

“The killer’s language was the same, even if the choice of words was different.” The Language of Murdering as Gendered Expression of Social Critique in Henning Mankell’s *The Fifth Woman*

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Artikkelissa tarkastellaan murhaamista kielenä ja merkityksenmuodostumisprosessina ruotsalaisen kirjailijan Henning Mankellin romaanissa *Viides nainen* (1996). Tulkitessaan murhaajan tekoja kielen näkökulmasta etsivä on lukija, joka rakentaa narratiivia murhaajasta sen perusteella miten hän toistaa murhaajuuttaan. Romaanissa murhaajan parodiseen ja ironiseen murhaajuuden performanssiin perustuvan narratiivin katkokset ja epäloogisuus edustavat hänen tapansa tuoda näkyväksi kritiikkinsä väkivaltaa vastaan. Väkivalta nähdään patriarkaalisten valtarakenteiden tuloksena, joita naispuolisen murhaajan subversiivinen eettinen asenne vastustaa. Kriisiyttämällä etsivän identiteetin, murhaaja samalla uudistaa rikosgenren tapaa käsitellä sukupuolittunutta väkivaltaa äärimmäisen dramaattisella tavalla – antautumalla itse kuoleman välikappaleeksi.

Keywords: crime fiction, language, gender, violence, narrative, female murderer, social critique, Henning Mankell, *The Fifth Woman*

1 Introduction

“The killer’s language was the same, even if the choice of words was different” are the words uttered by the detective protagonist Kurt Wallander in Henning Mankell’s *The Fifth Woman* (2004; original *Den femte kvinnan* 1996) when the body of the second victim murdered by the female murderer, Yvonne Ander, is found. The victim is a man whose starved, naked body is left hanging on a tree in a forest. Wallander is shocked by the brutality and the expressiveness of the setting. He relates to what he sees and experiences at the murder site as language, a language that feels somehow familiar despite its estranged expression. Although the words are different, Wallander thinks he is still able to recognise the language of the murderer as something he has confronted earlier.

When referring to the murderer’s performance of murderhood as language, Wallander expresses Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek’s idea that murder, in crime fiction, is structured like language (1991/1993: 54, 57). What the dead body and

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the setting in which it is found suggest about the way in which the murder is committed is a “domain of *meaning*” (Žižek 1991/1993: 57), consisting of signifiers left for the detective to contextualise and decipher. When the detective strolls around at the site of the crime, gathers impressions, or connects earlier evidence with more recent one, he creates meaning. By doing that, he engages in bizarre communication with the murderer: in *The Fifth Woman*, the investigation process becomes a morbid dialogue between Wallander and the murderer whose brutal and extravagant way of ‘doing murderer’ speaks a language that is both familiar and unfamiliar, an uncanny language of ambiguity, fallacy and confusion. Moreover, this language that functions as an expression of the murderer’s radical ethical attitude, based on her status as the object of the detective’s desire and her capitulation to death (cf. Žižek 1991/1993: 63), also engages him in a painful redefinition of his own values and preconceptions and forces him to reassess his conceptions of the special relationship between gender and power.

Mankell’s *The Fifth Woman* is a story of gendered violence. It tells about a chase of a female murderer during which detective protagonist Kurt Wallander’s previous conceptualisation of violence, gender and power are called into question. In the novel, Wallander is forced to confront a murderer whose unintelligible language poses a serious threat to his identity both as a detective and a man. *Murdering as language and a process of meaning creation* is the starting point of my discussion of the subversive consequences of Wallander’s construction of the narrative of the female murderer. “Every murderer has his [sic] own language” (Mankell 2004: 108), says Wallander at the site of the first murder victim. It is his obligation as detective to read this language, interpret it and gradually begin to construct a narrative of the murderer which eventually, following the generic constraints of crime fiction, will lead to capturing the criminal. Wallander’s narrative is originally based on the prevalent cultural assumption of men as normative agents of violence. However, since the language spoken by the murderer’s acts convey ambiguous meanings that do not comply with his conceptual framework of gendered violence, Wallander’s narrative of the murderer threatens to remain fragmented, illogical and thus, unintelligible. This unintelligibility of the narrative of the female murderer is represented as a source of identity crisis for Wallander

because of his inability to understand the murderer's language and define her identity in terms of traditional gender categories.

