

Department of Distance and Continuing Education University of Delhi



B.A. (Hons.) Political Science/B.Com. (Prog.)/B.Com. (Hons.)

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GENRE FICTION

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Genre Fiction

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Sherlock Holmes, *The Sign of the Four*

Sulanbeni Odyuo

STRUCTURE

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A: Study Guide

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, *The Sign of the Four*, published in 1890, is part of your course 'Genre Fiction.' You are advised to read the novel before going through this study material. The main objectives of this study material are to:

- familiarize students with the history of detective fiction;
- help students to develop a deeper understanding of the genre;
- draw their attention to Sherlock Holmes' methods of investigations; and
- encourage them to think critically about fiction.



2. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arthur Conan Doyle was born on May 22, 1859, to Mary and Charles Altamont Doyle. He wrote his first novel at the age of six. After being educated at home and in schools in the neighbourhood, his uncles sent him to the Jesuit Preparatory School of Hodder in Lancashire when he was only nine years old. While at school, he would write letters to his mother and also adventure stories, which he read aloud to his classmates. Later on, he was sent to Austria for further studies, and it was during his stay there that he read some of his favourite authors: one is Edgar Allan Poe whose detective Auguste Dupin became the prototype for his Sherlock Holmes. Apart from Poe, he is said to have been influenced by Jules Verne and his professor Joseph Bell too.

In 1881, Doyle completed his Bachelor of Medicine and Masters of Surgery degrees and later earned the title of “Doctor” through practical experience. During his study there, his professor Joseph Bell’s ability to deduce his patients’ illnesses after closely observing their behaviour, inspired him to imbue his detective with remarkable deductive capabilities. Later on, he wrote the stories of Sherlock Holmes to while away his time when he had fewer cases to handle. It was in *A Study in Scarlet* in the year 1887, that Holmes was introduced to the reading public by Arthur Conan Doyle.

3. ON SHERLOCK HOLMES AND DR. WATSON

In 1887, Sherlock Holmes first appeared along with Dr. Watson in *A Study in Scarlet* published in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*. Sherlock Holmes is more than just a fictional character spawned from a book, he and his investigative adventures are larger than life. What makes this fictional character so alive is that the author Arthur Conan Doyle presents Holmes as a complete human being by borrowing attributes from not just his own character but from real people with whom the author had had interactions. One of the most notable inspirations for Holmes was Doyle’s tutor at Edinburgh University, Dr. Joseph Bell, who had a knack for deducing a man’s problem just by taking a glance at a patient entering his room. Sherlock Holmes also possesses this talent for arriving at the right conclusions so much so that Holmes does the same deduction of Watson’s background when they are first introduced in *A Study in Scarlet*.

Sherlock became the ideal gentleman for the contemporary Victorian audience and his popularity grew further after he started appearing in *The Strand*; a British monthly magazine



published from January 1891 to March 1950. The first short story of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to feature in *The Strand* was “A Scandal in Bohemia” in July 1891. It is mentioned by Doyle in his autobiography *Memories and Adventures* that he started writing Holmes stories to establish himself in *The Strand*, which of course was one of the most popular magazines at that time. In 1893, *The Adventure of the Final Problem* was published, where Holmes was killed. Conan Doyle felt that the character of Holmes had become too successful so he decided to kill the detective. But the public did not like it and demanded the return of Sherlock Holmes, to which Conan Doyle responded by writing *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

From the first few pages of *The Sign of the Four*, we learn that he is someone who is consulted when the police force and other moral apparatuses fail. He does not receive credit for completing the task; yet, the thrill of solving crimes excites him. He is extremely proud of his skills and says it aloud;

“I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection. When Gregson or Lestrade or Athelney Jones are out of their depths - which, by the way, is their normal state - the matter is laid before me. I examine the data, as an expert, and pronounce a specialist’s opinion. I claim no credit in such cases. My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward.” (Doyle 11)

Holmes is accompanied by Dr. Watson in his adventures. Dr Watson not only shares the flat with Sherlock Holmes but also provides assistance to Holmes in solving crimes and mysteries. Dr. Watson is a war-torn hero who has just returned from Afghanistan, seeking medical help for the trauma he has borne during the wars. Sherlock feels that Dr. Watson’s knowledge of medicines and science would be of great help to him so from day one itself, he seeks Dr. Watson’s help. He keeps a detailed account of Holmes’ cases; his memoirs make Holmes popular.

4. BRITISH IMPERIALISM

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the British empire grew in size, wealth, and population. Britain was one among many European countries trying to build an Empire through armed conquest and economic expansion. The British Empire had around one-quarter of the earth’s surface under its control. The Industrial Revolution in their home country pushed them to take on an aggressive expansion policy. They built settlements in the



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countries which were under their control and even established administrative rule there. There were swift changes taking place in the field of science and technology, and the development of railroads and industries demanded economic resources; thereby leading Britain and other countries of Europe to seek new avenues of expansion.

This expansionist policy was also driven by social, political and religious factors; based on a belief in their own superiority over the so-called backward societies. The British Empire viewed the natives in their colonies as inferior to them. Imperialism and its impact could be seen in every sphere of life in British society. Their ideas about what was morally right and morally wrong were also shaped by the forces of imperialism. The contacts and communications that were created as a result of imperialism led to a society which became a fertile breeding ground for crime and criminals. Other than imperialism, the social, political and cultural turmoil created as a result of the Industrial Revolution led to the large-scale rise in crime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The birth of the modern policeman took place with a sudden spurt in criminal activities. In fiction, the figures of the modern policeman and the detective assuaged the rising anxieties associated with real crime.

