

Byomkesh Bakshi Stories – Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s Anticolonial Resistance to the ‘White Cultural Imperialism’ of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot Stories

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Abstract

Agatha Christie and Saradindu Bandyopadhyay both lived in the same age and their literary outputs also were in similar eras. Both were influenced by Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes when they created their trusted detective characters of Hercule Poirot and Byomkesh Bakshi, respectively. Christie took forward the trope of Sherlock Holmes’ ‘white male private eye’ with her creation of Hercule Poirot. However, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay remained well-known only in Bengali literary circles since he wrote only in Bengali. His creation of the Bengali private detective, Byomkesh Bakshi, was more realistic and authentic. It was also Bandyopadhyay’s fierce reply to Holmes and Poirot. Byomkesh Bakshi symbolised anti-colonial resistance, at a time when detective fiction was not even looked at as a serious literary genre.

Keywords: Anti-colonial; Authentic; Characters; Detective; Imperialism.

“It often seems to me that’s all detective work is, wiping out your false starts and beginning again.”- Agatha Christie

Detective Fiction has always been highly popular, a genre of crime fiction that is led forward by a detective investigating the crime, which very often is a murder.

Such investigative stories have been around for centuries. They were popularized in the 1800s by Victorian authors such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens. The first detective story is credited to Edgar Allan Poe with his story, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841, which saw the

creation of the unusual detective, C. Auguste Dupin. Poe created a plot formula which has been acknowledged by other crime fiction authors throughout the world. Poe's character of Dupin got this name from the word "dope" or "deception". Poe's other tales like *The Mystery of Marie Roget* and also *The Purloined Letter* featured Dupin. The term given by Poe to his detective stories was *Tales of Ratiocination*. The main plot of these stories was to unearth the truth by using logic, powers of observation, deduction and intuition. "Early detective stories tended to follow an investigating protagonist from the first scene to the last, making the unravelling a practical rather than emotional matter." (Kismaric and Heiferman pp 56)

Arthur Conan Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes greatly increased the popularity of this genre. Sherlock Holmes has been an inspiration for every new crime fiction author. Doyle made Sherlock Holmes a scientific detective, one who used reason, logic and his deductive abilities brilliantly to foil the most intelligent and ruthless of criminals. Holmes was the 'White male hero' in an imperialistic London. Doyle betrayed his own Eurocentric leanings in the actions and words of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes - in his own words- was purported to be the 'only one in the world' who could resolve the most contentious of crimes. He symbolized British supremacist tendencies of order and rationality especially when he was pitting against the 'evil and disorder' of the colonized world. Sherlock Holmes cases revolve around the aristocracy and the nobility. He is highly regarded by them and is the last resort to solving issues not only of individuals and families but also of national and international importance. His criminals are always Americans - a former British colony- or belonging to the British colonies or whites who have had a background in the British colonies.

Since the first book, *The Adventure in Scarlet*, in 1892, that introduced Sherlock Holmes and his companion Dr. Watson, both appear to be prejudiced against the Orientals and quite in favour of Britain's expansionist ambitions. Dr. Watson, in fact, is a retired military surgeon who has the experience of serving as a military doctor in British India. The British viewed the Orient as superstitious and steeped in ancient pagan rituals whereas rationality, modernity and critical thinking ability was attributed to the science-seeking Victorian age detective, Sherlock Holmes, as depicted in *The Speckled Band* and in *The Adventures of the Sussex Vampire*.

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. (Ahmed Sabir, pp 178)

The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle showed Holmes' dexterity in solving international crimes and this could also be seen in *The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone*, in which precious gemstones, with connections to the orient, have been stolen. The Blue Carbuncle, a precious gem, is originally from China while the Mazarin Stones are also exotic stones from the British crown.

Doyle also makes Sherlock Holmes conform to the patriarchal norms of the Victorian age. Holmes is a confirmed bachelor who has no time for the female of the species except in taking up cases where they are portrayed as victims or are silent, meek and unintelligent. If Doyle's women characters are smart or powerful, then they have been rendered as femme fatales or belonging to other lesser countries like America or France but definitely not British. Even in the portrayal of women characters, Doyle's 'ideal, British' women are shy, reserved, well-behaved and elite.

