

A RE-VIEW INTO THE GENESIS OF DETECTIVE FICTION

Sabir Ahmed, Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, (W.B.) And Assistant Teacher, Per-Raghunathpur Kamal High School (H.S), Domkal, Murshidabad (W.B.)

Abstract:

The present study encompasses the spasmodic origin of detective fiction and its subsequent evolution and involution to become more complicated from stories of 'armchair detection' to psychosocial novel. But this did not happen in a few hundred years, instead the concept of detective fiction is as old as the global civilization itself, since it deals with crime or infringement of law in a broader sense of the term, which is the arcane and pre-historic preoccupation in human nature that had been most curiously cultivated by the first man and woman. Because of this susceptibility of human nature to crime and since art mirrors life, detective fiction came into being much earlier than many other genres but some factors were there which helped its emergence. In this study I have tried to situate those factors that I think have played premier role in the growth and development of detective fiction, into a chronological paradigm to facilitate understanding its complex history.

Keywords: *Crime, Detection, Development, Golden Age, Growth, Hard Boiled.*

I. Introduction

The history of detective fiction is much more complicated and longer as it may seem. The general consensus is that detective story began with Edgar Allan Poe with his short story "Murder in the Rue Morgue" in 1841. But, a much careful study shows that this genre has a much earlier provenance. Before 19th century detective fiction has appeared throughout the world in a very random fashion. It has appeared spasmodically throughout the ages in different countries, which posits the main difficulty to get to its origin. As such, before trying to get to its root, it would be more sensible to detect those factors or influences which triggered its emanation. In so doing, I would consider three principle influences that led to the emergence of this popular genre and continued its evolution through ages.

Among these three influences the ancient, I am of the opinion, is theological influence. By theological I refer to 'sacred' such as The Old Testament where the first tale as to detection of a criminal act is written in the story of "Susanna and the Elders" in the book of prophet Daniel. Here Daniel with his divine insights and dialectic reasoning absolves Susanna of adultery. Besides the Old Testament Ranjit Chattopadhyaya and Siddhartha Ghosh identify, in the 10th Mandala of *RigVeda* written in 1500 BC, the parable of Sarama, the dog that helps gods to track down the poni -group of cattle snatching dacoits as the first detective story of the world.

The second influence that paved the way for this genre is establishment of formal police force, which I entitle here as historical influence. Dorothy L. Sayers, a noted critic and detective fiction writer in the introduction of her "Great Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror" said "The detective story had to wait for its full development for the establishment of an effective police organization in the Anglo Saxon countries". In 1812 establishment of world's first formal police force Surete in Paris with Eugene Francois Vidocq, a former convicted bandit as its first chief (1812-1827) and publication of his "Memoiers" in 1828 bears out Sayers claim. Soon Britain followed France and established first municipal constabulary in the world organized by Sir Robert Peel by Metropolitan Police Act in 1828. In 1856 Britain founded Calcutta

Police in its imperial colony of India. The United States could not build its own force before 1856. Vidocq's "*Memoirs*" inspired French writers in fictionalizing their own detectives like Honore de Balzac's Vautrin, Emile Gaboriau's Monseur Lecoq, American writer Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin. It also influenced many police officers to put down their real life experiences in the following century. Priyanath Mukhopadhyay's "Darogar Daptar" ("The Journal of the Officer- in-Charge") may be cited as an example. The police force of Britain inspired its own breed of detective heroes. Jonathan Whicher, one of the detectives of London Police force (1842) became involved in 1860 with a murder case at Road Hill House. This real life experiences of him influenced Henry James' "*The Turn of the Screw*", Charles Dickens' "*The Mystery of the Edwin Drood*", and Wilkie Collins' "the Moonstone" (1868) though loosely based on the plot.

I entitle the third and the last one as canonical influence. Though officially detective fiction is around two hundred years old, its instance, although not in the modern sense of the term, can be traced back in some of the world's ancient books. This genre inspired the writers centuries after century to try their hands at it. It was only in 19th century, the genre got its name as a distinguished literary style. So numerous writers without knowing what they were creating enormously contributed to the evolution of detective fiction. For convention of discussion I will cite them chronologically.

Dorothy L. Sayers in her 1928 introduction to "*Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*" apart from two Old Testament Stories from the Book of Daniel points out two other stories, one from Herodotus (5th Century BC), and the other from Hercules myths. John Scaggs in his book "*Crime Fiction*" writes "In the story of Hercules and Caucis the thief, Caucis is one of the first criminals to falsify evidence by forging footprints in order to mislead his pursuer. Herodotus' story of King Rhampsinitus and the thief is often identified as the first 'locked room mystery', in which a crime (usually a murder) is committed in a room which it seems is physically impossible for the criminal to have either entered or existed. In Herodotus' story, as in the story of Hercules and Caucis, the thief also tampers with the evidence of the crime to evade capture". The story of "*Oedipus the King*" (430 BC) by Sophocles subsumes all the characteristic attributes to detective fiction.

After a lapse of around two thousand years traces of detective fiction is found in the 16th century in Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*" where Hamlet's revenge of his father's murder is postponed and the detection of the crime is foregrounded: "Hamlet accepts his filial obligation, but before killing Claudius he takes the precaution of first proving his uncle's guilt and his investigations". Although there are several disputes among the critic for "*Hamlet*" being in the line of detective genre.

