

THE DETECTIVE FICTION IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT: RECONSTRUCTING THE GENRE IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S SWEET AND SOUR MILK AND DORIS LESSING'S THE GRASS IS SINGING

Bidisha Mukherjee

Research Scholar, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on how the popular genre of detective fiction is subverted and re-constructed in the postcolonial context, with emphasis on two postcolonial texts- Nuruddin Farah's Sweet and Sour Milk, and Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing. A detective novel, as a genre, has been known for presenting insight into normative social and moral values and critiquing contemporary socio-cultural malpractices through the character of the protagonist, mostly presented as a heterosexual white male figure. In the postcolonial context, this popular genre has been made an instrument to cultural assertion and self-definition against the appropriations and manipulations under numerous variations of power-relations- from colonialism to dictatorial regimes. Whereas in Nuruddin Farah's Sweet and Sour Milk, the conventional search for the reason of the death re-contextualizes the genre into a search for resistance and self-definition against the manipulations of the socialist dictatorship in the post-independence Somalia; in Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing, the search for the motif of murder leads to a revealing commentary upon racism in southern Africa in the apartheid era. With its focus on the conventions of the genre of detective fiction, the article will analyze how this popular genre is subverted, reconstructed and re-contextualized in these two novels.

KEYWORDS: *Detective Fiction, Dictatorship, Discourse, Norms, Racism, Apartheid*

INTRODUCTION

A detective novel, as a genre, has been viewed as a medium of reinforcing normative values belonging to dominant ideologies of a culture (usually, the white colonialist supremacist discourse) by criticizing anomalies to those cultural constructs as a criminal offense. Conventionally, the genre develops in the form of quest: search for truth or puzzle-solving; and revolves round some incident, a robbery, a murder, kidnapping, blackmailing, or some other thing that appears anomalous or paradoxical to the socio-cultural norms. The emphasis usually rests on an epistemological and ideological insight into how justice is served, generally through the medium of the white male detective-as-protagonist. Thus, the detective fiction, in course of its rise as a popular genre in the nineteenth century, has, as Cawelti observes in his study of literary formulas, set an ideologically regulated formula following a pattern that "... clearly has some special appeal and significance to many people in the culture" like it "... becomes a matter of cultural behavior that calls for an explanation along with other cultural patterns" (Cawelti 21). Indeed, he raises the question as to whether "some works of literature become popular primarily because... they embody values and attitudes that their audience wishes to see affirmed..." (Cawelti 22). Having become a formula for popular literature since the Victorian era, the detective fiction can

very well be seen as a hegemonic tool for implementing the colonialist ideology of the white supremacist values across the homeland and around the colonies, emphasizing a sense of guilt and chaos for the absence of those values and promising hope of redemption by abject submission to that particular discourse that assures coherence and order. It can be easily imagined how the genre used to exercise such an unfathomably immense influence on the cultural psyche of the era as it normalized the European-colonialist concepts of rationality, law, order, justice, and criminality in terms of an absolute system - epistemologically as well as ideologically.

Right from the beginning, detective fiction has emerged as a kind of formulaic structure indicating the marginal space or the terra nullius of the colony. Within the formulaic structure, the antagonist character functions as the indicating point of the ideological boundary between “... the permitted and the forbidden” (Cawelti 35) in order to “express, explore and finally to reject those actions which are forbidden, but which, because of certain cultural patterns, are strongly tempting” (Cawelti 35). Quite obviously, race, colony, authority and nation became defining criterion in choosing a side; in selecting which should be the marking line between the antagonist and the protagonist and which values should be associated with the antagonist or the criminal. The imposition of law and order upon the colonial subject went hand in hand with the justice-abiding narrative of detective fiction- both promoted domestic policing on various levels. In his commentary on the crime fiction of Australia, America, and Wales- three British colonies, Stephen Knight observes how crime fiction emerged as one of the earliest literary forms to respond to new social and cultural constructs resulting from the colonial situation. From the introduction of the marginal as prone to evil and destined to die or be destroyed, as in the stereotypical caricatured portrayal of an indigene named Tonga from the Andaman Islands in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* who is dwarfish, deformed, adept in killing without conscience at the master’s order, and dies conveniently at the requirement of the plot without any script-space for redemption; to the representation of the colonial and transnational space as potential threat to the British imperial ethos of scientific prosperity and cultural openness as in Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*, the colonial space is stereotyped as the centre of evil and criminality which is likely to be penetrated and enlightened by the white ethos of prosperity, spirituality, and rationality.

