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Colonial and Post-Colonial Reflections in Crime Fiction

[1,]Dr. Rakesh Jain, [2,]Akshita Sharma
[1,2,]Head, Department of English, National P.G. College, Lucknow – 226001
Academic Consultant

ABSTRACT: Crime fiction has been one of the most prolific literary genres in the last 150 years and continues to be so. The search for other, more appropriate critical paradigms continues. One featurethat has been increasingly noted of late is that crime fiction is a more interwoven and international body of writing than has often been recognised.

KEYWORDS: Detective Fiction; Narratives; Anti-Imperialism

I. INTRODUCTION:

Crime fiction has been one of the most prolific literary genres in the last 150 yearsand continues to be so. However, "the study of this genre" as Stephen Knight recently pointed out, is a little "harder to detect" (Knightx), though by no means as obscure and marginal as it used to be. The very popularity and mass appeal of crime fiction initially made it an unlikely subject for scholarly pursuit, except for the critical musings of early writers and some their acolytes in their attempt "to justify their writing and reading habits". (Pyrhonen 4) It was in the 1960s and 1970s that a wealth of academic literature began to emerge on the history and typology of the genre, later also on ideological frameworks and the social contexts in which they were placed. Today, research on crime fiction continues to thrive, particularly on the novel and its various sub-genres (the clue- puzzle, the '*hardboiled*' or private eye story, the police procedural, the psychological thriller etc.), with prestigious academic publishers devoting whole book series to the genre.

The search for other, more appropriate critical paradigms continues. One featurethat has been increasingly noted of late is that crime fiction is a more interwoven and international body of writing than has often been recognized. (Knight xiv) While cozy mysteries continue to be associated with the English, or the hardboiled seen as a particular American variety, regional boundaries of the classic crime novel no longer hold. Nowadays we increasingly encounter investigators with a migrant or transcultural background operating across countries and continents. A closer look confirms that detectives have long left their home turfs, Britain and States, to emerge in postcolonial societies. Especially in India, where the genre crime fiction is remarkably well described. Even in its early days, crime fiction already transgressed national boundaries, as many of the Golden Age detective novels (e.g., Agatha Cristie, Arthur Conan Doyle) were drawn to colonial cultures.

Interrelation of Colonial Authority, Crime and Literature : The interrelation between colonial authority, crime and literature, one might conclude, in many ways shaped the European perception of the Orient with all its imagesof the inscrutable Asian, the occasional noble savage, or journeys to the *'heart of darkness'* that expressed little hope for the for the future of the colonised territory. In *Crime and Empire* (2003), for instance, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee investigates the centrality of the language of policing, of law, of crime and punishment to the formation of the authority of British Empire in relationship with India. Crime became a political and cultural preoccupation as British society attempted to consolidate its authority at home and abroad at the end of the eighteenth century under the stresses of war, colonial expansion and urbanization. Traditionally, we have read crime fiction, with its relatively linear structure, investment in closure, and need for good guys and bad guys, as a sort of special agent working to solidify authority and make it legible to the reading public.Mukherjee, however, argues that crime fiction's "relationship with the dominant ideology was much more problematic" (Mukherjee vi) and often exposed the fragility of authority: "at the level of ideology and consensus, narratives of crime, punishment, and justice are double-edged tools that both empower and question authority" (Mukherjee vii).

Mukherjee lays out the central destabilizing paradox by showing how representations of British authority established an essential criminality in the Indian character to justify the expansion of British notions of law and order. But there were two problems: first, if Indians were essentially criminal, British attempts at rehabilitation were always already doomed to failure; second, British ideas of law and order were far from straightforward and, in fact, were hotly contested at home. "The necessary illusion of progress, the ideological staple of colonialist aggression," Mukherjee explains, "could no longer be fabricated" (Mukherjee 34). Caroline Reitz, in *Detective the Nation* (2004), likewise confirms the inextricable link between crimefiction and imperial enterprise.