Gordon Meghan R says that women in the Victorian age of England had to deal with confusion about their precise roles whether in the home or in society or in politics or when dealing with property.

"Doyle manipulates this societal confusion within his stories to: 1) further the ingenuity of deduction of Sherlock Holmes in placing him in juxtaposition to female characters who are typically eccentric, sensuous, or silent; 2) use women in his stories to advance the perception of the English as the elite, and all other cultures as lesser; and 3) provoke and perpetuate the idea that a patriarchal society in England is preferred and prevalent". (Gordon Meghan R)

Sherlock Holmes has been the most remarkable detective of all times. His companion and narrator, Dr. Watson, has been loyal to him throughout the journey of Sherlock Holmes Series. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote four novels and fifty-six short stories featuring Sherlock. 221B Baker Street, the place where Holmes lived with his companion has become a chief setting and is recognised around the world.

The 1920s and 1930s, are regarded as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction when many new popular detective characters came into existence. Of these, two notable and very well-known characters were that of Her-

cule Poirot and Jane Marple, both created by Agatha Christie. Her first book, published in 1920, was *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, and it was here that the reader was introduced to Hercule Poirot, a hugely popular and long enduring detective character of Christie's. The character of Hercule Poirot appeared in 54 short stories and 33 novels. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes heavily influenced Agatha Christie in her creation of Hercule Poirot. A little more than a decade later, in 1932, appeared Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's first Byomkesh Bakshi work in the Kolkata based monthly, *Basumati*. Bandopadhyay was influenced by both Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie in his creation of Byomkesh Bakshi.

Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie had almost 2 billion of her copies of books sold. She ranks only after the Bible and Shakespeare's works in the Guinness Book of World Record for most copies sold. She came from an upper-middle-class family in the town of Torquay in Devon, on September 15, 1890, and died on January 12, 1976. She was not just a crime novelist but also a playwright and a short story writer. Under the name of Mary Westmacott she also wrote six romantic novels. However, it's her sixty-six detective novels that are more celebrated. In 1971, she was made a Dame for her contribution to literature. Jane Marple is Christie's other well known detective, who was introduced in short stories and consequently appeared in twelve novels. Christie was widely reputed to be the "Queen of Crimes" for her ability to blend creative plots with psychological analysis and well-crafted story development. It is this speciality that has cemented her place in the popular English literature canons.

Christie's strong hold on the contemporary age and characters is another factor in her popularity in the middle of the 20th century. Her keen interest in archaeology which was quite a popular activity of the wealthy upper-class British of the 20th century, also led her to highlight this subject in her works. Some of Christie's works revolve around themes related to archaeology, artefacts, and the activities of archaeologists prominently. Death is symbolized by the presence of ancient tools, statues and artefacts which represent impending trouble, and mystery. All of this led to an enhanced aura of the supernatural elements in the stories and many of these were set in the Middle East, Mediterranean and France.

Hercule Poirot, Christie's hard-nosed, inimitable white male Belgian detective, is like Sherlock Holmes, a man of thought rather than a man of action. It's very interesting to note that Poirot's name came from two other detectives of fiction of the time- Marie Belloc Lowndes' Hercule Popeau and Frank Howel Evan's Monsieur Poiret. Poirot's green eyes seem to

glow “like a cat” when he comes up with an intelligent plan. He is exceptionally prompt and carries a “turnip pocket watch”. Hercule Poirot’s two famous catch phrases are “these little grey cells” and “order and method”. He solves the most convoluted crimes using his sharp and acute analytical reasoning. He follows the model of the classic private eye, who solves a crime to restore ‘order’ and remove ‘disorder’ and punish the perpetrator, who is generally only one person who indulges in an evil act.

