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DETECTIVE FELUDA: SATYAJIT RAY'S MOST SIGNIFICANT
CONTRIBUTION IN CREATING THE SCHOOL OF INDIAN DETECTIVE FICTION

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Abstract

With the advent of industrialization, urbanization, and the creation of the law enforcement figure, the west, particularly England, witnessed the emergence of a new genre of writing that would captivate readers in the years to come. Detective stories were here to stay. Until the arrival of Sherlock Holmes, the image of a professional private detective hung in precarious balance. Sherlock Holmes epitomizes the genre's classic décor, and his appearance marked a new dawn in the genre's history. Soon the popularity of the genre surpassed nations, and like many other countries, India also produced tales of crime, primarily translations or adaptations of western originals. But these tales did not help create an indigenous tradition of Indian detective novels. This paper studies noted Bengali writer-director Satyajit Ray's contribution to developing a new practice of Indian detective fiction with particular focus on his fictional detective Feluda who emerged as an iconic Bengali detective in the realm of Indian detective fiction.

Keywords: Bengali detective, classic western model, Indian detective novel.

Detective fiction as a genre evolved mainly in the nineteenth century. Although the genre bloomed in periodicals in its nascent years, full-length novels came much later in the nineteenth century. Interestingly there was no detective, nor was there any detection idea in the initial years. Before the development of printing technology in Europe, accounts of crime saw the light of the day in pamphlets circulated with elaborate illustrations and sensational titles. Scholars suggest that the term 'detective' made its first appearance in Edgar Allan Poe's "*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*" in 1841. The age witnessed the evolution of an ideal detective by drawing influences from early models of proto-detective figures. Amidst a wide range of quasi-detective figures, the nineteenth century saw the arrival of Sherlock Holmes. This investigator was intellectual, celebrated for his logical reasoning, clever disguises, charisma, eccentricity, and highly scientific detection skills. In *Crime Fiction since 1800*, Stephen Knight describes Holmes as "... a

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detective who is highly intelligent, essentially moral, somewhat elitist, all-knowing, disciplinary in knowledge and skills, energetic, eccentric, yet also in touch with the ordinary people who populate the stories” (Knight 55). However, long before Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe conceived the idea of a fictional detective in the 1840s and laid the basic conventions of the genre. C. Auguste Dupin arrived at a time when the term 'detective' was yet to be coined and popularized. Still, Poe's Dupin immortalized the concept of the future gentleman detective who was intelligent, empirical, and analytical. Poe laid down the main components of the detective story, “...the character and method of amateur sleuth, the concept of sleuth's companion, the puzzle and the specific devices and motifs which were to become conventions of the genre” (Maida 36-37).

The genre was thought to be a western phenomenon for a significant period. Due to widespread popularity, the genre slowly spread its wings to other countries, with writers producing their versions of crime narratives. In many former British colonies, the genre found a suitable place to increase following the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, A.C Doyle, and Agatha Christie. India has always fascinated British authors, and writers like Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle have referenced the subcontinent in their works *The Moonstone* (1869) and *The Sign of Four* (1890). Later in the twentieth-century British authors, H.R.F Keating and Leslie Forbes based their crime stories in Bombay (present-day Mumbai). Keating's detective Inspector Ghote became so popular that he produced around twenty novels featuring him. However, in India, the genre's emergence is marked by the early works of translation from the English originals to other Indian languages. Francesca Orsini, in her essay, "Detective Novels: A Commercial Genre in Nineteenth-Century North India," made a very understandable study of the evolution of the genre in India. She notes:

The Detective novel was introduced first when translated from English into Bengali and from Bengali into other Indian languages at the end of the nineteenth century...Detective novel was brought into India 'readymade' without the intellectual and historical substratum that had generated them in Europe...(Dalmia, Blackburn 436).

In the 1890s, fiction writing in India flourished, and various monthly magazines in Hindi and Urdu were published. Detective novels or *Jasusi Upanyas* perhaps contributed the most to such magazines and constituted the most significant subgenre of Indian fiction writing. Many Indian writers drew inspiration from English crime fiction writings or those translated from English into Bengali. *Jesus* or Detective (1900) and *Hindi Daroga Daftar* or Hindi Constabulary (1910) were two monthly magazines devoted solely to detective novels. Devkinandan Khatri wrote many short mystery novels and was inspired by the English novelist W.G. Reynolds. He wrote the adventure novel *Chandrakanta* which came in installments in 1892, and other short mystery novels like *Virendravir asthma Katora Bhara Khun* (1895) and *Kajar Ki Kothari* (1902). He even launched a monthly fiction magazine *Upanyas Lahri* and published sequels of his novels to substantial widespread acclaim. *Jesus*, the first Hindi monthly devoted to detective

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fiction in 1900, printed about hundred and seven detective stories, including originals, adaptations, and translations. But such stories created between 1890 and 1930 failed to develop an indigenous tradition of Indian detective fiction. Most of the works published were translations or adaptations of western detective fiction. However, from the 1940s, writers in the subcontinent took a severe approach, and the genre experienced a gradual and steady development in cheaply produced prints of pulp magazines. The pulp tradition of early Indian crime fiction is somewhat akin to the American style of hard-boiled crime fiction of the early nineteenth century. With the development of the printing press, the genre found a favorable ground to develop in cheap paper-back newsprint material popularized as pulp magazines.

However, Bengal contributed considerably with its rich and almost inexhaustible tradition of crime stories to create an indigenous school of Indian detective fiction. Bengal was home to various pulp magazines, which helped escalate the popularity of pulp fiction in the region. Bengali authors tried their hands at crime tales published in local magazines with glossy prints on low-grad paper from the early nineteenth century. Amongst a variety of pulp outputs emerged the tradition of *Guptakathas* or crime thrillers, which often dealt with various crimes like robbery, murder, and abductions and focused on the moral codes of conduct by highlighting the ethical principles of the aspect of sin. Many narratives even presented the scandalized side of the so-called elite class indulging in illicit relationships. Some critical anthologies of those times which published a collection of similar thrillers are *Goenda Aar Goenda*, *Bibhav*, and *Sakha O Sathi*. Slowly the pulp culture led to the mainstream publication of crime tales, often in the form of short stories and even full-length novels. This eventually paved the way to create a unique tradition of Indian detective fiction.

From the early twentieth century, Bengal produced a host of Bengali detectives who were not copy-prints of the colonial model. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi and Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Kiriti Roy were fictional detectives who appeared in the Bengali literary scene within a period that spread across, before, during, and after independence. Satyajit Ray is another big name in the domain of Bengali detective fiction. The first story featuring Feluda and Tapeshe was published in *Sandesh*, Ray's grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray Choudhury's children's magazine. Originally written in Bengali, Feluda's stories met with massive success after their launch in 1965 and were later translated into other languages. The stories were first translated into English in 1988. Pradosh Chandra Mitter, popularly known as Feluda, is a twenty-six-year-old ordinary Bengali youth accompanied by his fourteen-year-old cousin Tapeshe or Topshe as he affectionately calls him. Later Ray adds another character to the series, and Feluda is joined by Lalmohan Ganguli, a famous writer of crime thrillers.

In the early twentieth century, the educated Bengali youth became nationalistic, and the concept of physical culture was gaining ground among them. At the same time, cultural revivalism coupled with western education took care of the development of intellect. When

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Bengali detective fiction emerged during this period, the Bengali sleuth reflected this happy combination of brain and brawn. Thus Bengali sleuths were not mere prototypes of the western detectives. They were typical Bengali detectives imbibing the trend of physical prowess and mental agility. When Satyajit Ray first introduced his fictional detective, he contributed to the already established tradition of Bengali detective fiction. Feluda can be said to be an extension of the Bengali consciousness. But in his characterization, Ray showed some modification.

