



The Lethal Film Noir Femme Fatale: A Precursor to Bond Girls in James Bond Films.

Haris Hasan*

*Assistant Professor, Delhi School of Journalism, University of Delhi, India

Received: 15 August 2021 **Accepted:** 20 November 2021 **Published:** 23 December 2021

Abstract: *Film noir as a film making style gained prominence in a post world war II world. The filming style of noir with its unique americanization became a force of sorts in the mid 1940's and in much part of the post war booming decade of 50. One of the interesting contribution of film noir apart from aesthetics of visual and lighting techniques is the depiction of female characters which came to be known as femme fatale. Femme fatale in its synonyms and various contours came to be recognized as a character with its diabolical charm and fatal attraction became the reason for the ultimate demise of the male protagonist. The development of femme fatale chracters also paved way for future fetishization of female characters in cinema. The highly popular 007 Bond series is an excellent nursery of sorts where the female characters often found themselves to be either femme fatale or femme atrappe. The paper aims to establish some of the occurrences of this sort of character in Bond films and how their resemblance with the ones in the film noir era was an experiment in creating fierce female characters on the celluloid. The depiction and celluloid portrayal in a way helped establish and explore the various contours of female characters.*

Keywords: *Femme Fatale, Bond Girl, Feminism, Film Noir, Fetishization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The lethal archenemy of James Bond was a master manipulator, fatally attractive and reminiscent of the bygone war spies who were apert in honeypotting and were placed in narratives to act as one of the reasons in intensifying the conflict within the screenplay. The mannerism of Bond girls, their depiction, characterization all over the years bear historical resemblance to the film noir femme fatales. The characterization of Bond girls over the years has gone through sea changes but the intrinsic value of the same characters being often typecast in the sand casts of femme fatates is clearly visible till now.

Femme fatale was an important ingredient within the Film noir universe. The portrayal of female characters in these dark themed films was born out of the male insecurities of the time. *Femme fatale of the classic age of hollywood*

The classic age of Hollywood in a way coincides with the Film noir films. The aura of film noir was deeply influenced by the way in which female characters were often placed. The



charm and enchanting mannerism of the female characters often gave way to the ongoing conflict in the plot setting. The fall of the precariously placed antihero was a highly dependent variable and the dependence was closely related to the fallen character of the femme fatales. Barbara Stanwyk, Rita Hayworth, Gene Tierney, Ava Gardner were all the prominent female leads of the 40's and early 50's. They brought in new dimensions to the portrayal of femme fatales. Each had a distinct style and it made it extremely exciting for the audience to see them in the film noir films of the times.

Progress of the film noir

The era of film noir had its ups and downs. The post world war II noir films were able to capture the general mood of the populace. The ongoing war gloom mixed with a kind of skepticism was clearly visible in the initial start to the hollywood film noir. The timeline of noir films have their own crests and troughs with films finding it a challenge to continuously experiment with the similar story plots. The later period of Hollywood film noir in the 50's was finding it difficult to remain true to the signature themes of film noir. The film noir style eventually shifted to the other greener pastures. The most interesting and alluring aspect of the film noir: Femme fatales found their way in the narratives of French new wave and the more popular and post WWII cold war era crime and spy films of James Bond, an adaptation of the literary thriller and adventure genre created by an ex serviceman Ian Fleming. The lethal female leads in the bond films imported a kind of influence from the femme fatales and their portrayal in the film noir genre. Film noir as a cinemactical style and theme based concept found its place in similar narratives and settings and the influence made it easy to film certain aspects of crime thriller spy films of the later period.

Influences

The influence of femme fatales of film noir on a number of film genres is immense. The neo-noir female characters were a direct descendent of their film noir counterparts. The vamps and villains in the Bond films borrowed heavily from the characters of film noir. The classic Femme fatales would act as inspiration when characters with similar plot value would want to fill the bill. Andrea Anders (The man with the golden gun) and Octopussy (Octopussy) both played by the brilliant Maud Adams. Dianan Riggs As Tracy Bond (On Her Majesty's Secret service) one of the great bond girls till date. Ursula Anders as Honey Riders (Dr. No) in a pioneering portrayal of a bond girl. The post soviet dissolution Bond films had their share of brilliant bond girls with Xenia Onatopp played by Dutch actress Famke Janseen and Vesper Lynd played by Eva Green have brilliant shades of femme fatale in them.

Cultural impact of femme fatales and Bond girls is immense. The "Bond Girl" has become a barometer of culture. The spectrum ranges from femme fatales to objects of desire to more powerful women who still emotionally prop up a male hero.

