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The Genre of Female Metaphysical Detective Novel: Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract. This article investigates female metaphysical detective novel as a specific literary genre of crime fiction. The theoretical framework of the study includes several cross-fertilizing approaches such as the structuralist approach to the genre theory, the theory of postmodern anti-detective novel, and the feminist reading of the detective novel evolution. The nexus where these mutually correlated theoretical approaches overlap is the concept of female metaphysical detective novel. This subgenre of detective fiction intertwines several important elements of the postmodern aesthetics, i. e., self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and subversiveness with emphasis on political, gender, and class issues. The specific character of female-authored detective stories is studied diachronically and synchronically. The evolution of the genre of female metaphysical detective novel from the Golden Age until now is considered through the lens of metaphysical or heterotopian settings that are featured in detective fiction written by women. First, it is shown that the construction of space in several Golden Age narratives provides grounds to consider them the precursors of contemporary female metaphysical novel. The conclusion is made that even before feminism was universally recognized as a literary theory, women had been trying to break out of the ‘locked room’ canon designated for them mainly by traditional literary criticism. Next, several new tendencies are pinpointed that have appeared in female-authored detective fiction only recently. Finally, the set of generic features is identified that are characteristic of female metaphysical detective novel as a distinct genre of crime fiction. Most prominently, the novels epitomizing the genre foreground the evolution of the heroine’s identity depicted as a complex network of gendered spaces.

Key words: female metaphysical detective novel; genre; the Golden Age; heterotopia; feminist literary criticism; generic features.

Female metaphysical detective novel can be defined as the junction of the two tendencies of contemporary crime fiction: “the current postmodernizing of the genre into “metaphysical” (allegorical) detective fiction” and the increasing “feminizing of the genre” [Merivale 1996: 693]. The notion of female metaphysical detective novel is not yet as universally recognized, as are, for example, the terms “Golden Age novel” or “hardboiled novel”. This article is aimed at clarifying the genre definition of female metaphysical detective novel, outlining the history of the genre from its precursors to contemporary condition, and summarizing the generic features that are most characteristic of the nowadays female-authored narratives typical of the genre.

For about three decades, the literary history of the detective genre has been remapped. Our research contributes to better understanding the genre transformations by setting forth the notion of female metaphysical detective novel as a specific genre form. Its principal difference from other genre modifications is a conscious blend of self-reflexivity, subverting the detective conventions, and focus on diverse experiences configuring the evolution of female identity. Despite considerable interest in female detective fiction of different epochs, there have been no attempts to reveal an intrinsic relationship between its “metaphysicality” and feminine navigational strategies. The novelty of the present study consists in addressing crystallization process of female metaphysical detective novel and identifying its milestones.

Elements of metafiction can be noticed in most recent detective novels, and in women-written stories they have acquired new relevance as a jumble of postmodernity, identity issues, and feminist agenda. As is known, the forging of the metaphysical thriller as a genre is largely associated with experimental postmodern fiction of the last quarter of the twentieth century. However, from a diachronic perspective, in crime and detective fiction there has always existed a particular “metaphysical touch”, a tradition as old as crime writing itself that embraces several authors including the founding father of the genre E.A. Poe, and such well-known writers as G.K. Chesterton, J.L. Borges, Vladimir Nobokov, Paul Auster, Umberto Eco, and others, who tended to address realms and considerations that lie far beyond the traditional scope of a crime story. In order to understand the links between the classical detective story, metaphysical detective novel /thriller and specific narrative models and strategies characteristic of its most recent feminized version, it will be helpful to look briefly at the history of the genre.

One essential feature that lies at the heart of crime fiction is the quest for solving a mystery as

something hidden, unresolved, intellectually challenging; in various sub-genres of crime fiction “mystery goes from being only one of the elements in a story to being the central purpose of a story” [Rollyson, Magill 2008: 1891]. The sources of crime fiction are numerous. There have been attempts to trace it back to Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* [Ascari 2019: 97], or to the Bible [Scaggs 2005: 8]. The use of mysterious and thrilling elements as well as the plot motif of unveiling the truth makes scholars believe that crime fiction had its genesis in Gothic novels, such as Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* [Reddy 2003: 191] or William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* [Shaw 2010: 361].

The existence of genetic links between Gothic and crime fiction can also be traced in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the author unanimously recognized as a coryphaeus of detective fiction. According to Howard Haycraft, Poe, “the avowed apostle of the morbid and grotesque”, chose “to forsake his tortured fantasies ... for the cool logic of the detective story” [1941: 8]. His story “The Murder on the Rue Morgue” for the first time featured the detective, Auguste Dupin, as a protagonist and focused on the method of solving mysteries and detecting the culprit. Poe’s detective stories set the trend and determined the features of detective writing that all his successors have been trying to follow or subvert.

One of Poe’s most far-reaching contributions to the genre development was the introduction of a classic tandem of detectives. An outstanding and somewhat egocentric intellectual, a mastermind with excellent skills of observation and analysis is accompanied and narrated by a slow-minded though enthusiastic assistant. The detective’s eccentricity and secluded life, his relative lack of personal features outweighed by exclusive intellectual power have determined the pattern of detective writing for many decades to come.

In 1887, the story “A Study in Scarlet” by Arthur Conan Doyle was published that featured Sherlock Holmes, the all-time most famous detective. Conan Doyle’s crime stories epitomize representation of detective’s identity as a collection of multiple selves engaged in a complicated relationship of attraction and repulsion. Holmes and Watson appear to be the reason for each other’s identity. The dichotomy of the two detecting subjects can be turned into a triadic structure if contrasted with another projection of Holmes – his principal opponent Professor Moriarty.

The first body of literary criticism of crime fiction was mainly self-reflection of the genre representatives. Among those works were Gilbert Keith Chesterton’s “How to Write a Detective Story” [1960: 125–132], the collection of essays edited by

Howard Haycraft *The Art of the Mystery Story* [Haycraft 1947], and others. Based on the social and cultural norms of Great Britain before World War II, or even nostalgically longing for the traditional Victorian values, these critical essays contributed to developing the canon of the classical detective story, otherwise known as the Golden Age story. According to Holquist, it is “rather the tale of pure puzzle, pure ratiocination, associated with Poe, Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie” [1971: 139]. It is characterized by a set of generic properties and highly recognizable structural elements.

In an attempt to formalise the typical plot scheme, characteristic of most narratives created in the framework of the genre, Viktor Shklovsky proposed a universal model of a classical detective story [Shklovsky 1990: 101–117]. As a rule, the action is set in an artificially constructed isolated space that can be based on an existing geographic location. An investigator summoned to unravel a crime is often an amateur, and his method of detection includes observation and logical analysis. At the end the solution of a case serves to restore justice associated with social stability and adherence to traditions. As observed by Tzvetan Todorov, the characters are conventional, and so are their interactions: “Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective's immunity” [Todorov 1977: 44–45]. The narrative follows the chronological order of events from an initial mystery to its brilliant solution. The omniscient author exercises full control over the narrative, and, as a result, its poetic space is ordered, commonplace, and familiar.

A different variation of the traditional detective pattern was the hardboiled fiction, originating in the 20th-century North American literary tradition. This subgenre studied the dynamic social processes of the USA before and after World War II. Among the main features of the hardboiled detective stories were realistic depiction of crimes committed in the urban setting, instead of pure detection – action and chase-and-run game between the detective and the criminal, and a cynical, hardened loner as a detective, most commonly a private eye. The hardboiled detective story shed a new light on the traditional for the crime fiction problem of identity. The homophonic resemblance of “eye” and “I” implies the private-public dichotomy, and the conflict between an individual and the society. In the novels of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, or Ross Macdonald private investigator possesses polyhedral identity, sliding easily from one avatar into another.

Talking about the evolution of the genre of crime fiction from the postmodern age until our time, it seems appropriate to consider the terms “antidetective

novel” and “metaphysical detective novel”. Antidetective novel came up with the development of postmodernism. Postmodernism is known for abandoning the mimetic function of art. Instead of copying real life, postmodern fiction plays with its distorted reflections and replicas, simulations and “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” [Barthes 1977: 146]. Such authors as Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Paul Auster, and Umberto Eco employed the formulas of detective fiction to question the ontological status of the cognitive subject and limits of consciousness. Postmodern narrative is essentially self-reflective, unclosed and rejecting universal truths.

