

# A Study On The Themes And Perspectives Of African American Detective Novels

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*Abstract: Detective fiction is a sub-genre of crime fiction. It is a type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. Detective stories frequently operate on the principle that evidence is the most important factor. In African American detective fiction this centre- staging of the detective and detection changes radically. Here the detective is not keen on finding and looking the criminal as in the genre elsewhere, for example in the detective of Arthur Conan Doyle. Rather the detective gets embroiled in problems not related to crime as such. African American detective fiction is a subgenre of the literary brunch called detective fiction and in this paper an attempt has been made to examine the themes and perspectives of the African American detective fictions as a whole.*

*Keywords: African American, justice, investigation, society.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Detective fiction is a sub-genre of crime fiction. It is a type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. Detective stories frequently operate on the principle that evidence is the most important factor. Usually it is also axiomatic that the clues from which a logical solution to the problem can be reached only through the sleuth. The sleuth finds solutions to the puzzle from a logical interpretation of these clues. In other words, the detective and the world of detection depend on the ability of the detective to bring the criminal to hook. In African American detective fiction this centre- staging of the detective and detection changes radically. Here the detective is not keen on finding and looking the criminal as in the genre elsewhere, for example in the detective of Arthur Conan Doyle. Rather the detective gets embroiled in problems not related to crime as such. For the purpose of understanding and make easier to elaborate the facts African American novels of Chester Himes is taken as the main resources.

## II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are to make a study on the themes and perspectives of the detective novels written by African American writers. Simultaneously, we also try to study in what way they are different from the white detectives and what merits or demerits they have as African American detectives.

## III. METHODOLOGY

To prepare this paper, mainly the secondary sources have been used such as the the detective novels of African American writers, specially the books written by Chester Himes and also some other books written by the authors on African American fiction.

## IV. DISCUSSION

A detective is a law enforcement officer, who investigates a case, secretly or openly, by examining and evaluating clues and personal records in order to uncover the identity or the acts of the criminal. Generally detectives are or of two types,

private and governmental. Depending on the types of works done by the detectives, they can be categorized into many categories. Such as Cyber Crimes Detectives (Cyber crimes detectives investigate crimes committed through the Internet, or computer-based crimes.), Homicide Detectives (Homicide detectives conduct investigations on cases where someone has died and foul play is suspected.), Narcotics Detectives (Narcotics detectives work at the local, state and federal level. These detectives conduct undercover operations and investigate the sale and purchase of illegal narcotics.), Cold Case Detectives (Cold case detectives may be new detectives or former homicide detectives who work cold cases on a volunteer or part-time basis.) etc.

Detective fictions can be included under the genre of crime fiction, where a detective investigates a crime and prevents the unlawful acts of criminals. Detective fiction tries to analyze important aspects of constructing crime in terms of social deviance. The chief motto of the detectives is to investigate the crime and provides justice irrespective of race, gender or status. In case of English literature, the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", in 1841, is often regarded as the beginning of detective fiction. Poe calls his stories as "tales of ratiocination", whose primary goal is to reveal the truth through a complex and mysterious way, that combines intuitive logic, astute observation and perspicacious inference.

In addition to crimes, writers of detective or crime fiction provide information about the collective world. Detective fiction gives us the space to explore the biographies of whole group of persons, the person who, for example, run organizations such as the police force or the political parties and the people, who may be viewed as individuals but who are nevertheless part of a social world. Throughout its history, detective fiction has also recognized the ongoing tensions between moral codes and the very differences in social power and influences which are consequences of societies divided by class, race and gender. Detective fiction or the crime stories have some special features. The traditional elements of the detective story are: (1) the seemingly perfect crime; (2) the wrongly accused suspect at whom circumstantial evidence points; (3) the bungling of dim-witted police; (4) the greater powers of observation and superior mind of the detective; and (5) the startling and unexpected denouement, in which the detective reveals how the identity of the culprit was ascertained.

Detective fiction is always dominated by the stories of crime because crime is the main thing that this types of fiction deals with. Crimes refer to the activities that break the law and create threat for the peaceful human existence. In general, it refers to an unlawful act punished by the state or government. About crime what is most interesting is that, though crime is the greatest enemy of a gentle society, it is the society who gives birth to crime and criminals. Crime is a social construction as it constructs moral positions, gender, status, racial hierarchy etc. No human being is criminal by birth but it is the situation or the social system that makes a man criminal. Various social issues like injustice, politics, poverty, and race or gender discrimination can push forward a man towards these unlawful activities. Detective fiction shows us how the society itself is responsible for the criminals.

Though the chief motto of detective fiction is to give the lesson that crime is always unacceptable and criminals can never run away from the hands of police or administration, it also shows us the facts, which turn a common man into a criminal. Simultaneously with the crime story, it also portrays the society, because crime cannot be occurred without a society. This kind of literary works see the society from a double perspective; it looks from the perspective of a good man (means the detective or the administration) and also from the perspective of a criminal. It is the universal truth that everything in this world always has two sides, good and bad. It suggests that a society also has two sides and we cannot ignore or hide its worst side through the good one. Because it is the bad side of the society that turns a common man into a criminal. So, to repair this bad side, we must have a proper idea of this side. A detective fiction can help us in this case because it portrays the life story of a criminal, which can provide us much information about the unseen side of the society.

The study of detective fiction or crime stories contributes to our social understanding of evil. Literature attempts to offer through fiction, an ethnography of the way in which people imagine crime. Crime and detective fiction make a unique contribution to social norms by assuming that good and evil are part of the same moral continuum, with the same connection to the social world. Detective fiction always provides us the moral that crimes never give any meaning to human life. The end of the life of a criminal is always full with terror and sorrow. Some people think that criminal activities are the short cuts to gain power and money in less time. But these fictions show us that in human, to achieve success, there is no short-cut. To achieve success, one has to work. If anybody acquires a name by deceiving somebody, or by indulging with some criminal activities he/she will have to pay for it. Detective fiction also provides us the morale that, we cannot keep crime as secret. One day or the other it'll come out. Achieving or acquiring something unlawfully should always be avoided.

