

Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi as Binary Oppositions

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Abstract: Sherlock Holmes may be the most famous detective in literary history, but Sreejata Guha considers Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi narratives "a classic of (modern Indian literature)" (Picture Imperfect viii), easily forming the most popular Bengali detective fiction in late pre-independence and post-independence India. Culturally, while Holmes sports the general European deerstalker, ulsters, jackets, shirts, trousers and heavy shoes, Bakshi sports a much less westernised look and is, indeed, rather a level-headed dhoti-clad bourgeois Bengali gentleman, who is rooted in his time but is keenly aware of the societal and political fault lines that inform his context. He wages an intellectual opposition to Holmes as well as to Poirot and Father.

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1. Introduction

Sherlock Holmes may be the most famous detective in literary history, but Sreejata Guha considers Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi narratives "a classic of (modern Indian literature)" (Picture Imperfect viii), easily forming the most popular Bengali detective fiction in late pre-independence and post-independence India. Holmes's and Bakshi's conception, behavioural features and investigative methodology are markedly different.

Even a very casual rereading of the Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi canons reveals several basic differences. The criminals Sherlock Holmes deals with in *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, *Five Orange Pips* or *The Adventure of the Dancing Men* are either Orientals or Americans or White Westerners with direct association with or attraction for Britain's contemporary or former colonies. In contrast, Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's attitude towards the British colonisers, at least in the initial stage of crime writing, is ambivalent.

As already mentioned, except for *The Basic Instinct*, no other Byomkesh Bakshi story contains detailed reference to the Indian freedom struggle even when the first ten of the narratives had been written and published in India embroiled in political turmoil before the Independence. However, even if there is no direct representation of the British imperialists being evil, there is a subtle indication that the self-proclaimed super-administrators are erroneous and dispensable.

2. Cultural Differences between Holmes & Bakshi

Culturally, while Holmes sports the general European deerstalker, ulsters, jackets, shirts, trousers and heavy shoes, Bakshi sports a much less westernised look and is, indeed, rather a level-headed dhoti-clad bourgeois Bengali gentleman, who is rooted in his time but is keenly aware of the societal and political fault lines that inform his context. He wages an intellectual opposition to Holmes as well as to Poirot and Father Brown, Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay might have initially taken Sherlock Holmes as the model, but unlike his predecessors like Priyanath Mukhopadhyay or Dinendra Kumar Roy he went on to recast and restructure the basic tenets of Western investigative narratives into a subaltern, especially Indian, perspective.

Everything about Sherlock Holmes is Occidental, setting him apart from the general-coloured residents of the colonies. He smokes briarroot pipes, is attracted to Bach and Beethoven, and in stories like *The Red-Headed League* frequents opera houses for intellectual refreshment (Doyle 121). His food includes cold beef, grouse and white wine while he is addicted to seven per cent solution of cocaine (Doyle 79,54), and thus a complete set of White codes of etiquette is presented and demonstrated as being followed. In contrast, Bakshi does not like music and opera, and seldom watches movies (Picture Imperfect 118). Further, he never consumes alcohol in any of the thirty-three stories.

The pre-Byomkesh Bakshi detectives, except Robert Blake, have a rather clichéd procedure of detecting Indian criminals and handing them over to the perceptively superior White police officers. Against this, Bakshi displays his insularity by avoiding joint action, other than briefly in *The Gramophone Pin Mystery*, with the British-Indian police forces in the pre-1947 stories and dealing personally with the native criminals. This is not the Fanonian collision but a cultural and literary collusion as an implement of protest the British colonisation that aims at flouting the perceived omnipotence and omniscience of the colonial administrators, and, in extension, their detectives created by Doyle, Agatha Christie and G.K. Chesterton.

Sherlock Holmes's very own nationality is ambiguous. His creator Doyle was not an Englishman by birth, having had been born at Picardy Place, Edinburgh, on 22 May 1859 to the Irish

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Catholics Charles Altamont Doyle and Mary Foley, and Holmes's full name — Sherrinford Scott Holmes according to Klinger — might be interpreted as referring to his Scottish ascendancy. Patrick Wolfe, in *Irish Names and Surnames* (1923), opines that “the Sherlock family is of Anglo-Saxon origin, had settled in Ireland before the beginning of the thirteenth century, and soon became very widespread, being found in Dublin, Meath, Louth, Wexford, Waterford, Tipperary, etc.” (William 10). Moreover, Catherine Wynne has informed that Charles Altamont Doyle was committed to the Irish cause. An element of subalternity in his investigator might have become symbolically an instance of Scottish Doyle's own resistance against the hegemony of the English colonisers. Holmes's refusal of the English knighthood also assumes significance in this context (Doyle 1017). However, Holmes's associate Watson is identifiably an Englishman from his full name and is constantly dominated by the detective. It is identifiably to impart universality to his creation and in background of his practice as an ophthalmologist at South Sea in the imperial metropolis of London that Doyle usually uses the name-Sherlock Holmes- that combines a name and a surname unspecifying the sleuth's nationality or the Western continent to which he belongs. The detective has no relative except his elder brother Mycroft who appears in *The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter* and *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans* and whose first name, again, does not reveal his nationality or faith.

