

CRIME FICTION IN INDIA: A NEGLECTED GENRE IN MAINSTREAM LITERATURE

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Abstract

Crime fiction, often dismissed as "pulp fiction," has long been a significant yet underappreciated genre in literature. This paper explores the historical roots of crime fiction, tracing its origins from ancient texts like *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* to its evolution through Gothic novels, sensation fiction, and modern thrillers. Despite its rich history and universal appeal, crime fiction has struggled to gain the same respect as other literary genres, particularly in India. The paper examines the reasons behind this neglect, including cultural biases and a postcolonial mentality that favours Western literature over Indian works. It also highlights the contributions of Indian crime fiction writers like Vikram Chandra, Vikas Swaroop, and Anita Nair, whose works address complex social issues and challenge the genre's marginalization. This paper makes a case for recognising crime fiction as a meaningful and valuable genre of literature, deserving of respect and serious consideration.

Keywords: Crime Fiction, Indian Literature, Gothic Novels, Social Commentary, Postcolonial Literature, Catharsis.

Occurrence of violence in literature has been there since perhaps the first of the writings. Violence has been portrayed in many shapes and forms and in its real sense of the word it is preponderantly present in the genre of crime fiction, a genre which has not been considered as serious literature to date and is considered inferior as compared to the elite genres of fiction. It is not owing to its never being identified in fiction but because we have always considered it as pulp fiction which is not to be respected as the other genres. We read *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles as a classic and are in awe of it, we read *Hamlet* by Shakespeare and are in praise of the wonderful creation it is but have avoided considering them as exemplary texts about crime having all the essential attributes of a crime text. Even the first known author of literature in the world, the high-priestess of Ur, Enheduanna (2285-2250 BCE) wrote hymns in praise of the Sumerian goddess Inanna (<https://www.ancient.eu/literature/>) who is the goddess of many aspects of life including war and where there is war there is crime and violence. Here it is worth stating what John Scaggs has to say in his book titled *Crime Fiction*. He writes that "It is worth noting...that while the old adage that crime does not pay might well be true, crime has nevertheless been the foundation for an entire genre of fiction for over one hundred and fifty years" (1).

Crime fiction and what historians and literary critics consider to be "literature" have always had a controversial connection. Though it is usually clear from mainstream literature and many other genres, including science fiction and historical fiction, it seems to have blurred lines all through its existence. The term "crime fiction" is somewhat all-encompassing as it combines any tale that revolves on the investigation and identification of criminal conduct as the main focus of its plot. The critics could agree that the term "crime fiction" is a dangerous expediency for those who use it, even if it is almost difficult to have a conversation about crime fiction without first engaging in a heated argument on whether or not the works in issue are considered "literary" and whether or not they do deserve such categorisation. In this specific environment, however, we are unable to recognise that literature is nothing more than a collection of writings that are special in terms of their form or expression and that convey ideas that are of long-standing or universal appeal. Criminal conduct is a natural part of any civilisation regardless of its location or global presence as the human mind is

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not influenced by the passing of time or geography. Whether or not it is recorded in literature, criminal conduct has always existed in society and has origins in the dawn of human history.

Tzvetan Todorov claims that the narrative of a crime consists of two stories: the first is the crime itself, and the second is the inquiry of the crime (45). Conversely, John Scaggs sees things differently that sets crime fiction apart from detective or investigative literature. He claims that unlike a detective fiction, a crime fiction stresses more on the crime that was carried out than it does on the investigation of the crime (1). This is the reason I indicated earlier - that a detective fiction may be seen as a subgenre of crime fiction. This leads us to consider the precise definition of a work of crime fiction.

