woman collaborating with the main criminal group, Imabelle is underestimated by others as they laugh at her for offering help. In the end, however, it is revealed that Imabelle has been lying and the gold ore does not exist.

In the novel, it is Jackson whose Romantic ideal blinds him when his unwavering belief of Imabelle's innocence coincides with her disappearance. Imabelle is said to deceive Jackson when her sister tells him: "If [Imabelle] told you she met somebody in my house called Jodie, she is just lying. And if you do not know by this time that she is a lying bitch, you is a fool" (Himes 2011, chap. 2). Jackson's certainty of Imabelle's true intentions contradicts the perception of the femme fatale losing all the "capacity for love" (Ridge 1961, 353). In *A Rage in Harlem,* Jackson defies the stereotype of the Decadent man who is "malignant [and] [becomes] even worse because of her" (1961, 353) as Jackson's unwavering loyalty, despite being questioned multiple times, never ceases. The features of the Romantic heroine in Imabelle are revealed when she admits she knew Jackson believed the gold ore existed: "I figured the best thing was to let [him] take the trunk and get away as fast as [he] could. Then [he'd] be gone before Hank and Jodie got back" (Himes 2011, chap. 24). While this declaration confirms Imabelle's deceit that caused numerous deaths, she serves as a mere catalyst of exposing men's greed. Epitomizing the Decadent femme fatale, Imabelle "overwhelms the weak male" (Ridge 1961, 356) when Jackson is forced to steal money from his employer: "Jackson had never stolen any money in his life. He was an honest man. But there was no other way out of this hole" (Himes 2011, chap. 1). Further, she exhibits masculine traits through her use of hard-boiled language normally reserved for the hard-boiled detective and his dealings with women characters as she "was looking steadily into Jackson's eyes. Her lips formed the words 'Come on in and kill him, Daddy. I'm all yours'" (Himes 2011, chap. 12). When a police officer declares that Jackson is "an honest man, just led astray by a woman" (2011, chap. 1), the novel offers another confirmation of Imabelle's trickery. While Imabelle tries to save Jackson and affirms Jackson's trust is well-founded, she proclaims that "if any man says he's having trouble with me, you can just say that's his own fault" (2011, chap. 19). In Imabelle and Jackson's relationship, "romanticism and decadence merge with grading tonalities" (Ridge 1961, 354). It is, nonetheless, the violence Imabelle experiences that is sidelined to exhibit the femme fatale's calculating aims at men's destruction.

While Imabelle's journey begins with her generating chaos which results in numerous murders, she is revealed to ultimately deceive for her love for Jackson. Mosley's femme fatale character Daphne Monet is introduced in the hard-boiled novel as a missing fiancée of a white businessman who hires the novel's protagonist

Easy Rawlins to investigate her disappearance. Daphne is considered to be a white woman who has been regularly encountered in Black-owned bars in the Watts area in LA. At the beginning, Daphne is pictured as an innocent young woman, which is a fantasy image further supported once Easy falls in love with her for her daring, mysterious aura. As Daphne's relationship with Easy progresses from the romantic to the sexual, Daphne exhibits masculine, animal-like behavior which startles Easy who starts to ponder that she might be dangerous. Daphne's shameless, explicitly expressed sexual desires are highlighted when she does not wait for Easy's consent and seizes his penis, asking if it hurts him to love her (Mosley 2017, 187). As the novel implies Daphne's associations with love as driven by toxicity due to being sexually abused as a child by her father, it can be deduced that from an early age, she has been taught that being appreciated sexually is a sign of a healthy relationship with a man. On the night Daphne and Easy have sex, Daphne bathes Easy and he remarks that her straightforward erotic behavior is masculine. Imitating the behavior of her father by acting masculine, according to Easy, she keeps controlling situations involving her. Convinced that instituting sexual practices means that sex is what she chases, she subconsciously avoids being sexually harassed in her adulthood. Nonetheless, it is not until Daphne discloses she is passing together with her abuse that Easy classifies Daphne as "the devil. . . . She got evil in every pocket" (2017, 151). Easy sees Daphne's evil nature exhibited in numerous murders occurring indirectly because of her. In the end, she leaves without any of her trauma being resolved while Easy develops his amateur detective skills into a professional investigative vocation, and even thrives as a new owner of two properties.