Feluda is a twentieth-century detective who enjoys superior intellectual faculties and can withstand any physical or mental challenge. He represents a typical Bengali gentleman or *bhadralok*. A simple English illustration of the term '*bhadralok*' would mean a gentleman, but the time is loaded with cultural bearings as it stands to define a quintessential Bengali man. Bengalis represent a culturally refined race and are thought to be intellectually sound. Bengalis are not seen as a part of the macho class who are physically strong and agile. But in his fictional creation, Ray reverses this consideration and presents Feluda as a typical Bengali *bhadralok* who is intellectually sharp and physically strong. Thus, Ray's delineation of his hero shows a slight deviation from the conventional idea of a Bengali gentleman. He is a Bengali of the '*bhadralok*' category with refined taste and intellectual abilities. Still, he is not meek like Mr. Ganguli, nor is he like Prakhar Rudra (Mr. Ganguli's superhuman fictional hero) since his powers do not solely depend on his physical strength. It is to be noted here that Satyajit Ray was an ardent lover of Sherlock Holmes stories, and the English gentleman detective somewhat influenced his creation.

To some extent, Ray's hero does bear some similarities, given his extraordinary intellectual prowess and charismatic personality. But Ray's characterization of Feluda is also strikingly different from the colonial model. He is a blend of the best of east and west. Thus in Feluda, Ray makes an excellent amalgam of the finest qualities of the *bhadralok* category and the colonial model with necessary deviations to present him as a more efficient twentieth-century realistic investigator with the best combination of brain and brawn. He was not someone "...larger than life superman whom one would venerate and admire from afar...On the contrary, Topshe's charming narration described him as so utterly normal and human that it was not difficult to see him almost as a member of one's own family." (Majumdar xi)

Feluda became one of the most beloved and iconic figures in the domain of Bengali literature. Ray composed 34 stories featuring the trio of Feluda, Topshe, and Lalmohan Ganguli. When Ray managed his first story, he was fully aware of the generic conventions of detective fiction. His use of the detective-assistant duo, an assistant cum narrator, indeed reminds the reader of Holmes and Watson. But Ray was an artist and not an imitator, and hence as an intentional move, he introduced two cousin brothers as the detective-assistant duo in his stories.

Moreover, none of them were professionals. Feluda is a twenty-seven-year-old man who is like any other office-goer. At the same time, the younger one is an enthusiastic schoolboy who

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idolizes his brother and looks up to him with respect and admiration. To make his narratives distinctively different, Ray added one more member Lalmohan Ganguli to make it a group of three. Lalmohan Ganguli became an active member of the group, accompanying Feluda in almost all cases; in many narratives, he also happened to assist Feluda in his unique style. However, drawing inspiration from the western tradition of detective fiction was not that simple; since Ray intended to write his stories mainly for the young readers of Bengal. In this regard, Ray had to ensure that he should produce thrilling narratives without any trace of violence and eroticism. Even if they were not essential requirements, violence and sex were common aspects in the western tradition of detective fiction. But without employing any of them, Ray did succeed in creating a successful detective series featuring a proficient private detective out of a twentieth-century Bengali intellectual.

When the stories were first translated into English in 1988, the intention was to spread the genius of Ray's stories to a broader reach of readers. But translation always runs a handful of risks. It is tricky to translate the stories written in a source language (laden with some cultural nuances) into a target language without losing the original work's essence. However, reading the novels in translation might offer some interesting insights since translation often makes way for the 'rewriting of an original text' (Lefevere xi). Ray even made two Bengali films based on his stories, *Sonar Kella* (1974) and *Joy Baba Felunath* (1979). Later other stories were also made into movies by Sandip Ray and even serialized as *Kissa Kathmandu Ka* for television. Thus, Satyajit Ray's Feluda stories must be credited for their contribution to establishing an indigenous tradition of Indian detective fiction. In this respect, one must credit Ray's craftsmanship in conceptualizing a new detective series featuring a quintessential Bengali detective in the realm of Indian detective fiction.

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