



POLICE-DETECTIVE RELATIONSHIP IN THE DETECTIVE STORIES OF SARADINDU BANDYOPADHYAY— A POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT



As the generic nomenclature suggests, detection of the criminal constitutes the chief narrative interest in a detective fiction. In Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's detective stories that palpably bear the impress of the classical detective fiction, crime and criminal are treated as an infection in the society that needs the healing touch of the private detective, Byomkesh Bakshi, for restoration of status quo. Prevention and investigation of crime and protection of the innocent are the official assignment of a law enforcing authority. The private investigator and an investigating police officer operate in the same direction, though their methodology, commitment and competency level differ significantly, prompting thereby a mutuality of clash and coalescence in their relationship. The present paper invokes the spirit of postcolonial criticism that encourages ambivalent mechanism in any decolonization agenda, to study the political import of police-private detective interaction in select detective stories of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay.

Keywords: *Detective, Postcolonial, Police, Crime, Ambivalent.*

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The presence of a police officer of varying rank in the investigation scenario is a common phenomenon in most of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's detective stories. But his appearance evokes mixed responses from the readers, as he is portrayed as pitifully inefficient and ridiculously mechanical in handling interrogation and apprehending potential suspects. Often he turns out to be a diehard fan of Byomkesh and evinces readiness to be of help to him.

Inspector Pramod Barat in *The Menagerie* unquestioningly supports all of Byomkesh's strategies and is content in leaving the onus of decision making to an expert private detective. Police commissioner Birenbabu seeks Byomkesh's help in desperation and follows his instructions unhesitatingly as is evident from the short stories like 'An Encore for Byomkesh' and 'Calamity Strikes'. He leaves aside the burden of huge dignity as top brash police official in independent India and knocks on Byomkesh' door to take advantage of the proven expertise of a celebrity private detective. DSP Purandar Pandey in 'Picture Imperfect', though not a Bengali, holds Byomkesh in high esteem and works in perfect sync with Byomkesh's style of investigation. In other cases where Byomkesh functions in the capacity of a professional private investigator he can enlist smooth cooperation from the police. Inspector Halder in 'The Will That Vanished' demonstrates passionate alacrity in championing the cause of the truth that Byomkesh seeks, and avidly declares his willingness to bear witness to the authenticity of the will written and encrypted in an ingenious way by Rameswarbabu. In 'The Gramophone Pin Mystery' the police provide required force to lay trap for the criminal. All these instances put up humane, cooperative and protective profile of the police who scaffold a private sleuth and get their duty accomplished and image brightened in full view of the public. Byomkesh may be immensely resourceful and he may have tremendous hold over criminal psychology, still his noble purpose in the avatar of the truth seeker or an 'inquisitor' would have remained unfulfilled had he not been assisted by an authority in which rests the power of the establishment to keep law and order and conduct public administration. This symbiotic relationship with the police reflects the post-independence reconstruction and reformation of colonial era

policing. Post-colonial policing lays emphasis on public service, though eminent scholars are doubtful as to its effective translation into practice. Arnold categorically avers:

The police also serve as the metaphor for the colonial regime as a whole. Through the police it is possible to see institutionalized and enacted the priorities and principles of colonial administration. (Arnold, 1986:2)

In the colonial period policing was more concerned with suppression of rebellion and relieving the military from non-combat duties. It was characterized by the relative neglect of prevention and detection of crime and also by a blatant suppression of political dissent. Instead of protecting the life and property of the people it was directed to uphold the authority of the state. Obviously police forces were modeled along paramilitary lines. Another scholar Surajit Chandra Mukhopadhyay in his Ph.d thesis entitled "Conceptualising Post-Colonial Policing: An Analysis and Application of Policing Public Order in India" argues the continuity and change of colonial policing in post-colonial context, keeping in view the nature of the post-colonial state and its discursive practices.

Byomkesh as a postcolonial detective adopts several strategies to render counter-productive the devious professional rivalry, couched in a colonial era pro-establishment mindset among a few Bengali police officers. He employs banter, intentional humour and reprimand, depending upon the gravity of the situation, to neutralize the dismissive, non-cooperative moves of the hypocritical police officers. In 'The Death of Amrito' Byomkesh encounters Inspector Sukhomoy Samanta in connection with the investigation of arms smuggling in the village of Baghmari. He is deputed there on behalf of the government and Inspector Samanta is under instruction to render his best services as an aid to Byomkesh's professional requirement. But in effect, Mr. Samanta maintains duplicity to satisfy his grudge against Byomkesh. Ajit makes a general observation that though salaried policemen were not favourably disposed towards Byomkesh, he was highly regarded by the higher administration. Whereas the top level in administration was motivated by zeal for and commitment to public



service as a contribution to the multifarious decolonization agenda in a nascent nation state that had just managed to secure political freedom, the lower rung was still wallowing in colonial 'darogah' system that indulged in coercive measures to alienate common people branding their grievances and dissent as sedition against the British Raj. The inspector perceived himself as the 'centre', whereas a private sleuth, despite his affiliation to the top brass for curbing criminal activities, was treated as the 'margin'. Ajit tries to attribute Inspector Samanta's jealousy and non-cooperation to the fact that 'Perhaps he did not approve of an outsider succeeding where the police had failed'. The village youths seeking investigation into the murder of Amrito as a right to justice, was thrown out by the inspector, who in public estimate was 'a nincompoop'. The inspector was not ashamed of his outrageous behavior to them, rather he flaunted his vicious colonial stereotyping of those common people whom he summarily read as a disturbance to the establishment. His willful neglect of his duty is justified in the arrogant 'knowledge' of those youths:

