

REVISITING THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD BY AGATHA CHRISTIE THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN AND THEIR DESIRES

Niharika Agarwal,

Research Scholar, University of Delhi

Abstract

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd by Agatha Christie, published in 1926, is a classic work in detective fiction that is often celebrated for its innovative narrative technique and unexpected twist, also a widely known novel studied from almost all the perspectives. But, while the primary focus of the novel is on the murder mystery and the ingenious use of an unreliable narrator, that too a male protagonist and male culprit, we can explore a completely different and equally intriguing angle pointing towards the portrayal of women and their desires in the context of the story. This research will reflect on the novel through a different lens of women desires as the novel reflects the constraints and expectations placed on women during this period and subtly examines how these societal norms, their desire (material or emotional) for independence and authority, and their reputation influence their actions and motivations through various female characters like Flora Ackroyd, Caroline Sheppard, Mrs. Ferrars. The interplay of these characters' actions, motivations and desires adds depth to the mystery and keeps the plot moving forward. Christie's portrayal of women, while progressive for her time, still reflects the constraints of her era. Women in her novels often operate within the boundaries set by their societal context, and their ambitions are frequently interpreted through these lenses.

Before reaching its conclusion, the research will consider the works of other critics who have argued in the same respect. The aim of this research is to present the detective fiction of Agatha Christie through a different window of women's desires through female characters of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd & also, Murder on The Orient Express.

Keywords: *Agatha Christie, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Murder on the Orient Express, Critics, Women desires and their roles, Portrayal of Women, Women in 1920s.*

INTRODUCTION

This research will open a window to all the feminist writers who want to argue that Christie did not lack a woman perspective or feminist agendas. For example, a critic, Roberta S. Klein, mentioned that, "Christie's work may lack a formal feminist agenda, but it repeatedly subverts patriarchy." (Agatha Christie 8)

The character of Caroline Sheppard, the overbearing and possessive sister of Dr. James

Sheppard, serves as a starting point for this exploration. Caroline's desire for control and protection over her brother becomes a driving force, shaping her interactions and influencing the unfolding events.

Christie masterfully employs Caroline's character to reflect societal expectations of women in the early 20th century. Through her, the author unveils the complex layers of desire that extend beyond romantic inclinations. Caroline's desire for power and influence over her brother's life

challenges traditional gender roles, highlighting the constraints imposed on women in the pursuit of agency. Also, her wit as a woman of many sources, indicates how women were more analytical than men as she didn't need to go anywhere to gather the deepest information regarding anything which was evident with Dr. Sheppard's statement, "Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home." (Christie 6)

The character of Mrs. Ferrars adds another layer to the exploration of feminine desires. As a widow, Mrs. Ferrars grapples with societal expectations regarding mourning and the emergence of new romantic interests. Her desires, concealed beneath a facade of grief, provide a compelling subplot that challenges societal norms.

Some other characters of Agatha Christie that supports the research and its perspective are from *Murder on the Orient Express*. For example, Mary Debenham, an intriguing character introduces a different dimension to the exploration of desires. As a governess, she is portrayed as independent, intelligent and resourceful. Mrs. Hubbard, a wealthy American widow, whose desire for justice and closure becomes apparent as the story unfolds.

Linda Arden, though physically absent but plays a strong role as the victim's mother. Her desire for justice and revenge is the driving force behind the events that takes place on the orient express. There are many more characters to convince that the fictions of Christie are not only about detective fiction and male dominance but also about women's intelligence and their desires.

Thus, this research project will investigate through an analytical lens that how Christie presented the above stated being a woman writer herself. I will delve into the intricate web of desires woven by Christie, paying particular attention to the female characters and how their desires play a role in shaping their characters.

AGATHA CHRISTIE AND THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

Agatha Christie, often known as the "Queen of Mystery", was an English writer famous for her detective novels namely '*The Murder on The Orient Express*', '*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*', '*The Mousetrap*', '*The Crooked House*', etc., also short stories and plays. Born in 1890, Christie's writing career spanned over five decades, during which she created some iconic characters like Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Her works are generally characterized by ingenious plots, clever twists and a deep understanding of human nature. But not only she has focused on the detective fiction, she has often featured some great female characters who are complex, intelligent and multifaceted, reflecting a diverse range of desires, ambitions and roles. As Ana Vukelic has argued, "her women characters are usually more active, are allowed to behave badly, and be held accountable for it. Many scholars note the high number of female villains, including murderers, in her novels, but their interpretations of this fact differ." (Vukelić 43)

These characters not only contribute to the intrigue and depth of her stories but also offer insights into the position and perception of women, particularly in the early to mid-20th century. "The 1920s was a challenging time for American women. Women were expected to raise children, keep house, provide emotional support for their husbands, and in myriad ways, contribute to American society" (Rubio 1).