Due to exerting socially inappropriate behavior, Easy labelling Daphne as evil in the end is not deemed surprising. Despite dealing with racism, Easy is still protected by established sociocultural norms of the patriarchy. When he and Daphne first kiss, it is Daphne who institutes the action. It is her whom Easy is supposed to find, and if it was not for her, he would not engage in life-threatening situations. Hence, the story establishes her as the villain as she reveals her passing and hidden ethnicity as yet another trait threatening the norm. As Easy confesses to Daphne about being suspected of at least two murders and threatened, he feels something dark inside him that he compares to "jazz when it reminds you that death is waiting. 'Death,' the saxophone rasps. But, really, I didn't care" (Mosley 2017, 184). The uncertainty of Daphne's persona is emphasized by her femme fatale characteristics that lead to even lesser clarity about her indifferent fierceness. Daphne talks in a hard-boiled fashion by calling Easy "honey" and her daring nature corresponds with her

duality further unveiled when Easy notes how her soothing causes him pain while at the same time having transient fond memories of his mother (2017, 185–86).

The main difference between the two women is their introduction to the respective novels: while Imabelle enters the story as an already suspicious woman with obscure motives, coming from the South but not disclosing from where exactly, Daphne's fiancé paints a clear image about Daphne's identity so Easy can find her. Although Jackson recognizes that he hardly knows anything about Imabelle, he is willing to sacrifice his life for her. At the end of the novel, Imabelle is assaulted and taken into custody after defending herself; she is then interrogated by a Black police officer who hits her with fierce violence. On the other hand, Daphne's character is supposed to be fixed; Easy falls in love with a white woman who excites him. In time, he discovers that the clearly articulated vision of Daphne has been deceitful, which Easy disdains. Both women withhold information and eventually deceive the men, but it is Daphne whose concealment of her true identity and race as a passing woman leads to her ultimate othering and exile from the Black community in LA.

To understand the position of the femme fatale figure in hard-boiled fiction, the subgenre became most popular in the 1930s to 1950s U.S. and with its graphic, violent nature of crime aimed at working-class, male audience. In hard-boiled novels, there is a sense of claustrophobia and internal pressure tied to the tension between the individual and wider society. With all society corrupted, hard-boiled detectives' relationship with the police is often complicated and hostile, emphasizing social critique and the action-packed nature of the genre. In hard-boiled stories, everyone is guilty and neither the detectives are commonly depicted as heroes. There, femme fatales continuously appear as highly ambiguous figures concealing their true selves from the outside world. They become the catalyst of the plot, being strong and independent with control over the events, for which they are expected to be punished.

There is an echo of the decadent movement in hard-boiled novels as the man searches for beauty but as the ideal woman weakens him, he is met with death and further destruction of the patriarchal society. Although Black American authors modify the narrative form of the genre in numerous ways to illustrate how systemic discrimination and racial inequity harms the Black community in the U.S., toxic masculinity in many ways dominates the fictional environment. Both Imabelle and Daphne are revealed to be lying, therefore pertaining to projections of male fear and desire as seductive, dangerous phantoms. Both of them harbor many masks on the inside and outside; Imabelle is underestimated for her seeming innocence and Daphne is perceived as fragile, unattainable white girl by Easy. Imabelle is beaten by a Black police officer and Easy's attraction to Daphne ceases as he discovers she is passing.