In the postcolonial context, however, such stereotypes are deconstructed and often reconstructed as a tool of defiance against authoritarian discourses such as colonialism and autocracy. This popular genre has been made an instrument of cultural assertion and self-definition against the appropriations and manipulations under numerous variations of authoritarianism. Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* is one such text where under the structure of a murder mystery-cum-detective novel, the novelist tries to expose and often reverse the colonial stereotypes. Set in the colonial Rhodesia (presently Zimbabwe) depicting the lives of the white settler community, the novel opens with an article in an English newspaper under the title “Murder Mystery” that reports about the murder of Mary Turner, wife of a white settler farmer, by the native houseboy Moses. The evocation of the puzzle-solving “who is the killer” genre is immediately shattered upside down as the same newspaper report also mentions that the murderer has confessed to the crime and has been taken under custody by the colonial police for further legal procedures. What rather the story invites its readers to engage further in is “why does the murder take place” instead of “who the murderer is”. The author thus reverses from the very beginning the popular detective genre into creating an engaging study into racism, white supremacy and colonial discourse. While the narratorial voice describes objectively, quite dispassionately and ironically indeed, as is usual in a newspaper report, how the local community of white settlers keeps on a hush-hush attitude towards the murder and the native houseboy’s involvement in it; the omniscient author also shows the gruesome incident through the consciousness of Tony Marston, the

newly employed managerial assistant to the Turners, who has the idea that the murder has something to do with the crossing of the line in the white master/black slave relationship and yet is confused and disillusioned by the community's contemptuous silence and denial of it. It is through his consciousness that the hidden measures of the colonial discourse in the apartheid era in terms of objectifying and segregating native Africans as black and thereby necessarily the epitome of evil and incapable of all possible human emotions and relationships, is made clear:

Mary Turner... since she was dead, was no longer a problem. The one fact that remained still to be dealt with was the necessity for preserving appearances... it was 'white civilization' fighting to defend itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant, 'white civilization' which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or evil, with a black person. For once it admits that it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turners' failure (Lessing 29-30)

Like her blurring of the line between the master-slave relationship in case of Mary and Moses, which the narrative constantly keeps away from any distinct definition other than some vague ideas and assumptions, Lessing also blurs and subverts the detective novel's intention of reinforcing the white colonialist ethos by engaging in a deeper commentary on racism and apartheid.

Moreover, Lessing willingly manipulates and subverts the conventional structure of the detective fiction genre. She consciously avoids any attempt to explore motif/ modus operandi behind the murder. Just as the narrative exposes right in the beginning who the murderer is, and thereby, leaves no room for suspense, it also wistfully retains a decided opacity around the motif of the crime and the committer, and focuses rather on the life of the victim, and eventually goes deeper into the dark sides of Mary's psyche. Lessing makes it quite clear that the focus will be on racism as the narrative traces the lives of the Turners rather than that of Moses. The story turns into a trajectory of retracing Mary's life from childhood up to her final predicament, involving a relentless depiction of her inner torment and gradual derangement into loss of control and total surrender to Moses.