In *The Sign of the Four*, it is against this political and social backdrop that the events of the novel take place. India was one of Britain's most precious colonies.

5. DETAILED SUMMARY OF *THE SIGN OF THE FOUR*

This is Arthur Conan Doyle's second novel, published in 1890. It relates the story of the mysterious disappearance of Captain Morstan and how, a few years later, his daughter Mary Morstan seeks Holmes' help when she receives a mysterious letter. Holmes who is in dire need of an interesting case to break his monotony quickly lends his help to Miss Morstan.

Chapter 1-3

"My mind," he said, "rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental excitement." (Doyle 10)

This is how Doyle's *The Sign of the Four* begins, by showing Holmes' obsession with the employment of his mind. Holmes is introduced as someone who is dependent on drugs like cocaine and morphine, and Dr. Watson strongly disapproves of his friend's habit. Sherlock Holmes is seen sitting in his velvet-lined armchair and taking a syringe of cocaine into his



forearm. This, Dr. Watson observes, has been going on three times a day for the past many months. Watson had become concerned with Sherlock's habit; to the point of summoning enough courage to confront him. Sherlock Holmes is not offended but believes that it helps his mind transcend reality and gives him clarity of thought. Watson is concerned that Sherlock's drug usage may prove harmful to the qualities he is endowed with. Sherlock Holmes replies that his mind abhors the dull routine of existence and that he craves mental excitement. And this is the reason why he likes and chose his profession as the "only unofficial consulting detective" (Doyle 11). Solving intricate cases, like a puzzle involving his mind, gratifies him and this chapter especially shows how he is deprived of thrill and excitement because no interesting case is coming his way.

They briefly discuss Watson's write up which is about Sherlock Holmes' Jefferson Hope Case. Watson is annoyed by Sherlock's criticism of his work as being too emotional and romantic. Sherlock tells Watson about his exploits and to further prove his intelligence deduces the owner's background by taking one look at the watch that he has inherited from his brother. And just then there comes the landlady announcing the arrival of Miss Mary Morstan.

Miss Mary Morstan gives an account of the case of her missing father. Her father, Captain Morstan was an officer in the Indian regiment. He had sent her to a boarding establishment at Edinburgh when she was quite young, since her mother had passed away and she had no relatives in England. In the year 1878, her father who had obtained a long leave, telegraphed her to come and meet her in Langham Hotel, London. On reaching the hotel she found out that her father had gone out the night before and had still not returned. And that was the last time she heard from her father and to this day, ten years later, he was still missing. They found his luggage, which had some clothes, books and many items from the Andaman Islands. He was one of the officers in charge of the convict guard in the Andamans. The only friend she knew her father had was one Major Sholto who belonged to the same regiment as her father's, the 34th Bombay Infantry, who told her that he had no idea about his friend Major Morstan being in town.

Mary Morstan further narrates how she saw an advertisement in the newspaper asking for her whereabouts, when she had just started to work with Mrs. Cecil Forrester. She published her address in the newspaper column and on the same day she received a cardboard box which contained a pearl, which experts deemed to be rare and of considerable value. In total, she had received six pearls over the course of six years. And on this particular day of her meeting with Sherlock Holmes, she had received a letter which instructed her to come to a certain spot with two of her friends, who should not be from the police. Miss Morstan



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requests Holmes' help and on hearing this, Holmes quickly informs her about his decision to accompany her, along with Dr. Watson. Dr. Watson finds Miss Morstan attractive whereas Sherlock sees her as a client and nothing more.

The next chapter shows Sherlock in a good mood. After prolonged boredom, Sherlock finally finds himself in an engaging case and feels already accomplished. He deduces that the disappearance of Mary Morstan's father has something to do with the pearls she is receiving. He connects the disappearance of Miss Morstan's father to Major Sholto's death; as he was the only person he apparently knew. He feels that Major Sholto's heir must have some information about the mysterious disappearance of Miss Morstan's father and that the pearls were sent to her to compensate for the loss of her father. Later, Miss Morstan meets Holmes and Dr. Watson to go to the address mentioned in the mysterious letter she has received. She also brings a paper which she had found on her father's desk which she feels would be of some significance to Holmes' quest. On proper examination of the paper, Holmes sees that the diagram shows a plan of part of a building and notices a hieroglyphic like "four crosses in a line with their arms touching" (Doyle 26). Next to it is written "the sign of the four," along with the four names of Jonathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, and Dost Akbar. He cannot see any relation of that paper with the case he has taken up but figures out that it holds importance. At the appointed place, a coachman comes to take them to the house of the person who had written the letter to Miss Morstan. The doors are opened by a Hindoo servant and the three then are directly taken to the owner of the house, Thaddeus Sholto, son of Major Sholto.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is Sherlock Holmes bored at the beginning of the novel?
2. Write a few lines about Miss Morstan's father?
3. What was found in Mr. Morstan's luggage?

CHAPTER 4-6

The fourth chapter shows Thaddeus Sholto's residence which is well decorated with artefacts from the East. Thaddeus Sholto requests Holmes and Watson to keep the meeting confidential and explains to them the reason behind it. He tells them how his father Major John Sholto seemed to live in fear of something, which he never shared with anyone and would always keep two prize fighters with him. They are told how Major Sholto had received a letter from India in 1882 and fell ill after reading it. His health deteriorated and he summoned his two sons and informed them about the secret Agra treasure. Thaddeus Sholto



informs them about his father confessing his guilt for not giving his due share to Morstan's orphan, who is none other than Miss Mary Morstan.

