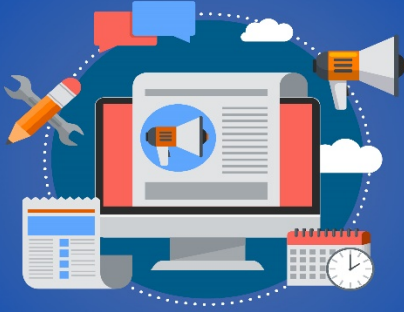


ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION


AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access


**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-3 (June 2020)

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite
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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Detective Fiction: A Mirror Reflecting the Issues of Corruption in Society

Avijit Kar

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English, Mewar
University, Rajasthan, India.

&

Dr. Poonam Sharma

Associate Professor,
Department of English,
GDMG PG College, Modinagar,
CCS University, Meerut.

Article History: Submitted-14/05/2020, Revised-30/06/2020, Accepted-02/07/2020, Published-10/07/2020.

Abstract:

Apart from its moral aspect and resultant impact on mass-psyche, corruption has been posing a corrosive threat across the globe; and in some countries, its detriment is devastating every domain of human existence. One is struck by the diversity of corruption and the social scientists as well as the psychologists are getting sweaty spells of running to counter it. Though the plots of different literary works have been incorporating corruption as a cardinal issue, detective fiction, in all its specificity, and acting as a cautionary instrument, has taken up cudgels against this social evil long ago, and in its various phases of development, has shown remarkable responsibility to inform the readers to stay awake and alert.

Keywords: Corruption, Public Powers, Organized Crime, Typologies of Corruption, Corruption in Detective Fiction.

The word 'corruption' creates a feeling of detest and helplessness in most of men and women. One knows that it cannot be left behind as it has become an invisible and omnipresent companion. We are, therefore, being compelled to live with it, accepting its pernicious effects in our lives. Previously, it was thought that corruption was an inveterate characteristic of the underdeveloped and the developing countries. But from the past few decades, we have been getting aware of its bare-faced presence in the developed nations as well, acknowledging its being a global problem, which is still on the rise. In fact, corruption has remained and has been a social pathology from the beginning of human history. The word itself derives from the Latin *corruptio*, the implication being 'spoiling', 'polluting',

‘abusing’ or ‘destroying’, depending on the context. The concept of corruption, so to speak, has undergone some modifications over the centuries and varies somewhat across cultures. This has posed a problem to hold it and to describe it with some definite definition. Moreover, the multiple factors lying beyond the practice of corruption also play a vital role to mystify its several dodgy attributes.

In international jurisdiction, corruption is defined as ‘The misuse of public powers, office and authority for private gain through bribery, extortion, influence, peddling, nepotism, fraud, speed money or embezzlement’ (*United Nations Development Programme 1997:7*). Nowadays, due to globalization and liberal economy, the costs of corruption have come significant and they are affecting people worldwide. According to Fletcher and Hermann, corruption is ‘linked with political instability, human rights violations, the exacerbation of poverty, the erosion of public confidence in institutions and many other negative outcomes. It has also been identified as a major obstacle to political, social and economic development in many parts of the world’ (1). The definition of corruption formed by Transparency International (TI) in 2012 is terse and apparently simple but quite broad in its scope. It states that corruption is ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain’. This definition can, on the other hand, reflect different meanings—specified, technical and professional. Corruption should be viewed as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with a multiplicity of causes and effects, exhibiting many different forms and functions in very diverse contexts, such as a single act that transgresses either a law, or a way of life for an individual, group of people and for social order which is morally acceptable. In this regard, the typologies of corruption referred to by Fletcher and Hermann is worth mentioning:

In addition to defining corruption, analysts have sought to provide typologies of corruption; in other words, defining which types of behaviour can be classified as ‘corrupt’. In this sense, corruption is often used as an umbrella term to refer to a range of specific illicit activities. For example, Langseth (2006) lists different types of corruption, namely, grand corruption, petty corruption, active corruption, passive corruption, bribery, embezzlement, theft, fraud, extortion, abuse of discretion, favouritism, nepotism and improper political contributions. (5)

Criminology often uses criminal laws to define several ills of the society. In case of corruption, the definition induced by criminal laws covers a substantial corpus of work but fails to encapsulate the range of crimes that are part of the continuum of corruption. Its scope, as Siegel and Nelen point out, should be extended to acts that reach beyond the law and focus on acts of collusion, lobbying and networking, money laundering, various sorts of

white-collar crime, and other forms of transactional organized crimes. Due to the exercise of a multi-level approach whose interests have set up connections and networks among organized, corporate, state, and occupational crimes, corruption is not be viewed as isolated incidents, but an interconnected one, colligating illegal drug trade, human trafficking, illicit arms trade, bootlegging, prostitution, racketeering—to name a few (1-2).

Detective fiction, from its inception, has been instrumental in relating caution to its readers as well as letting them be aware of several malpractices, i.e., both corrupt and corruptive practices prevalent in the growing industrialized social set up—more so in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though attempts have been made to establish the antiquity of the literary detective and the detective fiction; literary historians and critics alike are

divided between those who say that there could be no detective stories until organized police and detective forces existed, and those who find examples of rational deduction in sources as various as the Bible and Voltaire, and suggest that these were early problems in detection. For the first group the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, for the second its roots are in the beginnings of recorded history. (Symons 27)

If one chooses to stand by the first group, one should, however, be of the like opinion of Howard Haycraft who wrote that ‘there could be no detective stories (and there were none) until there were detectives’ (5), and in his vein, we can reasonably say that the first detective story cannot be much more than a century and a half old. The OED cites no use of the word ‘detective’ earlier than the nineteenth century and no even rudimentary professional detective appears in English or American history before the middle of the eighteenth. Contrary to this stance, there are some others who give credit to such plays as *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 B.C.) or *Hamlet* (c. A.D. 1600), or even to some fables of Aesop; for they have found out some elements of detection in these literary creations. But whatever be the case, be it from pre-millennial compositions or from those not more than a century and a half ago, corruption has been mirrored in many of them. Theoretically speaking, detective fiction gravitates to resolving a criminal mystery or crime, usually murder, though many other forms of crimes may also be there, by an agency of amazing deductive acumen. The agency in question, i.e., ‘the detective’ seeks to repair the social order temporarily disrupted by the intrusion of a criminal or corrupt act and sets the power of order which is the goal of detection to resolve. In the end, the detective assumes a heroic image in a way that is plausible because it is reinforced by the reader’s values.

Elements of corruption and the disfigurement of society can be traced in many writings having the detection as their root, even in the primordial pieces. In one of Aesop's fables, the lion after reaching ripe, old age and getting weak and unable to hunt any longer makes it known to the other beasts that his days are numbered. Other animals, taking pity on the king lion's miserable condition, pay him their respective visits and fall into the lion's trap in his den. The lion preys upon them at ease and grows fat on the easily available diet. The fox suspects some foul play and decides to visit the lion and inquire about his health. Standing at some distance from the den, the intelligent fox judges the marks left by the footsteps of other animals. They all point toward the den but none reveals return from it. When the lion invites the fox to get into his den for a word of consolation into his ears, the fox lets out his analysis and thus saves himself. This fable can be adjudged to be having both the elements of corruption and detection. The lion, using his position and posing as a soul about to depart from his physical body befools many gullible beasts to become his prey—his sole positive gain. The fox, on the other hand, like an observant detective analyses the footmarks left by other unfortunate animals and discloses king lion's greedy desire and corrupt practice. Another story of Aesop again allegorically uncovers the avariciousness of the people at the helm, ill-using their power and position to grab the maximum—and hence, is another fable featuring corruption. In this story, once at the behest of king lion, he and other beasts form a party to go out hunting. After they kill a healthy stag, king lion comes to the fore to apportion the stag into three parts. He takes the best portion for himself and proclaims his justness to take it in view of his official role as the king; takes the second portion as his own personal share for participating in the hunt. And for the third part, he openly challenges anyone to take it who dares.

Two Biblical stories may be touched on here as the unmistakable specimens of corruption as their theme. The first to be mentioned here belongs to the *Apocrypha*. Here, we are made aware of the feat of detection of Daniel, a young exile from Judah who becomes an important counsellor to the Babylonian and Persian Kings during the sixth century B.C., and is famous for his ability to interpret dreams. He convinces King Cyrus that the Babylonian idol Bel which the King supplies with a massive quantity of ration of food and drink is nothing but an inanimate image; incapable of eating and drinking anything. The seventy priests of Bel, greatly enraged by Daniel's open blasphemy and iconoclasm, challenge him and asks King Cyrus to set the usual offerings and then to seal the entrance to the temple. Their condition is to put Daniel to death upon Bel's consumption of the said offerings. If anything contrarily happens, the priests themselves are to be subjected to death

sentence. One day, after the ration is set before Bel and the priests' leaving the temple, Daniel's servants, in the King's sole presence, strew ashes throughout the temple and then go out sealing the door as has been decided upon. At night, the seventy priests of Bel, their wives and children enter the temple through a secret door and as has been their diurnal practice, consume Bel's ration. The next morning, Daniel attracts the King's attention to the footmarks on the floor. The King discerns the footmarks of men, women and children; and his wrath compels the priests and others to reveal the privy door that they use to enter into the temple surreptitiously. The King then slays them and delivers Bel into Daniel's power, who destroys the idol and the temple.

The story of Bel clearly shows the corrupt practice of the priests who, taking advantage of their position, beguile the King and his subjects, win their trust and awe deceptively, and induce them to make arrangements of their sumptuous meal every day. Modern time corruption also holds mostly the like traits as the corrupt practitioners tend to play the tricks of the same ilk—well, in different climes and situations.

Another patent story exhibiting the confirmed exemplum of corruption be the tale of Susanna, an apocryphal addition to the Old Testament Book of Daniel, appearing both in the Septuagint (Gk.) and the Vulgate (Lat.) versions. In this tale, Daniel, the great Jewish hero is shown to use his knowledge of Torah to save a woman of high moral character from the salaciously motivated judges who falsely accuse her of committing adultery. Susanna is depicted as a very beautiful and pious woman. She is the daughter of Chilkiah and the wife of Joakim, a wealthy man. The beginning of the tale states the appointment of two shady elders as judges. They go to Joakim's house for at his house, the court cases are adjudicated and there, they see Susanna whose beauty and oomph immediately captivate them. The elders get struck with indomitable carnal desire for her; but they remain reciprocally tight-lipped about their own feelings. A few days later, one day, they separately sneak into Joakim's garden to catch a glimpse of Susanna and while playing voyeurs, they catch each other in the act, and confess their licentiousness for her to each other. As Susanna bathes in the garden, she asks her female attendants to shut the garden gate so that she can remain out of others' sight, scarcely knowing anything about the elders' hidden presence in the garden. When Susanna's maids leave to fetch her olive oil, the elders come out from their lair and give her their uttermost threat: unless she lies with them, they will testify that they have witnessed her committing adultery with a young man. Pious as she is, Susanna refuses to comply with them and cries out aloud. The two elders shout too. The people in the household rush into the garden through the garden door and in presence of them, the elders deliver their accusation.

Next day, a tribunal is held at Joakim's house to try Susanna for her alleged adultery. She resigns herself to her fate, lamenting on her plight. Her predicament is all the more crucial as the two witnesses' accusations are sturdily established and they give their testimony. The elders' seemingly identical indictments cause Susanna's doom and the court delivers death sentence to her. As she is being led out to the place of execution, Susanna cries out a prayer to God, and God stirs up 'the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel' (Susanna 45-46; *NSRV*) who cries out utterings of protest. Daniel castigates the Israelites for not judging enough into the matter and emphatically accuses the two elders of giving false evidence against Susanna. Daniel is the real hero of this tale. He instructs men to return to the place of judgement, separates the two elders and asks them the same question as to under what tree have they caught Susanna committing adultery. Both of their answers appear different, for the former says it to be a mastic tree and the latter an evergreen oak tree. Thiswise, their false allegation comes to light, Susanna's innocence is conclusively proved, her husband and parents praise her good character, the elders meet their end through death and Daniel's reputation as a wise and discerning young man rises up.

In this tale of Susanna, we get a glimpse of corruption perpetrated by the two judges, who try to use their power and position to satisfy their lust and rendering doom to the beautiful damsel for having not complied with their immoral move. We also get Daniel playing the detective, who, by dint of sheer ready-wit and majestic intelligence, not only unties the knot but saves an innocent woman's life and reputation.

Examples of detective tales and novels galore, that we find to have portrayed both corruption and detection during the later period of the sub-genre's history. Some prominent works showing this trait are hereby turned to. The father of modern detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe published five detective stories between 1841 and 1845. These five stories set Poe as the *avant-courier* of detective fiction as these stories set the trend of the characteristic detective fiction. One of these stories is *The Purloined Letter*. The crime is not murder, but theft with a view to blackmailing an unnamed woman. The letter gets stolen from the royal apartments, and the man who has committed the theft is a well-known Minister D—, an important government official. The letter, addressed to a young lady, contains information capable of harming an individual of substantial political power as well as wielding 'its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable' (183). Minister D— keeps the letter hidden in his apartment and continues to exercise power and control over the lady. Poe's detective Dupin rescues the letter and saves the lady's reputation. Here we

can find corruption on the part of Minister D— who, exercising his position gets access to the royal apartment and also holding the position, tries to gain some leverage out of it.

It would be an amiss not to mention *The Notting Hill Mystery* (1862-63), by Charles Felix, pseudonym of Charles Warren Adams. It is, by some critics, regarded as the first English detective novel, dealing with insurance fraud, a kind of corrupt practice as we know. Baron R— purchases five life insurance policies for his wife and after a few days, it appears to be known that she dies of drinking a bottle of acid, while sleepwalking at her husband's laboratory. Ralph Henderson, the detective employed by the insurance company investigates the case and discovers three murders. Baron R— is suspected of killing his wife and eventually this is revealed. The novel is more of a 'howcatchem' than of a 'whodunit', and the plot of mystery runs by, at the outset, showing or describing the commission of the crime, generally revealing the perpetrator's identity to the audience or the reader, then showing or describing how the detective proves the perpetrator's guilt.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), a novel rather, presents corruption prevalent in the religious leaders and their descendants, in terms of grabbing and assimilating maximum resources available in the sect. In the novel, Doyle presents Brigham Young, the real life leader of the Mormon Church. In Part 2, the reader is taken on a long flashback to the wilds of Utah, detailing the history of the links among Hope, Drebber, Stangerson and their connection to the Mormon Church. In the narrative, the Mormon leader Brigham Young delivers his verdict that Lucy must marry either Drebber, an elder of the Mormon Church, or Stangerson, a Mormon Elder and Drebber's secretary— knowing fully well of Lucy's engagement with Jefferson Hope, a non-Mormon; citing the reason that she cannot marry outside Mormon faith. Lucy, her father and Hope leave under cover of darkness, heading for Carson city, trying in vain to escape the grip of the Mormons. Stangerson kills Lucy's father and Drebber forcefully marries Lucy who dies broken-hearted. Doyle in this novel has clearly hinted at the unjust power and hyper-materialistic propensities of the Mormon Elders who can go to any extent to satisfy their cravings. This is a sheer example of corruption which we still can see in many religious institutions and entities.

During the modern period, especially the golden age of detective fiction, the plots became much more complex and multi-layered. Due to rapid changes in social construct, the nature of crimes also underwent alterations which were mainly due to criminal initiatives taken by group action. With the advent of American crime fiction, the dimension of detective fiction took a new turn, with more violence and violation of long-lasting social mores. This

phenomenon is aptly described by Rosemary Herbert, citing the factors behind it. According to her analysis, it is evident that

the genre of detective and mystery fiction arose out of the modern historical conditions that made crime a problem contingent in everyday life; the circumstances of urbanization and social mobility made the creation of the new institution of official crime solvers—police—a necessity. With those historical conditions in place in the western world as a result of industrialization, the rise of the economic system of capitalization, and the displacement of populations from the cultural and physical environments they had traditionally inhabited for centuries, it became inevitable that popular literature would develop types of writing to accommodate the new reality while formulating suggestive ways of psychological and social control. Humanity has always sought to know reality by the stories it tells. The case is no different when reality involves violation and violence among people who are strangers to each other and living in social arrangements made opaque by their size and complexity. (87)

The hard-boiled school of crime writing originated in America in the 1920s was mainly chiselled out by the hands of Dashiell Hammett whose best-known example of chain actions and brutal murders in *Red Harvest* (1929) can be discerned as the inevitable outcome of rampant corruption and limitless meanness. Hammett created the unnamed character known simply as the Continental Op who, in *Red Harvest*, as R. Herbert has put it, ‘takes on an entire army of crooked cops and gangsters who run Personville, later Poisonville. The Op’s method is to “stir things up”, manipulating the crooked cops and gangsters in ways that turn them against each other and destroy them’ (87).