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, published in 1926 is one of her most celebrated works. It features not only the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, but also a great load of head strong female characters like Flora Ackroyd, Caroline Sheppard and Mrs. Ferrars the latter who drives the plot to its ultimate destination. The story revolves around the murder of a wealthy widower, Roger Ackroyd in a fictional English village, King Abbot. Hercule Poirot, known for his sharp wits, intellect and meticulous attention to detail, investigates the case. The story is narrated by

Dr. James Sheppard, who becomes Poirot's assistant and confidant in the midway but also turns out to be the ultimate murderer.

PERIOD OF ROARING TWENTIES

The period of 1920s, which is often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties", was a decade marked by significant social and cultural changes, particularly in western societies which ultimately led to a profound impact and highly influenced women's roles and desires. For instance, the aftermath of World War I led to a role shift as women took up the roles traditionally held by men during the war which led to a change in perceptions about what women could and should do in society and also fueled their desire for greater independence and equality. The Right to Vote, a landmark achievement for women in 1920s, was a significant step in acknowledging their rights and inclining them to be more actively involved in political and public life.

The period also saw a loosening of the strict moral and social codes of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Younger women, also called 'flappers', began to challenge traditional norms through their fashion, behavior and attitudes and were more open about their sexuality. They began to express their desires for relationships based on mutual attraction and compatibility rather than solely on economic or social suitability, a clear expression of new found social liberation and individuality.

Moreover, the economic independence, as more women entered the workforce, fostering a sense of financial independence that allowed them to pursue personal and professional ambitions more freely, like women's magazines, films, and writing novels etc., were the significant changes which was a great push for women towards gaining independence, political rights, economic opportunities and challenging the traditional social norms.

FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THEIR DESIRES

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

As per the thesis, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* offers a nuanced portrayal of women and explores their desires and roles within the context of early 20th century society. The novel reflects the constraints and expectations placed on women during this period and subtly examines how these societal norms, their desire (material or emotional) for independence and authority, and their reputation influence their actions and motivations through various female characters.

Caroline Sheppard

Caroline is the sister of Dr. James Sheppard, the narrator of the story. She is portrayed as an intelligent, curious, and somewhat nosy woman, deeply interested in the lives of those around her. Her character reflects how well she understands the dynamics and secrets of the people around her. Her well-connected relations with everyone, shows her desire for social engagement. "It wasn't Annie who told me. It was the milkman. He had it from the Ferrarses' cook" (Christie 7). Caroline's keen observation skills and ability to gather information make her an unofficial detective in her own right, often providing crucial insights into the case. Her primary desire for knowledge and involvement in the mysteries and events surrounding her depicts how she was not content with the passive, domestic role typically ascribed to women of her time, therefore challenging the traditional boundaries.

Through Caroline, Christie may be commenting on the broader themes of women's roles and desires in the 1920s. Caroline represents a woman whose ambitions and actions defy the stereotypical domesticity of the time, embodying a more modern, involved, and intellectually active woman.

Flora Ackroyd

Flora Ackroyd, a pivotal character, is the niece of the murder victim, Roger Ackroyd. Initially, she is presented as a conventional and somewhat naive young woman of the era, who appears to be deeply distressed by her uncle's death and concerned for her fiancé, Ralph Paton (Ackroyd's stepson), who becomes the prime suspect in the murder. One of Flora's primary desires is financial security. This desire is reflective of the social and economic conditions of the time, where marriage was often a means for women to secure their financial future. Her engagement to Ralph Paton can be seen in this light – a step towards securing a stable and comfortable life, simultaneously bringing her into conflict with societal norms of honesty and integrity. Also, her actions in the novel also suggest a desire for a certain level of independence and agency. This is evident in how she actively engages with the investigation, showing a degree of assertiveness and intelligence, challenging the traditional passive role of women in detective fiction of the era.

As the story progresses, Flora's character reveals greater complexity. Her involvement in certain deceptive acts – such as duplicity in her alibi – is driven partly by her desires and fears, motivated by a mix of personal and financial concerns which is shown when Poirot asks her, “You took the money, did you not?” (Christie 156). This deception is a significant plot point and adds depth to her character, showing her as capable of manipulation and not merely an innocent damsel in distress. And, by the end of the novel, Flora's character undergoes a transformation. The resolution of the murder and the revelations about various characters, including herself, allow her to reassess her priorities and desires. This change is indicative of her personal growth through the course of the narrative.

Mrs. Ferrars

Mrs. Ferrars is a wealthy widow who lives in the same village as Roger Ackroyd. While Mrs. Ferrars does not appear directly in the narrative, because she is presented as dead from the beginning, her character serves as a catalyst for the progress of the events. Her actions, desires, and ultimate fate drive

the plot and highlight themes of guilt, desperation, and the impact of societal pressures on individual lives.