Their father further told them about his confrontation with Morstan and the heated argument which followed, about the division of the treasure. When Morstan, who seemed to have a weak heart, got up to confront Sholto he fell down, hit his head on the treasure chest and died. His servant Lal Chowdar, on hearing the quarrel and the sound made by Morton's fall, mistook the role of Sholto in the death of Morstan. Lal Chowdar then helped his master to dispose off the body and Sholto became more convinced about his decision to hide Morstan's death when he realized that he could not convince even his own servant about his innocence. His guilt arises, not only out of hiding Morstan's death but also depriving his orphan of her due share of the treasure. Sholto pointed to a pearl-embedded chaplet that he had taken out from the treasure test to send to Mary but couldn't bear to part with it. When Sholto was about to share the location of the treasure with his sons, his appearance changed and he screamed at someone at the window. The sons saw a face peering at them and when they rushed to the window, the man had disappeared. Later on, that night they find no sign of the intruder but find a single footmark on the flowerbed. In the morning, they find Major Sholto's room in a mess, the windows open and on his chest, a paper with the words "The sign of the four" written on it.

Thaddeus Sholto further tells the group that it was he who convinced his brother to send Miss Morstan pearls at fixed intervals because he felt that Mary Morstan deserved her share in the treasure. This generosity on Thaddeus' part led to a rift between the two brothers and he left Pondicherry Lodge with two servants. He had requested Miss Morstan to come and see him because he had learnt that his twin brother Bartholomew Sholto had found the treasure, in a secret garret above the ceiling of Pondicherry Lodge. Everyone present there is shocked to know that the value of the jewels found in the treasure amounts to half a million sterling. Thaddeus Sholto feels that they should immediately go to Pondicherry Lodge in Norwood to demand a rightful share from Bartholomew.

Chapter Five opens in Pondicherry Lodge; it is nearly eleven o' clock. The house seems to be swallowed up by the darkness; filled with gloom and total silence, leaving Thaddeus Sholto uneasy and confused as he had thought that his brother would be awake and anticipating their arrival. In that instance, a woman's shriek is heard, Thaddeus Sholto goes in and comes out horrified. It is Mrs. Bernstone, the housekeeper, who screams after seeing Bartholomew's lifeless appearance through the keyhole. They force the door open when there is no response from inside the room and, to their astonishment, find Bartholomew motionless and still, with a fixed and unnatural smile, reclined in his wooden armchair. Upon the table



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where Bartholomew's hand rests, they find a peculiar instrument and a note which says "The sign of the four." Amidst all this, Dr. Watson finds himself alone with Miss Morstan and feels an attraction toward her. On that night, they find comfort and peace in each other. Holmes finds a thorn stuck just above the ear of the dead man and declares it is a murder. Thaddeus Sholto who has been standing in the doorway, terrified, breaks into a cry after noticing that the treasure is gone.

While Thaddeus Sholto is sent to the police station to report the death of his brother, Sherlock Holmes and Watson are left with only half an hour to search the room for clues before the arrival of the police. Bartholomew's room and windows are closed from inside, there is no way to climb up, yet a man has entered the room from the window; which is confirmed by the presence of muddy footprints on the floor and a thick rope in a corner of the room. They also find an impression of a wood stump, which Holmes deduces could have been left by a wooden-legged man. Next, they draw the conclusion that a man must have climbed up the wall with the help of an aide, who had probably lowered down the rope from the window.

They find out that the aide had entered through the roof to drop down the rope. Sherlock Holmes and Watson examine the secret room, above Bartholomew's room, in which the treasure was hidden, and discover a trap door which leads to the roof. They again find naked footmarks, probably half the size of an average man, on the floor which startles both of them. Sherlock finds another small-sized footprint in the creosote (oily liquid obtained from tar and used to heat wood) and is elated that the culprit will be caught soon. Mr. Athelney Jones, the police inspector arrives at Pondicherry Lodge and jumps to the conclusion that Thaddeus Sholto must have committed the murder and arrests him.

Check Your Progress

1. What made Thaddeus Sholto send the pearls to Miss Mary Morstan?
2. What do you learn about the Agra treasure?
3. Why does Thaddeus Sholto want to take Miss Morstan with him to see Bartholomew Sholto?
4. What mystery awaits Sherlock Holmes at Bartholomew Sholto's residence?

CHAPTER 7-9

In the seventh chapter, Watson escorts Miss Mary Morstan back to her home. Watson empathizes with Miss Morstan and feels the urge to confess his love for her. But Watson



stops himself from doing so because he does not feel like taking advantage of a woman in a helpless position. Afterwards, he sets off to Pinchin Lane, from where he brings the dog Toby to Pondicherry Lodge, as instructed by Sherlock Holmes. They examine the footprints again and detect a strong tarry smell. Sherlock Holmes climbs up the roof and sees traces of the same small-sized footprints and finds a pouch with half a dozen sharp spikes, like the one which had hit Bartholomew. Toby is made to sniff the creosote they had found earlier, and the chase begins.

