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Sexual Politics in the English Department: A Feminist Appraisal of *Death in a Tenured Position* by Amanda Cross

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The locale is the claustrophobically masculine precincts of the English Department of Harvard University. Chaos seems to break loose when the university is offered a million dollars for a professorship in the English Department, provided the holder is a woman. The professors of the department find it too tempting an offer to turn down, even if it means having a woman in their midst. Perhaps they could make the best of a bad deal and pick a woman least likely to make matters unpleasant for them. So a search committee (all male, of course) is appointed and the utmost care is taken to find a woman who is of a "sweet and unprejudiced nature" -- that is, a woman who is not a feminist and who will not be a threat to her worthy male colleagues.

But what happens to Janet Mandelbaum, the woman professor, in her new assignment? How does she cope with the prejudice of her colleagues? And how and why does she finally lose the battle? This is what the novel is about.

Even though the writer insists that the characters and events of her story are fictitious, one can be reasonably certain that the sexual politics depicted in the fictitious English Department of Amanda Cross's Harvard University are very much like those that actually take place on the American university campus. But first, what happens to the woman professor?

At a departmental tea someone slips a "mickey" (hundredproof vodka) into her campari and she passes out. Later she is found "sloshed" on the floor of the ladies' room, in the company of a woman with strong lesbian leanings. Her reputation suffers and she invites a former acquaintance, Kate Fansler, who is not only a professor of English but also a sleuth, to help her figure out who is trying to defame her. Before Kate can unravel the mystery and collar the culprits, Janet is found dead. This time she is discovered in the men's room, apparently murdered. Kate Fansler, the sleuth, pieces evidence together and finally comes to the conclusion that it was suicide and not murder. It is evident that the woman professor had finally cracked under the pressures of the patriarchal system.

Death in a Tenured Position is, in many ways, like the traditional whodunit which deals with a small, closed world. Into this microcosm enters an alien force, a stranger, or a misfit. This disturbs the existing state of affairs and gives impetus to the action that follows. The established order that is invaded by outside forces is the well-oiled patriarchal machinery of Harvard University. The forces threatening its peace belong to the female of the species who manage to get a toe-hold in this exclusively male domain. In Julia Kristeva's language, perhaps we could see it as the invasion of the symbolic order by the semiotic. The symbolic is the highly organized male academic society which has hitherto managed to keep the disorder called woman out of its stronghold. But, with the changing times, the portals must be opened for their female counterparts

who represent the semiotic and the libidinal as against the symbolic and the ordered. The authoritarian androcentric world sees them as irrational, destabilizing forces threatening the male empire.

Evident in the main plot is the mingling of two genres: the feminist novel and the whodunit. While it is feminist in its attitude and perspective, it belongs to the detective genre as the entire action pivots around the crime that takes place halfway through the story. The criminal has to be apprehended and punished before the novel can come to a satisfactory conclusion. There are trails and counter-trails, red herrings, persons suspected or otherwise, investigations, and the rest of the whodunit paraphernalia. So what we ultimately have is not just another tedious treatise on women's oppression and their rights, but an interesting, absorbing drama played against the backdrop of one of the world's most prestigious universities.

The author, Carolyn Heilbrun who writes as Amanda Cross, is a committed feminist. Gender issues are central in her scholarly works like *Reinventing Womanhood* and *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*. But in her moments of leisure she writes detective fiction. Whereas her earlier novels like *The James Joyce Murder* and *The Theban Mystery* are in the conventional detective mode, her later mystery novels like *The Question of Max, Sweet Death, Kind Death, No Word from Winifred, In the Last Analysis* are more feminist in tone. Feminism, one may note, is nothing if not a rejection of the convention, a revision of earlier accepted norms. Convention is the "norm" as prescribed by the patriarchal order. (And what is "normal" for the male is supposed to be accepted as normal by the female, too). Cross begins by accepting genre conventions, but each successive novel shows her diminishing commitment to classic detective novel and her growing interest in feminist issues.[1]