Her husband's death, a few years prior to the events of the novel, is shrouded in mystery and scandal. She is described as a beautiful and intelligent woman but is also perceived as troubled, especially towards the end of her life. One of the primary desires that can be inferred about Mrs. Ferrars is her longing for love and companionship. This is evident in her relationship with Roger Ackroyd. Despite the complexities surrounding their relationship, there is an implication that she genuinely cared for Ackroyd and saw a future with him.

Mrs. Ferrars was haunted by a significant secret – poisoning her first husband. This act, driven by her desire to escape an unhappy marriage, becomes a source of immense guilt and distress for her. Her secret not only affects her mental health but also leaves her vulnerable to blackmail. Her actions are significantly influenced by her desire to free herself from the blackmail she faces from her husband's murder and her own guilt.

The societal expectations of the time play a crucial role in shaping her life and actions. As a woman, her options to escape an unhappy marriage or deal with her guilt are limited and the fear of social scandal and the repercussions of her actions confine her within a set of difficult choices. As a result, her story ends tragically with her suicide, which is a direct result of her inability to cope with her guilt and the pressure of being blackmailed. Her death sets the stage for the events of the novel and significantly impacts the lives of other characters, particularly Roger Ackroyd.

The interplay of these characters' actions, motivations and desires adds depth to the mystery and keeps the plot moving forward. Mrs. Ferrars' tragic past and actions are the catalysts for the events of the novel. On one hand, she conforms to societal expectations through her role as a respectable widow but the revelations of having poisoned her abusive husband on the other hand,

challenges the passive and submissive stereotype of women. Flora's behavior and her own secrets add layers of complexity and misdirection. She is portrayed as a typical young woman concerned with her engagement and future, embodying 1920s ideals of a woman whose primary focus is on marriage and financial stability. However, she challenges these expectations and shows a degree of independence and assertiveness, particularly in her interactions with Hercule Poirot. Caroline's role, although more peripheral, provides an interesting contrast to these societal norms. Her character portrayed as an intelligent, observant woman challenges the stereotypes of passive, uninvolved spinster. Her active engagement, sharp insights and role as a confidante to her brother positions her as a quiet influential figure.

IN MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

Mary Debenham

Mary is a governess traveling on the Orient Express. She is portrayed as independent, intelligent, and resourceful. In a society where women were often confined to traditional gender roles, Mary seeks freedom from societal expectations. Her decision to pursue a romantic relationship with Colonel Arbuthnot reflects her desire for love and companionship on her own terms, rather than conforming to societal norms.

Mrs. Hubbard

Mrs. Hubbard is a wealthy American widow who is traveling alone on the Orient Express. While initially presented as a frivolous and talkative character, her desire for justice and closure becomes apparent as the story unfolds which reflects her desire for accountability and moral righteousness.

Princess Dragomiroff

Princess Dragomiroff is a regal and imposing figure who commands respect from those around her. Despite her aristocratic background, she harbours a desire for connection and understanding. Her

relationship with her companion, Greta Ohlsson, reveals a tender and compassionate side to her character highlighting the universal need for human connection.

Countess Andrenyi

Countess Andrenyi is a mysterious and enigmatic character whose true motives are shrouded in secrecy. Her desire for self-preservation drives her actions throughout the novel. Despite her outward appearance of sophistication and grace, Countess Andrenyi is willing to do whatever it takes to protect herself and her husband from suspicion. Her cunning and resourcefulness highlight the complexities of female desire and the lengths to which women will go to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Hildegard Schmidt

Hildegard Schmidt is Princess Dragomiroff's loyal maid, whose desire for loyalty and duty is unwavering. Despite her subordinate position, Hildegard demonstrates strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

Linda Arden

While not a passenger on the train, Linda Arden plays a significant role in the story as the mother of the murder victim, Daisy Armstrong. Her desire for justice and revenge is a driving force behind the events that unfold on the Orient Express. Linda's determination to seek vengeance for her daughter's death illustrates the depths of a mother's love and the lengths she will go to protect her child.

Through the desires of these female characters, *Murder on the Orient Express* explores themes of love, justice, and the complexities of human nature. From Mary Debenham's quest for autonomy to Mrs. Hubbard's pursuit of truth, each character's desires shape the narrative and reveal the multifaceted nature of women's desires in society. Agatha Christie's masterful storytelling highlights the strength, resilience, and complexity of women in a male-dominated world, offering a nuanced portrayal of female characters and their motivations.

Narrative technique

Agatha Christie's narrative style in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is particularly notable for its innovative use of the unreliable narrator, a technique that significantly impacts the portrayal of women's desires in the novel.

