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Detectives in *White and Brown*: a Comparative Study
of Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION:

“The fantasy... which the detective story addict indulges is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as law. The driving force behind this daydream is the feeling of guilt, the cause of which is unknown to the dreamer” – Wystan Hugh Auden¹

Tracing the gradual development of the sub-genre of detective fiction, Auden thus summarises a typical plot in of detective stories:

“A murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies” (*The Wordsworth* 253).

While Auden, by stating so, delineates the basic structure of every detective story, the sub-genre itself is concerned with several more aspects and ingredients including vivid description of the country and the society in which the narrative is set, representation of the social demeanour of the detective, portrayal of his associate who is characteristically his best friend and the narrator of his adventures. The criminals, along with their preferences, prejudices, eccentricities and flaws, come to assume centrality in sleuth fiction whose most important function is to facilitate interpretation of the message the novelist wants to convey through his narrative.

The literary sub-genre has sprung from the eternal attraction of human beings for mystery, and deals with the primordial issue of crime and punishment. The detective story writers depict the various ways the ordinary men are threatened with criminality. This particular form of popular fiction identifiably occupies a considerable portion of every literature. However, as far as popularity and acceptance of the detective characters are concerned, four European, and more precisely, British and French detectives – Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Father Brown and C. Auguste

Dupin – dominate every other fictional sleuth, including those of the Eastern literatures. European nations like Britain, France, Germany and Spain that had colonised more than eighty per cent of the world in the late-nineteenth century, not only physically dominated the technologically underdeveloped Easterners, they also destroyed their indigenous cultures and traditions, injecting within their languages and literature different Eurocentric traditional, ethical, and lingual values (Said, *Culture* 6). It is, therefore, natural that the sub-genre of Afro-Asian detective fiction has also been permeated by conventions of the European sleuth stories which accounts for the wide popularity of Holmes, Dupin and Poirot in the East at the exclusion of any significant Oriental investigator.

Scholars have traced the origin of detective fiction to the Bible (Daniel, Susanna and the elders) and the puzzle tales of the Enlightenment like Voltaire's Zadic that was published in 1747 (*The Wordsworth* 253). Michael Seidman, Julian Symons and Douglas Greene, on the other hand, refer to the sixteenth century Italian tale translated into French by the Chevalier de Mailly as Le voyage et les aventures des trois princes de Sarendip (1719), which was later rendered into English as The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip in 1722, as being among the first detective stories². However, according to Ranjit Chattopadhyay and Siddhartha Ghosh, the parable incorporated in the tenth *Mandala* of the three thousand five hundred year-old *Rig Veda* where Sarama the bitch apprehends the "Poni" group of dacoits, who had stolen cows belonging to gods, is the "world's first detective story" (Chattopadhyay and Ghosh 747).

According to the compilers of Merriam Webster's Encyclopaedia of Literature, the modern history of detective fiction begins in the mid-nineteenth century with Edgar Allan Poe's five tales of *ratiocination*: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Gold Bug" (1843), "The Mystery of Mary Roget" (1842-3), "Thou Art the Man" (1844) and "The Purloined Letter" (1845), that introduce the French detective, C. Auguste Dupin, the first modern fictional sleuth (Merriam 320).

Starting with Poe, detective stories have rapidly gained popularity to become one of the more read literary sub-genres even in the first decade of the twenty first century. Its acceptance and wide readership could be accounted for by the following six points.

First of all, detective fiction is closely related to the real life of human beings. Crimes like homicide and theft are as old as the history of the human civilisation itself. By committing them the criminals intimidate smooth functioning of different human institutions, unsettle the social *status quo*, and, according to Auden, commit the direst offence against God (Gupta, *Introduction* 4). It is to ensure protection of individual interests, perpetuation of social institutions, and assertion of the human right to live in peace and prosperity that the criminals need to be apprehended and crimes like anarchy, sedition and nihilism be punished. Ordinary human beings do not support crime but are not privileged with sufficient physical or intellectual prowess to counteract the anti-socials because of their innate superior physical and mental faculties.