As Julie Grossman writes, the desires of femme fatales appear unmotivated (2007, 19). Their morally wrong acts occur because *they* are, in fact, immoral and corrupt just as the rest of society. They are treated as evil objects due to what their bodies can do to men. Nonetheless, this standard imagery of the white femme fatale incorporates character traits usually attributed to Black or Native women or women of color. In "Consuming the Exotic Other" (1995), Suren Lalvani provides a direct correlation between androcentric ideals and European romanticism. Lalvani emphasizes how during the nineteenth-century Europe, uncontrolled sexual appetites of the colonized women attracted the colonizers. According to the narrative, once this lust was released, that already posed a threat to the hierarchy of the countries of the Global North. Hence, apart from the misogynist representation of women who deviate from their socially prescribed binary roles, the politics of femme fatale imagery is also racialized. The femme fatale stereotype, while working with women as ambiguous figures, deliberately omits that, regardless of gender, any complex character can be considered ambiguous. This stereotype is especially harmful to Black women in Black hard-boiled fiction as it employs the androcentric point of view where any deviation and crossing of these lines threatens the male dominant culture.

The destructive attributes of Black women and women of color in the subgenre include for instance primitive sexual desires, violence, sexual aggression, masculinity, treachery, corruption, or sovereignty (Caputi and Sagle 2004, 92). The strategy of male authors of hard-boiled fiction to present femme fatales through the male lens sustains the patriarchal conventions centering the male and his pain at the forefront of the narrative. In the case of Black women characters, mirroring the white sexist notions onto them does not depict them mainly as "objects," but as animals. While white women are portrayed as human bodies, Black women's behavior is depicted as animalistic which parallels the notion of animals being inferior to humans and provides further evidence for the double discrimination of misogynoir that Black women and women of color face.

In their novels, Himes and Mosley maintain the traditional hard-boiled tropes as they depict the gruesome reality of urban living, adding hate crimes motivated by race ethnicity. From this standpoint, the stories focus on unequal distribution of power and subsequent relations between the white majority and marginalized groups. On the one hand, it can be argued that by engaging in criminal activities, the two fatal women are given the autonomy to decide their own fate and act independently. In the subgenre, however, even this view can be considered as invalid if we take into account that no person of color can truly act independently outside the constraints of systemic racism. Additionally, there are two major factors that make

Imabelle and Daphne's depictions potentially harmful. First, while Imabelle protests her assault, lies about the gold ore, and her sexual innuendos imply the femme fatale promiscuity, she lacks structured agency by mainly being talked about by the men in the novel. Consequently, her silence and lack of voice result from her absence, which shows how African American women can be in the "representational frame," as Michele Wallace (quoted. in Caputi and Sagle 2004, 105) calls it, and be pushed even further aside. Imabelle's deviance and her substantial exclusion from the plot only aid the illusion of her that others create. Throughout the novel, Jackson's faith in Imabelle never falters, and when it is disclosed that Imabelle loves Jackson the way he believed from the moment they met, we may see the Romantic component of Imabelle's true self being the same as in the beginning. On the other hand, while Daphne shares many characteristics with Imabelle – including her deception, daring nature, or sexual openness –, unlike Imabelle, Daphne likewise struggles with internalized shame from hiding her true identity and memories of sexual abuse. Her process of decline and "falling away" as presented by the Decadent perspective is concluded when at the end of the novel, she leaves without her trauma being addressed and ultimately not resolved or even mentioned after she leaves. Daphne's presence as the monstrous, masculine and malevolent Black woman offers no counterargument to her tragic ending of fading away and being completely forgotten.

In the end, the two examples of femme fatales in Black American hard-boiled fiction show how using the conventional tropes of white authors in regard to the treatment of women employ the common misogynistic outlook. This is amplified by the racial politics surrounding the portrayal of the fatal woman in the two selected novels and the implications of either silencing the Black woman's voice, denying her agency, or disregarding her emotions. This reduction dates back to the androcentric views of the colonial period which position Black women and women of color as inferior, immoral and malevolent. For that reason, the femme fatale stereotype in hard-boiled fiction can support additional othering of already marginalized women characters and overlook the fact that complex characters in crime fiction are ambiguous and dangerous by rule.

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