Sherlock Holmes proposes a hypothesis in which he asserts that the wooden-legged man must be Jonathan Small, who was a convict when he met the two English convict guards. The map in the chart, which was in Captain Morstan's possession, was drawn by Jonathan Small and signed by him on behalf of his other associates, which he calls "The Sign of the Four." According to Holmes, Major Sholto must have remained in peace with his treasure until the day he received a letter which informed him that Jonathan Small, whom he had wronged, had been set free or escaped. Small probably kept a close watch to get his treasure back. With the help of someone within the household, he learnt about the treasure being in the possession of Major Sholto. It was he who had peeped through the window when the Major was on his death bed. He had no grudge against Bartholomew Sholto, it was the "savage instinct" of his associate which killed him. They have, by this time, reached Kennington Lane, following Toby. But Toby leads them to a barrel of creosote which was given to him to smell, only to make Holmes and Watson realize that they have taken the wrong direction.

What puzzled the dog was that the scent led to two different trails, running in opposite directions. Toby leads them towards the river-side to the very edge of a small wooden wharf. It looked like the miscreants have taken a boat from there. Sherlock Holmes manages to find a small brick house with the name of the owner on a placard and information about the steam launch *Aurora*, from the wife of one Mordecai Smith. He is informed about the visit of a wooden-legged man which got her husband excited. Holmes decides to track down the *Aurora* and plans to involve Athelney Jones, and then sends a telegram to one of his lieutenant Wiggins. Wiggins is sent away with instructions to find the steam launch *Aurora*. Sherlock Holmes unravels the mystery behind the other man, the associate with the small footprint. The other man, according to Holmes, is from the Andaman Islands, an aborigine of the islands which have the distinction of being one of the smallest races on earth.

Sherlock Holmes is worked up and dejected as there is still no news from Wiggins or Mrs. Smith about her husband. He barely speaks to Watson and keeps to himself from evening up to the wee hours of the morning, by being engrossed in some chemical analysis,



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heating and distilling vapours. One day, in the early dawn, Holmes goes down to the river with the hope of finding clues and Watson is instructed to stay back as his representative. Watson reads the newspaper and finds an advertisement in the agony column; about the missing Mordecai Smith and his son Jim. It also mentions reward money and an address: 221b Baker Street. Watson quickly realizes that it is Holmes who has done this to give the appearance of a wife's genuine concern to find her husband and son and mislead the perpetrators of the crime. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Athelney Jones shows up at 221b Baker Street as he has received a telegram from Holmes, requesting to wait for him, as he is close to tracking the culprits. As they both wait for Sherlock Holmes, he comes to them disguised as a middle-aged man, clad in seafaring attire, looking for Holmes; delighting both Watson and Jones. They discuss the course of action to be taken when they have obtained the treasure and they have a merry time together as their expedition is coming to a close.

Check Your Progress

1. What is Sherlock Holmes' hypothesis about the entire mystery of the Agra treasure?
2. Why did Toby the dog lead Holmes and Watson in the wrong direction?
3. Describe Higgins and how he helps Holmes?
4. What does Dr. Watson notice in the agony column of the newspaper?

CHAPTER 10-12

Athelney Jones, Sherlock Holmes and Watson set out to pursue Jonathan Small and his associate. Sherlock Holmes explains that when he was conducting his chemical experiment, he placed himself in the shoes of Jonathan Small, and tried to think as a man of his capacity would think. He, therefore, concluded that the steam launch *Aurora*, that Small had taken, was neither on the land wharf nor in the river, it was concealed well somewhere. He figures out that Small must have given the *Aurora* to a boat-builder or repairer, requesting only some minor changes so that the boat could be taken out at a few hours' notice when required. All of them go down the river Thames and reach Jacobson's Yard.

The *Aurora* is seen leaving the yard at full speed, giving them a hot pursuit. Watson sees two figures on the deck, one holding on to something black between his legs and the other appears to be a dark mass; described as a Newfoundland dog. They are none other than Jonathan Small and his associate Tonga. Watson fires at the dwarf as he pulls out a piece of wood and he falls into the stream. The wooden-legged man tries to escape to the southern bank and jumps out from the boat but his wooden leg sinks in the muddy land and gets



trapped there. Holmes and his team capture Jonathan Small and recover the treasure chest from the boat.

In the eleventh chapter, Jonathan Small is held captive. Small pleads innocence in the death of Bartholomew Sholto and confesses that it was Tonga who had shot the poisonous dart. Sherlock Holmes lets him know that if he gives him an honest account of the matter, he may be able to prove his innocence, as Bartholomew was dead before he reached the room. Jonathan Small also affirms to Athelney Jones that Mordecai Smith had no knowledge of the Norwood business. Athelney Jones agrees to hand over the treasure box to the rightful owner and he lets Watson execute the duty. Watson is dropped off at Vauxhall to deliver the Agra treasure to Miss Morstan. Watson narrates the events of the expedition to Miss Morstan, and when he speaks about the treasure she shows no eagerness or excitement. Since the key has been tossed into the bottom of the river by Jonathan Small, they decide to force it open by using a poker. But to their surprise, the box is empty. Watson exclaims a sigh of relief. All this time, Watson was dejected because he thought that the treasure would make Miss Morstan rich and beyond his reach and he admits as much to her.

