

AN EXPLORATION OF THE ARDENT CONVENTIONALISM IN THE SELECT SHORT STORIES OF AGATHA CHRISTIE

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Abstract

Detective fiction acts as a vehicle for perpetuating the existing social relations within the social formation or the class structure of the society. It reinforces the reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology and thus the domination of the ruling class is carried out. The multiple, diverse and distinct ISA's are at function in detective fiction whose ultimate goal is to uphold the dominant ideology and hence the interest of the ruling class. Detective fiction also acts as a potential site of the application of the RSA's in the society to protect the political conditions and the relations of exploitation through the medium of repression ranging from "the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship" (Lenin 150). This paper aims to identify the precise nature of the dominant Ideology conveyed by detective stories of the Golden Age, particularly focusing on Agatha Christie's detective fiction. This paper will also focus on the interesting features of the English society in Golden age period, as reflected in the short stories of Christie's detective, Miss Marple.

Keyword: Ideology, ISA, RSA, Detective Fiction, Conservatism, Golden Age Detective Stories

Althusser in his essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, talks about various institutions central to the implementation of the ideology, the focus in the present paper is on the institutions of the law, the police and the family which are central in the discussion of the institutions of Classical detective fiction. One of the important elements of ISA's is the 'Family ISA' which was

stressed in one of the stories as the story deals with the crime in the family institution. By committing such a heinous crime, it is questionable that whether an individual has the right to take law in his own hands. Miss Marple said in her story, *The Tuesday Night Club* that such people should be prosecuted as they were threat to the society, when she says, "I hope that wicked Jones is hanged, I am sure, making that poor girl a murderess. I suppose they will hang her too, poor thing." (312)

Thus, in this story, there was a clear reference for the need of RSA's, in order to control the criminal activities. Whenever an individual pose a threat to society, officers of law were called upon to provide support and background in the crime solution, as the criminal activities can only be repressed through such institutions as police and prisons. Thus, the murder represents the violated social order which must be checked in order to protect the most fundamental institution of the society that is, the family.

While following the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction, Christie challenged the modernist's lack of faith in religious and social law and order. She portrayed her detectives as heroes who were problem seekers and solvers and who brought the culprit to his end. This clearly indicates that the English society perceived the legal system as just and reliable.

Althusser further theorises in his essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* that, "Ideology has a material existence", that 'ideals' or 'representation', do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a material existence" (165). Althusser suggested that an individual's behaviour and his attitude was the result of the beliefs and ideal of the individual concerned.

Every 'subject' is endowed with a 'consciousness' and believing in the 'ideas' that his 'consciousness' inspires

in him and freely accepts, must 'act according to his ideas', must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the action of his material practice. (168-169)

Pablo Mukherjee also argues that crime was central ideological and political tool in the development of capitalism in order to maintain a hegemonic position.

The class nature of the society is undermined by the type of crime committed. The crime mostly centres on murder and through the analysis of Christie's major works, the motives for the murder were 'money, sexual jealousy, fear and revenge'. Christie's restricted use of motives was also in accordance with the conventions of mystery fiction as "its crimes... are the product of a limited number of self-evident motives". (Malagren 119)

Most of the stories of Miss Marple have money motives behind the crime whether its murder or a theft. In *Tuesday Night Club*, Mr. Jones was a commercial traveller and during his stay in hotel in Birmingham, one of the chambermaid in the hotel saw the blotting paper which he had used to write a letter whose phrases referred to his dependency on his wife's money, "Entirely dependent on my wife...when she is dead I will...hundreds and thousands..." (308)

It has also been made out that Mr Jones might have murdered his wife as after the death of Mrs Jones, he would have inherited hundreds and thousands of pounds and to say exactly, the amount was 8000 pounds. Thus the suspicion naturally falls on him. On investigation, he explained that the letter was being written to his brother in Australia, as a response to his letter, in which he asked him for money. He replied that he had written to his brother that he was entirely dependent on his wife's money, so he was unable to help him. He further wrote that there were hundreds and thousands of people in this world, who have been suffering through the same problem.

