

A Reading Of The Trials And Tribunals Of A Female Detective With Reference To Tana French's *The Secret Place* And *The Trespasser*

SK Benazir, Assistant Professor of English, Barjora College, Bankura, WB.
Research Scholar Ph.D.Aliah, University, Kolkata.

Article Received: 6/8/2022,

Article Accepted: 15/09/2022,

Published online: 20/09/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.9.10

Abstract

The Dublin Murder Squad Series is a collection of novels by the American Irish Crime Fiction Writer Tana French. The series comprises loosely interconnected stories that can be read as stand-alone novels. The Black Woman Detective Antoinette Conway works in this famous murder squad, and she features in *The Secret Place* and *The Trespasser*, which are the fourth and sixth novels in the series, respectively. Tana French, through her portrayal of the character of Antoinette Conway, talks about the topics related to gender, class, and racial discrimination, and also about the psychological understanding of rejection and abandonment issues, even when faced as a child, and how it impacts adversely for a lifetime and as a traumatic memory these underlying triggers surface at particular circumstances. As the only woman of color, Conway faced racist and sexist remarks at her workplace and was considered an outsider. Yet driven by her passion and love for the profession, Conway strives to make her own identity in an essentially male-dominated arena. This paper intends to make a comprehensive study on how, despite battling past trauma and abandonment issues, Conway, the black woman, continues to pursue her profession despite facing a hostile atmosphere at work. Only through her intelligence and relentless persistence can she finally establish her identity as a professional female detective.

Keywords: Female detective, Black woman, Past Trauma, Gender and Race, Memory, Psychoanalysis, abandonment and rejection, Woman protagonist

Tana French, the American-Irish writer, made her debut with the novel titled "In the Woods," which is a psychological mystery thriller, and it won her the Edgar Award for the best first novel. The British newspaper "The Independent" has referred to her as the First Lady of Irish Crime fiction, "who very quietly has become a huge international name among crime fiction readers."

The Dublin Murder Squad Series by Tana French is one of the most gripping, atmospheric thriller series; it is a mixture of police procedures and psychological thrills with a tinge of gothic romance beautifully woven into one stunning story. Although each novel in the series is loosely connected and eschews a franchise protagonist, French grants the controlling perspective to a different detective each time, but it also provides stand-alone novels.

Antoinette Conway, the black woman detective of Tana French, features her two novels in The Dublin Murder Squad series, *The Secret Place* and *The Trespasser*. This paper intends to make a comprehensive case study of her journey as a successful professional detective and how she came out of her cocoon and established an identity of her own while fighting all odds.

The Secret Place is the fifth in *The Dublin Murder Squad* series and features Antoinette Conway for the first time but as a minor character. Stephen Moran is the main detective in that novel who has been assigned the case of solving a murder mystery. And Stephen joins forces with the abrasive black woman detective Antoinette Conway to investigate the murder of a famous school boy named Chris Harper of St. Colm's School.

The narrative oscillates between the perspectives of the detective Stephen Moran and a student named Holly Mackey, the prime suspect. The key characters are eight teenage girls, members of rival groups, and Chris Harper, the adolescent boy who was found murdered on St. Kilda's grounds. The initial police investigation remained inconclusive. Moran and Conway started their research, questioned all the eight girls, and found some close relationships between Chris and most other eight girls. After further investigation, they find evidence that links Chris's murder to Holly's group. When the detective grills Holly, her father, Frank Mackey, a senior member of the murder squad, intervenes and complicates the investigation. However, Stephen and Conway continue with their research, but Conway comes across as a meek and feeble character, somewhat bowed down to pressure, and has nothing much to say or do.

"The Trespasser" is the sixth in The Dublin Murder Squad series, bringing back the black female detective Antoinette Conway, teaming up with Stephen Moran again. These two are the same detectives from the Dublin Murder Squad who had earlier successfully solved the prep-school murder in French's *The Secret Place*.