The last chapter recounts the story of Jonathan Small, once he is apprehended by Holmes. He was a soldier posted in India and lost his leg in an accident and got himself a wooden leg after surgery. A colonel, who was fond of him, recommended his name to look after the coolies on the plantation. But then the Indian mutiny happened and he had to run for his life to the fort of Agra because that was where the nearest British troops were stationed. At the Agra fort, he was given a duty to guard one of the gates, along with two Sikh men. One night, those two Sikh men threatened him to keep an oath or get killed. Jonathan Small agreed to take one if it did not compromise the safety of the fort. Small was told about the plan of the two Sikh men, hatched with their other friend Dost Akbar. A rajah in the Northern provinces was sending some of his valuables to Agra fort, along with Achmet, his trusted associate, to be safeguarded and Dost Akbar was accompanying him with that fortune. Dost Akbar, in turn, conspired with his two friends to kill Achmet and steal the treasure but they needed Jonathan Small's help because Small was posted at the same spot. Achmet was killed and after burying his body and treasure, all four of them took an oath to keep their secret sacred and signed it "The Sign of the Four." But they were soon apprehended for Achmet's murder and got penal servitude for life.

Small was sent to the Andamans and it was here that he came across Major Sholto and Morstan who had given in to gambling and had incurred losses there. Knowing how terrible a financial condition Sholto and Morstan were in, Jonathan Small thought of taking their help to flee the Andamans in exchange for giving them a fifth share of the treasure. He speaks to



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his three other partners and they decide to give Sholto the coordinates of the Agra treasure. Sholto was supposed to come back after confirming the existence of the treasure. After that, he was supposed to send a yacht for Jonathan Small and his associates to flee the Andamans for Agra. Captain Morstan was to apply for leave after Sholto's return, meet the group at Agra and take Sholto's and his share. But Sholto never returned, it was discovered that he had gone to London with the treasure and cheated the four and his close friend Captain Morstan. Ever since then, as Small narrates, he had a desire to take revenge on Sholto because he felt that no other person had a right over that treasure, except the four of them. He then tells them how he found out about Sholto's residence at Pondicherry Lodge and showed up at his place to find out about the treasure. He waited patiently after Sholto's death to learn about the treasure and one fine day, learns about Bartholomew Sholto finding the treasure and goes after it once again. He further tells them how it was not his intention to kill Bartholomew but it was Tonga who killed him in the heat of the moment. Jonathan Small is taken away by Athelney Jones; Dr. Watson finds himself a wife in Mary Morstan and Holmes goes back to his cocaine; maybe to drive away his boredom once again.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Holmes take Dr. Watson and Athelney Jones to Jacobson's yard?
2. Why is Dr. Watson happy to find the treasure missing?
3. Briefly describe the plan Jonathan Small and his three associates designed.
4. Describe the treasure chest and its contents.

B. Critical Analysis of *The Sign of the Four*

1. DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF DETECTIVE FICTION

Tzvetan Todorov, in his essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction," described the genre and evolution of detective fiction. The first one, according to him, is the 'whodunit,' which has two parts; it informs readers about the crime but the identity of the perpetrator is kept a secret. The first part of a 'whodunit' describes the crime in detail, where the detective carefully assembles clues and interrogates, and the second part reveals the perpetrator of the crime and his/her intention behind carrying out the crime. Another form is the 'thriller' which focuses more on finding out the criminal. The final form of detective fiction is 'suspense,' which has elements of both the 'whodunit' and the 'thriller.'



Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), an American writer, is seen as one of the first writers to start the genre of detective fiction. In the year 1841, he introduced the figure of C. Auguste Dupin in his first detective story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In Poe’s story, we see Dupin solving the crime, not for a reward of any kind, but for his own amusement. *The Moonstone*, on the other hand, considered the first English detective novel, was written by William Wilkie Collins in the year 1868. Collins introduced a professional police officer as his detective; thus making his work different from the rest. The most popular assumption about detective fiction is that it is dominated by men. Women are shown either as love interests for whom the hero fights or as those who perpetrate crimes. But we do have female detective figures and women writers who have contributed equally to developing the genre of detective fiction. To name a few, Mma Precious Ramotswe from *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series by Alexander McCall Smith, Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple, Patricia Cornwell’s Dr. Kay Scarpetta, Dr. Beatrix Bradley by Gladys Mitchell and Peter O’Donnell’s Modesty Blaise are popular female detectives created by both, women and men writers.

The most productive years for British detective fiction were at the end of the nineteenth century. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is considered one of the most popular British authors of this period. He, along with Edgar Allan Poe, is said to have given birth to the modern detective story, but it is with those writers who started their writing careers after Doyle that we see the birth of the Golden Age of Detective fiction. The Golden Age of Detective Fiction refers to the inter-war years, 1920- 1939. Agatha Christie with her well-known characters Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple is hailed as the Queen of Detective Fiction. Other notable writers of this period are E.C. Bentley, G.K. Chesterton, Father Ronald Knox and Dorothy L. Sayers. The prominent characteristic of fiction in this era is the ‘whodunit’ or ‘who has done it?’ plot, where the main focus is on who has committed the crime. The ‘whodunit’ informs readers about the crime but the identity of the perpetrator is kept a secret. The detective in this kind of fiction is rather an amateur detective or semi-professional detective. Readers are engaged in solving the mystery by deducing the perpetrator of the crime through the clues provided by the narrator. The crime is presented as a puzzle to be solved by the clues provided by the narrator usually through interrogation and through the questions posed by the detective. Newspaper crime reporting is said to have influenced a lot of writers in writing detective stories then. Laura E. Nym Mayhall in “Indecently Preposterous”: The Interwar Press and Golden Age Detective Fiction” explores how press coverage of crime and detective fiction co-existed within the interwar cultural field. Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Clouds of Witness* can be taken into consideration to show how techniques from journalism were taken to tell a story of murder, suicide and adultery.