Some Femme fatale characters in Film noir and Bond films over the years

Phyllis Dietrichson (Double Indemnity : 1944) played by Barbara Stanwyk

The character is considered one of the best femme fatale roles in film noir history. Phyllis is well-known for her skills at seduction. Dietrichson traffics in two of the narrative elements most frequently associated with femme fatales: Sex. Money.



Rita Hayworth as Elsa "Rosalie" Bannister (*The Lady from Shanghai* : 1947) is adroitly punctuated by many of the genre's conventions, and viewers will be hard pressed to find a more impressive and thorough film noir. Through O'Hara's voiceover, we recognise immediately that he knows Elsa is seducing him and making him the fool. His foreboding narration bleeds with a brooding sense of fatalism, and although he is powerless for most of its duration, the one un-noir-like quality of the film is the fact that he does ultimately overcome his transgressions and foolish decisions. Nevertheless, his voiceover is underlined by a melodramatic nostalgia.

Elsa is splendid as the femme fatale, revealing very little about her intentions and duplicity but often revealing much of her body to O'Hara. As a former "lady of the night", Elsa wisely hides her precarious Shanghai past. She speaks as much with her physical beauty as she does with her psychological angst, and her body is a vehicle for expressing this inner pain. The scenes of her bathing along the rocks during a pit stop and singing on the boat make obvious allusions to her role as a siren. Her clothing throughout the film symbolizes her shifting allegiances. At times she wears white, at other times she wears black, and during other scenes she wears both. Throughout the film, she acts as the queen bee manipulating all of the film's male characters: O'Hara, Grisby, and Bannister. Most of her machinations are conducted off-screen, which adds to her sense of mystery, allure and power. Welles forces us to imagine her craftily designed plans instead of actually seeing them.

Xenia Onatopp(*Golden Eye* : 1994) Played by Famke Janseen

Onatopp, born in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, is a former officer and fighter pilot in the Soviet Air Force. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, she joins the crime syndicate Janus, led by traitorous MI6 agent Alec Trevelyan. Early in the movie, Bond (Pierce Brosnan) gets into a car chase with her, meets her at a casino, and places her under surveillance.

She lures a Canadian admiral, Chuck Farrell, onto a yacht moored off Monte Carlo and kills him during sex by crushing his ribs with her thighs, achieving orgasm in the process. Meanwhile, Trevelyan's henchman General Arkady Grigorovich Ourumov (Gottfried John) steals the dead admiral's NATO ID, granting him and Onatopp access to a Eurocopter Tiger aboard a French warship anchored off Monte Carlo.

Paul Simpson argues that with Onatopp, the femme fatale made a "welcome reappearance" after the role had previously fallen out of fashion.^[4]

Anna Katherine Amacker and Donna Ashley Moore suggest that Onatopp is a "direct throwback to the earlier style of Bond girl, complete with an innuendo-laden name and a blatant sexuality." Robert A. Saunders suggests that she "personifies the hypersexualized archetype of the post-Soviet Russian woman."

Vesper Lynd(*Casino Royale* : 2006) played by Eva Green

Vesper Lynd was a fictional HM Treasury liaison officer and love interest of James Bond. The official adaptation of the literary character who first appeared in Ian Fleming's 1953 novel, *Casino Royale*, the Bond girl appeared in the 2006 *James Bond* film of the same name, portrayed by French actress Eva Green.

Vesper Lynd was an intelligent and perceptive person who was able to guess information about a man simply based on his behavior and mannerisms as demonstrated during her first meeting with Bond. She was also very attractive and elegant, so like many women, she likely feared



not being taken seriously by her male colleagues and overcompensates by dressing in a slightly masculine manner, although she also enjoyed wearing evening gowns and makeup. Because of her intellect, Vesper could be suspicious, rebellious and even icy in certain situations, sometimes making false inferences about those around her and therefore; making poor judgments about them, as was the case on several occasions in her relationship with Bond.

Vesper was nevertheless sociable and rather sensitive, hence her ability to bond easily with men, even after tense exchanges. She was also very averse to violence to the point of being traumatized after witnessing a murder in which she herself participated (such as that of Steven Obanno) but she was ready to do anything for Yusef Kabira, including betraying his cause if he were to be in danger, unaware that the man was actually using this asset to manipulate her in secret. Vesper, however, felt horrible feelings of guilt at siding with her enemies to the point of becoming suicidal, which eventually led to her demise.