“Perhaps these character traits began to grate on Christie herself and by 1930, she found her own creation “Insufferable”, and declared him a “detestable, bombastic, tiresome, egocentric little creep” by 1960. However, the audience liked him and therefore she refused to kill him off”. (Murder on The Orient Express, A Reader’s Guide)

Christie makes Poirot eccentric, in keeping with his European origins. He speaks with an accent, has an egg-shaped head, is proud of his flamboyant moustache and despite his five feet, carries himself with great dignity.

The nature of the Detective Novel of Manners (DNOM) was expanded upon by Heilbrun who said that such novels are dependent upon British class, in particular with its roots in the British Golden Age.

“One could put both Christie and Doyle into that category, since both are well aware of social class and work to maintain that social order. In, Murder on the Orient Express, Hercule Poirot rides in the first class wagon, containing only upper-class people with their servants. Holmes helps a rather wealthy young lady in the “A Case of Identity.’ In a previous adventure, he helps a king from a foreign country.” (Larson, pp 15)

Hercule Poirot is a detective who deals exclusively with the upper class. He is extremely finicky about his sartorial elegance and his moustache. He looks at the psychology behind the accused and the victim while solving the most intricate of thefts or murders. He is “an armchair detective”. Unlike Homes, he does not delve into other sciences and nor is he asocial like Holmes but instead Poirot has many friends. However, like Holmes, Poirot is quite arrogant and thinks himself to be the “best detective in the world”.

Unlike Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot is highly principled. He believes in justice and tries to fulfil it. A Poirot story’s denouement is the revelation of the murderer and bringing about justice, which is generally through the help of the Scotland Yard police force. Poirot also explains the motives

of the criminal act and like in Shakespeare's tragedies, the last scene is always before a room full of people connected with the crime.

"This is a typical trace of Agatha Christie's detective fiction. Poirot gathers friends and family of the victim and together with his companion and the police officer submits the clues collected during the case investigation. Poirot gradually connects motives and clues with the present guests. He explains all the unclear relations and information and finally, dramatically reveals the identity of the real murderer. (Veselská, pp 25)

Both Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot are bachelors by choice. They do not appear to have had any relationship with any woman and in fact seem to endorse patriarchal norms in their opinions and attitudes towards women.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay is a well-known Bengali novelist, short story writer, essayist, screen playwright, and poet. He was born on March 30, 1899, and died on September 22, 1970. His most famous fictional character is the Bengali detective, Byomkesh Bakshi. The first Byomkesh Bakshi work appeared in 1932, in *Satyanweshi* and last appeared in *Bishopal Bodh*. Byomkesh is a middle-class Bengali Indian sleuth. He prefers to be referred to as a "Satyanweshi" or "Truth Seeker" as he dislikes the term detective. Saradindu also created Baroda, a ghost hunter. In his work "Byomkesh O Baroda", the two characters meet. Although Bandyopadhyay was a writer in colonial India, he barely alluded to the British Rule in India. His works are all focused on Indians and show the impact of Indian culture. His aim is to use rational thought but also to have social issues revealed in his novels.

Byomkesh Bakshi is married to Satyabati and they have a son. Thus, with regards to family and marriage, Byomkesh is a little dissimilar to other popular detectives who are not tied by familial bonds. He also ages with time in subsequent stories. Like the other detectives, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, Byomkesh has a companion and a friend Ajit, who is also the narrator of some of his stories. They meet in "Satyanweshi" where Byomkesh has chosen another name for himself to hide his identity so as to catch the criminal red-handed. The stories of Byomkesh Bakshi were initially written in Bengali. Nevertheless, they have now been translated into English and Hindi languages as well. Byomkesh Bakshi is a detective of the middle class, unlike Holmes or Poirot. He is a cultured and sophisticated personality, dressed typically in the Bengali garb of dhoti-kurta.