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The two popular sub-genres of detective fiction are cozy mysteries and hard-boiled detective fiction. The former concentrates on solving crimes, like pieces of a puzzle. The perpetrator is usually non-violent, sane, rational and articulate and is able to explain why s/he committed the crime. They are ordinary people who are members of a community and hence they are able to hide in plain sight, and once unveiled they surrender without a fight. The story is usually set in a rural area; a town or a village, and restricted to a small space such that the detective has knowledge about the family history of the characters. The puzzle-solving crime fiction was examined later by some American writers and they found it to be too clean and too unrealistic. They wanted stories based on real-life crime and thus the hardboiled detective genre paved the way for depicting corrupt cops and heinous organized crime. Hard-boiled detective fiction started appearing by the 1920s, whereas in America it became popular as a genre between 1930-1950. Unlike the previous sub-genre, the hard-boiled detective stories follow a little less predictable formula, sometimes criminals act on impulse and the climax does not show a detective explaining the crime.

2. ANTHROPOLOGICAL PREJUDICES IN COLONIAL FICTION

Although the novel is set in a colonial backdrop and the crime itself can be traced to British exploitation of colonial wealth - such as the Agra treasure - the implications are never examined. The narrator, Dr. Watson (Doyle) does not raise questions about the true ownership of the jewels (the Indian rajah is the true owner). The narrator assumes, like everybody else, that the rightful owners of the Agra treasure are the Sholto brothers and Miss Morstan. The killing of Achmet, who was entrusted with the jewels, is never brought up. Neither is the deceitful manner in which the treasure is acquired.

Note how Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson display anthropological prejudices that were prevalent during imperial rule. *The Sign of the Four* is a classic example of contemporary colonial fiction. The antagonists are either natives or have returned from the colonies, where, as the white man believed, only uncultured people and criminals reside. Jonathan Small is shown as the loyal white man who cannot kill anyone but Tonga can and does kill Bartholomew Sholto. Small the white man, is absolved of the murder of Bartholomew Sholto but Tonga the native stays as the murderer. This passage, where Watson describes Tonga, clearly illustrates such prejudices;

At the sound of his [Jonathan Small] strident cries there was movement in the huddled bundle upon the deck. It straightened itself into a little black man – the smallest I have ever seen – with a great misshapen head and a



shock of tangled, disheveled hair. Holmes had already whipped out his revolver, and I whipped out mine at the sight of this savage, distorted creature. . . . Never have I seen features marked with such bestiality and cruelty. (Doyle 100)

The Indian Mutiny of 1857 is described as a violent uprising and the English as hapless victims before the angry multitudes; fighting to save themselves. Jonathan Small calls the people of Agra “fierce devil-worshippers” (Doyle 115). There is a serious lack of understanding about local culture.

Another instance of colonial prejudice is seen when Holmes tries to identify the associate of Jonathan Small. Holmes practices “arm-chair” anthropology, wherein he forms an opinion of Small’s associate Tonga by reading a narrative written by some white colonial administrator. The natives of the Andamans are described as “naturally hideous.”

It is apparent that the imperial background is just that- an exotic background to showcase Holmes’ power of logic and reason. Doyle also demonstrates the British fascination for the exotic while describing Thaddeus Sholto’s residence.

Activity

Write a brief note on The Indian Mutiny. You can consult many online resources.

3. VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND FORMS OF MORAL POLICING

The Sign of the Four depicts the concerns and fears of Victorian society. Development in trade, technology, and commerce made the movement of people easier, thus making cities like London accessible to people from all parts of the world. The fear of the “other” constantly bothered Victorian society for which different forms of policing were required. The rise in crime and insecurities among the public are assuaged by police forces and a detective like Sherlock Holmes. A figure like Holmes comes to rescue the Victorian public when the police forces are incapable of solving crimes. Athelney Jones is shown as a conceited individual in *The Sign of Four* who dismisses Holmes’s opinion in the beginning but later on seeks Holmes’ help to save his position. The presence of a character like Sherlock Holmes is reassuring. He represents ‘reason’, ‘logic’, and ‘justice’- can contain crime in society.



4. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sherlock Holmes

Arthur Conan Doyle introduced Sherlock Holmes first in *A Study in Scarlet*. When Dr. Watson is looking for accommodation in London, his friend Stamford takes him to Sherlock who is also looking for a flat mate to share the expenses towards rent. Holmes is described by Stamford;

“... a little too scientific for my tastes - it approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects... he appears to have a passion for definite and exact knowledge.” (Doyle 8, *A Study in Scarlet*)

Sherlock is the protagonist of the novel, a private detective who is endowed with exceptional qualities, like a higher reasoning power. A very intelligent man who thinks less of those who are not, boastful at times; he informs Watson how his services are requested abroad as well. He thrives on challenges and boredom kills him; he is restless when there are no cases to provide him with thrill and adventure. Sometimes, he indulges in writing as well, which he declares in *The Sign of the Four*. He tells Watson;

“Yes, I have been guilty of several monographs. They are all upon technical subjects. Here, for example, is one ‘Upon the Distinction between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos.’ In it I enumerate a hundred and forty forms of cigar-, cigarette-, and pipe-tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in the ash.” (Doyle,12)

Similarly, he boasts about writing another monograph on footsteps and the use of plaster of Paris while taking impressions of footprints. These show us Sherlock’s close attention to detail and the importance of observing those details even when it holds no significance for others. Take one example from *The Sign of the Four*, when we see Sherlock taking out his lens from his pocket as soon as he suspects foul play at Bartholomew Sholto’s residence. When the housekeeper informs them about her master Bartholomew’s state inside his room, Holmes, along with Watson and Thaddeus Sholto, heads towards the room. Dr. Watson narrates how Sherlock takes out his lens to examine marks on the stair-carpet which, to him, merely appear as smudges of dust; “Twice as we ascended Holmes whipped his lens out of



his pocket and carefully examined marks which appeared to be mere shapeless smudges of dust upon the cocoa-nut matting which served as a stair-carpet” (Doyle 45).