In the following, I discuss, firstly, *the way in which Wallander's narrative of the confusing performance of the female murderer, Yvonne Ander, questions his status and identity* in Mankell's *The Fifth Woman*, and secondly, *how this questioning can be seen within a wider framework as a critique of violence in society*. In the novel, gendered violence and the blurring of the contents of the categories of gender are the critical tools. Ander expresses her critique of violence through the discrepancies in her narrative which resists conforming to the traditional categories of gender. By showing the consequences of male violence, legitimised by patriarchy, Ander becomes a redoubtable critic of society's power structures. By consciously blurring her language, she acts out her radical ethical attitude as a constantly volatile object of knowledge who uses ultimate means and makes death her playground.

Before addressing these questions, I shall briefly discuss 1) the novel, 2) Butler's famous idea of gender as performatively constructed and 3) the relationship of gender and violence in order to introduce the reader to the theoretical points of departure in my discussion.

2 *The Fifth Woman* – Victimisation and Agency

The Fifth Woman, originally published in Swedish in 1996, is the only novel in the Wallander series, comprising 11 novels, with a female murderer protagonist. Besides being a serialised police procedural, the novel is a trauma narrative and a revenge story featuring a victimised woman who turns into an avenging agent. Thus, the novel reproduces two traditional narrative patterns: firstly, that of women's victimisation and secondly, that of trauma as productive of violent agency. The murderer protagonist is a woman traumatised by male violence in childhood, who metamorphoses into an avenger after the murder of her mother by a group of anonymous male religious fundamentalists.

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As is common for narratives of female victims turned into agency, the point of conversion also in this novel is described as a sudden metamorphosis triggered by an upsetting event in the personal life of the character (cf. Dijkstra 1986; Toikka 1997: 298–299). The death of Yvonne Ander’s mother, by establishing a link with the earlier trauma repressed until now, makes room for the advent of her new identity. This identity is created upon the involuntary repetition of killing as a means of coming to terms with the haunting traumatic experiences, as a desperate and ambiguous effort to maintain the illusion of unified subjectivity by embracing death. Yvonne Ander goes on to kill until she is stopped by the police, but her obsession with death does not end there: she commits suicide in her cell as her final act of dedication to the death drive.

Since identifying the men who killed her mother is impossible, she directs her rage against all men who have committed crimes against women but escaped responsibility. Thus, Ander represents an avenging principle, an Angel of Death with the mission of compensating for the shortcomings of the legal system by punishing those who deserve to be punished. Because of the underlying victim narratives, her acts appear, although not legitimised, in some way morally justifiable, and the moral dilemma of justification becomes another question to add into the fragmentation of her narrative.

3 Murder as ‘doing gender’

Gender is, according to Butler, constructed performatively. By performativity she means a routinised repetition of everyday acts regulated by cultural norms and practices which, because based on the heterosexual imperative, determine this behaviour as either male or female. Butler (cf. 1990: 151) uses the term ‘heterosexual matrix’ about the set of cultural norms and practices that naturalise ways of doing gender according to the male–female dichotomy. Consequently, within the heterosexual matrix only performances that are constructed according to its norms are intelligible and legitimate. Because of the masculinity of violence, a woman who turns violent comes up against gender norms.

If gender is seen as ritualised repetition of conventions within the frame of compulsory heterosexuality (cf. Butler, 1995: 31), the way in which Yvonne Ander ‘does murderer’ goes against the grain. Her repetitive murderous performance, based on mimicking and parodying male violence and an ironical treatment of male desire, creates a space for female agency in which the boundaries of gender and power are redefined. This space is characterised by the blurring of femininity and masculinity. Thus, through her indeterminate murderous performance, based on conscious exaggeration and ironic display, the female killer *does* gender trouble: she calls into question normative conceptions of gender and patriarchal power.

4 Masculinity of Violence

The Fifth Woman discusses the consequences of male violence as a practice with the help of which patriarchal power is maintained. Although the murderer protagonist is a woman, violence is a male matter in the novel; it emanates from the power imbalance between men and woman, and is founded on the culturally grounded assumption that women are not violent. Wallander is greatly pained by the first evidence indicating that a woman might be involved in the murders (Mankell 2004: 356). Only when the evidence is quite indisputable, does he reluctantly acquiesce in the message they communicate.