In *The Trespasser*, the black female detective working at Dublin Murder Squad, Antoinette Conway, is the protagonist and first-person narrator. Conway here is assigned the case of solving the murder mystery of Aislinn Murray, the young girl who was found dead in her house with a dinner table set for two, and this unfolding of the murder mystery is seen through the perspective of Detective Conway and her partner at work Stephen Moran. As French presents: "This case comes in, or anyway it comes into us, on a frozen dawn in the kind of a closed-down January that makes you think the sun's never going to drag itself back above the horizon" (French, *The Trespasser* 11) And further it is mentioned that initially, the case looked like a lovers' tiff "just like the uniforms figured...some gobshite who got his knickers

in a twist and threw a tantrum at his girlfriend” (French TT 14) and thus the initial suspect was the romantic partner involved.

However, being on the murder squad was practically nothing like what Conway had dreamt of; as the only woman and also of color in that extraordinarily competitive and sophisticated police unit, she was often bullied, faced isolation, and was forced to accept and endure her outsider status because "some of the guys figure that's the natural order ."Only her partner at work, Stephen Moran, was happy for her and supportive of her and continued to work together even when they were handed over the pettiest cases like a bar brawl, a domestic dispute gone wrong, or a missing pet. Her working life was mainly constituted of a collection of thankless little cases, vicious pranks by her colleagues, and endless harassment. Antoinette Conway, the lone woman on the murder squad, had been a target for abuse for months, mainly because she was a black woman. Her colleagues used to make ugly comments about her looks and personal life, steal documents from her desk, and her paperwork vanished from her locker; she even discovered that someone had spit on her coffee. Yet, she stubbornly refuses to bow down to sexism because she loves being a detective and has a commitment to her profession. Still, the hazing is harsh, and she starts to wonder if she should quit as she feels the target on her back, the resentment, and the desire to put her in her place. When another detective groped her- a joke and power move from the Donald Trump playbook- she refused to laugh it off, and now everyone but Moran seems to wish she would stop making things uncomfortable and quit. In addition to the psychological strain, her leper status also made her job difficult. Thus when she was assigned the case of solving the murder mystery of Aislinn Murray, she was contemplating leaving the job as she thought to herself, " Two years of watching my back, watching every step and every word, in fight mode all day, every day: my instincts are fried to smoking wisps ."(French, *TT* 33) However, Conway refuses to tolerate their racist and sexist behavior and the oppression and subjugation that she faces at work, which ranges from sexual harassment and inappropriate jokes to taunts at her color and appearance. Since she voices against the wrongs, she is again termed aggressive and temperamental, and she becomes the problem. Conway deliberately accentuates the features others think she should be ashamed of primarily because of her gender and race – “The stuff people think I should try to hide - being tall, being a Woman, being half whatever - is the stuff I keep up front and in their faces. If they can't handle it, I can, use it,"(French, *TT* 47) says Conway to herself.

The hostile atmosphere at the workplace had a substantial adverse impact on her mental health, and even though she tried to keep up her solid and savage personality upfront but deep down, she knew she was on the verge of breaking down, yet she continued to strive. Conway was already aware that the harassment she endured at her workplace had made her paranoid. She questioned her capability as to how long she will be able to survive or if she should give up. When she was assigned this particular case of the murder mystery of Aislinn Murray, she thought if this was done on purpose to get her off the squad or if there were darker mysteries involved underneath the polished surface, as from the very initial days she and Moran were

pressurized by the other senior colleagues to arrest Rory, the alleged partner of Murray as the prime accused and the murderer and thus close the case. But Conway decided to continue with actually investigating the matter and decided to unravel the absolute truth.

Conway started systematically investigating the case and methodically analyzed it; thus, she first tried to find out about the person Aislinn Murray. It was like "the whole thing approximately her appears dense enough with disappointment to drop you want a sandbag" (French, *TT* 63). Conway suspects that Lucy, Aislinn's friend who had known her since grade school, was aware of more facts than what she had confided and that the case was a lot more than a lover's tiff and the additional pressure from the murder squad to hunt down and arrest Rory, the alleged romantic partner of Murray who's the initial suspect, made the case even more complicated as to what could be the actual motive behind the murder and the supposed pressure. However, Conway refused to give up on the domination of the higher authority and continues to carry on the investigation on her own, and diving deep into the mystery; she unearths a striking similarity between Aislinn Murray and herself, both of them had been deserted by their fathers in early childhood.