Sherlock Holmes offers his service to the imperial Britain more actively and rigorously than even Watson, an English ex-military surgeon who has the experience of service in British India. The investigator's early habitat might have not been specified but he exhibits a strong patriotic fervour in celebrating the rule of Queen Victoria in *The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual*, thus alluding to the monarch under whom Britain's colonial expansion had reached its ultimate maturity (Doyle 14, 334). Holmes's clients, too, belong to the section of the British and international aristocracy usually concerned with imperial expansion: for example, the king of Bohemia in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, knighted old squires in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the British Prime Minister and the Secretary for European Affairs in *The Adventure of the Second Stain*, and members of the British Royalty in *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client*. Many of the cases Holmes investigates are of international importance but are directly or indirectly related to colonisation.

In stark contrast, the Byomkesh Bakshi's adventures are generally aimed at solving principally social problems of the ordinary Indians in and around the subaltern metropolis of colonial Kolkata. Occasionally, though, landlords like Kumar Tridibendra Narayan Roy of *The Simonto Heera*, Himangshu Roy of *The Quicksand*, Deep Narayan Singh of *The Firefly* and Mahidhar Choudhury of *Picture Imperfect* consult him. Bandyopadhyay thus first of all negates the Eurocentric convention of granting primacy to the bourgeoisie. In creating the bhadrolok but unmatchable Bakshi, Bandyopadhyay was influenced by the renowned Bengali barrister, industrialist, patriot and politician Byomkesh Chakroborty (1855-1929), and

hence too the elements of anti-colonialism in Bakshi.

3. Post-Colonial Response

The Indian author's postcolonial response can also be noted in his conception of Ajit Bandyopadhyay, Bakshi's middle-class assistant and the narrator of most of his stories. In the Holmes stories, Watson appears as a retired army-surgeon — a figure who has had actively suppressed the native figures in India — thereby testifying to Said's observation that “the cult of the military personality was prominent [in late Victorian British culture] [...] usually because such personalities had managed to bash a few dark heads” (Said, *Culture* 181). Watson's being a former member of the imperial army is aimed at fusing the Sherlock Holmes texts with the contemporary British cultural outlook. Contrarily, Ajit Bandyopadhyay is a litterateur, with his creator perceptively hinting at the power of pen being superior to that of sword and that an intellectual resistance of the colonial encroachment is often a more successful one than gross physical violence. Ajit Bandyopadhyay comes to represent that very section of the closet intelligentsia that the British tried to subsume first as clerks and thereafter tried to control culturally but failed.

As described in *The Inquisitor*, Bakshi first meets Ajit Bandyopadhyay at a central Kolkata-boarding house in 1925. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's specification of the year has a significant postcolonial connotation because the anti-colonial activities of armed Indian revolutionaries had peaked in Bengal and particularly Kolkata during the 1920s. That Bakshi and Ajit Bandyopadhyay, fresh out of university, are aged between twenty-three and twenty-five during their first meeting is even more important because the participation of Bengali youths in their early twenties was the largest in contemporary Indian nationalist movement. Gopal Krishna Pahari has observed that even before the 1930s, “Bengal had been one of the important regions for the rise of militant nationalism”, and that the Bengali youths taught in Western system of education and philosophy — much like Bakshi and his associate — had thrown themselves in an exhaustive war against the British occupants (Pahari 254).

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay never employs assaulting anti-imperialists in his detective stories which can be traced to his profession. As a lawyer at British Indian courts, such representations would have earned him administrative censure, if not detention, for supporting and writing about seditious activities.