Crime fiction, according to David Glover is a formulaic popular literature having cardboard characters and about conventional themes, devices and structures (Glover 135). This clearly points out with what degree of disgust crime fiction has been treated with by critics. This neglect is not the only one. In 1924, R. Austin Freeman calls a detective fiction as one "...which finds its principal motive in the unravelment of crimes or similar intricate mysteries" and in his words "the mere crime story" is one having "...incidents - tragic, horrible, even repulsive-from the actual theme, and the quality aimed at is horror" targeting "...to make the reader's flesh creep" (qtd in Scaggs 106). This coincides with what Mary Shelley states in the introduction to her novel *Frankenstein* that her purpose in writing the novel was to "...make the reader dread to look around, to curdle the blood, and to quicken the beatings of the heart" (Shelley 7-8). Going by the above statements, the modern-day crime thriller has Gothic novel as one of its ancestors. The revenge tragedies, the novels by Charles Dickens and the sensation novels of the mid to late 19th century had characters which disappeared and later emerged in the modern crime fiction. And thus, one of the important aspects of a crime fiction, according to Julian Symons is "an interest in crime and its outcome" (198). Fred Botting states that from the Gothic novel the crime thriller inherits the concern for hidden knowledge and the narrative of social disintegration. According to Scaggs the "interest in the criminal underworld is clearly drawn from such novels as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. In this context Glover states that from the Sensation fiction of the 1860s and 70s the crime fiction acquires the convention of "...disturbing treatment of crime, mystery and betrayal" (136). Martin Priestman identifies another important aspect of a crime fiction and that is its emphasis on the present dangers rather than on the past ones or their

investigations. He further states that to recreate this danger the protagonist must feel threatened by some external force which is also powerful. And that is why, as Scaggs states, a crime thriller finds its parallel in the gothic novel with its focus on the notion of evil and villainy. Some other aspects of a crime novel as mentioned by Symons are that it is based on the psychology of characters(191), that there are no detectives in it and if perchance there is then it has a secondary role(192), that the setting is central to the atmosphere and tone of the story of the crime novel and often is incapable of being disentangled with the nature of crime in the fiction (193), that the social perspective is fundamental questioning the society, law and justice (193) and last but not least in the words of Symon "The lives of the characters are shown continuing after the crime and often their subsequent behaviour is important to the story's effect" (193). Scaggs mentions that a bewildering variety of crime thrillers exist depending on the inclusion or exclusion of some or the other points. There can be a legal thriller, a political one, a psychological thriller and many more.

The western literary world has been benignant in incorporating the crime fiction in the mainstream literature. There are many crime thriller writers who have been shortlisted for prestigious awards. Some awards have been initiated exclusively for crime fiction such as the CLUE, The Thriller, The Daphne Du Maurier, The Edgar and many more. The crime thriller writers are celebrated writers in the west and acknowledged by the critics as best sellers but somehow the Indian literary world still has its inhibitions in accepting the crime fiction writers in the mainstream writing and shies away from terming those few who are acknowledged for their crime writings as crime fiction authors. Arvind Adiga is one such name. His works are crime thrillers, but we do not acknowledge him as one. We consider him literary but not a crime writer. There is no dearth of crime fiction writers in India but still when we go to a bookstore, we look for a western one. Radha Vatsal writes that when she asked at Kitab Khana in Mumbai, about the bestselling crime fictions, she was given the names of Daniel Silva, Ian Rankin, Jo Nesbo, Henning Mankell, Steig Larsson and Harlan Coben. Here we call such fiction as popular fiction and the attitude we have towards it is very condescending. We look upon the western noir writers with awe but fail to acknowledge the Feluda series by Satyajit Ray and Byomkesh Bakshi by Sardindu Bandopadhyay which entertained us by their sheer brilliance. Surendra Mohan Pathak, whose works have been translated into English by the Chennai based Blaft publishing says that educated people in India would never want to be seen dead with one of his books. Even writers who have authored crime fiction do

not acknowledge the efforts of Indian authors in this field. Bhaskar Chattopadhyaya feels that who ever has written such works is indebted to Arthur Conan Doyle. Mita Kapur, a leading literary agent and the soul behind the Noir Literature Festival initiated in 2015 does not attract many fans as if it is some event which is proscribed. What I want to highlight here is our inhibition in accepting crime thrillers as a respectable genre. Why is it a taboo to be seen enjoying an Indian thriller while it is considered elite to be reading its western counterparts. Our postcolonial psychology has been thus moulded to make us believe that Indian crime narrators are an inferior category as compared to the western crime narrators who we look upon with awe.