It therefore becomes the purview of the trained and intelligent detectives to challenge and apprehend them. Moreover, without possessing details of different criminal acts and unable to remain in physical proximity to scenes of crime because of personal safety, it is impossible for ordinary people to remain updated about varied anti-social activities. Therefore, simulated instances of crimes are re-created in literature and fictional investigators are invoked to resist the subversions on behalf of the society in totality.

Second, human mind is characteristically attracted to the mysterious and incomprehensible. Naturally, they are attracted to tales of crimes and criminals that are generally outside the purview of common people. Auden observes,

“For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol. The symptoms of this are: firstly, the intensity of the craving – if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one, I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it. Secondly, its specificity – the story must conform to certain formulas (I find it very difficult, for example, to read one that is not set in rural England). And, thirdly, its immediacy – I forget the story as soon as I have finished it and have no wish to read it again” (Gupta, *Introduction 4*).

Third, detective stories satisfy the inherent human desire for quest and adventure. Because the ordinary individuals are not privileged to

undertake arduous and dangerous journeys, they find a sort of wish-fulfilment in their adventurous detectives.

Fourth, the fictional investigators guarantee the general readers of their physical safety and continuation of the societal status quo. They transform themselves into nearly omnipotent figures that the defenceless commoners could depend upon.

Fifth, the sub-genre of detective fiction directly appeals to the emotions of readers and provides them with a pleasant suspense, thus helping them against the boredom of conventional forms of literature like the general short stories, poems, essays and critical articles. Sleuth narratives are generally light in tone, subject and treatment and do not require strenuous reflections prior to comprehension and enjoyment. Moreover, they help readers to sharpen their intuitive and analytical prowess, and verify at the conclusion of the story whether they had guessed correctly.

Finally, the doctrines that whatever happens must have a cause and that in this world governed by realism every mystery is solved in due course of time, are explored and vindicated in detective fiction. To exemplify, a murder is not committed without a context, and after it is committed, the detective is expected investigate and infallibly unravel the mystery of the murderer's identity.

In "The Typology of Detective Fiction", Tzvetan Todorov compresses within eight points the twenty rules of detective fiction that S.S. Van Dine had laid down in 1928 to characterise 'properly-written detective stories'. According to Van Dine, an ideal detective novel must have at most one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse); the culprit must not be a professional criminal, must not be the detective, and must kill for personal reasons; should not deal with love; in it, the culprit must have a certain importance: (a) in life: must not be a butler or a chamber maid (b) in the book: must be one of the main characters; should explained everything rationally and not admit fantasy; should not be descriptive or deal with psychological analysis; with regard to information about the story, observes the following homology: 'author: reader = criminal: detective'; and, must avoid banal situations and solutions (Todorov 50-1). In addition, Martin Priestman notes that European detective stories of the late nineteenth century are exclusively concerned with the "white-male-centred private eye" (Priestman 5). On the other hand, Martin A. Kayman writes:

"Nineteenth-century detection's concern with the City is another significant aspect of its modernity. Indeed, G.K.Chesterton claimed that 'The first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life' by which he means 'the poetry of London', an urban text of histories and meanings waiting to be read. Chesterton exemplifies this theory in the very first Father Brown story,

The Blue Cross (The Innocence of Father Brown, 1911), but rarely elsewhere, and while most detectives have offices in the city, a great many of their cases do seem to occur in country houses; what is important here, as no doubt, for the suburban commuters who formed a large part of the magazine readership, is the sense of connection to contemporary urban reality” (Kayman 43).