Also in Christie's stories, family ISA plays an important role besides the law and the police that form the RSA of the society. The family is a central ISA where, according to Althusser, the capitalist regime is naturally concealed and covered up shown to be a neutral environment purged of ideology, but it is an essential form of the ruling bourgeois ideology. The importance of the family institution is easily overlooked as it is also a seemingly

neutral, ideology free environment. The power of the family in the formulations of culture has to be acknowledged as it is, and the human relationships connected to it, serve as the primary defining institution in the lives of the inhabitants of the capitalist society. Everyone grows up in a family of some sort and adopts a set of values and beliefs which can be argued to reinforce the ruling ideology and reproduce individuals as its enforcers. Christie establishes family as an important institution where any kind of deviance or distortion caused by any family member is shunted out and the person responsible for that get punished for his or her misdeeds. Thus, the institution of family is restored to its original shape and the smooth functioning of family and thus of society is ensured.

The most common physical setting in Christie's works was a country house setting because Christie had a strong affection for her childhood home in Torquay and other country Manors which were built in old "Victorian Gothic" style. This strong nostalgia for country house was reflected very clearly in most of her short stories. The choice of country house or village setting is also not accidental. A survey indicated that "nearly half of the middle class families in 1930's were buying houses on mortgages...Their real estate were situated in the countryside or sub-urbia." (Scott 166). It might also be claimed that the study of the evolution of detective fiction genre was directly influenced by the emergence of bourgeoisie tout court.

The word country house brought to the minds of the readers a place away from cities, a typical village setting having large green fields, lakes and woods. The country house setting, as the main site of crime was preferred because it effectively created an aura of mystery in wilderness. In her stories, the peace in the country-life was disturbed with the advent of crime but by the end of narrative, it returned to its natural and lawful order.

A strong reference of country-house was made in the story, *The Ingots of Gold*. In *The Ingots of Gold*, Raymond West told the story which happened two years ago when he went down to Cornwall with his friend John Newman to spend Whitsuntide. The exact place was a village called Polperran, which was situated at the west coast of Cornwall, a wild and rocky spot.

"The place was charming one, it was situated high up the cliffs, with a good view out to sea. Part of it was some three or four hundred years old and a modern wing had

been added. Behind it farming land of about seven or eight acres ran island". (328)

In Interwar England, the rate of crimes actually decreased in comparison to the Victorian period. Still, British detective writers turned to murderous plots not as an aspect of social reality rather because it was the most unacceptable catastrophe at that time. The other reason was that it also provided the re-assurance that there can be no trespass without an aftermath and no violent act without punishment.

As Althusser contended, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162), same was portrayed through the works of Christie. Here detective fiction acts as an ideology and the real conditions of existence of men are reflected in the imaginary representations of the world. The real focus is on the relation of the men to those conditions of existence which are represented to them as imaginary. Thus, ideology is at work and acts by revealing the relationship of men to these conditions of existence. Detective fiction builds an imaginary representation of the conditions of existence of men and through this means people of that society seek compensation for an otherwise intolerable existence in a post-war era. It awakens the people towards the reality that life is worth living and nobody has the least right to end that. Christie portrayed this in her stories that, no criminal has the right to kill anybody. The person has the right to live his life to the fullest and finally die his natural death. Despite, its preoccupation with death and violence, detective fiction puzzle hinges on the "fundamental assumption that people matter" (Paul24). Christie assured readers that the dutiful English state devote all possible police resources to ensure and protect this right. Christie's detective stories usually feature a corpse, "regular reading of the genre, however, helps to distance death's horrors and "to blunt temporarily the fear of death" (Watson, 173). Christie achieves this by showing readers that however difficult and dangerous life can be, at least they are not the corpse on the floor.

In the story, *A Christmas Tragedy*, Miss Marple narrated the incident which took place at Ketson Spa Hydro where Miss Marple went for Christmas. She told how when she first met a couple Jack and Gladys Sanders in a tram, she witnessed Mr. Sanders deliberately tripping on the stairs on to his wife and she fell down but was

fortunately saved by the conductor. But of course, that looked like an accident but somehow; she got suspicious of Mr Sanders that he wanted to get off with his wife as, Her husband had some property that was coming to him, but for the moment they were very badly off. In fact, they were living on her income...She bemoaned the fact that she could not touch the capital... But the money was hers to will away- I found that out. And she and her husband made wills in favour of each other directly after their marriage. (460)

Hall Porter, George had died of pneumonia, just four days before Christmas. Within the 24 hours of the death of George, one of the young housemaids, too died, and everyone was talking of such ill-omen. One lady, Mrs Carpenter was saying,

"Mark my words", she said. "This isn't the end. You know the saying? Never two without three. I've proved it true time and again. There'll be another death. Not a doubt of it. And shan't have long to wait. Never two without three."(461)

The only thing which became an important clue in solving the case was the cheap hat which was placed at the face of the dead body but that hat was of housemaid's, not of Gladys. Thus, Mr. Sanders killed his wife just to get money from the will which he wouldn't have got till his wife's death. At the end, Miss Marple says of the murderous culprit:

'Sanders was hanged', said Miss Marple crisply. And a good job too. I have never regretted on my part in bringing that man to justice. I've no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment. (469)

Detective fiction works in accordance with Althusser's argument about ideology having no history. By this Althusser means that general ideology "has no history of its own" (Lenin 159) as a structure and function is assigned to it so that it appears as a non-historical reality i.e. omni-historical reality. This implies that it is endowed with an immutable structure and functioning throughout the extent of the history. For example the values like morality and justice are eternal values which are valued throughout history and their qualification is immutable. As is evident from the Christie's stories, a confident affirmation exists that the goodwill always allows justice to triumph over immorality. Christie represents the ideology embedded in the British conscience that right and wrong can be easily defined,

law and order always prevails. And good will always triumphs over evil. It confirmed the stability and virility not only of Christian values but of the nation itself.

In these detective stories, the country house setting was shown which complies with the 19th century society in which Christie wrote and which represents the foundation on which the ideology of the sub-genre is founded. Golden age may be seen as divorced from the reality, as industrialization and urbanization had taken place but the Golden age stories were located in severely confined environment i.e. bourgeois country house. Thus, one can also find a strong note of nostalgia of longing for the past, which had a different socio-economic system.

Althusser also talks about individuals who become subjects because of interpellation with the certain exceptions of "the 'bad subjects' who on occasions provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus" (181). A person, male or female, who commits a crime, stems from the murderer or criminals lack of self-control over the negative, sinful aspects of human nature, particularly jealousy, greed, revenge and hate which are the main motives of crime in Christie's stories. Essentially, the criminal always commits atrocities against others while sane and not because of mental disorder. In this story also, the elements like country -house setting, the money motif, the role of Police and RSA, all made intricately embedded in the story.

Capitalist society has set a value-that of money. It has also established the legitimate means for achieving that value which includes inheritance, investment or landed gentry. In middle class, money is seen as something unimportant, when you have it but the moment it comes to sharing, it becomes a very strong motive for crime. Those people who do not possess the legitimate right to achieve that money or property, they, at their own risk, turned to illegitimate means in order to own that and to satisfy their aspirations. As the laws of inheritance at that time being, those who would not inherit had to achieve a lesser position in life or find some alternative for achieving those riches. Other means includes the crime like murder and theft.

In the story, *The Blue Geranium*, Colonel Arthur Bantry told about his friend George Pritchard whose wife died in a mysterious way. Mrs Pritchard was not well and for that they hired nurses one after another to look after her but they were not able to cope up with the tantrums of

Mrs Pritchard, except for one nurse called Nurse Copling. One day Mrs Pritchard told George that according to one of the fortune-tellers, Zarida, their house was under the evil forces and they need to avoid blue flowers. After two days, a letter came from Zarida which contained a warning that says "Beware of the Full Moon", after few days, on the night of full Moon, primroses in the wallpaper on Mrs Pritchard room turned their colour to blue.

The next morning after the next full Moon, Mrs Pritchard was found dead in her room, while the door was locked. Another important thing was that Zarida had disappeared and no clue was found of her. Again Miss Marple got the right solution that Nurse Copling in the disguise of Zarida killed Mrs. Pritchard in order to get married to Mr. Pritchard after his wife had died.

As in Althusser's theory, repression is used by the official institutions and different punishments like incarnation and death sentence are reserved for those who break the law. Here in this story also, Miss Marple does not separate herself from the repressive violence, instead she strengthens its importance in creating a just society. Her means of enforcing justice was same as that of official institution of law. As Miss Marple was furious over the thought that Nurse Copling was still not punished for her crime on which Sir Henry confirmed that Nurse Copling was arrested recently, 'You needn't worry', said Sir Henry. 'As a matter of fact I have something up my sleeve. A nurse has been arrested on a charge of murdering an elderly patient who had left her a legacy.'(428)

According to the followers of Gramsci and Althusser, "hegemonic control of populace is maintained through interpellation". He further asserted that, "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects." (Lenin 173). Thus, detective fiction being a part of popular mass entertainment, interpellate its readers in compliance with the hegemonic middle class values in capitalist industrial society.