Wallander’s inability to read the evidence is based on the rigidity of his previous narrative of gender. His conceptualisation of woman as non-violent reflects the overall cultural assumption of violence as a naturalised constituent of masculinity. Precisely because violence in society is so strongly culturally coded as male (Hearn 1998; Boyle 2005: 95; Chesney-Lind & Eliason 2006: 31; Ness 2007), a violent woman, like the murderer Yvonne Ander, is a controversial matter. Due to the prevailing myth of women’s endogenous incapability of committing violent acts, a woman who against all odds resorts to violence represents a gender paradox and shakes normative assumptions of gender and power. This becomes pronounced in the case of Ander who, besides murdering, does it in a way which calls for extra attention and suggests her as being more than an ordinary murderer. In *The Fifth Woman* the murderer’s agency is constructed as

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a parody of masculinity in which the murderer engages in a conscious play with attributes of the normative male murderer.

5 Ambiguous Narrative as Source of Gender Crisis

Pyrhönen (1999: 5–6) has referred to crime fiction murderers as artists who write their stories of crime. Thus, Wallander appears as a reader who constructs a narrative of the murderer based on the meanings conveyed by her language. Like all readers, the crime fiction detective also becomes intimately involved with the text in the process of meaning creation. While constructing a narrative of the murderer, Wallander simultaneously (re)constructs himself through his reading. In this case, however, the unintelligible, conflicting and shocking meanings which he reads into the murderer’s narrative prove critical for his identity. In the following, I approach the question from two angles: first, I describe how Ander’s language, embedded in a specifically female trauma caused by male violence and expressed through murdering, speaks to Wallander the language of identity-threatening ambiguity. Second, I identify Ander’s language of murdering as expression of a radical ethical attitude questioning Wallander’s male identity and his status as detective and even further, as a critique of patriarchy and the violence that supports the maintenance of its power structures.

5.1 Precarious Narrative of Gender

In a crime novel, the relationship of the detective and the murderer is always intimate. It is the murderer’s agency that gives birth to the detective: without murder there would be no need for a detective, nor would there be a story to tell. The hunt motive that contemporary popular crime fiction, including *The Fifth Woman*, is structured upon means that the relationship between Wallander and Ander becomes like a fluctuating negotiation between the subject and its other, and the narrative is structured upon the detective’s attempt to attain this object which proves fundamentally unattainable. For Wallander, the truth which he attempts to reach is a painful project that concerns him both rationally and ethically (cf. Žižek 1991/1993: 63). The painfulness of the project is motivated by the unintelligibility of Ander’s language within the framework of gender as

conceptualised by Wallander. Ander's language represents gender ambiguity; it is the language of a non-existent subject, the language of a paradoxical identity: that of a female murderer. This language shakes the established gender order and threatens Wallander's male identity as a subject. In other words, Wallander is confronted with a crisis of masculinity.

Like all narratives, this one also draws from the previous experiences and knowledge of the narrator, as well as his or her internalised social values. When standing at the first murder site, looking down in the pothole at the body of the old man penetrated by sharpened bamboo poles, Wallander already defines the language of the murderer as an "other language" (Mankell 2004: 77), thus marking his narrative of Ander with indefinable 'difference'. This murderer is not like any murderer; this murderer is 'different'. Ander's performance is, in fact, a distorted parody of the previous violence of her victims, and it is the obvious flamboyance of the perversely cruel staging that confuses Wallander. The confusion is also reflected onto the language in which Wallander portrays the murderer's acts. He describes the violence like serial killers' acts are often characterised, as being something beyond just murder (cf. Plain 2001; Boyle 2005: 62), as "more than a murder" (Mankell 2004: 110). He resorts to a language that reflects his confusion before the impenetrable performance: he calls it sadistic and macabre (Mankell 2004: 86, 219), he refers to its savagery and brutality (Mankell 2004: 108, 324) and its "ghastly, cruel perfection" (Mankell 2004: 73). Not being able to interpret the perpetrator's language (Mankell 2004: 77–78, 217, 245, 337), his narrative of the murderer grows ambiguous. When he sees more murder sites and victims, the naked and starved body of the florist left in the forest, and the drowned man who in his last moments in life had kicked a hole in the sack in which he was thrown into a lake, Wallander, in the end, when language no longer provides adequate means to describe the murderer, has only one definition left to describe Ander: he calls her a 'monster' (Mankell 2004: 572).

'Monster' is a word in which symbolification meets with something inherently beyond definition. Halberstam (1998: 21) calls monsters "meaning machines" because of their potential to address cultural anxieties beyond other expression. Monsters are

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polymorphous violators of boundaries and disintegrators of categories of intelligibility (Cohen 1996: 6; Halberstam 1998: 27; Asma 2009: 10). In their complexity and liminality, monsters remain as indefinable as the anxieties they represent. When the female murderer is characterised in terms of monstrosity by the detective, a demarcation is suggested between himself as the representative of law and morality, and the female murderer as an inhabitant of the other side, the lawless, chaotic and evil. However, monsters resist all categorisation, which means that all efforts to construct a boundary between the norm and the indefinable are prone to fail. So, when Wallander defines Ander as a monster, he simultaneously recognises the horrendous disintegrative potential this definition embodies.