Elektra King (The World Is not enough : 1998) played by Sophie Marceau

- Elektra has a British father (Sir Robert King) and a mother of Azerbaijani descent. Her father had acquired his wife's oil wealth and merged it into his own construction business, forming King Enterprises. Elektra is both wealthy and beautiful, and becomes famous. She is kidnapped by Victor "Renard" Zokas, a terrorist and former KGB agent. On the advice of M (a family friend), Sir Robert refuses to pay the ransom money.
- Elektra was embittered, and became Renard's lover. She joined in Renard's extortion scheme and mutilated her own ear to send to her father. James Bond initially thought she was suffering from Stockholm syndrome, but it turns out she already had a hatred for her father, based on loyalty to her mother. She and Renard attempt to blow up her family's oil pipeline, and she kidnaps M, Bond, and Christmas Jones. Elektra tortures Bond with a garrote, but when Valentin Zukovsky frees Bond, Bond shoots Elektra.
- Kirsten Smith suggests that "Elektra holds some of the characteristics of the femme fatale displayed in her clothing choices, her quest for power over all the men in her life, and her ability to use sex to enhance her position." Smith goes on to say, however, that Elektra is also a "damaged and complex woman trying to redeem her mother's name and cultural heritage."
- Dean Kowalski notes that while we are led to believe Renard is the main villain of the film, Elektra is actually the "brains and evil heart of the operation". Kowalski concludes that "Elektra's attitudes and behavior are reminiscent of the *yin* force and exactly what we would expect of a strong (even if misguided) female character."

Evolution of Bond Girls over the years

The Bond girls and their portrayal in cinema has tremendously evolved over the years. The early bond films in a way depicted the cold blooded assassins and henchwomen in a classic femme fatale way. That changed with the frequent onslaught on the recurring fetishization of female characters in bond films. The bond girls of the 60's and 70's with their brooding charm were the epitomes for evilness and fallibility of humankind. The 80's saw a change of sorts with female characters in Bond films often shown to be headstrong and in a way aiding Bond in his pursuit to foil the attempts made to disturb world peace. Ursula Andress to Octopussy and Miranda Frost to Vesper Lynd the characterization of bond girls is an interesting case study of sorts.



Gender studies and femme fatales

An important area of study is the linkage of femme fatale case study with gender studies. Femme fatales is a phenomena in cinema that can be also understood through the lenses of gender studies

Sex symbol or precursor to women empowerment

This is a pertinent question per se the overall meaning one the audience can derive from the characterization of femme fatales over the years. The portaryal of femme fatales as the ultimate seductress and man eater, a perfect epitome of sex symbol or was it the other way around and the femme fatale portrayal brought in narratives of women empowerment to the fore. Cinema as a mass mediated medium enjoys a mass appeal and in a way constructs popular culture. The medium message debate of the 1950's by McLuhan can be understood in this context. The femme fatale characters were definetly born out of the male anxieties of the time but with the progress of time it also helped the larger audience to realize and understand the importance of understanding the psyche of such onscreen portarals. The society had to accept the new found change and the new found independence that the women of times in western hemisphere were founding themselves to be in.

2. REFERENCES

1. Muller, E. Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir. Published May 15th 1998 by St. Martin's Griffin
2. Truffaut, F. Hitchcock. Published December 4th 2015 by Simon & Schuster
3. D'Abo, M. & Cork, J. Bond Girls Are Forever . Published October 1st 2006 by Harry N. Abrams
4. Field, M. & Chowdhury, A. Some Kind of Hero: The Remarkable Story of the James Bond Films , Published December 5th 2015 by The History Press
5. Chapman, J. Licence to Thrill. Published March 29th 2001 by Columbia University Press
6. Micheal J Wilson, Barbara Broccoli, (Producer), A, Michael (Director) 1999 The World is Not Enough [Motion Picture]. United States . Eon Productions
7. Sistrome, J (Producer), Wilder, B (Director) (1944). Double Indemnity. [Motion Picture]. United states. Paramount Picture.
8. Micheal J Wilson, Barbara Broccoli, (Producer), Campbell, M (director) 1995 GoldenEye [Motion Picture] . United States. United International Pictures
9. Micheal J Wilson, Barbara Broccoli, (Producer), Campbell, M (Director), (2006). Casino Royale, [Motion Pictures]. United States. Eon Productions
10. Welles, O (Producer). Welles, O (Director) (1947). The Lady from Shanghai [Motion Picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures