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Deconstructing Detective Fiction Narrative: A Theoretical Autopsy

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Abstract:

Detective fiction is one of the most popular genres of literature. Largely popular for its thrill and entertainment, an archetypal detective fiction narrative is much more than a narrative of crime and its detection. A detective fiction narrative can be read as a complex interplay of individual motives. In fact, the detective's act of investigation is driven by his motive to decode the criminal's motive that might have propelled the crime. In cases of multiple suspects, a detective must accurately assess the intention behind the crime. This paper attempts to deconstruct a detective fiction narrative in the light of Kenneth Burke's theoretical postulations to provide new insight into the mechanics behind the intricate structure of the so called 'conventional' narratives. In this regard the paper analyses Satyajit's Ray's selected Feluda stories to understand the detective's course of dismantling the criminal's motivational discourse to unveil the culprit.

Keywords: detective fiction narrative, deconstruct, motivational discourse.

Meaning inherent in a text depends on the intricate triangulation of the author-text-reader. Reading detective fiction is often considered to offer limited intellectual expertise than those genres that are hailed to be cerebrally challenging. However, like any other work of fiction, a detective story is a fictional representation of an author's imagination in a typographic format that succeeds in catering to the reader. Though writers in all ages have composed narratives based on crime and detection, this very style of writing evolved as a genre primarily in the nineteenth century. The archetypal story involves a crime, followed by its investigation wherein the detective disentangles the mystery with the aid of his or her extraordinary intelligence, superior reasoning faculty, shrewd observation and an inquisitive mind. Often denigrated as pulp-fiction, the genre has always been treated as unsuitable for serious literary scholarship on grounds of stereotyped

structural conventions and predetermined ending. But new age studies have galvanized the genre into a domain of academic respectability by embarking on theoretical notions to explore the complexity of the genre that validates its significance by arguing that the genre necessitates serious reading and interpretation.

It is imperative to note that investigating the crime and unmasking the criminal does not summarize the dynamics of a detective fiction narrative. With a crime at its epicenter detective stories work on a problem-solving principle. In fact, a typical detective story is a collection of multiple stories where each story results out of the principal motives of the concerned protagonists. While the criminal tries to conceal his story, the detective attempts to unravel this hidden tale. In this process both criminal and detective give life to “the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (Todorov 44). Of these two, the story of investigation first unfolds to gradually unveil the dynamics of the story of crime and thus the former is governed by the principle of cognizance and the latter is governed by the principle of concealment. The dynamics of a detective story primarily rests on the reader’s expectation of resolution of the suspense which will eventually solve the puzzle. In these narratives the author blends mystery and suspense by negotiating the act of narration to create a fusion of expectation and delay followed by the final resolution. While the reader expects the author to unmask the criminal, the author delays the final revelation to heighten the suspense. This paper attempts to deconstruct these intricacies of a detective fiction narrative in the light of Kenneth Burke’s theoretical postulations to provide new insight into the mechanics behind the complex structure of the so called ‘conventional’ narratives.

The entire discussion about a detective fiction narrative can be resolved as a narrative of motives and action. When the detective tries to analyze the criminal’s action (act of crime) he is actually trying to understand why and how the criminal executed the crime. In fact, the dynamics of these narratives depends on the equation between act, scene, agent, agency and purpose of crime. These five aspects are more famously known as the ‘pentadic’ scheme of noted theorist Kenneth Burke. Burke believed that motives behind human action make them more understandable and so his ‘pentadic’ structure helps to apprehend the discourse of human action through the implications of drama and its five principle aspects. He explains:

...any complete statement about motives will offer *some kind* of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose) (xv).

In this regard each element has its particular relevance and is also intricately related to others. He uses the term 'ratios' (Knapp 589) to explain how the equation between these elements is significant to grasp the ambiguities involved in making a one-way track of possibilities while apprehending human action.

The drama in a detective story also commences from human action. The detective tries to understand the criminal's act of crime by positing it against five major 'wh'-questions- what is the crime, where and when did it occur, who did it and how and finally why did he do it. This trajectory can be understood in terms of Burke's 'pentadic' scheme. However, the 'pentadic' scheme operates at two different levels in detective stories. On one hand the criminal tries to conceal his involvement and avert revelation, while the sole motive behind detective's investigation is to find the miscreant. Each protagonist acts according to his principle motive and this leads to their respective 'motivational discourse' (Knapp 588). The term 'motivational discourse' refers to the discursive attempts taken to comprehend human action. Considering Burke's concept, a detective fiction narrative can be read as a complex interplay of individual motives. These respective motives or desires of the two central protagonists come into a direct conflict and eventually the detective's motivation of arriving at a comprehension of the criminal's motivation outlasts the criminal and brings about a closure of the narrative.

However, the entire concept of such a discourse will be target oriented and monolithic. Thus, it will depend on how the five variables work both singularly and in ratios as it would determine the motivational discourses of the respective characters. In case of multiple suspects and motives the detective has to rationally narrow down from multiple motives to logical motivation and finally to the most logical one. When there are several suspects or motives, the detective must apply this structure more than once in order to understand the most logical purpose that could have driven the miscreant to execute the crime. Each time, the detective has to rationally analyze the five aspects of 'act, scene, agency, agent and purpose' and their concerned operating ratios to zero down to the real culprit. This entire theoretical approach would, infact, reduce the

varied possibilities of interpretation into a single possibility or the best determinative set of possibility.

Satyajit Ray introduced Feluda as a new age private detective with a brilliant combo of “powerful brain, steady nerves and strong muscles” (Majumdar 537). Ray’s first story featuring Feluda and his young cousin Tapesh was published in *Sandesh*, a children’s magazine started by his grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray Choudhury. Ray captured the imagination of many young readers and Feluda went on to become one of the most loved and iconic figures in the domain of Bengali literature. Feluda stories met with huge success after their launch in 1965 and were later translated into other languages including English. Gopa Majumdar’s English translation of Ray’s thrillers gave a wide platform to the famous detective. Ray’s stories incorporate a dense network of action, thrill and suspense and it is interesting to analyze the theoretical implications of the cult stories under the light of Burke’s pentadic scheme. However, this paper primarily focuses on selected stories of Satyajit Ray that features in the second volume of Gopa Majumdar’s *The Complete Adventures of Feluda* (2005). In this volume there are a number of stories where Feluda solves the mystery by decoding the criminal’s motivational impetus behind the crime. In the stories “Napoleon’s Letter” (1981), “The Acharya Murder Case” (1985), “Murder in the Mountains” (1986) Feluda solves the mystery by primarily understanding and deciphering the strongest motive behind the crime.

In “Napoleon’s Letter” Feluda’s meeting with a young admirer brings him to the Halder house-hold where Pavitracharan’s murder almost coincides with his time of arrival. The reason behind the murder became evident when his most prized possession- Napoleon’s letter was found missing. Later the missing of Aniruddha’s pet bird and a stain of blood on the bird’s cage triggered Feluda’s suspicion. He established the missing links between the ‘missing bird’, the stolen antique- ‘letter of Napoleon’ and the ‘murder’ to expose the two culprits who joined hands to fulfill their respective motives. In “The Acharya Murder Case” renowned actor Indranarayan Acharya’s murder raised suspicion against Ashwini Bhaur- the last man to visit the victim. Initially it appeared that Indranarayan was killed because of professional rivalry and the murderer’s main motive was to steal his brilliant compositions. However, Feluda assessed the motive behind the crime to unmask the real culprit. In “Murder in the Mountains” the death of Birupaksha Majumdar was first thought to be caused by poisoning. But later he was also found to be stabbed to death.

Initially the victim's servant appeared as the most obvious suspect. However, while investigating Feluda retraced facts from the Mr. Majumdar's past and analyzed them in the light of the present to discover various angles of the mystery which ended up in exposing multiple crimes and culprits.

With multiple suspects the detective's task of narrowing down the list of probable miscreants to the real criminal often gets tricky. The five components of the 'pentadic-scheme' and their corresponding ratios help to find the actual culprit. In the stories discussed above Feluda tries to comprehend the strongest motive that has led to the crime. In "Napoleon's Letter" a number of incidents before and after the murder of Pavitracharan triggered Feluda's suspicion. Before the murder, Feluda was intrigued by the missing of the pet bird and the discovery of blood stains in its's cage increased it further. The gap between the crime and its revelation was very thin and the moment it was discovered everyone started looking for Sadhan Dastidar, Mr. Halder's last visitor. But despite the prompt reaction he slipped out of hands and disappeared mysteriously. This was followed by the discovery of the murder weapon and it almost became evident that Sadhan Dastidar murdered Mr. Halder to take revenge for being terminated from his job by Mr. Dastidar. While investigating, Feluda's attention was drawn towards the 'agent-scene' ratio of the act of crime. He revealed that when Dastidar left the study at 10.30 am and moved downstairs, he did not go out of the house. Infact, he went upstairs after taking the disguise of Hrishikesh Datta, Mr. Halder's present secretary. Feluda explained that Dastidar was living in the house in disguise to execute his pre-planned act of killing his employer at an appropriate time. Thus, the incongruity in the ratio between the agent who carries out the crime and the scene when the crime took place eventually helped to assess criminal's motivational discourse and solve the mystery.

In a story of double crime and multiple suspects, Feluda had to display the best of his skills to solve "The Acharya Murder Case". Here the motive behind the murder of Mr. Acharya was interlinked with his profession. Initially it appeared to be a case of rivalry but the theft of his composed works made the motive clear. Considering that Mr. Acharya was killed an hour after Mr. Bhaur had left, Feluda focused on the 'agent-scene' ratio to conclude that Mr. Mallik's need for money made him kill Mr. Acharya in order to get hold of his newly composed plays and songs. Though previously it appeared that the thief and murderer were two different people but finally it was clarified that, having committed both acts at separate times Mr. Mallik tried to sell the papers to Mr. Bhaur.

“Murder in the Mountains” exposes an unusual tangle of multiple murders and motives. Birupaksha Majumdar’s murder, his servant’s disappearance, the missing statue of Lord Krishna, the piece of paper with ‘vish’ (poison) written on it, suggest that he was poisoned by his servant for stealing the precious statue. But the victim was also stabbed with a dagger and this raised questions about the motive behind both stabbing and poisoning the victim. Feluda questioned the victim’s son, his secretary and others who were shooting in the house on the day of murder to gather vital information from the victim’s past and an old photograph. While investigating Feluda focused on the ‘purpose’ of the crime and examined the ratio between the context (act of crime) and the manner (agency) of the crime to unmask two killers. Vishnudas Balaporia alias Rajen Raina, the film actor was a former banker who fled after looting the bank in which Mr. Majumdar was also employed. So, he killed the victim to avoid any revelation of his past crime. Feluda found an old photograph in Mr. Majumdar’s study which included the criminal with his real name- Vishnudas Balaporia and that explained the presence of the paper with ‘vish’ written on it. On the other hand, Rajesh Brahma arrived as Rajat Bose to take revenge of his father’s death who was accidentally killed by Mr. Majumdar many years ago. After being discovered by Mr. Majumdar’s servant, Bose was at the risk of being exposed and so he murdered Lokenath.

However, in some exceptional cases when the narrative is not provided with any specific details about the intention of the criminal, the detective analyzes the other four aspects and resolves the mystery according to his own logic of convenience. The detective as the alter-ego of the criminal tries to assess his opponent’s thought process. So in the absence of any clear motive, the detective analyzes the motive that could have led him to commit the crime by placing him in the criminal’s shoes. Here the concept of the criminal is based on a possibility which appears to be more valid to the detective’s logic silencing the other probable logics.

Thus, the ‘pentadic-schema’ of Kenneth Burke reveals the inherent narrative implications of the stories. This deconstruction of the narratives enables to comprehend the theoretical implications of the narrative conventions incorporated by the author. So, the quotient of entertainment and popularity goes to the credit of the generic conventions which enables an active reader to utilise his intellectual and reasoning faculties to enjoy the thrillers. If a reader fails to understand the mechanics of the narrative, then reading detective fiction will be boring, because a plain reading of the semantic content of the narrative would never produce the thrill and

entertainment that the genre is known to deliver. This explains Heta Pyrhonen's "...two broad conceptualizations of reading the genre: a 'lowbrow' explanation accounting for its appeal to a mass readership, and a 'highbrow' explanation accounting for its appeal to a distinctly academic audience" (7).

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