Stories of order and disorder in the colonial era- in personal narratives, travel writing and in the emerging genre of crime fiction- thus offered a particular perspectiveon the 'other' who could be seen both as a threat to and mirror of the imperial power.Order and discipline as primary colonial interests could then be affirmed through the investigation of crime and the reconstruction of a social stability so typical for the genre. In discussing the contribution of culture to colonialism, Edward Said draws upon the Eurocentricism found in imperialist literature, which took the colonized and "subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe." (Said 72) This textual reinforcement of racial and cultural identity through a colonial discourse has been highlighted in early forms of detective fiction by a variety of critics. Klien asserts that depictions of foreigners such as "African American characters in the mystery and detective fiction of writers in the United States and England reflected the class and racial/ethnic biases rooted in centuries of colonialism and empire building. (Klien 187) Abdul R. Janmohamed develops this, discussing colonial discourse as attempting to mask the "contradiction between the theoretical justification of exploitation and the barbarity of its actual practice" by "obsessively portraying the supposed inferiority and barbarity of the racial 'other', thereby insisting on the profound moral difference between self and the other". (Janmohamed 22-23) This is the colonial dynamic between the constructions of a superior domestic 'self' and foreign, inferior 'other' which have been found in many detective narratives.

Crime fiction, especially of the classical clue-puzzle type, has always been agenre with highly moralising potential, in which conflicting perspectives could be negotiated through questions of good and evil, often confirming the status quo. While such aspects are still of central interest to the exploration of postcolonial detective novels – as in questions of authority and social power – crime fiction has long proved that it has more to offer. Often, the social order is no longer restored, but questioned through alternative notions of justice. While a morally ambiguous closure has also been a standard pattern of the conventional hardboiled, postcolonial texts moreover suggest that power and authority can be investigated through the magnifying glass of other knowledges, against the local or global mainstream, past and present, or against potentialprojections of a dominant group and a (neo-)imperial West. Many authors have thus broadened the theme of investigation to address issues of community, beliefs and identity constructions across geographic and national boundaries, including gender and race relations. Others have broadened the genre by inventing recognisable sub-categories which relate to the social, political and historical formations of their specific postcolonies. (Knight 13)

Since its coinage on 1842, the term investigative and detective fiction, even in definitions of Ed Christians' *Introduction to Postcolonial Detective* and Julie H. Kim's *Race and Religion in the Postcolonial British Detective Story*, is understood to be primarily European, and focuses mainly on the White detective's powerful investigation of criminals in exotic settings. The properly defined modern detective stories, usually written in English and French, continued with their suppositions that crime is native to the tropical and other colonised countries and tried to avoid bringing in Easterners in the main plot, until the early Twentieth century when diversified critical literary and philosophical schools began to grow. To Stephen Howe, "All history is imperial" and "[the] echoes of empire recurred on the levels of imagination and metaphor" (Howe 1,6)The fictionalised sleuths came quickly to assume imperialistic identities.

Evidence of colonialism and empire has therefore been legible in the detective genre since its beginnings. From Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), in which C. Auguste Dupin attributes a pair of grisly murders to a racially- encoded Bornese *"Ourang-Outang"* brought to Paris by a profit-minded sailor, to ArthurConan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), wherein Sherlock Holmes exposes the murderous revenge of a frontier settler who tracks his fiancée's killers from the deserts ofUtah to the gas lit streets of London, the classic detective fiction of the Victorian era suggests that this migrating violence is

not a social aberration but a structural feature of empire. Transnational encounters are not always dangerous in this period; they can lead to spiritual reinvigoration for touring Europeans, as when Holmes wanders from Mecca to Tibet following his apparent death at Reichenbach Falls, or to improved local knowledge and more efficient colonial policing, as in Rudyard Kipling's spy novel *Kim* (1901). Beyond these fantasies of Orientalist wisdom and beneficent imperialism, however, classic detective fiction and its close cousin the spy story more typically align mystery conventions with anxieties over contamination, irrationality, and the threat posed to imperial modernity by unassimilated racial and cultural difference. This combination is not only a common fixture, but also—in narratives such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1900) and *The Secret Agent* (1907)—one that easily traverses the boundaries of high and popular culture.

But then, in Michel Foucault's philosophy, all deployments of power are accompanied by resistance. The perceptively all-powerful White detectives came to be criticised within half a century by the non-White and often dominated litterateurs from European colonies. Actually, concerned about developing a national identity in wake of prolonged colonial rule, intellectual and authors from the East, many from the culturally and philosophically developed India, engaged themselves in, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins write, in contesting the Western "discourses, power structures and social hierarchies". This is when they began to consciously oppose several of the simplifying and generalising assumptions of the Western detective fiction, and postcolonial opposition emanated. This ethical and literary-political perspective began to "address issues such as identity, gender, race, and ethnicity. The challenge of developing a national identity in the wake of a colonial rule, the ways knowledge of the colonised people had served the interest of the colonisers and how knowledge about the world is produced under specific power relations, repetitively circulated, and finally legitimised, to serve certain interests."