As a postmodern intersection of intellectual novel and mystery, the antidetective story significantly undermines the detective canon. Most importantly, it obliterates the axiological validity of detection itself. In doing so, it imitates the structure and plot devices of both classical and hardboiled detective story to compare unsolvable criminal case with cryptic and incomprehensible text. Dismissing the closure that used to be a crucial element of the previous detective canon, the antidetective story “frustrates the expectations of the reader, transforms a mass-media genre into a sophisticated expression of avant-garde sensibility, and substitutes for the detective as central and ordering character the decentred and chaotic admission of mystery, or nonsolution” [Tani 1984: 40]. The location in these stories is deliberately distorted, ambiguous, set on the margin between real place and its mental projection.

The term “metaphysical detective fiction” was first used by Howard Haycraft, who attributed special metaphysical dimension to the detective stories of G. K. Chesterton [Haycraft 1941: 76]. Michael Holquist proposed the term as a synonym of antidetective novel, stressing innovative and subversive character of the new genre modification: “The new metaphysical detective story finally obliterates the traces of the old which underlie it. ...It is not a story – it is a process; the reader, if he is to experience the book, must do what detectives do, must turn it into a series of objects” [Holquist 1971: 133]. However, in this article metaphysical detective novel / metaphysical thriller is considered a distinct subgenre within the broad realm of crime fiction.

The proposed genre concept follows the pivotal research on metaphysical detective novel by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney who claim that “a metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions... with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and

knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” [Merivale, Sweeney 1999: 2]. It seemed appropriate in this research to differentiate this subgenre both from the old-school patterns and from the chrestomathy antidetective stories that speak not of people but “of other books” [Eco 2014: 342] and detect “detective writing more than anything else” [Kravitz 2013: 47].

It should be recognized that both metaphysical novels and antidetective novels modify and subvert the conventions of the classical detective story. Both types of crime fiction make use of the postmodern philosophy and aesthetics. As well as the antidetective novel, the metaphysical detective novel can be characterised by ontological rather than epistemological dominant [McHale 1987: 7], the irrelevance of the closure, and “book-conscious-of-its-bookness” narrative style [Tani 1984: 40]. Other features of similarity include porous boundaries between reality and its virtual or literary models, parodying and deliberate playing with the conventions of detective writing.

However, the beginning of the 21st century has provided mounting evidence to distinguish female metaphysical novel from the antidetective stylizations of the early postmodern age. The two most important features of the contemporary female metaphysical detective fiction that define the genre as self-standing are: first, its preoccupation with the national, social, cultural, and gender aspects of identity, and second, eagerness to voice the women’s point of view and women’s struggles, expectations, and empowerment. As a result, contemporary female metaphysical thriller has become less “flamboyantly postmodernist” [Merivale, Sweeney 1999: 20] and far more socially and politically aware.

There are important grounds to support this new genre subdivision. Quite notably, the best detective novels of the 21st century instead of polarising the features of the classic detective and antidetective story, try to blend them together. As a result, it is virtually impossible today to talk about the clear boundaries that used to exist between highly sophisticated with an absurdist touch antidetective stories and popular crime writing. The novels of Donna Tartt, Kate Atkinson, or Joan Rowling appeal both to the mainstream audience, and to the lovers of literary subtleties and palimpsestic narratives. Providing enough suspense or action to win the mass reader, they at the same time indulge in cultural metaphors, psychological intricacies, and hidden allusions. Most typically, they combine the metaphysical with the social: the metaphor of a detective solving the case is used to ask burning questions about

contemporary society, and the individuals of which it is composed.

The second feature of the new metaphysical detective story is the end of male only narratives. Merivale and Sweeney observed that “male authors like Robbe-Grillet (in his later novels) and Hubert Aquin have turned the metaphysical detective story into a branch of highbrow pornography,” and predicted the advent of female authors to develop the up-and-coming branch of “research” or “pseudobiographical” novels exploring the roots of “the palimpsested identity” [Merivale, Sweeney 1999: 20]. Today we are witnessing the triumph of women’s detective writing: Ruth Rendell, Val McDermid, Anne Cleves, Rachel Hannah, Janet Evanovich, Fred Vargas, Ingrid Noll, Dolores Redondo are just a few names of female authors from all over the world whose crime stories have become bestsellers. These authors are preoccupied with societal responses to the growing economic, political and cultural potency of women. This shift from male to female dominance in crime fiction can be loosely compared with the so-called “feminization” of detective story during the Golden Age, when many prominent crime fiction writers were women.

Detective or crime fiction from the outset has been interested in identity issues, as its main preoccupation is unravelling the crime and identifying the perpetrator. Not less important is the identity of the detective, as it appears at the intersection of the concepts of crime, justice, social order, investigator’s authority, and gender relationships in a particular society. The figure of female detective has always been viewed against the background of society’s attitude to women in the jobs previously occupied only by males. Women as professional investigators emerged in literature only in the 1970s with the second wave of feminist movement [Reddy 2003: 193]. Before that time, women in fiction had been confined to domesticity; female sleuths were portrayed as amateurs, rich spinsters with plenty of free time, as Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple or Patricia Wentworth’s Miss Silver, or voluntary assistants of male professionals, as Ngaio Marsh’s Agatha Troy. “Spinster cosy” approach in detective literature prevailed until approximately 1970s-1980s, when female writers inspired by feminist ideas challenged the genre conventions and articulated the new vision of a full-time female detective [Horsley 2005; Gavin 2010]. In order to understand how the genre formula has been transformed by women writers then and now, it is necessary to concern which elements of the genre straitjacket of crime fiction have been foregrounded and revisited by female writers.

Contemporary literary criticism is moving steadily towards recognizing the female detective novel as a self-standing genre/subgenre of crime fiction, trying to capture its unique characteristics and distinctive features. Apparently, feminist critique offers the best perspective to view the concept of female metaphysical detective novel. An umbrella term “feminist criticism” embraces a range of approaches from 1970s to the present day trying to capture and conceptualize, aestheticize and articulate the need to reclaim feminine space. As is known, feminist critical thought is tightly interwoven with spatial criticism. A great number of feminist authors tried to express their visions of the role of women in terms of space. Thus, the French school of feminism, whose representatives Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva are often allied in the theory of *l'écriture féminine*, opposed Freudian phallogentrism and sought for alternative feminine space as “a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright” [Cixous 1976: 885]. American feminist theorists, preoccupied not only with pure semiotics or psychoanalysis but with political activism, stressed the materiality of feminine spaces. Pondering on the evolution of feminist spatialities in the twentieth century, Ruth Salvaggio makes a conclusion that “while theories produced by men take on certain gendered spatial contours, theories written by women – especially those generating from the last decade and a half – bring women’s actual experience of space to discourse. Instead of shaping masculine space into something feminine, these women bring feminine space to life by writing from, through, and about the spaces women themselves have occupied” [Salvaggio 1988: 262].

Considering these diverse approaches, we can summarise that they are united by the universal feminist spatial metaphor as a model of thinking. This metaphor was inspired by Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay on women writers *A Room of One’s Own*, which puts forward the idea that the critical factor in women’s success is the possibility for a woman to own a room of her own, a room where she is comfortable and undisturbed. Let us use the feminist spatial approach to capture and calibrate the typological features of the genre of female metaphysical detective novel. The main question to be considered is, what is feminine literary space in the female metaphysical thriller and how it differs from the male literary canon.

According to Holquist, “the new metaphysical detective story finally obliterates the traces of the old which underlie it. It is non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered” [Holquist 1971: 153].

The metaphysical detective story poses questions not having ready-made answers and compares the detective’s failure to resolve the case with any person’s inability to solve ontological mysteries that shape their inner and outer world. From the ancient times the term “metaphysical” correlates with the potential, the inconceivable, and the uncanny. Dwelling on metaphysical potential of places and spaces, Michel Foucault suggested the term “heterotopia” – a place intrinsically charged with implied cultural, social, or gender symbolism [Foucault 1986: 22–27]. Henri Lefebvre linked heterotopias with the occult and the otherworldly: “With the dimming of the ‘world’ of shadows, the terror it exercised lessened accordingly. It did not, however, disappear. Rather, it was transformed into ‘heterotopical’ places, places of sorcery and madness, places inhabited by demonic forces” [Lefebvre 1991: 263].

It can be suggested that nearly all places appearing in the female metaphysical detective novel, no matter if they are featured as crime scenes or not, are essentially heterotopias, intrinsically gendered and intertwined with the women’s perspective as the “Other” [Beauvoir 2010:26]. The construction of femininity as spatial performance is not only deducible from the geographical location and physical environment, but also is largely conditioned by spaces as cultural metaphors. The association of heterotopia with femininity stems from the fact that in the Western culture woman, following the revered Aristotelian dichotomy between “maleness and form, and femaleness and (inferior) matter” [Freeland 1998: 5], was also considered irrational, incomprehensible, and of less value. So, from a feminist perspective, any women-related place can be interpreted as heterotopia, and not only sites intended for female use only, such as nursery, nunnery, female boarding school and the like, but various inner, outer, and crossover places, including the space of the female body, psyche, and behaviour.

In this article we argue that the coherent tradition of female crime writing from the Golden Age story to contemporary metaphysical detective novel can be traced based on the evolution of heterotopian spatiality in female detective fiction. The precursors of the genre are female detective writers of the historical period known as “the Golden Age”, approximately from the 1920s to the mid-forties. If female writing in general is often compared to “a room of her own” [Woolf 1929], representation of female detective writing of the first half of the twentieth century by literary criticism can be associated with “a locked room”. This definition cross-maps two notions. First, “the locked room mystery” used to be a popular Golden Age plot, and the metaphor of a

locked room can be extrapolated to all settings of the period as confined spaces: “a country manor, a university college, a library, a train, a cruise ship, a country village” [Bertens and D’Haen 2]. Second, scholars tend to view the early female crime fiction as essentially “locked” by genre limitations, i. e. conventional and formulaic: “The locked room – with its imagery of enclosure and entrapment, and its reference only to elements within its own finite space – provides a perfect metaphor for the inherent self-reflexivity of the genre” [Sweeney 1990: 1–2]. However, this simplistic vision of the Golden Age novel as a container does not take into account the tendencies towards questioning and even removing altogether the genre straightjacket that could be found in particular novels of individual writers.

In general, most literary critics associate both the Golden Age novel and the hardboiled detective story with a locked room model because of the fixed number of parameters and pre-arranged ways of their configuration. Most significantly, such novels frame the crime scene and establish the order of characters moving in and out of it depending on the validity of clues. The demand for a solution of the case and the closure is a repetition of the metaphor of the locked room in terms of narrative. However, even inside this deliberately schematised framework there can be found attempts to create nonlinear and labyrinthine settings, like in Ngaio Marsh’s novels where the crime scene has its metaphysical doppelgänger – the space of painting or theatre stage. Another development, even more pronounced, is instability or hybridity of the spaces of detective and culprit’s identities that seem to be trying to reach out beyond the rigid definitions of their role, swap their selves, generate multiple selves, or use several corporal containers of the same identity.

It was typical for such Golden Age female writers as Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers to depict rural and secluded settings, small villages or country houses. Presumably, a solitary house is a much more comfortable place for a female sleuth than a big city, because “it is imperative to remember the simple and brutal fact that women’s experience of public space is undeniably different from that of men” [Schmid 2012: 16]. The same can be said about a small village community: a female detective feels at ease in an idyllic setting where the neighbours know everything about each other, relationships are informal, frequent encounters with all potential suspects inevitable, and gossiping is the favourite pastime. It can be assumed that Golden Age novelists emphasized the gender symbolism of the “locked room” spatial pattern, and cautiously chose such settings to

address the issues of female self-realization and societal perceptions of femininity.

Several novels published by British and American women writers at the end of the Golden Age and describing women-only communities, such as Dorothy Sayers’ *Gawdy Night*, Gladys Mitchell’s *Laurels are Poison*, Josephine Tey’s *Miss Pym Disposes*, and Hilda Lawrence’s *Death of a Doll*, feature the kind of feminist spatialities that enables us to consider them as immediate precursors of contemporary metaphysical women-written crime stories. These novels challenge the Golden Age architectonics and depict spaces embodying, on the one hand, the idea of spatial segregation and marginalization of women, and on the other hand, the emergence of crossover spaces with opportunities for women to navigate their sexual, professional, and social identities. In these narratives the construction of independent and self-reliant woman’s identity through space is realized through the metaphor of female identity as female-centred space in the process of transformation. So, they indicate the move towards transgressing the boundaries of the Golden Age stories and paving the way for the contemporary female authors of crime fiction.