The novel is narrated in the first person by Dr. James Sheppard, who, as the story unfolds, is revealed to be an unreliable narrator and the ultimate murderer. This narrative choice is crucial as it directly influences how the characters, particularly the female characters, are perceived. Through Dr. Sheppard's perspective, the desires and motivations of female characters like Flora Ackroyd and Mrs. Ferrars, at times his sister, Caroline as well, are initially presented in a certain light, often coloured by his perceptions and societal norms. This can lead to the reader initially misunderstanding or underestimating these characters.

But Christie's narrative style allows for a subtle and layered portrayal of female characters. The reader's understanding of characters like Flora and Mrs. Ferrars evolves as the narrative progresses and as more information is revealed. The way they are initially presented versus their true motives and desires, such as Flora's financial motivations and Mrs. Ferrars' desire for freedom from her past, reflects the societal tendency to underestimate or misinterpret women. This contrast is crucial in understanding the depths and complexities of the female characters' desires. It highlights the societal constraints they face and the often-ingenuous ways they navigate these constraints.

A key aspect of Christie's narrative style is the contrast between appearance and reality, which is especially relevant to the female characters. Christie skillfully uses dialogue and Dr. Sheppard's observations to reveal character traits and desires. The way female characters speak and are spoken about provides insights into their personalities and motivations.

The novel's famous twist ending not only changes the reader's understanding of the entire story but also recontextualizes the actions and

desires of the female characters. The revelation of the narrator's unreliability forces a re-evaluation of the women's actions and motivations throughout the novel, emphasizing the theme of hidden depths and desires beneath societal facades.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S DESIRES IN THE NOVELS WITH CONTEMPORARY ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN AND THEIR AMBITIONS.

In the novels, women's desires and ambitions are often framed within the norms of the 1920s. For instance, Flora Ackroyd's character initially appears to be driven by traditional desires—marriage and financial security. Mrs. Ferrars is portrayed as a woman burdened by her past actions and societal judgment. Their ambitions and actions are subtly constrained by the societal expectations of the time, reflecting the limited roles and options available to women. Their deeper, more complex motivations are revealed only as the plot unfolds, highlighting the tendency to overlook or misinterpret women's true desires.

Today, there is a broader understanding and acceptance of diverse ambitions and desires among women. Contemporary literature and media often portray women in a wide range of roles, from leaders in business and politics to protagonists in their own complex narratives.

The emphasis is on individuality and the recognition that women's desires and ambitions are as varied and nuanced as those of men. This is a significant shift from the more homogenized and constrained portrayals of women in earlier literature, including works from Christie's era.

Christie's portrayal of women, while progressive for her time, still reflects the constraints of her era. Women in her novels often operate within the boundaries set by their societal context, and their ambitions are frequently interpreted

through these lenses. As M. Vipond also stated in his article,

“Christie thus presented seemingly contradictory images of women—the independent, self-sufficient, capable and courageous woman who is respected for those qualities and treated as an equal partner in adventure and in life coexisted with the silly, emotional woman who has no identity except through her husband and children. But the lines kept crossing; the independent young flapper heroines wanted to settle down to marriage and children, and the silly ditherers often turned out to be made of steel” (VIPOND 4).

Modern literature, however, tends to offer a more expansive and varied portrayal of women, with characters that challenge traditional gender roles and exhibit a wide range of desires and ambitions, reflecting the ongoing societal conversations about gender equality.

In the novel, Flora's decision to bring Poirot into the investigation and Mrs. Ferrars' actions that set the novel's events in motion demonstrate their agency, thus reflecting modern views that recognize women as active decision-makers.

Today, there is a greater emphasis on women pursuing diverse paths beyond traditional roles. Christie's portrayal, while progressive for her time, might be seen as reinforcing certain stereotypes from a modern standpoint. The novel challenges the notion of women as inherently moral or virtuous. Mrs. Ferrars' backstory and Flora's deceptive actions present women as capable of moral complexity, which aligns with modern views that reject simplistic notions of gendered morality.

While romance and marriage are significant elements, the novel also touches on desires related to independence, security, and freedom from societal judgment. This aspect resonates with modern narratives that portray women with diverse desires and goals, not limited to romantic endeavours.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* reflects and explores the theme of women's desires in early 20th-century society by portraying female characters who grapple with societal expectations, desire for autonomy, and the complexities of navigating their roles in a patriarchal society. Christie's treatment of these themes is subtle yet insightful, offering a window into the lives and challenges faced by women during this period. The period was marked by a dynamic tension between old and new, significantly influencing the path of women's rights and gender roles in the years to come.

Christie's female characters in *The Murder on The Orient Express* are not just accessories to the plot; they drive the story forward with their actions and decisions. They reflect the evolving roles and aspirations of women during Christie's time, showcasing a range of desires from independence and professional fulfilment to love, security, and intellectual engagement. Through these characters, Christie subtly comments on and critiques the societal norms and expectations of women, making her works significant not just for their mystery and intrigue but also for their portrayal of women's experiences and desires.

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