Mary's is a childhood of poverty and hardship fraught with deprivation and negligence from a drunken father and an embittered mother. Wife of a drunkard trying to fare moderately under poverty with the burden of her family, her mother ran a store for the native slaves for a living, something which she resented every moment. The narrative thus entangles issues of patriarchal domination and racial disdain deep within the personal level towards developing Mary as a stereotypical colonizer: control-freak, dominating, and inhuman in her treatment of the black people. Despite leading an ordered life later in her adulthood as a working woman, she returns to the life of poverty and isolation that she hated most ardently by marrying Richard Turner, a white farmer settling in the Southern Rhodesia, and emerging as the domineering white master (not the weaker and gentler mistress) during her husband's illness. The rest of the story is dedicated to the description of her alienation and psychological torment as she fails to adapt to the surroundings and ultimately surrenders, psychologically as well as physically, under the control of the native houseboy Moses, whom she had earlier beaten while overseeing the fields during Richard's illness. While the narrative most ardently follows each and every detail of Mary's growing sense of isolation and derangement and gradual surrender to Moses, it spends almost no time in developing the part from the latter's point of view. While it can be viewed as a great impropriety on part of the author for not giving enough space for the character Moses for having a say in the matter other than confessing his crime, even when she intends

the text to be a critique of racism, the narratorial manipulations also emerge to be effectively handling the matter. It can be argued that the author purposefully denies the reader to have first-hand access to the inner psyche of Moses, as is clear from the deeply ironical final statement: "... what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say" (Lessing 256). While such a stance leaves room for political interpretations of the writer's intentions, Shadia S. Fahim, in her book *Doris Lessing: Sufi Equilibrium and the Form of the Novel*, observes that in the text, the representation of Moses is made intentionally ambiguous and balanced, and thereby, manipulative:

In abstaining from developing the character of Moses any further, the narrative creates a tension which refuses to reduce the interpretation of the ending on any one level and induces the reader to speculate on the symbolism implicit in the role of Moses. Lessing's discretion in remaining outside Moses' conscience, therefore, helps to maintain the balance between two levels of interpretation. (Fahim 44)

Such stance initially affirms the colonial racial discourse but then deconstructs and subverts it by refusing to objectify Moses as either evil or heroic. The otherwise objective tone of the narrative is at once transformed into a subjective one that captures the tormented soul of Mary as she anticipates her death. It is not the author who is stereotyping Moses with the opaqueness of the bush, a recurrent image in colonial and detective texts for identifying natives, criminals and other marginal figures with the darker side of morality, but Mary's own consciousness that identifies Moses with the bush: "... the bush avenged itself; that was her last thought" (Lessing 218). Lessing intentionally blurs the lines between the objective linear realistic narrative of the detective fiction used from the beginning and the subjective tone of psychological exploration, the real and the symbolic, the known and the unknown in order to unsettle the status quo of apartheid and the certainties associated with its objectification of native people. The lack of narratorial precision leads towards unsettling the genres of detective fiction and colonial narrative and their tendency towards cultural appropriation by shattering their permanent prefixed criteria into opaque subversions. It is in this way that Lessing presents a critique of racism and apartheid through the structure of a detective murder mystery by subverting and reconstructing its conventional narrative.

Whereas in Lessing's text, this popular genre is subverted into a critique of racism in the context of the apartheid in the southern parts of Africa, Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* also radically remodels the structure of the detective fiction into creating a revealing commentary on power-relations during the dictatorial rule in postcolonial Somalia and traces hidden links between colonial and postcolonial discourses running deep underneath postcolonial governments- especially dictatorships and military regimes. Set during the era of the dictatorship of General Siyaad Barre, the novel develops under the structure of what John Masterson calls "... a brooding experiment in quasi-detective fiction" (Masterson 34). It traces the possible reasons and truth behind the sudden and mysterious death of Soyaan Keynaan, who used to hold a significant post in the Ministry of Finance under the socialist-Islamic government run by the General, through the actions of his twin brother Loyaan whose search for the truth behind his brother's death draws the latter into deeper levels of the networks of power.