Those rascals from Baghmari came to you, didn't they? They came to me too. Young Bengalis carried away by all the excitement—they won't give it up in a hurry. Don't pay them any attention, I tell you, or they'll make your life miserable. ('The Death of Amrito', 119)

Needless to say Byomkesh ignored his suggestions, rather he enlisted their each and every possible help to nab the criminal. When Mr. Samanta snubs Byomkesh for violating his 'forbidding', Byomkesh throws challenge—'Who are you to forbid me?'. Mr. Samanta exudes his sense of pride and security thus—'I am the senior inspector of this area, the head of the police'. So far Byomkesh had maintained affable attitude to him and humored him occasionally to minimize his planted obstacles, but when Byomkesh senses that his freedom is threatened and his identity is in crisis, he promptly appropriates the colonizer's language and strategy by means of an assertion of his official affiliation. He spells out the possibility of a stern reporting against him to the higher authority. Inspector Samanta's long nourished arrogance deflates and his habitual

standoffishness and gross irresponsibility are corrected by Byomkesh's well-timed counter strategy.

In 'The Rhythm of Riddles', Inspector Pranob parades unwarranted professional jealousy against Byomkesh, treating the private detective as his inferior. When the inspector dares Byomkesh to reveal the name of the culprit, Byomkesh issues a fitting rejoinder—'That is my own discovery. You are paid a salary for your work; you will have to find out on your own'. In view of the inspector's antagonistic attitude, Byomkesh forms an estimate—'He is not unintelligent, but his intelligence is destructive'. Inspector Pranob confines Ajit, Byomkesh's sidekick to his mess under the superficial suspicion that Ajit may be a suspect as he wears a brown shawl. In a bout of wit Byomkesh makes fun of the inspector's short height by jokingly comparing him to the scriptural dwarf. He threatens the inspector with dire legal consequences 'for unnecessarily interfering with individual freedom'. The postcolonial private detective gets even with the inspector, who uses law and order as an excuse to harass common people. Colonial hangover of treating people as the 'other' to the establishment, continues blatantly and also subtly in the lower rank of the police force. Byomkesh has to appropriate the much practised colonial discourse of referring affiliation to the higher authority for securing justice, equality and individual freedom. Thus he disarms the inspector's non-cooperative trick through mentioning his hobnobbing with the commissioner. Despite initial hiccups and bumpiness in their relationship they feed each other. Byomkesh gets access to official information that are secretly preserved following colonial era practice, and the police department manages to claim success in keeping criminal activities under reasonable limit. Byomkesh destabilizes 'centre'/'margin' binary and the disenfranchised and the establishment are engaged in an ambivalent interaction.

In 'Byomkesh and Barada', Shashankbabu, the DSP of Munger engages Byomkesh in a strange relationship. He is bemused by recurrent supernatural haunting in an elite township of Munger. His reputation is at stake. He is forced to rekindle an old and half-forgotten friendship with



Byomkesh. A desperate invitation from him brings Byomkesh to Munger, but its ulterior purpose fails to elude a veteran private detective. Byomkesh is amused by the super-subtle and cunning way Shashankababu broaches the real issue:

I shall not disappoint you with sights like historic ruins or hot water springs alone,---If you are interested in the supernatural, I can show you something of that too. A mysterious ghost has arrived in our town lately- I am somewhat perturbed by him. ('Byomkesh and Barada',39)

Byomkesh wittily lavishes tribute on Shashankababu's strong conversational skills which constant application has refined further, and sensing his overwhelmed ,yet desperate state of mind, Byomkesh solicits details from him. Unlike other high ranking police officers who do not mind betraying their clueless, stuck-up condition and readily acknowledge Byomkesh's superior investigating faculty, Shashankababu throws his meanness into sharp relief by wearing the mask of a host, while in reality he is just coaxing Byomkesh into taking up the case without any formal request to do so. His glib tongue betrays his ethical inadequacy thus:

I'm not making an official request to you; but you are a fellow traveler, if your observations lead you to certain ideas you can always help me personally.You are on holiday; I do not wish to burden you with responsibilities. ('Byomkesh and Barada',46)

However, Shashankababu's hypocrisy and stinginess in acknowledging credit to someone outside the establishment does not deter Byomkesh from engaging himself into the task of clearing the scum of confusion and superstition to get to the bottom of the truth, which he values more than fame. Shashankababu exhibits colonial sham of capability and unfounded high regard for the integrity of the department of police that is single-mindedly dedicated to the task of saving the image of the establishment, by suppressing all anarchic elements. Byomkesh as a postcolonial detective blurs the boundary of 'self' and 'other' and disturbs the privileged status of the 'centre' from his apparent peripheral position.

Bidhubabu holds the post of the Deputy Commissioner of Police in 'Where There's a Will'. An ostentatious fool,he subjects Byomkesh to bombastic lectures regarding his superiority in both intelligence and expertise. Byomkesh digests this strategically, and humors him amusedly, for in the course of his declamations Bidhubabu lets slip a lot of secret information that stand Byomkesh in good stead. Bidhubabu enjoys patronizing Satyaboti, assuming her innocence and harasses the servants making stereotypical assumption of their habitual complicity in crime. When his interference in a murder case, where Byomkesh's expertise is officially solicited, crosses reasonable limits ,Byomkesh administers sharp reprimand citing his affiliation to the higher authority.

Thus this paper endeavours to present concisely as well as precisely, the polemical elements and the political overtones of the police –detective relationship, which has received little critical attention so far.

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