Observation, therefore, is the first step in his deductive process. He observes, calculates and then reaches a conclusion. To him, observation and deduction are two different processes and he goes on to explain to Watson how these are different. Holmes says that it is through observation that he could tell that Watson had gone to the Wigmore Street post office because his instep had reddish-coloured soil, which he probably had got after treading on the mud thrown next to the pavement. His close observation of his surroundings helped him to locate the exact place where he had gone, since that particular soil was found only in that part of the neighbourhood. Next, he tells Watson that it is through deduction that he finds out his purpose for going to the post office. Noticing that Watson had not written any letter since the time they sat together, led him to conclude that he had gone to the post office not to post a letter but to wire a telegram.

He is known for his deductive skills which he employs to come to a logical conclusion. Holmes tells Watson to “eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be true” (Doyle 14). Once Watson puts him to test to say something about the character and habits of the owner of a watch in his possession. Holmes rightly deduces that the watch belonged to Watson’s elder brother; from the initials on the watch and infers that his brother had financial problems. Holmes recalls that Watson’s father had died many years ago and so this expensive watch would have passed down to the eldest son. He could even tell the drinking habits of his brother by observing the dints and scratches on the watch. For Holmes it is easy to deduce because he has a keen eye when it comes to observation; he tells Watson that “what seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thoughts or observe the small facts upon which inferences may depend” (Doyle 16).

Holmes is a man of science and logic, a true representative of the scientific spirit of the Victorian age. A man who is informed about almost everything; from the varieties of tobaccos and the tracing of footsteps, to identifying lithotypes of different tradesmen. In Chapter Six, recall how Holmes explains his theories to Dr Watson in an almost clinical manner. They are at Bartholomew Sholto’s residence and examining whatever they can before the arrival of the police. Holmes is methodical: first, he wants to find out the entry and exit route of the intruder, who entered Bartholomew’s room. He very carefully notices that there is no water pipe or any kind of support for the intruder to enter the room. The visible round marks on the floor make him realise that those are not footprints but the impressions made by a wooden stump. After eliminating certain possibilities, he concludes that the intruder got help to climb Bartholomew’s room. After deducing all of this, he even manages



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to see the smallest detail like the blood mark on the rope which the intruder had used to climb up. Sherlock tells Watson;

“... our wooden-legged friend, though a fair climber, was not a professional sailor. His hands were far from horny. My lens discloses more than one blood mark, especially towards the end of the rope, from which I gather that he slipped down with such velocity that he took the skin off his hand.”

(Doyle 51)

He shows signs of a true detective. A private detective like Holmes is approached, instead of regular police agencies, to keep the case out of the limelight. Holmes, you will see, is more discreet and keeps the client out of the public eye as far as possible. He does not use the regular means of communication to find out information and instead relies on Baker Street irregulars who are just regular people. This is because he does not want the antagonists to know that he is already aware of their identities and their movements. He is adept at digging out information too; in the scene where he is asking Mordecai Smith's wife about him and his launch *Aurora*, he manipulates her into disclosing the truth. He deliberately blurts out the wrong information so that Smith's wife would speak the truth and he is successful in doing so.

But all of these qualities that Sherlock is endowed with come at the cost of remaining detached from human emotions. He retains his intelligence, deductive abilities, logic, and sharp memory because he does not preoccupy himself with emotional matters. When Dr. Watson talks to him about Miss Mary Morstan's beauty, he informs him that she is nothing more than a client to him. He comments that “A client is to me a mere unit, - a factor in a problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning” (Doyle 22). To which, Watson calls him a “calculating-machine! . . . There is something positively inhuman in you at times.” (Doyle 22) He is unconventional, called inhuman, and has no friends to rely on, yet Sherlock remains preoccupied and is most happy when he is working on a case.

Dr. Watson

It is Dr. Watson, who is also the narrator, whom we are introduced to in Doyle's first novel *A Study in Scarlet*, even before Sherlock Holmes. *A Study in Scarlet* begins with Watson's narration of his life; his misfortunes and the injuries that he suffered during the second Afghan war, which made him unfit to serve in the army as an assistant surgeon. He narrates;

... a medical board determined that not a day should be lost in sending me back to England... I had neither kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air ... I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into



which all the loungers and idlers of the empire are irresistibly drained.
(Doyle 6, *A Study in Scarlet*)

With very little financial resources to depend on, Watson could no longer stay in a private hotel in London and started looking for alternative accommodations. This is when he was introduced to Sherlock Holmes by a friend called Stamford and both of them start sharing the flat at 221b Baker Street. Sherlock Holmes appreciates Dr Watson's common sense and affable nature and asks him to accompany him on his investigations. He keeps a record of all of Sherlock Holmes' cases and it is through Dr. Watson's perspective that we read about his detective skills. He is the first-person narrator and it is through his eyes that we see the other characters.