Janet Mandelbaum suffers because she is an intellectual. However, she tries hard to be conventional. According to the "stuffy old boys" of Harvard University, a normal woman should be a sweet-tempered, soft-spoken, dumb doll, and not encroach on the male intellectual sphere. Janet tries to cope by accepting male values without question. She does not resist the male prejudices that she has lived with. Nor does she exorcise the male mind that has been implanted in her. "Telling herself that any woman with qualifications could make it, she had been as strict as any man in judging the women who applied for jobs, or tenure" (49). She imbibes the male perspective which is assumed to be "universal," and serves the dominant (male) culture. In a way she has been brainwashed by patriarchal ideology. She has "internalized" male preconceptions and almost become antagonistic to her own sex. She is initially accepted in the professorial position as she is, "perfectly safe on the subject of feminism and women's studies" (139). Besides, she is not strictly a woman as she has undergone a hysterectomy when young and is guaranteed not to have a menopause during which all women are supposed to go mad (10). She is the best candidate for Harvard. But for Janet the appointment proves fatal and she has to pay with her life. Had she been able to see through male machinations, she would have survived. She could have also found support in the "sisterhood" of women had she not been so contemptuous of it.

On the other hand is the narrator of the story, Kate Fansler, also a university professor, but one who is able to see through the designs of her male colleagues. She does not serve the male order, nor does she subvert it. She is simply aware of its sinister, malefic operations and knows how to protect herself from it. She may be an intellectual but, unlike Janet Mandelbaum, she does not deny her sexuality or her emotional or physical needs. Her concerns, like those of a true

feminist, pertain to what it means to be a woman. She is not concerned with the "good" or the "bad" woman. Such value judgements, needless to say, are the male prerogative -- it is the men in the story who condemn the comforting security of "Society of Sisters" and who disapprove of Janet.

In the true feminist manner *Death in a Tenured Position* is a reaction against patriarchy, on the one hand. On the other it invokes a sympathy, a "sisterhood" among women.[2] There is a "mirror tendency" to turn the gaze horizontally towards other women and co-relate their sufferings. And fellow-sufferers they all are, suffering under the inexorable yoke of male domination, treated as inferior, as subordinates, by smug colleagues who are considered superior simply because they belong to a different gender.

The novel is an example of what Hélène Cixous calls *ecriture feminine* not simply because it is signed with a woman's name. It is *ecriture feminine* because it gives us a female perspective of a situation that is familiar to all of us. It shows how women have been, and still are, marginalized in the academia. As long as they remain marginalized or invisible, they can be tolerated, but if they step out of their positions, if they come into the limelight and are likely to be recognized as independent, intellectual entities, they become a threat to the so-called superiority of their male colleagues.

Amanda Cross's book takes up a stand for the cause of women in the teaching departments. It speaks of the repressive phallocratic system and the need to break out of it. True, the lone woman trapped in the system finally becomes a victim to it, but her fate is an eye-opener in many respects for it lays bare the inanities of the rules that women in the academia are expected to live by and emphasizes the need to evolve a new system that will be less lopsided, more rational, more humane. A system that will treat woman not simply as a goddess or a whore but a living human being who exists in her own right.

Death in a Tenured Position in more ways that one maps out what Cixous calls the "binary opposition" of the phallocentric system which sees the sexes as opposite poles. It questions the male right to dominate the intellectual sphere. It exposes the sexual stereotyping of women in the academia by their male colleagues who feel that "women are happier when they are looking up to some man, and having kids, which is what nature intended them for" (114).

But, one may protest, Amanda Cross's novel is, after all, a work of fiction, a figment of the author's imagination. As such, can it be taken as truly representative of the social scene? Yes, it can, because literature has its roots in reality. It is the product of a culture, a time, a place, a state of affairs. It embodies not only the author's beliefs but also the convictions of the society as a whole. And so its social connections cannot be overlooked.

Maureen Reddy feels that the novel deals with three possible responses to male domination: imitation of men, entire avoidance of men and of patriarchal institutions, and bonding with other women while continuing to participate in patriarchal institutions in the hope of reforming them.[3] But if we scrutinize the novel carefully, keeping in mind Elaine Showalter's division of the feminist tradition into three phases,[4] we note that each of these phases is clearly represented in the novel. The first is the "feminine" phase which, according to Showalter, spanned the years between 1840-1880 when women writers "internalized" and imitated male aesthetic standards. This internalization of male values is evident in Janet Mandelbaum who is conventional, very conventional, and who has achieved recognition in her field not for her

intellectual prowess but for her conformity to the patriarchal system. She is "scared to death of being unconventional but seething underneath," as a student puts it (33). But the dormant resentment is not recognized, respected, or given expression. It is stifled and this leads to her undoing. Before coming to Harvard, she was considered "the most solid person in the world. The *least* likely to crack" (57). But it did not take long for her to break down, surrounded by "smart-assed professor[s] of English" (71) belonging to the other gender.