Hence, it would be incorrect to link female representation in women’s Golden Age detective fiction with the confines of a locked room. Outwardly following the genre conventions of the classical detective story, female narratives very significantly subvert them, thus opening a passage from the locked room into the boundless space of the future. Most importantly, they set forth the problem of female identity as transcending traditional codifications and narrate this new vision through a complex network of women’s places and feminine spaces on the edge or in the process of transformation. Comparing the late Golden Age novels with contemporary metaphysical thrillers written by women, it is possible to trace coherent female tradition of detective writing, in which the symbolism of unmasking hidden identity and escaping from confined settings is used to rediscover and rewrite female self in the new social and cultural environment.

Today one cannot but agree that “the locked room continues to cast its shadow” [Cook 2011: 172]. Women-authored metaphysical detective novels of the 21st century often return to the familiar imagery of the confined setting, like a workplace or a family mansion, but do it in a postmodern self-reflexive way, subverting the impenetrability of the locked room and making it transgressive. Other spatialities that first emerged in the female crime fiction of the 1940s not only reappear in the contemporary fiction but become emblematic, such as colonial and regional geographies, or Gothic spaces designed to

promote women but turning out hostile and menacing. One idea common both for the Golden Age and contemporary novels by women is that of female detective's identity being non-homogeneous, fluid, multi-faceted, pluralistic, conflating several identities of one person, or several persons as each other's doppelgängers. The forging process of this complex identity can be viewed as a passage from a locked room as a lot prepared for females by patriarchy to the multiple physical, conceptual, and narrative open spaces where contemporary woman can achieve empowerment and assert herself.

During the last 30 years there has been a considerable growth of research exploring how female authors of crime fiction rethink the previous ways of mutual construction of femininity and masculinity, and discharge from the stereotypes of the archetypal male detective. According to Stephen Knight, "feminist crime writers have changed the face of the genre enormously" [Knight 2004: 164]. Most importantly, the tradition has been debunked, according to which the woman was pictured as "the dark other to the masculine western tradition of privileging reason, intelligence, order and rationality; a tradition that has much to do with the generating of the fictional detective" [Rowland 2001: 16]. Abandoning the rigidity of the genre as shaped by and encoding masculinist values, feminist theorists prove that Kathleen Klein's restrictive definition of the detective formula as "an unsuitable site for women's stories" [Klein 1995: 229] does no longer apply.

An important move towards re-gendering of the detective novel was the appearance in the mid-1970s of a feminist detective embodied by such characters as Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, and Sara Paretsky's Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski. Marking a difficult transition to a new female presence and empowerment, they occupied "the 'in-between locus' of the female dick" [Horsley 2005: 262]. This provocative double-edged term juxtaposes female detectives' capability to be as efficient as men and their conscious distancing, on the one hand, from male professional attitudes and strategies and, on the other, from patriarchal convictions about women. Eventually, literary criticism has come to apprehend female detective fiction as a renewed, transgressive genre, loaded with intersecting cultural shifts and gender politics.

Today feminist critique politicizing gender issues in detective and crime fiction proliferates. Several noteworthy contributions have been published recently that are genuinely concerned with the gender politics of women-authored detective novels [Reddy 2003; Gavin 2010; Seago 2017; Binder 2021]. The focus is analysing female narratives as consciously

politicized and deliberately transformed into an arena for ideological debate. Recent feminist studies of the female detective novel have combined interest in the generic features with a wide variety of issues stemming from the racial, national, or ethnic identity of the investigator and the culprit, as "racial and gender politics is also a factor in determining the crimes and victims the detectives attend to, the truths they uncover and the kind of justice they thereby administer" [Binder 2021:134]. Throughout this critique, the evolution of gendered spaces in the narrative has been mentioned as an important tool of female claim to empowerment.