5.2 Radical Ethical Attitude

Ander’s paradoxical and ambiguous language of murdering, her performance of ‘monstrosity’, can be related to as a realisation of a radical ethical attitude. When discussing the role of the female villain in hardboiled crime fiction, Žižek (1991/1993: 63) connects the capacity of the femme fatale to shake the detective’s identity with the radical ethical attitude she represents. This attitude emerges and is manifested through her ambiguity on the one hand as an object of desire and on the other hand as a figure who fully embraces the death drive. Although Žižek does not mention it explicitly, the radical ethical attitude of the femme fatale is a fundamentally female attitude with gender difference as its starting point. After all, the femme fatale is a *female* villain and occupies her position in the novel precisely because of her femininity.

Like the femme fatale in hardboiled detective novels, Yvonne Ander in *The Fifth Woman* appears as the object of the detective’s scrutinising gaze and his desire to know and to understand – a desire he expresses in a symbolic form in his narrative of the murderer. The object of desire is typically constructed by the owner of the gaze as unified and unambiguous: the onlooker has the power to define and thus create coherence in the narrative from his personal perspective, based on his values and assumptions. When the object resists objectification as Yvonne Ander resists being seen, known and narrated as unambiguous and intelligible, the detective’s desire remains unfulfilled.

Ander's resistance to conform to an interpretation of her narrative as a conventional and unified narrative of femininity, results in Wallander's failure to settle the identity-threatening ambiguities in his reading. Because of Ander's 'monstrosity', Wallander remains in a state of uncertainty caused by the subversive potential of her murderous agency.

This potential is fully realised at the end of the novel. Wallander has a strong motive to pursue his desire to know until the very end, i.e. the moment when his narrative of the murderer will be completed and with no ambiguity left. However, Ander evades Wallander's efforts to define her until the very end. Although Yvonne Ander narrates the story of her life to Wallander, his narrative of her still remains without closure. Because Wallander is not able to understand, to complete the story, Yvonne Ander remains, for him, a reminder of difference, otherness, a 'monster' (Mankell 2004: 572).

Therefore, in *The Fifth Woman*, capturing the murderer does not mean that the case is closed. Ander's radical ethical attitude as an object of desire that evades objectification is, in addition, accompanied by her equally radical evasion of punishment by the legal system. Her capitulation to the death drive manifests itself in her total dedication to death: not only is she a harbinger of death, but her subjectivity as a murderer is born out of the death of her mother and she voluntarily surrenders to death at the end of the novel.

By calling into question the detective's status as the locus of knowledge and by her refusal to assent to settle with the position defined for her, Yvonne Ander's agency can be seen as redefining the traditional constraints of the crime fiction genre. By shaking the identity of the most central representative of justice, morality, law and order in the novel, the murderer makes heard her critique of male violence and its consequences in society. Although her means are extreme and by no means legitimate, it is difficult to totally deny the justification of her acts in the patriarchal society in which she turns her trauma and victimisation into agentive murderhood in revenge for those who have suffered at the hands of rapists, abusers and murderers.

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6 Conclusions

In this article I have discussed murdering as language and expression of a radical ethical attitude with potential to criticise constructions of gender and violence in Henning Mankell’s *The Fifth Woman*. Trauma, victimisation and metamorphosis into an agentive avenger create a language of murdering that remains a source of confusion for the detective throughout the novel. This language is based on a parody of male violence staged by the female murderer in order to accentuate her critique of male violence against women – the original source of the traumatic experiences that recreate her as an avenging murderer.

The narrative constructed by the detective of the murderer resists coherence and in its total unintelligibility shakes his identity. By calling into question the status of the detective as the representative of law, order and morality, the murderer simultaneously calls into question the legitimization of patriarchal order and the power upholding it.

The novel engages in a critical discussion of gendered violence through its introduction of a female murderer who murders men responsible for violence against women. Although the murderer is a woman, patriarchy with its direct and indirect practices of legitimising male violence is the main target of this critique. The novel seems to point out that violence in its different forms only creates more violence and this violence no longer has to be the violence of those in power against the less powerful.

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