Antoinette Conway recounts the memories of her mother, who used to tell her about her absent father: when she asked for her father's identity, her mother said to her that he was an Egyptian prince, later when she was eight, she was told that her father was a Saudi Arabian medical student, and at thirteen Conway was told that her father was an abusive Brazilian Guitarist and by that time Conway knew that her mother was weaving false stories and telling lies all along: "By the time I was older, by the time I made it into training college, it was because I thought maybe I knew what she was doing, and I knew she had been right." (French *TT* 172) and even though as a child, she used to weave imaginary stories regarding who her father was. But after a certain age, she placed apart those testimonies, rejected her absent father as unimportant in her life, and continued with her life at her own pace while being aware that the father had long abandoned her and was never going to return either. Thus Conway says: "I grew up and ...realized this is my real life, and I'd bleeding well better start running it myself, instead of waiting for someone else to do the job for me. That's what grown-ups do." (French, *TT* 176-77). Conway, the rookie detective, was aware of the fact that she was often the target of abuse and harassment because of her biracial parentage, but she never let anyone intimidate her regarding that; she was confident about herself as she said: "I take after my da, or I assume I do: I got my height from my ma, but not the thick, shiny black hair, or the cheekbones, or the skin that's never gonna need a fake tan." (French, *TT* 39) Thus, Conway constructed her life on her own and did not feel the need to include her absent father. She even felt contempt for those people who put their lives on hold and kept looking for absent parents and anxiously waiting for them to show up. The way she responded, reacted, and eventually tried to cope with the haunting incident of parental abandonment, shows how strong and a logical character Conway was; she had this past trauma, and yet she didn't let it hinder her growth in life and the

professional arena, even though she had her moments of weakness and was on the volatile emotional ground, but she kept persisting.

In this context, it can be mentioned that a significant contribution to the psychoanalytic understanding of rejection and abandonment was made by Rochlin's paper titled, "The Dread of Abandonment: A Contribution to the Etiology of the Loss Complex and Depression," which was written in 1961. Rochlin thought that the child's emotional development, wherein the formation of meaningful relationships is the most crucial psychic process, rests in the matrix of the dread of abandonment. Thus, Rochlin, as a consequence, considers the dread of abandonment as an organically natural method and also discusses why loss should have such a profound impact throughout life. He says :

“ The external and the inner influences which discernibly evoke despair prove to have a common denominator- the experience of loss...A loss here refers, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, to object loss, the desired relationship with another person who had to be abandoned. The object may represent or be substituted by some abstraction or may even be represented or substituted”(Rochlin)

After attaining a certain age, the psychologically rejected and abandoned children are cognitively aware of the truth that they were undesirable and rejected and thus discarded. This awareness has serious consequences. Their egos have to deal with the impact of the loss and the absolute abandonment of abandonment itself. The specific personality characteristics of those abandoned children are deeply rooted in their complex past. They are the observable symptoms of their ego's attempts to deal with both the loss and consciousness of having been deserted. Abandoned children are also at a high risk of psychological disturbance. In this context, Symonds found in his observation that psychologically abandoned and rejected children had a certain extent of uncommunicative hostile behavior and showed significant bewilderment about life in general. He says:

“The child who is wanted by his parents and grows up in a home atmosphere characterized by understanding and affection, loving care, and protection has every chance to develop into a well-balanced, emotionally stable adult. The child who is neglected or brutally treated by either parent or even the child who is rejected in more subtle ways-by criticism, hostility, submerged under a cloak of insincere care and affection-is destined on average to show strong, aggressive traits, to be hostile and antagonistic toward those with whom he must have dealings and to develop tendencies which may lead to delinquency.” (Symonds)

While Murray encountered her entire life battling abandonment issues and made it the centre of her life, she transformed herself, came out of her cocoon with the same purpose of finding the missing link to the father's disappearance, and was eventually murdered in that quest. While on the other hand, the black woman detective Conway comes across as a unique

character, one who had similar abandonment issues, a missing father, a biracial parentage, something for which she was always a target of abuse and had to bear with the sly remarks, yet she throws off her baggage and gives meaning and purpose to her life through her strong mindset and dedication towards her profession. All the while facing a hostile work atmosphere, Conway refuses to tolerate the sexist and racist behavior of her colleagues; in a moment of a mental breakdown, she contemplates quitting the job, but soon she rethinks and emerges more muscular, and it is evident as she says:

“That pulse is hammering right through me, particularly lifting me off the bench, forget coffee, this job, when it’s right, this job is the hit that speed freaks throw their lives away hunting...It’s the smell of blood raging at the back of your nose; your arm muscle throbbing to let go of the bowstring; drums speeding in your ears, and a victory roar building at the bottom of your gut.” (French TT 133)

This shows her ardent love for her profession, which is usually considered an unsuitable job for a woman, and being a Black woman, she had to face the hurdles twice. Yet, through her persistence, she was able to unravel the truth and efficiently hunt down the murderer, thus establishing her own identity. Being intelligent and ambitious, with a biting sense of humor and a strong, distinctive voice, Conway shines across as French's best narrators.