While the might of the English Imperialist empire ensured the widespread popularity of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, Saradindu Bandopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi stories actually attained immense notice only in the 1990s with the DD National Television series adaptation, directed by Basu Chatterjee and with Rajit Kapur playing Byomkesh Bakshi. The series had two seasons, airing in 1993 and 1997, and was well made. It was through it that a national audience was first claimed for Byomkesh Bakshi and many became his admirers. Saradindu Bandopadhyay wrote 32 complete and one incomplete Byomkesh Bakshi detective stories, amongst which *The Menagerie*, *The Quills of the Porcupine*, *Picture Imperfect*, *Where there is a Will* are the most famous.

At least the first decade of the writing of Byomkesh Bakshi stories by Saradindu Bandopadhyay were colonial years but Bandopadhyay consciously eschewed any mention of British. His stories are completely Indian in setting and character and he positions Byomkesh Bakshi as the intelligent and psychoanalytical detective with his own tenet of deductive reasoning, who was sufficient in himself and did not need to fall back on the colonialist's power or intellectual ability.

"In contrast, Byomkesh Bakshi identifiably 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 Eurocentric detectives, assumed national importance soon after his introduction. Bakshi's Kolkata symbolically becomes a subaltern response to and reaction against Holmes's colonial centre of London". (Roy Pinaki, pp XIV)

Saradindu published *The Quills of the Porcupine* (Shojarur Kanta) in 1967. The novella was written in Bengali and has been translated to English by Sreejata Guha. There are two story-lines in this novella, one a love story and the other a murder mystery. Both these stories intersect only later. The love story of a young girl, her lover and her husband is narrated in a straight-forward manner while several murders occur quite unrelated to this love-story. The story reaches a climax when the husband survives an attempted murderous attack and Byomkesh Bakshi, the detective steps in to solve the mystery and connect all the threads.

The story is set in South Calcutta in the early 20th century. The unique point of the story is the murder weapon which, most unusually, is a porcupine quill as the name of the story suggests. The murders are uncon-

nected with each other and start down the social scale, with the first victim being a beggar, the second a labourer and the third a grocer. The story then shifts towards the marriage of Debashish and Dipa, who are tied in a conventional arranged marriage even though Dipa tells her family that she loves someone else. Dipa's family thwarts her elopement attempt and marries her to Debashish, a gentleman who is caught unawares in a complex and quite hopeless situation. Dipa at once confesses her past relationship to her husband who, contrary to the patriarchal tendencies of the times, accepts her and allows her to stay in his house and does not use force upon her in any manner. The story progresses with many characters being introduced and thus adding to the confusion and the mystery. It takes Byomkesh Bakshi, the 'Truth Seeker' to divine the truth and catch the culprit who turns out to be Dipa's past lover.

The love story is etched out with a lot of sensitivity and charm. The characterisations are delineated realistically and the ensuing romance between Dipa and her husband Debashish, in spite of Dipa's resolve to not get close to him, is full of genuineness and warmth. Bandopadhyay does not just keep to the murder mystery but also reveals the casteist and patriarchal society and one young woman's firm, if a little misguided, fight to live her life on her own terms. The reader is made aware of how Dipa's wishes were never considered. On the other hand, her husband, Debashish, expressed great care and concern for her. He always asked her opinion about everything that mattered. It is quite horrifying to note that even women from affluent families, in those days, had certain taboos when it came to food. Dipa and other young unmarried girls were not supposed to eat eggs. The author draws a very warm and sympathetic picture of Dipa who is a strong young girl caught in a trap. We also learn of the casteism prevalent in society. It was not enough for Dipa's family that her prospective groom belong to their same upper Brahmin caste, even the sub-caste had to be adhered to and 'gotra' was important. The story also talks about the Calcutta of the times, the emotional distance between citizens, the poverty existing in society, the crime prevalent in even upmarket areas of the city.

The Menagerie was written by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay in 1953. It was first published as *Chiriyakhana* in Bengali. As the name suggests, the story describes a set of people who are like a zoo of oddball humans. The story is set in Golap Colony, Mohanpur near Calcutta. Byomkesh uses his psychoanalytical abilities and deductive reasoning to catch the killer.

