Serial Killing as a Defence Mechanism: A Study of Thomas Harris’s “The Silence of the Lambs”

Jerrin Aleyamma John
B. Ed Student
Department of English
Mount Carmel College of Teacher Education
Kottayam, Kerala, India
Jerrinajohn95@gmail.com

Abstract

The literary canon carries with it a huge array of possible writings exploring the various contours of fiction, the genre of Detective fiction is one such umbrella term. The effect of mystery and suspense and the surprise factors being hidden away in the pages, keeps the readers glued to detective fiction. This paper explores the plot line of one of the prominent detective stories, Thomas Harris’s ‘The Silence of the Lambs’ in search of certain existential questions regarding the named serial killer in the plot. The social evil of killing the lives of many for the purely pleasure aspect is viewed from multiple viewpoints and a new reading of the plot by placing it within relevant contextual framework is carried out. A traversal through the psychological, behavioural and social norms of the context is explores within the paper.
Keywords- Serial Killer, Detective Fiction, Psychological and Behavioural Aspects.

1. Introduction

The genre of detective fiction is one of the prominent fields within the literary sphere. In modern times, the genre has expanded itself and has incorporated many subgenres within it as well; making the genre an umbrella term for a whole set of specialised type of fictional writings. The subgenres within detective fiction ranges from the classical detective fiction stories to the modern day crime fiction, which includes the thriller, spy detectives, serial killer fiction, police procedural and so one. Today more than the written works the visual representation of these fictions have become much popular. Of the varying subgenres within detective fiction one of the most terrifying and thrilling of all is the Serial Killer fiction. This type of fiction was initially introduced by Thomas Harris with his publication of the 1981 novel Red Dragon. Harris introduced his most prominent character Dr.Hannibal Lecter or ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’, who immediately won the hearts of the reading public owing to his superior intelligence and peculiar mannerisms. With the publication of Red Dragon, Harris introduced and popularised the serial killer fiction which was eventually followed by other writers and were soon adopted in films as well.

The serial killer fiction is also a type of thriller but the underlining factor which differentiates it from the general style of detective fiction is, “it is unusual in its reliance upon, or subordination to, the single-minded drive to deliver starkly intense literary effect”(Priestman 135). The act of providing a starkly intense literary effect is the feature which sets the serial killer fiction apart from the other subgenres within detective fiction. Similarly as the readers traverse through the pages of the fiction, one could sense a mental agony and fear. The New York Times Book Review commented thus regarding Harris’ Red Dragon as well as with regard to the genre of serial killer fiction that it ,”is an engine
designed for one purpose, to make the pulse pound, the heart palpitate, the fear glands secrete”. Hence these physical and mental responses within the reader are necessary to evoke the correct responses with regard to the content and the mood created by the work.

Apart from the eerie and terrifying style of narrative, the other important factor which heightens the fear factor of serial killer fiction is the character of the serial killer. The genre of serial killer fiction has made its appearance only by the end of the twentieth century and hence is mostly a modern phenomenon. The character of the serial killer has the ability to make “the readers’ flesh creep” as the latter would realise that the victims of these killers were usually innocent and unrelated beings. The randomness in the act of choosing the victims itself sends a wave of fear among the readers as they believe that they too might fall victims one day. But equally important within the narrative is the motive behind the actions of the serial killer. Often the killer is driven by many factors both psychological and social and often a mental imbalance is also attributed with the killer. But in Thomas Harris’s novel The Silence of the Lambs, the serial killer Buffalo Bill is driven by another set of motives and desires. The narrative unfolds his character as the readers understand the reason behind the series of murders that Bill commits within the city. Quite contrary with the past characteristics and motives of the serial killers, Buffalo Bill has a different intention and an aim behind his killings. For him the serial killings were a means to escape marginalisation and to assert his identity within the society.

2. The Silence of the Lambs and its Serial Killer

The narrative of The Silence of the Lambs overtly presents the investigation procedure carried out by the young FBI trainee Ms. Clarice Sterling who is guided by the serial killer psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter. But apart from the encounters between Dr. Lecter and Sterling an equally important part is the hunting down of the serial killer ‘Buffalo Bill’. The
new killer who is loose in the city is killing white women from different parts of the city and dumps them back into some river or water body after a few days and often after scraping apart of their body. The news papers name the serial killer as ‘Buffalo Bill’ due to the peculiar manner in which he kills his victims. But as the narrative unfolds the readers are able the reality as explained by Dr. Lecter that Buffalo Bill is scraping the skins of his victims because, “he is stitching a vest with tits on it”. This truth is the turning point in the story and becomes the important hint for Clarice who eventually finds Buffalo Bill through her investigations.

The fact that sets apart Buffalo Bill from other serial killers from other fictional works and movies is the motive behind Bill’s actions. His motive is aimed at achieving mainly two aims; to escape marginalisation and to assert his identity. This assignment attempts a character study of the serial killer Buffalo Bill to expose how he adopts the act of serial killing as a means to escape marginalisation from the society and to assert his identity.