Without any exception the White private investigator, Sherlock Holmes, appears as the champion of the British Empire, conducting his investigative activities from the imperial metropolis of London. Created by Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes, who first appeared in print in 1887, was featured in fifty six short stories and four novels. What made Holmes identifiably superior to other European sleuths was his creator's employment of several indigenously developed techniques of investigation. Other than his efficient storytelling, Doyle had exhibited his own nationalistic sentiments and conformed to the imperial ideology of the British and the general White European leaders, who supported the European domination of the predominantly eastern colonised nation. Holmes' declaration that he is "the only one in the world" stems from an awareness of his supremacy as the representative of Britain. The Sherlock Holmes canon is easily an assertion of not only the omnipotence of the Eurocentric detective but also its author's 'Orientalism' that associated everything evil and disorderly with the Afro-Asiannations.

Cultural Identity of Subaltern Indian Detective : Conceived in the pre-independence India as an attempt to articulate the culturalidentity of a specifically subaltern and Indian detective, *Byomkesh Bakshi* narratives refute the Eurocentric ideologies. Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay convincingly demonstrated that Holmes' imperialistic claims to superiority could be counter matched by intelligent detectives from Britain largest colony, and that his empirical techniques are revealed erroneous when compared to Bengali inquisitor Bakshi's psychoanalytical approach to crime solving. The earlier Bengali detective fiction formed a part of the imperial literature itself. They were moreover defective in precision and methodology and lacked realism. In contrast, Byomkesh Bakshi represents the most perfectly conceived indigenous face in late pre-independence and post-independence Indian detective fiction. Byomkesh Bakshi incorporated within his character the behavioural features of an Indian against that of Eurocentric detectives, assumed national importance soon after his introduction. Bakshi's Kolkata symbolically becomes a subaltern response to Holmes colonial centre of London.

Neither Sherlock Holmes nor Byomkesh Bakshi appear to have been created for the sole purpose of producing popular sleuth characters. Banyopadhyay and Doyle have registered their respective ideologies through them. Doyle openly advocated in his stories like *The Sign of Four* and *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, the domination of the unruly Easterners by their White dominators. K.N.Panikkar in *Colonial, Culture and Resistance* developed that the subaltern can put up three forms of resistance against imperial hostilities and White aggressiveness- armed uprising, intellectual dissect and cultural protest. As a

resisting and intelligent colonised individual, Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay chose to follow the last two. He cautiously avoided referring to British colonisers directly in all the ten *Byomkesh Bakshi* stories written before the Indian Independence, and followed the path of cultural collusion, ambiguity and hybridity to create a subaltern world that uses the technical innovations of the British imperialists but effectively shuts them out.Where Sherlock Holmes incorporated the basic aspects of British social body (Jann, 685-708), Byomkesh Bakshi has all the characteristic features of a subaltern intellectual. As a representative inquisitor from the Bengali literature was effective in capturing all the essences of *Indianness*.

In the words of Sukumar Sen (1900-1992), the renowned Calcutta-based polymath, linguist and cultural historian of Bengal, in his *Crime Stories' Chronology* (1988), an authoritative diachronic study of "western" and Indian crime fiction: He is not a scientist, violinist or an addict. He is a typical Bengali gentleman of the 1930s – educated, intelligent, shrewd, reserved and sympathetic. Apart from his intellect and sedate serenity, he has got noother quality to distinguish himself from the average Bengali youths.

II. CONCLUSION:

The actions and adventures of the British detective may not always be infallible; when interpreted by a subaltern reader, their validity may as well be negated. Moreover, Doyle's objectification of the residents of Britain's colonies while constructing his criminals is erroneous. The postcolonial theories of the late twentieth and early twenty- first centuries deconstruct all the basic assumptions about the omnipotence and omniscience of the imperial detectives like Holmes. According to Said, "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europes greatest and richest and oldestcolonies, the source of its civilizations and languages" (Said, *Orientalism*1). It accounts for, other than in Doyle, such authors as G.M. Trevelyan's habitual usage of the term "richest jewels of the English Crown" to describe the Indian colonies (Trevelyan 391).But the Europeans, particularly the Englishmen who formed the mightiest of the colonialpowers, were not ready to link their own affluence to the resources of the colonies. In novels like *A Passage to India* and *Kim*, just as in different *Sherlock Holmes* narratives,E.M. Forster and Rudyard Kipling refute any symbiotic relationship between Europe and the Asian and African continents, projecting the latter two as forming the contrasting image, idea, personality and experience of the Occident. The English and French litterateurs, especially, have always tried to deal with the Orient by "making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it", and the Holmes canon proves to be no exception (Said, *Orientalism* 3).

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