

Literary Essay

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Crime in Fiction and Films

While talking about crime in fiction and in films it is impossible not to begin the discussion with Italy. After all 'Mafioso' is Italian, 'blood-feud' started in Italy, 'vendetta' is typical of the olive provinces and the Godfather by Mario Puzo is Italian by birth. Italy also becomes a natural selection because it has a very high rate of criminality. In a documentary movie on that country the Italian writer De Cataldo comments that "A great part of Italian history is criminal history" therefore Italy has always remained the happy hunting ground for writers and directors of crime fiction and films.

Between Edgar Allan Poe's invention of the detective story with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841 and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, chance and coincidence played a large part in crime fiction. Nevertheless, Conan Doyle resolved that his detective would solve his cases using reason. He modelled Holmes on Poe's Dupin and made Sherlock Holmes a man of science and an innovator of forensic methods. Holmes is so much at the forefront of detection that he has authored several monographs on crime-solving techniques. In most cases the well-read Conan Doyle has Holmes use methods years before the official police forces in both Britain and America start using them. The result was 60 stories in which logic, deduction, and science dominate the scene.

Sherlock Holmes was quick to realize the value of fingerprint evidence. The first case in which fingerprints are mentioned is *The Sign of Four*, published in 1890, and he is still using finger prints 36 years later in the 55th story, *The Three Gables* (1926). Other areas of detection used by Holmes are type-written documents, hand writing, foot prints, [The *Boscombe Valley Mystery* is solved almost entirely by footprint analysis] ciphers and dogs. He sets a trend which other writers of crime and detection follow.

But the days of Conan Doyle and Agatha Christi are now no more. Both Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot delved into the psychology of the crime and used their, to quote Poirot "little grey cells" to solve cases in a world which was leisurely, slow-paced and could compartmentalise crime from most other social areas. However crime, criminal, detective and detection of today have taken various turns. Gone are the days of over-coat and top hat, a horse driven carriage or a limousine for a taxi for the European detective and dhoti and bush shirt of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi. The detective of today rides ultramodern SUVs, dons Ray Ban sun-glasses, and wears Raymond and other branded clothes. Today he encounters crime syndicates, finds crime closely connected to religion and politics and studies the metamorphosed urban life and *weltanschauung* for a method and a solution.

The winds of change are first noticed in American crime fiction and films when the individual criminal is replaced by organised crime in the 1930s; the amateur private detective is often substituted by the arm of State law. In Indian literature such changes have been slow in coming. But the police officer which was something of a joke in the novels of Byomkesh is jerked into some kind of efficiency by the time we come to the Feluda novels of Satyajit Ray. But the police force which was the arm of imperialism in the pre-Independent India left its shadow in the early detective films and fiction like the 1965 Hindi film "Gumnam" directed by Raja Nawathe.

Ernest Mendel provides an interesting explanation for a general lack-lustre portrayal of the police force in the early detective fiction. He says that at the beginning of the 19th century British elite did not take the idea of having a police force to maintain law and order kindly. But after 1848 when the proletarian

protest against oppression and exploitation intensified with social movements like Chartism they recognised the need for a strong State sponsored peace-keeping and repressive force. But none from their ranks were ready to join this force. Hence the police personnel was mainly drawn from the working classes. Therefore looked down upon the police and indeed sneered at their low intelligence and this continued to cast a shadow on the detective fiction of the later years. Primarily for this reason the hero of the crime fiction came – not from the low born police personnel – but from the aristocratic and cultured class of the high-born.

In the colonised India when the British compared the divine icon of a white man with the weak and timid Indian to justify the continued British rule the alter-ego of this Indian is found in the detectives who are strong in body and mind and intelligent enough to earn the esteem of the ‘sahib police inspector by solving complicated crimes with intellectual aplomb. These detectives caught the public eye in both fiction and films and captivated the audience.

The first detective fiction in India is Priyonath Mukherjee’s *Darogar Doptor* [The Office of the Police Inspector] in 1892. It was a kind of narration from the police files extolling the achievements of the police detective. After this a number of writers tried their hand in the genre and most of them were women writers: Indira Devi, Kanti Devi, Chinmoyi Devi, Manorama Debi, etc. Other names include Dr Nihar Ranjan Gupta, Narayan Sanyal, Leela Majumder, etc. Most of these writers translated English detective stories into the vernacular. Sherlock was a particular favourite among them because he protected the innocents from the powerful and the vicious. But other detectives of other foreign writers too found a space. In England however a change in detective fiction was being noticed. Organised crime was forcing a replacement of the private detective by a police investigator. Moreover candidates from the upper classes also started to join the force in the England of the time. Hence the police got an acceptance and recognition from the higher orders of the society and slowly they found their place in the detective stories. However, the same trend started to come into the telling of Indian stories about crime much after Independence. Still, Indian literature is focussed on the expertise of a single individual – a Kiriti Roy or a Byomkesh Bakshi, or Feluda, an Arjun, a Kakababu or a Mitin Mashi. They are still reliant on their “little grey cells”; they are still engrossed in the psychology of the crime and not on the regular methods of detection. A loose button here or a cigarette butt there is still considered valuable evidence. But unlike the detectives of the past Feluda or Kakababu get positive help from a friendly police officer.

Thus crime in fiction and film which has a very long tradition in India as well as in the other parts of the world shows the human interest not only for the crime but also portrays the satisfaction of bringing the criminal to book and exposing his dangerous games.