Hammett’s successor and generally acknowledged to be the chief influence on the development of hard-boiled fiction genre, Raymond Chandler was the dispenser of literary cocktail that has ‘a severe kick and a tart flavor all its own’ (Wallace 126). His first novel *The Big Sleep* (1939) is a tale of corruption by money and power, inherited from racketeering, dealing in pornography and blackmailing the rich customers.

James M. Cain’s novella *Double Indemnity* (1943) uncovers another plot of insurance fraud. Here, the insurance agent Walter Neff, conspiring with Phyllis, a deft flirt and unscrupulous moneygrubber, takes out a policy on her husband’s name keeping him totally in the dark. Joining hands with Phyllis, Neff kills Mr. Nirdlinger, Phyllis’ husband for greed of the ‘double indemnity’ with which the policy has been triggered. The courses of events force Neff to kill Phyllis and lastly, he confesses to Keyes, his colleague about his black deeds and

awaits the arrival of the cops. This novella is another mirror held out to corruption in the arena of insurance, a scheme which is often adopted for making easy money.

Sue Grafton's first novel *A is for Alibi* (1982), after the hard-boiled conventions, features a female sleuth Kinsey Millhone. In this novel, Millhone, after a number of red herrings, takes up the right track and solves embezzlement in mutual accounts by the partner of a law firm and also some murders that the perpetrator has committed to wash up the evidence. This novel is yet another example of corruption related to monetary aspect of an organization.

Corruption assumes different forms and the postmodern detective tales have exhibited the variety with a good gusto. *L. A. Confidential* (1990) is James Ellroy's third novel in his *L. A. Quartet* series. The story tells the account of mainly three cops of LAPD and shows us what L. A. was like during the early 1950s—corrupt, violent, soaked in lust and addictions; operated by crooked cops and criminals. The storyline unravels corruption in administration and also in the police department, opening our eyes regarding what be the inside story.

Last but not the least, and without doubt noteworthy in the present article is American author Don Winslow's researched novel *The Power of the Dog* (2005). The novel elaborates the involvement of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in the 'War of Drugs', USA's three decade long campaign of drug prohibition, military aid and military intervention with a view to reducing illegal drug trade in the US. DEA agent Keller is pitted against Adám Barrera, a drug lord operating from Mexico to the US. After a DEA agent is tortured and killed in Mexico, Keller plunges thick into counter-measuring and finds out unbelievably active involvement of the US and the Mexican governments in drug trade operations. The novel unwinds connections of several high government officials and ministers in the drug trade itself and rings out an incredibly real tone of brutal corruption.

The plots of detective fiction have manifested immense diversity; but their leanings on corruption and other malpractices in society have become all the more prominent after World War- I. Life's growing complexities and increasing corrupt businesses have supplied staple food for detective fiction—apart from various sorts of criminal offences. The sub-genre's unfaltering popularity, it cannot be disowned, is due to the encompassing corruptive influences in all walks of life. In the words of Julian Symons:

Psychiatrists have strangely neglected the question of our motives for reading crime literature, and historians of the *genre* have never shown much interest in it. The first psychiatric piece of interest is Dr. Leopold Bellak's 'On the Psychology of

Detective Stories and Related Problems’, written in 1945. Dr. Bellak says about the content of detective stories that ‘the criminal and aggressive proceedings permit a *phantasy gratification of Id* impulses’. In other words, first, the reader is permitted to identify with the criminal. This can safely be done because ‘it [the story] is sufficiently removed from reality, and because soon the *Super-Ego is satisfied* that detection and punishment will follow.’ As any reader today will realize, this is true of detective stories *circa* 1945 and earlier, but different phantasies are often fulfilled today. (17-18)

And a substantial part of it is today’s darkly corruption.

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