French’s works render absurd the lingering difference between genre and literary fiction- the notion that even though crime novels are probably better plotted and more readable, it is pitted against literary fiction, which is supposed to be of superior quality of writing with more characterization, and thus, deserves the acknowledgment of readers. However, French rejects this dichotomy and points out :

“ I’ve never been much for the artificial divide between literary fiction and genre fiction,...I’ve never seen why audiences should be expected to be satisfied with either gripping plots or good writing. Why shouldn’t they be offered both at once?”(Anderson)

French also focuses on the Murder Squad, the kind of men the detectives are, and how they do their jobs. Many other writers have written well about police procedural works- Michael Connelly and the great Ed McBain - but no other novel digs more deeply into police culture, the trade tricks, the ugly side, and the heroics, too, than French does here. It also shows how often the detective's personal life is as challenging to navigate as the crime they are investigating. As a result, gender boundaries break down, and these writings also simultaneously provide much psychological insight into the protagonist's life and the criminal's motive, thus breaking the stereotypes of this genre. Conway, unwilling to remain a victim of male-driven injustices, proves her to be strong and potentially intelligent and unravels the real mystery behind the death of Aislinn Murray.

The Trespasser is about the life and death struggle of owning one's own story. That might sound abstrusely psychological, but it's not- the book is a pure pleasure, a fine-grained

but fact-paced police procedural. French is one of the best thinkers and plotters in the business, and she sells narrative control as a motivating force just as strong as love or greed. Female sleuths have been portrayed as bursting upon the mystery scene with wit, flair, courage, grit, and their unique form of genius. They successfully take center stage as spies, detectives, cops, and private eyes. Many of these female protagonists like Antoinette Conway have found a home in the psychological thrillers that are as much about emotional violence as the literal dead. The line between the perpetrator and victim is often blurry, and much cruelty occurs between people well acquainted. There is a constant hint at the societal setup, which perpetuates the idea that women should subsume their ambition to the need of others, that they aren't emotionally suited to the rigors of a detective's work and that their families will struggle if they pursue a challenging career. At the end of these persistent myths, women battle misogyny as they fight alongside their fellow soldiers or get metaphorically bloodied in the political arena. Threats come from criminals and, more insidiously, from co-workers and clients. However, time and again, contemporary crime fictions come up with a female protagonist who is every bit as capable of taking on the mean Street as their male counterparts in terms of physical strength, logical analysis, and even occasional ruthlessness. Women like Conway can unravel the mystery, unfold the truth, and arrest criminals against all odds. They do so in part by refusing to be defined by their gender. As the only female detective in the murder squad and also of color, Conway was well aware that she must guard against her overt emotions. Yet she still manages to promote compassion for the victim, shows respect, and is sympathetic to the junior. It is balanced work for her.

Unlike earlier crime fiction where the detective went primarily unchanged from one case to another, modern-day detectives have series-long arcs. Often the detective's personal life is as challenging to navigate as the crime they are investigating. As a result, gender boundaries break down and these writings also provide much psychological insight into the protagonist's life and the criminal's motive, thus breaking the stereotypes of this genre.

Conway's journey as a detective is a tale of significant struggles. She is traumatized by her past, discriminated against for being a black woman, sexualized by criminals, and potentially ignored by her colleagues. Yet, she stands firm against all odds; when we first meet Antoinette Conway, the detective, she is a secondary character in *The Secret Place*. She was seen primarily through the point of view of that novel's male detective Stephen Moran. However, Conway, the black woman detective, takes the lead in *The Trespasser*. With her rationality, wit, intelligence, and toughness, she comes across as a unique character and as successful in establishing an identity of her own as a potent professional female detective.

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