Bakshi's relationship with his friend is markedly different from that between Holmes and Watson. While the English ex-surgeon repeatedly asserts Holmes's intellectual excellence and uniqueness, Ajit Bandyopadhyay, who is more a friend and a fellow sufferer of colonial oppression, does not indulge in hero-worship while describing the Bengali inquisitor. Unlike Ajit Bandyopadhyay, Watson does not appear share the same social class with Holmes because none of the detective's aristocratic clients ever speaks to him. He acts as the passive receptor that Holmes lectures to demonstrate his encyclopaedic knowledge on topics ranging between the Stradivarius violins, the Buddhism of Ceylon and warships of the future, and the egg-

shell pottery of the Chinese Ming dynasty (Doyle 79, 1043). Being epistemologically compatible with Bakshi, Ajit Bandyopadhyay is spared of it, and Bakshi seldom exhibits his scholasticism in spite of his education. However, because of his associate's benignity and progressive lack of active involvement in dangerous missions, Bakshi is forced to replace him with Bikash Dutta in *The Basic Instinct*, *The Menagerie*, and *The Mountain Mystery*.

Doyle specified, although Holmes being a purely imaginary creation, in *A Study in Scarlet* 221B Baker Street in north-west London to be his residence. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay does not do so, assigning an unspecified lodging on Kolkata's Harrison Street (now Mahatma Gandhi Road) to his inquisitor. However, like Holmes who retires from his Baker Street flat to Sussex Downs in *The Adventure of the Second Stain* (Doyle 717), the Bengali inquisitor retires to Kolkata's Keyatala in *The Lock Knot*. (Byomkesh Samagra 925). The Indian author portrays his detective as a family man with middle-class values who, as implied in *Where There's a Will*, marries early to Satyabati (Picture Imperfect 127-8), which is a subjective reference in the context that Saradindu Bandyopadhyay himself married Parul Chakroborty on 28 June 1918 at the age of nineteen. This is also a rather conscious disregard of Van Dine's rule for (western) detective fiction that the detective should be unmarried and that sleuth stories should always focus on detection and not romance. Faithful to the Eurocentric requirement, Holmes never marries or has affairs. Unlike Watson, he remains unmoved by the physical charms of Mary Morstan in *The Sign of Four* (Doyle 58), Irene Adler in *A Scandal in Bohemia* and Violet Hunter in *The Adventure of the Cooper Beeches*. He even does not pay a single address to his associate's wife Mary Morstan after they are married in *The Sign of Four*. The investigator considers women to be distractions that would hinder, among other works, his vigorous championing of Britain's imperial interests.

Doyle, by eschewing description of scenes of courtship or post-nuptial life in his fiction, also conforms to the norms of the Victorian prudery and symbolically asserts the requirement of the colonisers not to exhibit emotions before the subaltern populace. In direct opposition to Doyle's formulae, both Byomkesh Bakshi and Ajit Bandyopadhyay are extrovertly heterosexual. Flouting the moralising conventions of the European detective stories, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay brings in vivid sensuousness and emotional involvements, beginning with a detailed description of Bakshi and Satyabati's courtship in *Where There's a Will*. Contrarily to Watson's restrained references to Morstan in *The Sign of Four*, Ajit Bandyopadhyay sensuously describes the physical appearance of Satyabati in *Where There's a Will* (Bandyopadhyay, Picture 100, 111-2), of Shakuntala Singh, in *The Firefly* (Byomkesh Samagra 517) and of Mohini Das in *The Riddle* (Byomkesh Samagra, 687).

4. Self-Identification with Detectives

The British and Indian authors also differ in the context of their self-identification with their detectives. Doyle positions himself between the extraordinary intelligence of Holmes and the simplicity of Watson to provide sufficient publicity for his

detective without himself appearing on the scene. On the other hand, Byomkesh Bakshi is admittedly Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's own self-projection, which administers a further intellectual subaltern identity to the inquisitor. Contrary to Doyle's focussing on Holmes's different adventures while consciously ignoring societal references, Bandyopadhyay keeps the detective stories at an intellectual level and writes them to be simultaneously read as social novels.

Holmes indulges in physical violence while capturing Jefferson Hope in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle 33), John Clay in *The Red-headed League* (Doyle 124), Joseph Harrison in *The Adventure of the Naval Treaty* (Doyle 411), Sebastian Moran in *The Adventure of the Empty House* (Doyle 548), and Evans in *The Adventure of the Three Garridebs* (Doyle 1028), or uses firearms in *The Sign of Four* (Doyle 82), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Doyle 527), Bakshi mostly avoids direct physical confrontation, does not carry a gun except in *The Inquisitor* (Picture Imperfect 23) and *Eternity Destroyed* (Byomkesh Samagra 633), and does not personally own a revolver. To depict his imperial investigator as unique and flawlessly conceived and attain credibility for his detective narratives, Doyle has devised several indigenous methods for crime detection including the usage of Plaster-of-Paris, chemical analyses of blood and mud stains, and forensic examinations of cigar ash, shoes, abandoned dresses and other daily-use materials. Science becomes a dividing factor between the two brilliant investigators- Holmes and Bakshi. Doyle himself was a gifted ophthalmologist while Saradindu Bandyopadhyay was a lawyer-turned-litterateur.