Detective fiction also provides two way views to the language of that society. How much a society is educated or gentle that is reflected in the language of the common people. Detective fiction deals with the criminal whom we considered as the lower class or underground people. Their language includes slangs and also has some secret code. Detective fiction reflects all these issues and shows us how the language of the criminal is somewhat different from the language of the common people.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century detective novels, we see some writers who use detective fictions as a weapon to criticize the social system as well as the administrative system. For instance we can mention the African American detective fiction. Black and other minority writers emerged in the scenario of detective fiction. The most notable writer of African American detective fiction is Chester Himes, after him there comes Walter Mosley in America with his Easy Rawlins series, an investigator for the black community in the divided America of the post war years, Ice Berg Slim, a recovering addict and pimp with his bleak tales chronicling criminal life in the ghettos or Tony Hillerman with his Navajo Indian cops Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. In the UK, examples include Jamaican born Victor

Headley who wrote *Yardie* and Mike Phillips whose protagonist is a black journalist.

In such novels writers use the crime story to present its society and to show the domination of the whites over the blacks. Literature critiques the irrationality of the criminal justice by portraying the law as that which exists for the safety of the whites and for the punishment of the blacks. The detective novels show how the American law enforcement system is quick enough to associate crime with blackness. Being black or not being white has long been seen as a sign of criminality or at least criminal propensity. The notion of racial profiling assumes that police officers, among others, can successfully, if illegitimately, use a person's race as an indicator of likely criminal product. The irony is that the criminal justice exists only for the whites while the blacks are always arrested even if they don't have a hand in the murder or crime. The crimes against the whites are investigated seriously while the crimes against the blacks are ignored. The police are not interested in identifying the crime but are more interested in finding the criminal so that the case is close. The crime as such is decided by white authority. The difference between what is good and bad is seen through the lens of white society.

The African American detective fiction exposes the racial, social and political ideologies used by the American justice system. It shows the ideology behind the white cops and detectives in identifying crimes or criminals, which, in turn, helps us to understand crime as a social construct. By understanding the social construction of crime, we can suggest the kind of racial discrimination that prevailed in the society in a particular period of time. A clearer understanding of the concept called crime and criminality will serve as a foundation for the readers to probe beneath popular notions of crime as created by law. It will also help the reader to see the African American detective novels as highly critical of the African American justice system as well as the sub genre of crime literature in America.

The African-American detectives, like other standard detective types, use both ratiocination and violence to solve or, in some instances, further befuddle cases. What makes them different is that they apply African American consciousness in solving their cases. These detectives are complex, multitalented, and possessed of a social consciousness, even in the most extreme case of hardboiled characters like Himes's Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. The African-American detective first and foremost always delineates the color line as primary in any case or social relation. In this way a special environment is created within black detective novels that are often based on an exclusive set of priorities dealing with a community with its own cultural values. The Black detective creates a different set of priorities than either the classical or the hardboiled detective. Rather than focusing simply on the crime and capture of the suspect, Black detectives are interested in the social and political atmosphere, often to the exclusion of detection. This social and political atmosphere is inscribed by racial prejudice. The Black detective recognizes his or her own blackness as well as what blackness means to the characters in the text. The Black detective knows what it means to be an African American.

African American detective fiction presents the African-American experience from an African-American point of view. They often tried to exercise their political and social autonomy in the face of resistance from the white public. In this context, African American detective fiction is different from the genre itself, because along with the presentation of crime stories, it also presents the African American society and their views, which gives it a look of social novel too.

The issues of recent crime fiction (as a whole) is as diverse as illegal immigration, male rape, organized child abuse, medical malpractice, environmental crime, gang culture, the drugs trade, stalking, domestic violence, child abduction, human trafficking, infertility treatment, alcoholism and mental illness. The genre continually re-invents itself with new writers bringing new voices and in recent years several writers of literary fiction have turned to crime, among them Booker winner John Banville writing as Benjamin Black and Whitbread prize winner Kate Atkinson who writes a brilliant series of crime novels featuring a chaotic copper called Jackson Brodie.

## V. CONCLUSION

Chester Himes' detective novels are different from other novels. The detective novel is structured in such a way that the end of the novel coincides with the mission of discovery of the criminal and the resolution of a moral or social dilemma. In Himes' the genre changes radically as the novelist is not interested in this aspect of the detective novel. Instead the novelist is interested in presenting and analyzing a social and economic condition of the black people especially in Harlem.

The social condition of Harlem exposes a double consciousness that is, at once explicit and implicit. On the one hand the black people populate Harlem and in a certain sense dominate Harlem physically; on the other hand, the economical power structure of Harlem is controlled by whites or whites in collusion with blacks. In fact, the Harlem Renaissance, seen from outside, appears to have addressed all the major problems of the African American community, in reality, the recognition of the problems is not simple, and does not always guarantee feasible solution.

This new movement influence Chester Himes also and he gives a strong voice against the Whites' oppression. Blacks are always being the victim of whites' oppression and even in the modern era also their condition is not changed. They are still live in the dirty ghettos, cannot even earn the sufficient amount for their livelihood, always projected as criminals, and for the whites they are still the objects of amusement. Himes criticizes these things through the two detectives and other characters also. We cannot restrain Himes contribution to literature as only a detective fiction writer but he also forms a revolution in the minds of blacks through his books.

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