Serial killing is usually defines as “the rarest form of homicide, occurring when an individual has killed three or more people who were previously unknown to him or her and with a cooling off period between each murder” (Haggerty). In this definition both the act of killing as well as the selection of the victims was usually random. But Bill’s selection of the victims do have a similarity, all the killed women were fat ladies or had well-built bodies. This too could be seen as a random obsession of the killer who wanted to give away the impression that his killings had a peculiar pattern. But in the case ofBuffalo Bill or Jame Gumb, the selection of the women was done carefully because he had to ensure that they would serve his purpose.

There have always been individualised studies with regard to serial killers which would mainly focus upon their biography and a study of the causes of their violent behaviour. According to various studies carried out about serial killers, most of them claim that the
motivations behind these killings are often the desire to obtain money, to experience the thrill, to gain a sense of power or a desire to rid the world of evildoers. But Jame Gumb turns out to be a killer who commits murders not driven by these common place desires but to establish a space for himself. The other scientific reason for individuals to commit serial killings are; chromosome abnormalities which is usually attributed as a genetic disorder. Low activity in the orbital cortex is another reason which biologically affects an individual also the presence of warrior gene too drives the individuals insane and makes them too violent in nature. Apart from these biological reasons one of the social factors which affects them the most are the abuses or the trauma the individual experiences while they were young. The childhood plays a very important part in an individual’s life as the changes and the effect which occurs during that period exerts a huge influence on the rest of their lives.

2.1. James Gumb, the serial killer

The serial killer Jame Gumb in The Silence of the Lambs is a peculiar character as he misunderstands his identity and sets off to correct his position in the society. Marginalisation in the society is a pathetic plight as far as any individual is concerned. It is mostly affected on individuals who deviant from the laws of the society. The deviants are often marginalised and are pushed to the margins and are kept away from the centre. In the narrative, Jame Gumb believes him to be a homosexual and has consulted various doctors for Sex change but has been rejected. He was rejected by the doctors because they realised that he is not really a homosexual but was imagining himself to be as one. This sense of rejection from the doctors prompted him to believe that the test that he had done have produced fault results. Hence, he feared that he too would be sidelined from the society. It is the fear of the marginalisation from the society that prompts him to be a part of the society.
Jame realises that in order to be part of the accepted part of the society one needs to fall within the boundaries of the society. Hence he determines to become a woman. Here we are able to witness the mental agony through which the man Jame Gumb passes through. The medical field has let him down by turning him away without changing his sex hence he finds out a means through which he could be a part of the society. Marginalisation on the other hand is fate of the serial killers as well. Once they commit a series of murders the culprit becomes the deviant and the other of the society and they eventually becomes the marginalised of the society. Thus he begins his hunt for women to obtain different parts of the woman’s body to make a cloth for him. Here, in this narrative, the serial killer has is not driven by any motive as we could see in other killers but his motive is to occupy a space for himself within the society.

As Dr. Lecter states to Ms. Starling that he is “stitching a vest with tits on it” portrays the real motive behind the actions of Jame Gumb. Though he attempts to escape a type of marginalisation from the society but the events turn out to be that he eventually become the marginalised of the society as he is named as” buffalo bill” the serial killer.

Similarly, another motive which drives Jame Gumb to be come serial killer is his attempt to assert his identity. He realises that he is unable to identify himself as aman within the society. His realisation of the feminine features within him drives him crazy and hence he sets off to assert his identity. The act of stitching a woman’s attire using the skin of real women is the project that Gumb undertakes to assert his identity. Jame Gumb plans the actions as he sees the transformation of a pupa from its state of a cocoon to a butterfly is what which triggers the mind of Gumb and he plans to transform himself. He realises that he can not survive in the society without being a woman but lack of medical assistance drives him mad. Hence he began to look out for well built ladies and begins to kidnap them. Ad=fter
abducting the women he starves them for a long time after which their skin becomes loose and is used to scrap off from the body.

Thus he eventually finds women from whom he obtains most parts of the female body and slowly begins to stitch the cloth for himself. As other serial killers he too does not develop any sort of mental attachments with the victims. As far as the killer is concerned the victims are merely objects that exist to serve a particular aim of the killer and are characters that are devoid of any personality of their own. It is through the stitching of the woman’s body that he asserts his identity and believes that he too has become a woman. Thus he was never worried about any of his victims but only used them for attaining his aim.

3. Conclusion

Thus it could be seen that Buffalo Bill is one type of a serial killer whose motives are highly personal and social in nature. The motives of Jame Gumb have its source from the social conditions and its effect upon his mental state. Serial killing becomes a defence mechanism as far as he is concerned. It is the means through which he is able to fight back the society. But the mental agony of his situation had made him blind to the moral standards of his action and does not regard his actions to be violent and heinous acts. Unlike other serial killers whose motives are often driven by psychological abnormalities, Jame Gumb on the other hand is driven by social factors.

The fear of being marginalised from the society is one of the factors which he tries to overcome through the act of serial killing and hence it becomes one of the defence mechanism through which he attempts to attain a position in the society. The mental state in which Jame Gumb finds himself is such a state that he is unable to understand the moral bearing of his actions and hence is unable to identify the fact that his actions have become
violent in nature. In this regard Buffalo Bill is a special case in point where he uses his serial killings as a means of self defence to become part of the society.
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