According to Scaggs, "...the 20th century crime thriller was to develop in its sensational, and often shockingly frank, depictions of sex and violent death" taking its inheritance from the sensation novels of the 1860s and 70s. Perhaps such elements in the crime novel prohibits us from accepting it as a literary work. The reason may lie in our ancient culture and wisdom which prohibits us from acknowledging anything in its extreme. Horror, terror and crimes are certain aspects which do not fall in the vicinity of Hindu philosophy, though they have been there in the society since times immemorial. The literature of any society is groomed by its culture and the ancient Indian culture has no place for crimes. But it would be denying the realism in extremes that these crime fictions envelope. Another interesting reason can be traced to the prominent Indian critic G N Devy who, while talking of literary criticism has a peculiar, but somewhat acceptable to some extent, explanation for the tendency of looking up to the western criticism by the Indians. He states that the traditional Indian respected learning of languages and poetry. Indian critics in our ancient history had been treated as sages - Bharat Muni, Ananda Vardhan, Abhinav Gupta. Our respect for them reflected in the unresisting acceptance of British Literature and English Criticism. I consider it as a postcolonial mentality which also reflects in our reading and accepting of the western crime thrillers while rejecting that is ours.

Just closing our eyes to the reality would never wipe it out and this is true for Indian crime fiction as well. India, with its multitudinous milieu is a pregnant ground for crime fictions that would shake even the western literary world. The only attempt from our side to be made is to accept them whole heartedly and consider them also as mainstream writings. Even today there are many crime fictions available that have left their mark. Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* is a true representation of India itself with a wonderfully

complex and intricate plot and storyline. Another eminent work is *Six Suspects* by Vikas Swaroop of the *Slumdog Millionaire* fame basing the plot on the famous Jessica Lal murder. Another of his notable work is *The Accidental Apprentice* which falls into the category of a pot boiler and thriller centred around an ambitious middle-class girl Sapna Sinha. A big name to be remembered for this genre is sahitya Akademi winner Anita Nair with her *Cut Like Wound* and *Chain of Custody* the latter being a sequel to the first one. For Nair, crime fiction is a medium for social commentary that should address the dark realms of the society. *A Cut Like Wound* can be categorised as a psychological thriller with a whodunit plot. *Chain of Custody* deals with child trafficking as the theme with the famous Inspector Gowda investigating it and a murder that is committed in the novel. The popular Theakston's Old Peculiar Crime Novel of the Year Award has shortlisted Abir Mukherjee's *A Rising Man*, a thriller set in 1919 Calcutta. Some more names to be mentioned are the Lalli series by Kalpana Swaminathan and *Dead in a Mumbai Minute*, *Goa Undercover* and *The Masala Murder* (The Reema Ray series) by Madhumita Bhattacharya. *A very Pukka Murder* by Arjun Raj Gaiind, published by Harper Collins is set in a fictional princely state of Rajpore and revolves around the murder of a British resident. Mukul Deva writes techno-espionage thrillers abounding with technology but very pacy and engrossing. Ashok Banker has set the Indian crime fiction world abuzz with his trilogy published in early 1990s consisting of *The Iron Bra*, *The Murder & Champagne* and *Three Dead Admen*. Ankush Saikia has established himself as a prominent crime thriller author by his work *Dead Meat*. Many women writers have also ventured into the writing world of crime fiction which was previously uninhabited by them.

This paper is mainly to orient the prospective researchers to work on this yet unexplored genre and to give the Indian Crime Fiction genre its due respect that its western counterparts enjoy. Though we do not as of yet take crime fiction to be a serious genre, it is just like what Samuel Johnson in his 'Preface to Shakespeare' said about Shakespeare's work "His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct", Ashwin Sanghi in the same vein says, "While writing is an art, crime writing is a craft". It is for us to give momentum to this genre by working more and more on it.

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