The Sherlock Holmes narratives that Arthur Conan Doyle first published in the November 1887-issue of *Beeton's Christmas Annual* conform to all the twenty rules postulated by Van Dine. Moreover, they are centred in the British imperial metropolis of London and revolve round the adventures of the White male detective – Sherlock Holmes. They are, therefore, not only ‘properly-written detective stories’ but also have been identified as “the most famous and enduring contribution to detective fiction by any single writer” (*The Wordsworth* 850). It requires mention that no other fictional detective, including Dupin, Poirot and Father Brown, has been able to achieve such wide popularity as the Sherlock Holmes stories, or has so widely been translated (*The Wordsworth* 850). It is not that the detectives prior to the appearance of Holmes, like Caleb Williams, Eugene Vidocq, Dupin, and Sergeant Cuff, were imperfectly conceived, but Doyle had employed several indigenously-developed techniques of investigation, including usage of plaster-of-Paris to take imprints of footprints, bio-chemical tests for analysing stains of blood, mud and ashes of different cigars, and examination of dust on criminals’ and corpses’ bodies, that helped his

detective stories to transcend the sole realm of literature and become a part of forensic science as well. In addition, while constructing his White British detective, Doyle exhibited his own nationalistic sentiments and conformed to the contemporary imperial ideology of the British and European readers, who overwhelmingly supported the European domination of the predominantly Eastern nations. Holmes's declaration that he is "the only one in the world" stems from an awareness of his supremacy as the representative of Britain, the world's greatest colonial power (Doyle, *The Complete* 54). In the Sherlock Holmes canon, Doyle asserts not only the omnipotence and uniqueness of his White Eurocentric detective but also an Orientalist bias, associating everything evil and disorderly with the Orient.

In contrast, Byomkesh Bakshi, whose first adventure story "Pather Kanta" was published in 1932 in *Basumati*, a monthly Bengali magazine published from Calcutta, is one of the more popular detectives to be introduced into the genre of Bengali detective fiction in pre-independence India. Since then Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's narratives have commanded attention and wide readership. In Bengali, the most preferred language after English in colonial India because until 1911 British India had its headquarters at Calcutta, there had been several other investigators including Priyanath Mukhopadhyay's inspector-in-charge, Kaliprashanna Chattopadhyay's Bankaullah, Panchkari Dey's Debendra Bijoy Mitra and Dinendra Kumar Ray's Robert Blake before Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's inquisitor was introduced, but they were overtly influenced by European detective fiction and actually formed a part of the imperial literature itself. Moreover, they were defective in precision

and methodology and their stories lacked realism. On the other hand, Byomkesh Bakshi represents the most perfectly conceived indigenous face in late pre-independence and post-independence Indian detective fiction. The inquisitor, who conspicuously incorporates within his character the behavioural features of an Indian against that of the Eurocentric detectives, assumed national importance soon after his introduction. India being the most famous of the British colonies in the Orient, and Bengali having had been the most preferred Indian language during the colonial occupation, Byomkesh Bakshi commands considerable importance as a representative Oriental investigator.

Neither Sherlock Holmes nor Byomkesh Bakshi was created by the litterateurs just for the sake of creating popular sleuth characters. In the Sherlock Holmes stories Doyle projects his own ideas about the superiority of the European Whites to the perceptively unsophisticated Afro-Asians. Serialised when Britain was at its imperial best, the Holmes narratives actually celebrate the British colonial occupations. Contrarily, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, himself a colonised litterateur, has painstakingly avoided referring to the British colonisers directly if not at all in all the ten Byomkesh Bakshi stories written before the Indian independence. Instead, he follows 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. Though he belongs to a British colony, Byomkesh Bakshi is perceptively as brilliant as Holmes. Simultaneously, his methodology is primarily opposed to that of the British detective. If Sherlock Holmes, according to Rosemary Jann, incorporates basic aspects of the British social body (685-708), Bakshi identifiably

exhibits the features of the Indian societal conventions and the Indian author's postcolonial response against the perceived omnipotence of the British detective. Analyses of the basic differences between these two investigators in context of their being respective imperial and anti-colonial constructs are not only plausible but also have wide scope and potency for attracting extensive researches. In the present thesis the author depicts Sherlock Holmes as Arthur Conan Doyle's imperially compatible spokesperson and Byomkesh Bakshi as a subaltern investigator whom Saradindu Bandyopadhyay uses to resist the Orientalist ideology Doyle's detective narratives. *Detectives in White and Brown: a Comparative Study of Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi* involves a comparative analysis of those particular Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi stories that bear the maximum number of Doyle's colonial and Bandyopadhyay's anti-imperial ideological aspects. *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" and "The Adventure of the Three Students" – have been segregated and analysed separately as the British litterateur's most imperially compatible Holmes stories. On the other hand, four Byomkesh Bakshi stories – "Satyanweshi", "Pather Kanta", "Arthamanartham" and "Chitrochor" – have been given a separate treatment and detailed analysis in the postcolonial perspective.