The Indian author understandably does not give primacy to scientific research and chemical experiments, whereas Doyle's investigator almost always verifies his doubts through experiments at the small laboratory inside his flat. Bakshi reads out in *Calamity Strikes* the debilitating influences of British colonisation upon the Indian science (Picture Imperfect 131-3). His stress obviously is on psychoanalysis for crime detection. Bakshi, by doing so, may appear to essentialise the Orientalist conception of the Easterners' aversion to science and technology; but then, it may also be interpreted as the author's (what Chakravorty-Spivak terms as) 'strategic essentialism'.

Doyle had a strong attraction for the atmosphere of the late-Victorian and Edwardian London (*The Wordsworth* 850), and stories like *The Sign of Four*, *The Red-Headed League* and *The Five Orange Pips* contain vivid description of the detective strolling in different localities of the imperial capital and its climate, though not inquiring into the prejudices and practices of its residents. Sherlock Holmes overwhelmingly testifies to the contemporary British colonial perception of being the microcosm and locus of the civilized world while speaking about his own omnipotence and uniqueness as investigator. He proudly asserts his uniqueness while describing his position as a consulting detective in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle 18, 54). By making his character refute the qualitative excellence of other literary detectives like Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Emile Gaboriau's Lecoq in *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle negates any challenge to his detective's position from representatives of other imperial powers like France or former colonies like the

United States of America. Bakshi avoids any such claim and acts silently to prove his mettle.

5. Atheism with Reference to Holmes & Bakshi

Though Holmes is not an atheist and does not desecrate the Christian religious institutions, his faith has not been demarcated. He seldom often cites references from the Bible other than his singular mention of the biblical David-Uriah-Bathsheba scandal in *The Adventure of the Crooked Man* (Doyle 367). This has been instrumental in making Doyle's detective stories popular cutting across religious lines.

However, though the inquisitor is a Hindu and, according to Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, a "Kyastha", the second group of Bengali social divisions, he does not ever visit temples and has not been depicted as praying. In *The Basic Instinct*, he avoids specifying his religious sentiment when approached by Fazlu Rahaman for declaring himself as a supporter either of India or the Hindus, or Pakistan or the Muslims. On the other hand, his introduction of his mother as a practicing Vaishnavite indicates his knowledge about his social and religious positions. In India, the acceptability for a general-caste character is greater than that from the upper classes like the Brahmins, and the author's ambiguity regarding his inquisitor's social strata and religious faith serves to grant the Bakshi narratives a wide readership.

Both Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi are occasionally maltreated by the official police forces. However, whereas, Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard is pitted against the British consulting detective only after safeguarding the imperial power's integrity, British India's police officers like Bidhubabu in the pre-1947 Byomkesh Bakshi narratives see the inquisitor as a threat to the functioning of the imperial government. Just as Holmes reprimands Lestrade in *The Adventure of the Norwood Builder* (Doyle 566), Bakshi exhibits a rare courage in warning and chastising a colonisers' appointed police official like Bidhubabu in *Where There's a Will* (Picture Imperfect 101). That both the detectives come under the purview of law for violating civilian privacy and on mere suspicion in *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client* and *The Inquisitor* respectively underscores their image as the just upholders of law.

Criminals in Doyle's detective narratives commit crimes of international ramifications and are concerned principally with power and money rather than love interests. Moriarty of *The Adventure of the Final Problem* and *The Valley of Fear*, Sebastian Moran of *The Adventure of the Empty House*, Grimes by Roylott of *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* and Negretto Sylvius of *The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone* are either scholastic or respectable, enjoy immunity, and evade

immediate suspicion because of their privileged position in the British society.

Significantly, Moriarty, Moran and Culverton Smith possess different improvised weapons like the sawed-off Von Herder air gun in *The Adventure of the Empty House* and poisoned spring, which Culverton Smith mails to the detective in *The Adventure of the Dying Detective*. Such sophisticated weapons are not mentioned in the Bakshi canon, except for Prafulla Roy's bicycle bell in *The Gramophone Pin Mystery* and Debkumar's poisoned matchsticks in *Calamity Strikes*. Importantly, the intensity of the Easterners' crime, in opposition to Doyle's representation, has been deliberately understated in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay.

6. Conclusion

Thus, by projecting an alternative society, sets of beliefs and conventions, other than an alternatively powerful and intelligent subaltern investigator and his associate, the Byomkesh Bakshi stories present a pronounced challenge to the perceived omnipotence and conceptual flawlessness of the most popular Eurocentric detective narratives concerning Sherlock Holmes.

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