Bandopadhyay creates a human and realistic character in Byomkesh Bak-

shi while both Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot are eccentric geniuses. Both Holmes and Poirot remain unmarried and both hardly age, with their appearances remaining unaltered. Byomkesh Bakshi was initially a bachelor but with the progression of the novels, he got married, had a child and aged too. His friend Ajit remained a bachelor. Byomkesh Bakshi, in fact, was the alter ego of Saradindu Bandopadhyay and his prospects in life changed as did his creator's.

Agatha Christie's famous creation Poirot, the sleuth, has a different style of catching the culprits and resolves the murder mystery in a closed space at the end, revealing the murderers before all. However, Saradindu Bandopadhyay's intelligent truth seeker Byomkesh Bakshi generally catches the culprit red-handed and then recounts the crime in front of other characters.

Saradindu's novels give us nuanced picture of characters and they develop and grow on us while Doyle's and Christie's characters are generally single faceted characters caught up in the drama of the mystery and the murders. Christie has not portrayed any depth to the characters nor has she dwelled on social injustice, which definitely existed in Europe from the early to mid-twentieth century. There is also no mention of the World War or the political and economic conditions of Europe, in Christie's novels. Most of the major characterizations are quite superficial.

Saradindu dwells a lot upon the psyche of the characters. Readers can immediately understand Dipa's change of heart towards Debashish, in *Quills of the Porcupine*, as the point of view shifts from third person to Dipa and occasionally to Debashish's perspective. His murderers too are all kinds without an attempt being made to belittle or exoticize any caste, class or race.

Agatha Christie, an English writer, achieved huge fame due to the colonizing power of Britain and the might of the English language. The numerous English films made on Agatha Christie's novels also contributed to her fame till she became renowned as the "Queen of Crimes". While it is true that Saradindu's body of work is by far fewer than that of Christie's, Saradindu's style of writing, plot construction, art of characterization and storyline is in no way inferior to Agatha Christie's. Christie's works have also been adapted into numerous plays, movies and television series, thus fanning further, the flames of her popularity. Saradindu's works have only recently been translated into Hindi and English. He was well known initially, only in Bengali literary circles. It was much later when

Byomkesh Bakshi, a Bengali film starring Bengali superstar Uttam Kumar, was released that the character became famous. The television series that appeared in the 1990s starring Rajit Kapur, helped popularize Byomkesh Bakshi nationally.

There are more than 20 films that have been made on Byomkesh Bakshi. However, amidst all this, the creator of Byomkesh Bakshi, Saradindu Bandopadhyay, has largely remained neglected. This is quite unlike the other famous Bengali fictional investigator Feluda, created by Satyajit Ray. Feluda was well-known because of Satyajit Ray.

A recent article in *The Guardian* spoke about the attempt being made by Harper Collins to remove “potentially offensive passages” from Agatha Christie’s stories as is also being done from Ian Fleming and Roald Dahl books. The article refers to the insults and derogatory references made in some stories of Agatha Christie that are being removed.

“This includes the Poirot and Miss Marple mysteries, which were written between 1920 and 1976. Certain passages have been reworked or ditched entirely in the new editions being published by HarperCollins. The edits have been done to remove language and descriptions perceived as offensive by modern audiences. Much usage of such language has occurred in stories that place Christie’s main characters outside of the UK. Examples of such language are describing a character as black, Jewish or Gypsy, a female character’s torso as “of black marble”, a judge’s “Indian temper”, as well as the words “Oriental”, the N-word, and “natives”. The last has been replaced entirely with the word “local”. (*The Guardian*, 26th March 2023)

Such changes are long overdue and speak of the growing power of the sensitive reader who ensure that their just demands are met by new age publishers.

Saradindu Bandopadhyay’s Byomkesh Bakshi symbolises the anti-colonial resistance to Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot – the western oriented detectives, with his nuanced and interesting characters, intricate plots and unusual murder weapons and without in any way belittling any race or class. It is time interest was revived in Saradindu Bandopadhyay’s works and his translated stories read all over the world to acknowledge his worth as a writer of murder mysteries and creator of Byomkesh Bakshi.

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