Women like Janet, in the eyes of the system, are "straight women," women who "work with the oppressor, [and] are male-identified" (25). As Showalter would put it, she is an "immasculated" woman. As Janet clearly states, "I will not say 'chairperson.' I think that's a revolting term. I will not destroy every sentence with him/her, he/she, or other nonsense. I honestly think that if women have the ability and are willing to pay the price they can make it" (38). Clearly, she belongs to the first phase of the feminist movement as a woman who has conformed without protest to the system she has been groomed in.

The other group of women in the novel is "woman-identified," comprising women who live in a commune outside the institutions. They represent the "feminist" phase of the women's movement which was a period of protest against male values, when women wished to carve out separatist utopia for themselves. In *Death in a Tenured Position* there is Joan Theresa, a woman who doesn't believe in appeasing the patriarchal order which she despises. She is one of the "sisters," who "have no part in the male establishment." Women who are not sisters, like Janet Mandelbaum, play along with the rottenness of male institutions, "either liking it, or thinking it unchangeable" (11).

And there is a third category of women who may be said to belong to what Showalter calls the "female" phase of self-discovery. To some extent, the narrator, too, falls into this category. At first she strikes the reader as belonging to the first phase that internalized male values as she is admittedly "dressed for the patriarchy" (9) and lives more or less according to its rules. However, unlike Janet, she has no illusions about the system and is aware of its viciousness. She rejects fixed, definite male theories and displays an openness of mind, a "multiple receptivity" in Showalter's phrase. Often, she seems to speak in a double-voice[5] that is interpreted in one way by the chauvinistic men she interacts with, and in another by the various women she meets. As such, she straddles both worlds, the male and the female, and is acceptable to both, unlike Janet who is scorned by the feminists.

Looking at the text another way, perhaps one could categorize the women of the novel on the basis of Margaret Atwood's analysis of the feminist struggle. According to Margaret Atwood, when women are oppressed they react in four different ways. The first reaction is a total denial of victimhood, a refusal to admit that the person is being dominated by another individual or institution. In this case the victims are completely unconscious of historical or cultural pressures operating on them. They identify themselves with the oppressors and internalize their prejudices and preconceptions. The second is the attitude of passive acceptance when the victim is aware of being oppressed but does nothing about it, perhaps afraid of public opinion. The third possible reaction to victimization is anger: the victim attempts to throw off all external authority. The fourth is that of the "creative non-victim" when the individual tries to understand and analyze the experience of being dominated.[6]

Using Atwood's classification, Janet would probably come in the first or the second category, Joan Theresa in the third, and Kate Fansler in the fourth. For Janet has passively accepted the rules of the system she works in, Joan has turned her back on the male world and found comfort in the company of "sisters," and Kate Fansler's is the privileged position of the comprehending viewer who has no illusions about either world, the oppressive masculine system or the utopic lesbian society.

Death in a Tenured Position is ultimately a criticism of the academic culture. It advocates what Adrienne Rich calls a "re-vision" of the world, seeing it with new eyes, seeing it not through the looking-glasses handed down to us by the patriarchal society, but through the eyes of a woman. It invites "redefinitions of self, art and society."[7] It enables us to get a woman's perspective of the teaching profession. It takes into account the status of a woman in the academia, the patriarchal traps that surround her, the hostility that she encounters while engaged in intellectual pursuits, and the hazards she may have to face in her profession. It promotes a sisterhood and a consciousness-raising, making us aware that in our long and arduous struggle against what may be called the "life-denying ethos"[8] of patriarchy, we are not alone. There are other women, too, like us, knocking at the doors of male bastions, braving male ire, being castigated for being ambitious, for not being "lady-like," for not conforming to male "norms." Yes, there are others, too, some suffering silently, others complaining loudly, but all, all of them grappling with the same "man-made" hurdles.

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[1] See Maureen Reddy's discussion of the novel in *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, Chapter Three.

[2] I have borrowed the phrase from Helena Michie's essay, "Not one of the Family" (cited below).

[3] Reddy 49.

[4] See Elaine Showalter's Introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism*.

[5] It is also possible to apply Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of *heteroglossia* to this text.

[6] See Margaret Atwood 36-39.

[7] The phrase is taken from the introductory essay of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (cited below).

[8] The phrase is Josephine Donovan's. See her introductory essay in *Feminist Literary Criticism* (cited below).