Thematically and structurally, the story seems to follow the classical detective fiction as it revolves round unveiling the mystery behind Soyaan's murder. But it gradually shifts towards unveiling the hidden corridors of autocratic power- the conspiracies; the unexplained arrests at the dawn; the tortures and murders at the detention centres; the oral-informants serving as spies to the National Security in the semi-literate nomadic pastoralist society; the patriarchal tyranny,

the nepotism and clan-based violence; the corruption; the conservatism; the collapse of basic human rights, especially those of women and children- all are entangled within the apparent search for the motif of crime. And it is in the handling of these numerous dimensions of power within the discourse of autocracy that the novel departs from the classic genre of solving a murder mystery. In "The Murder of Soyaan Keynaan", Ian Adams observes that the opaque semi-transparent narrative does not result from the author's desire to include indirect comment against the autocratic regime but from the inconclusive structure of the story that is employed to subvert the calculated finite progression of the detective fiction:

In the classical detective story... the labyrinth is mapped, signs direct you away from the wrong turn and blocked the exit... from multiple possibilities, polygraphy of meaning, emerges meaning single and definitive... it seems clear that *Sweet and Sour Milk* departs radically from the classic genre in this pattern of closure... one senses the relative lack of closure to derive less from epistemological skepticism than from an ethical principle which looks with mistrust at the egocentric tyrannies of the General's... "I am". The notion of a single superb deductive intelligence implied in the figure of the traditional detective... comes rather too close to the belief in one leader, one rescuer, that the novel opposes. (Masterson 342-3)

Farah transforms the journey-towards-truth structure into a riddle where neither the protagonist-as-detective, nor the author can find out the ultimate clue but are unwittingly involved in the narrative as much as the reader. As Loya'an's numerous attempts at penetrating the inner levels of reality and truth are frustrated and the complications prevail, the reader is also invited to participate in putting together the scattered pieces of the puzzle. Jacqueline Burdolph thinks that by inviting the reader directly to participate in the act as "free moral agents", Farah also "... risks losing us [the readers] at times... but we come back for more, because the enigmas he entertains us with are of the kind that aim at transforming our vision" (Burdolph 121). Farah transforms the reader's urge to get at finite solutions to the mysteries into ethical questioning of the given or the imposed that enhance the maze-like structure of the story: "[Loya'an] took several possible roads but came upon a cul-de-sac as before. Questions and questions. Whys and no wherefores." (Farah 58). It is therefore that the most significant concept emerging out of the text is "complications", a term used by Dr. Ahmed Wellie who reflects that Soyaan might have died out of "blood complications" (Farah 42). In their book, Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine observe, "... if it is true, as we are led to believe, that Soyaan was murdered in some way, what caused him to be killed was the complications of his own multiple involvements and commitments and the complicating of truth by its appropriation for political purposes" (Alden 52). It is this multiplicity of truth and numerous political techniques of appropriation within dictatorship that enhances the maze-like structure of the story with no definite solutions. Loya'an's circular search and the text's structural inconclusiveness has a dialectical relationship with the function of the state apparatus under the dictatorship of the General that acts just the opposite as it provides several appropriated answers to the reason of Soyaan's death at several points but never encourages any sort of questioning. This calls forth Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo's observation in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*:

Art has more questions than it has answers. Art starts with a position of not knowing and it seeks to know.... There may be answers implied in the questions. But they are often hints, open-ended possibilities, and not certitudes.... The state, on the other hand, has plenty of answers and hardly any questions. The more absolutist the state, the less it is likely to ask questions of itself or entertain questioning by others. (Thiongo 15)

The ethical queries are not solved by the protagonist but left to the reader to brood upon. The deconstruction of the structure of the popular genre thus enables the author to offer a critique of the Barre-dictatorship in Somalia that resulted into the collapse of individual freedom of the Somali national subjects.

Thus, the detective fiction, though a popular genre for inculcating values analogous to authority, patriarchy, and colonialism, has been reconstructed in the postcolonial context towards critiquing oppression, racism, and authoritarian suppression of individual freedom.

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