It is obvious that today the genre model of female metaphysical thriller is used to apply the socio-critical potential of detective fiction to the gendered concepts in contemporary world. Singular typological features of the genre could be traced back to the end of the Golden Age of crime fiction but most of them crystallised in the first decade of the 21st century. The unresolved contradictions in spatial construction of female identity, transcendental power of myth destroying illusory social order, and deliberate absence of closure define the face of contemporary female metaphysical detective novels across different countries. The subversion of the genre's conventions mirrors discrepancy between male worldview operating logically constructed spaces, and female fluid and transgressive picture of the world stemming from innate ontological ambiguity. At the same time, metaphysical detective narratives from different countries pinpoint various nation-specific issues and feature diverse discursive strategies and means of female identity construction and representation.

Merivale and Sweeney offered the following list of the characteristic features of the metaphysical thriller: "(1) the defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise en abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence; (5) the missing person, the "man of the crowd," the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation" (1999: 8).

An assumption is made that an analogous list of features can be provided that define the genre nature of the 21st-century female metaphysical detective novel:

1. Focus on female detective's identity to voice political concerns: gender, class, national, or racial.
2. Split, double, or twinned identity of the female detective.

3. Spatial construction of the female detective identity that is reflected in the narrative.

4. Foregrounding unstable, disintegrating heterotopian spatialities.

5. Logical solution of the case in parallel with elements of non-solution stemming from the metaphysical nature of evil which is also projected on social imperfection.

6. Elements of postmodernity: self-reflexivity, self-consciousness, intertextual play with myths, plots, and archetypes.

To recapitulate, the term “female metaphysical detective novel” is used to denote contemporary trends in women’s detective writing, as it brings together the notion of the metaphysical detective novel and the current developments inside female detective fiction related to growing political awareness of the genre. Metaphysical overtones that had existed in crime writing from the onset determined the pattern of postmodern narratives exploiting and deconstructing the genre canon of the classical detective novel. Female metaphysical detective novel, however, diverged into a particular genre modification that today is combining certain postmodern trends with sharp focus on contemporary social, political, and gender issues. The precursors of this new genre are those female authors of the late Golden Age who problematized the canon of the locked room as the only version of the feminine space and envisaged mobile femininity, aware of its potential to influence men-controlled spaces. Contemporary authors of female metaphysical thrillers, while continuing the locked room tradition, also depict other types of transcendent spaces to provocatively suggest a new concept of femininity. Consequently, we expect a rise of scholarly interest in the genre. The present study is just a pioneer attempt to outline a new and promising field of research connected with the intersections of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, metaphysics, and mythology in female detective fiction, discussing various national visions of empowered female detectives, and mapping connections between narratives across different countries.

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Жанр женского метафизического детективного романа: традиция и современность

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Женский метафизический детективный роман рассматривается в статье как особый жанр криминальной прозы. Теоретическая база исследования включает в себя несколько взаимодополняющих концепций: структуралистский подход к теории жанра, постмодернистскую школу антидетективного романа и феминистскую интерпретацию эволюции детектива как жанра. Областью пересечения этих взаимосвязанных подходов выступает жанр женского метафизического детективного романа. Это направление детективной литературы объединяет несколько важных элементов эстетики постмодернизма, таких как саморефлексия, интертекстуальность и отказ от привычных рамок с повышенным вниманием к политической, гендерной и классовой проблематике. Специфика женской детективной прозы изучается в синхронии и в диахронии. Жанровая эволюция женского метафизического детективного романа от «Золотого века» детективной литературы до сегодняшнего дня рассматривается через призму метафизических топосов или гетеротопий, фигурирующих в женских детективах. Во-первых, показывается, что пространственная поэтика некоторых произведений «Золотого века» позволяет считать их предшественниками современного метафизического романа. Делается вывод о том, что еще до того, как феминистская школа литературного критицизма получила всеобщее признание, авторы-женщины пытались изменить традиционные представления о каноне детективного жанра как о «закрытой комнате». Далее анализируются новые тенденции, возникшие в женской детективной литературе только в последнее время. Наконец, выявляется набор характерных черт, определяющих самостоятельную жанровую природу женского метафизического детективного романа. Главным образом, произведения, относящиеся к этому жанру, отождествляют эволюцию образа героини со сложной динамикой гендерно-маркированных топосов.

Ключевые слова: женский метафизический детективный роман; жанр; «Золотой век»; гетеротопия; феминистская школа литературного критицизма; жанровые черты.