In the 19th century detective fiction is firmly established as a literary canon but its prelude may be traced back in the 18th century Gothic fiction. Themes such as mystery, crime and death which are common in detective fiction are integral elements in Gothic fiction too. Moreover there is a strong affinity in the narrative technique between the two genres. In Gothic fiction behind the present crisis lies some hidden past incident, which must be discovered as to unravel the cause behind the present calamity and bring it to solution. Similarly detective fiction starts generally with a murder or some gruesome criminal acts. Then the detective starts probe, immerses into the past of the victim and finally with the knowledge of the new findings unravels the present mystery. Gothic fiction began in Horace Walpole's "*The Castle Of Otranto*" (1794) followed by Anne Radcliff's "*The Mysteries of Udolpho*" (1796), William Godwin's "Caleb Williams" (1794) etc. Godwin in his "Caleb Williams" distracted the attention of his readers from pure Gothic terror to pure detection of crime featuring his protagonist Caleb detecting his master's commission of a murder. Edgar Allan Poe, who is a significant contributor to Gothic fiction is credited to be the father of detective fiction for creating first standard detective story in its pure form in "*The Murder in the Rue Morgue*" (1841) featuring C. Auguste Dupin who makes an appearance twice more in the "*Mysterie of Marie Roget*" and "*The Purloined Letter*". Poe coined the term 'ratiocination' to describe the style of reasoning and intuition which his detective uses to unfold a mystery. His 'tales of ratiocination' inspired

Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie Immensely. In the 1880s in Victorian age popularity of Gothic fiction returned and was termed 'Gothic Revival' in the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson's "*Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde*" Oscar Wilde's "*Dorian Gray*" Bam Stroker's "*Dracula*". These novels are not stories of detection in formal sense, but they share certain characteristics of the mystery genre and often feature a hero whose challenge is to unravel a central mystery.

Detective fiction rose to prominence in the 19th century. Poe's contribution to detective fiction is the most significant and considered to be the first milestone in the development of the genre. French novelist Emile Gaboriau enlarged Poe's model of short story into first full length detective novel with a greater character insights and psychological introspection. He fictionalized two detectives, Mister Tabaret and Monsieur Lecoq who appear together in "*L'affaire Lerouge*" in 1866. Although Wilkie Collins' "*The Moonstone*" (1868) is considered to be the first detective novel in English language, a careful chronological study will show that his contemporary Charles Dickens much before him remarkably contributed to the development of this genre in "*Martin Chuzzlewit*", "*Bleak House*" and "*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*". All these novels of him are imbued with realistic representation of truth and injustice persevering by detective hero for the sake of justice. In the 1890s most influential of the 19th century detective fiction Sir Arthur Conan Doyle featured Sherlock Holmes in his short story collection "*The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes*" (1892). Though Holmes appeared twice before this in "A Study in Scarlet" and "*The Sign of the Four*" but, failed to leave a lasting impression on the audience. It was in the short stories, Doyle succeeded in epitomizing his detective hero Holmes with his less intelligent friend and omnipresent narrator, Watson who would serve as the prototype for both literature and cinema for more than a century. G.K. Chesterton in his Father Brown stories first published in 1911 as "*The Innocence of Father Brown*" invented a new type of detective protagonist featuring Father Brown who is a priest by profession but detective by hobby, and who sympathises with the convict more than that of the victim and unlike the other detectives he relies heavily on moral justice than the legal one.

Detective fiction since its inception most prosperously flourished in between the two world wars, which has been demarcated as the 'Golden age'. Detective fiction of this era is different from its precursors in respect of style and technique. During this period novels instead of short stories became the main form of detective fiction. Stories of this era mostly 'country house murder' with range of suspects, equipped with range of motives, demonstrating rare romance. The narrative style is simple and lucid. Tales of this age are termed as 'Whodunnit'. Notable authors of this period are Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Nagao Marsh and Ellery Queen. Among them Christie deserves to be especially mentioned. She is the most significant representative of this age. In 1920 she published her first book "*The Mysterious Affairs at Style*" in which she introduces one of many of her fictional detectives Hercule Poirot. Her another famous detective is Miss Jane Marple who is featured in "*Murder in the Vicarage* (1930). She was a prolific writer and produced around eighty books of detective fiction during her life time. She remains the most influential detective writer and all-time best seller. Many of her stories were dramatized, filmed and serialized in T.V. Dorothy Sayers is another notable detective writer of this age. She introduced Lord Peter Wimsey in her thirteenth full length detective novels and several short stories.

After 'whodunnit' of Golden age the most current sub-genre in detective fiction is 'hardboiled' novels. After the 2nd world war detective story writers started to show certain dissimilarities from their immediate predecessors. Hardboiled novel typifies less intellectual challenge than 'whodunnit'. Growing demoralization of the society, violence, bloodshed, love and hate are some of the typical characteristics of 'hardboiled' novels. Here the plot focuses less on the mystery of crime and more on the investigation and action sequences. The detectives of 'hardboiled' novels rely more on the physical strength than on the reasoning power of observation and logical deduction. Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler are two of the famous writers of this genre.

II. Conclusion

The literary scholars have a tendency to look down upon detective fiction as being the content of mere stories of detection and lacking the philosophical and linguistic over-preoccupation, which has reduced it to be complacent with the status of a subsuming category of popular fiction only. But we should not forget it has become a strong suit for authors like Arthur Conan Doyle to assert colonial imperialism by projecting a 'white male private eye' and G.K. Chesterton to promote evangelism transposed to a different cultural milieu. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay has subverted the same trajectory to put up a vitriolic anticolonial resistance. Present day decline of detective fiction stems from it being disparaged and looked inferior to canonical literature by the authoritative institutions as lacking felicity of philosophical speculations and potential of linguistic niceties. Decades ago America has included detective fiction in university curricula. This paper of mine, I hope, would augment a renewed interest in the rich literary heritage of detective fiction and help it find a decent place in the Indian university curricula as a medium of much broader and heavier thoughts, if not as mere stories of intellectual challenges.

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