With the unavailability of a complete set of translations for all the Byomkesh Bakshi narratives, the textual references to "Satyanweshi", "Pather Kanta", "Makorshar Rash", "Arthamanartham", "Agniban", "Upasanhar" and "Chitrochor" indicate Sreejata Guha's *Picture Imperfect and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999) in which she has translated them respectively as

“The Inquisitor” (1-28), “The Gramophone Pin Mystery” (29-70), “The Venom of the Tarantula” (71-88), “Where There’s a Will” (89-128), “Calamity Strikes” (129-161), “An Encore for Byomkesh” (162-194), and “Picture Imperfect” (195-249). Select passages from the remaining twenty-nine Byomkesh Bakshi stories have been translated into English by the author of this thesis himself, and the page numbers mentioned in parenthesis normally indicate those in Byomkesh Samogro (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1995. Rpt. 2000), unless otherwise specified. Because the references to the Bengali text involve transliteration, the author proposes to supply the closest English equivalent of the titles of those stories that have not been translated by Sreejata Guha or any other renowned translator. “Shimonto Heera” can be translated as “The Shimonto Diamond” and “Chorabalee” as “The Quicksand”. “The Scarlet Sapphire” is the translated form of “Raktomukhi Neela” and “Byomkesh and Baroda” of “Byomkesh O Baroda”. “Durgo Rahoshyo” and “Chiriakhana” can be substituted with “The Mystery of the Fort” and “The Zoo”, respectively. “Aadim Ripu” is “The Primitive Instinct”; “Bonhi Patango” is “The Fire-Obsessed Insect”; “Rakter Daag” and “Moni Mondon” are “The Blood Stain” and “The Stolen Gem”. “Amriter Mrityu” becomes “The Eternal Dies” in English while “Shaiylo Rahoshyo” becomes “The Mystery of the Mountains”. “The Bird Unknown”, “The Riddle” and “The Invisible Triangle” are the respective translated forms of “Achin Pakhi”, “Kahen Kabi Kalidas” and “Adrishyo Trikon”. “Adwitiyo” is “The Unique”; “Khunji Khunji Nari” is “The Quest Futile”, and “The Cryptic” can be substituted for “Magno Mainak”. “The Evil Triangle”, “The Rhythm of the Riddle”, “Room Number Two”, “The Melody of Deception” and “The Porcupine Thorn” are the respective English titles for “Dusto Chakra”, “Henyalir Chhando”, “Room Number Dui”,

“Chholonar Chhando” and “Shanjarur Kanta”. The titles of the last three Byomkesh Bakshi narratives, “Beni Sanghar”, “Lohar Biscuit” and the incomplete “Bishupal Badh” become “The Knot of the Lock”, “The Iron Biscuit” and “The Death of Bishupal” in English translation.

Passages from select Bengali critical and historical works have also been translated by the author himself. The English equivalents of their titles have been indicated in parenthesis in the list of “Works Cited” at the concluding portion of the thesis.

NOTES:

1. See Gupta, Nilanjana. “Reading Detective Fiction: Introduction”. The Murder of Roger Ackroyd: A Collection of Critical Essays. Nilanjana Gupta, ed. New Delhi: Worldview, 2001. 4.
2. Seidman, Michael, Julian Symons, and Douglas G. Greene. “Detective Story”, Microsoft ® Encarta ® Online Encyclopaedia 2003. 1 April 2003. <http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559994/Detective_Story.html#endads>