



TANA FRENCH'S ANTOINETTE CONWAY: A CASE STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL FEMALE DETECTIVE

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Abstract

The Dublin Murder Squad Series is a collection of novels by the American Irish Crime Fiction Writer Tana French. The Series comprises of loosely interconnected novels which can also be read as stand-alone novels. The Black Woman Detective named Antoinette Conway works in this famous murder squad and she features in *The Secret Place* and *The Trespasser* which are the fourth and the sixth novel 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 and that also of color, Conway had to face racist and sexist remarks at her workplace and she is considered as an outsider. Yet driven by her passion and love for the profession, Conway continues to strive to make her own identity in an essentially male dominated arena.

This paper intends to make a comprehensive study on how even while battling past trauma and abandonment issues, Conway, the black woman, despite facing a hostile atmosphere at work, continues to

pursue her profession and it is only through her intelligence and relentless persistence that she is finally successful in establishing her individual 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 had 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 with stand-alone novels.

Antoinette Conway, the black woman detective of Tana French, features in her two novels in The Dublin Murder Squad series, namely *The Secret Place* and *The Trespasser*, and this paper intends to make a comprehensive case study of her journey as a successful professional detective, 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 series in *The Dublin Murder Squad* and it 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 popular 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 teenage boy who was found murdered on St. Kilda's grounds. The initial police investigation

remained inconclusive. Moran and Conway started their investigation and questioned all the eight girls and found that there was some close relationship between Chris and most of the other eight girls. After further investigation, they find evidence that links Chris's murder to Holly's group. When the detectives grill Holly her father Frank Mackey, a senior member of the murder squad intervenes and complicates the investigation. However Stephen and Conway continue with their investigation, 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 series in The Dublin Murder Squad and it brings 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 also the 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 amorous partner involved.

However, being on the murder squad was practically nothing like what Conway had dreamt of, as the only woman and also of colour, in that extremely 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". It was only her partner at work, Stephen Moran who was happy for her and supportive towards 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 petty cases, vicious pranks by her colleagues, and endless harassment. Antoinette

Conway, the lone woman on the murder squad had been for months a target for abuse, mainly because she was a black woman. Her colleagues used to make ugly comments about her looks and personal life, they used to steal documents from her desk, and her paperwork gets vanished from her locker, she even discovered that someone has 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 tough, 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 just 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 thinks 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 behaviour and the oppression and subjugation that she faces at work, which ranged from sexual harassment and inappropriate jokes to taunts at her colour and appearance, and since she voices against the wrongs, it is again she who is 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 huge adverse impact on her mental health, and even though she tried to keep up her strong 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 of the fact that the harassment she had to endure at her workplace had made her paranoid and she questioned her capability as to how long she will be able to survive or should she give up and 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 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 case and decided to unravel the real truth.

Conway started investigating the case very systematically and methodically analyzed it, thus she first, tries to find out about the person Aislinn Murray and 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 knew her since the 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 told 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 and rejected her absent father as unimportant in her life and continued with her life at her own pace, while being aware of the fact that the father had long abandoned her and was never going to return either, and 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 says: “ 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) Conway, thus constructed her life on her own and she did not feel the need to include her absent father. She even felt contempt for those people who put their life on hold and keep looking for absent parents and anxiously wait 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, there rests 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)

The psychologically rejected and abandoned children, after attainment of a certain age, are cognitively aware of the truth that they were undesirable and/or rejected and thus discarded. This awareness has serious consequences. Not only do their egos have to deal with the impact of the loss but additionally the real abandonment itself. The specific personality characteristics of those abandoned children are deeply rooted in their complex past and are the observable symptoms of their ego’s attempts to deal with both the loss and /or 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 behaviour 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 that is 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 disappearance of the father and was eventually murdered in that quest. While on the other hand the black woman detective Conway comes across as an impressive 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 behaviour of her colleagues, in a moment of a mental breakdown she contemplates quitting the job but soon she rethinks and emerges stronger, 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, it’s your arm muscle throbbing to let go of the bowstring, it’s 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, one that is usually considered an unsuitable job for a woman, and being a Black woman she had to face the hurdles twice, yet it is through her persistence that she

was able to unravel the truth and efficiently hunt down the murderer and thus established an identity of her own. Conway, being smart and ambitious, with a biting sense of humor and a strong distinctive voice- also 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 itself, on 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 tricks of the trade, the ugly side, and the heroics, too, than French does here and it also shows how often the detective's personal life is as difficult to navigate as the crime he or she is investigating. As a result, gender boundaries break down and these writings also simultaneously provide much psychological insight into the life of the protagonist and the motive of the criminal and thus breaking the stereotypes of this genre. Conway unwilling to remain a victim of male-driven injustices, proves herself to be strong, and potentially intelligent and unravels the real mystery behind the death of Aislinn Murray.

The Trespasser is really 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 best 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 and flair, courage, grit, and their unique form of genius. They successfully take the centre 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 of cruelty occurs between people well acquainted with each other. There is a constant hint at the societal set up 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 not only from criminals but also 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 are capable of unraveling the mystery, unfolding the truth, and arresting the 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 that also of colour, Conway was well aware that she must guard against her overt emotions and yet she still manages to promote compassion for the victim and shows respect and is sympathetic to the junior. It is balanced work for her.

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

Conway's journey as a detective is a tale of significant struggles, as she is traumatized by her past, discriminated against for being a black woman, sexualized by the criminals, and potentially ignored by her colleagues, yet she stands strong against all odds, When we first meet Antoinette Conway, the detective, she was a mere secondary character in *The Secret Place* and was seen primarily through the point of view of that novel's male detective Stephen Moran. However in *The Trespasser*, Conway, the black woman detective, takes the lead, and with her rationality, wit, intelligence, and toughness she comes across not only as an

impressive character she is also successful in establishing an identity of her own as a potent professional female detective.

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