Christie through her works represented the ideological stance of the society during the interwar years in Britain. The society which was portrayed most frequently in Agatha Christie's fiction was the middle class. Her choice of middle class was not any co-incidence rather her detective stories were influenced by her own experience. She herself was brought up in a middle class family. Alison Light also commented, "real life lies... inside the homes of the middle class of whatever variety, and in

their feelings for each other.”(Forever England 83) The concept of large close-knit families also appeared in Christie’s novels and short- stories.

Due to her middle class origin, Christie drew inspiration from the people who surround her. Her list comprised of doctors, retired officers, superintendants and police officers etc. and she made frequent appearances of these characters in her stories.

The next thing to deal with is Christie’s middle class characters. The first character to deal with is a doctor. There are number of stories in which an intelligent and respected doctor makes his appearance in order to enunciate the cause of the death. In Miss Marple stories, Dr. Lloyd and Dr. Haydock from St. Mary Mead were the most likely to make their appearance on the scene. In *The Tuesday Night Club*, when after dinner all three people fell ill, the doctor had been called to see to all the three people that were suffering.

In the story, *The Companion*, among the members of Tuesday Night Club, Miss Helier asked Dr. Lloyd, “an elderly bachelor doctor who, for the last five years, had ministered to the ailments of the village St. Mary Mead” (430), to tell his story.

In another story, *Sanctuary*, Dr. Griffiths was called in to examine the dying man in the church, You must come at once, said Bunch. ‘There’s a man dying in the church.’ Some minutes later Dr. Griffiths rose from his knees after brief examination... ‘He was shot’, said Griffiths. (643)

When Dr. Griffiths was called in, he was busy in his surgery but still he went to see that dying man. From this, it can be concluded that Christie’s doctors were sincere men who helped the detectives in solving the cases and also in providing first aid to the dying man.

Other than doctors, the other influential characters in Christie’s detective stories were the retired officers and policeman, who represented the authority and discipline. Police is presented as an important RSA in the detective fiction of Christie. The main function of police is to provide official sanction for Marple to conduct her duty as a detective. Christie’s policemen are usually portrayed in supporting roles and at an inferior position to her sleuths in intelligence but at the same time, their

efficiency in combating delinquents and villains, allot them a heroic position. Her policemen are usually present at the moment to make necessary arrests and her detectives rarely work without their assistance.

A great example of retired officer was Sir Henry Clithering, a former Scotland yard Commissioner. Sir Henry was one of the members of the Tuesday Night Club and in every story told by each member of the club, Henry was there, participated actively in solving the unsolved mysteries. In these stories, the police inspectors played a great role as the investigation was usually held by police officers and they were the first person to call in at the crime site. Examples are very easy to find in most of the stories.

Time and again, in many stories there is a reference to police officers whom Miss Marple appreciates for their confidence and their work in her remarks as, “Slack was a positive type of man”(TMM 612); “He was an intelligent looking man and I liked him”(ACT 463); “Inspector Slack was always a confident man”(CPM 637).

But the police is not always shown as supportive. Sometimes, they are thought to be less understanding as in the story *Death of Drowning*, when Miss Marple had a strong intuition that the girl Rose Emmott had not been drowned rather she was murdered. Miss Marple told that she knows who the murderer was, but she had no proof and if she went to police without any proof, they wouldn’t trust her,

Thus, Christie provided a very stereotypical image of a policeman who was portrayed as stern professional. Christie reinforces the dominant ideology through the police as an RSA in her stories and encourages readers to view the police as steadfastly, hardworking and honest citizens who deserve supreme admiration and respect. But, despite that, Christie’s brilliant detective, Miss Marple, out shines them by her brilliance and intelligence, still she had the final word of hauling the criminal to the police officials.

Thus, classical English detective fiction, like any other form of fiction, reflected as a mirror to society. The important rule of “fair play” in Golden Age detective fiction seemed to have a sense of reality which reflected the actual sociological scenes. This social reality provide an overview of the conventional ideologies, attitudes,

moral and values of the interwar years in England, as portrayed in the Christie's Miss Marple short stories.

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