At the beginning of *The Sign of the Four* when Sherlock is seen taking cocaine to do away with his boredom, Dr. Watson is very much concerned about him and vehemently protests it and informs him about the ill effects of consuming drugs. Dr. Watson's intelligence is of a different kind and he serves as an excellent foil for Sherlock Holmes. He admires Holmes and does not hide his admiration for his abilities. His experience as a surgeon during the war makes Sherlock take his help in solving the cases. Dr. Watson is capable of seeing things through, and on many occasions turns resourceful for Sherlock.

Dr. Watson may not be as active and sharp as Holmes but remains a constant companion of Holmes. There are times when he is surprised to hear from Holmes that the case is coming to a close only when he feels it is getting more mysterious. We understand that he does not see the with the same clarity as Sherlock does, yet his suggestions are indispensable for Holmes. Watson's medical knowledge is also useful to Holmes: while examining Bartholomew's body, he says that his death was caused by "some strychnine-like substance which would produce tetanus" (Doyle 53).

Dr. Watson is the ideal Victorian gentleman; polite and chivalrous, and stands in contrast to his companion Holmes, who can be rude and conceited. Dr. Watson is intelligent but emotional, unlike Holmes who does not rely on emotions lest they divert him from reason. However, despite their different personalities, Watson stays with Holmes and becomes his true confidante.

In *The Sign of the Four*, we see Dr. Watson professing his love for Miss Mary Morstan, whom he finds attractive as soon as he sees her, even when Sherlock sees nothing significant about her. He is seen cheering up Miss Morstan by sharing anecdotes about his adventures in Afghanistan and feels sorry for the loss of her father. Throughout the novel, Dr



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Watson is concerned for the well-being of Miss Morstan and to find the treasure for her, on which, he believes, she had every right.

On hearing about the Agra treasure from Thaddeus and the share Miss Morstan would get from it, Sherlock and Watson were shocked but more than that, Watson felt a little disappointed. Watson was aware of the consequences if the treasure was found; he knew that Miss Morstan's treasure would create a huge difference in status between him and her yet, he wanted to help Miss Morstan to secure it; "Surely it was the place of a loyal friend to rejoice at such news; yet I am ashamed to say that selfishness took me by the soul, and that my heart turned as heavy as lead within me" (Doyle 39).

He does not want to be selfish about his love for Miss Morstan, even at the cost of putting her out of his reach. At times, he wants to confess his feelings to Miss Morstan but stops himself so as not to bother her during her difficult times. He expresses his anxiety;

If Holmes's researches were successful, she would be an heiress. Was it fair, was it honourable, that a half-pay surgeon should take such advantage of an intimacy which chance had brought about? Might she not look upon me as a mere vulgar fortune-seeker? I could not bear to risk that such a thought should cross her mind. This Agra treasure intervened like an impassable barrier between us. (Doyle 59)

At the end of the novel, when Watson delivers the treasure chest to Miss Morstan and it turns out to be empty, neither Miss Morstan nor Dr. Watson are unhappy. Dr. Watson professes his love for her as he now feels comfortable doing so, since the barrier between them posed by the treasure is removed. Miss Mary Morstan happily accepts Watson's proposal.

Miss Mary Morstan

Miss Mary Morstan is the orphan daughter of Captain Morstan. Her father had gone missing on the day he had called her to meet him at his hotel in London. Miss Morstan reaches the hotel but is unable to meet her father. She brings the case of her missing father to Sherlock Holmes. He helps her discover the secret about her share in the Agra treasure from Thaddeus Sholto. She falls in love with Dr. Watson and later marries him. She is described as a young blonde lady; sweet and amiable, currently employed as a governess at Mrs. Cecil Forrester's place. Her presence at Bartholomew's residence brings some relief to the terrified housekeeper who had just seen her master in such a state before. The old woman finds solace in Miss Morstan's presence and tells her- "God bless your sweet calm face! ... It does me good to see you. Oh, but I have been sorely tried this day." (Doyle 45). The Agra treasure, if



it had been found intact, would have turned her into a rich lady. She possesses a calm demeanour and remains unaffected even when she finds the treasure missing.

Major John Sholto

Major John Sholto is the father of Thaddeus Sholto and Bartholomew Sholto. He had amassed great wealth when he was in India through the Agra treasure he had recovered from the convicts. He was supposed to take a share of the treasure, along with his friend Captain Morstan, but he cheated the four convicts and his friend. On his death bed, he confesses to bearing the guilt of not giving the due share of the treasure to his friend's daughter Miss Mary Morstan. It is his greed and fear for his life which always bothers him.

Captain Morstan

Captain Morstan is the father of Miss Mary Morstan. He was posted in the Andamans, along with Major Sholto, whom he considered one of his closest friends there. Captain Morstan was a part of the deal that the four convicts had made with him and his friend. But he was cheated by his friend Sholto and deprived of his share of the Agra treasure. He loved his daughter and had sent her to a boarding school at an early age. With his history of a weak heart, he collapses to death when he and Major Sholto have a heated argument over the division of the Agra treasure.

Thaddeus Sholto

Thaddeus Sholto is one of the sons of Major Sholto. He is kind and generous in comparison to his father and brother Bartholomew, as he decides to give Miss Morstan her due share of the treasure. He decides to put up a front against his brother in claiming the treasure for Miss Morstan. He stands up for what is right and he leads a very quiet and contented life. He is happy with the wealth he already has and he thinks it would be an injustice to let a young woman be deprived of her rights and live in destitution. Thaddeus is a hypochondriac and thinks that he is unwell all the time; he requests a check-up as soon as he learns that Watson is a doctor. He is not materialistic and likes to live a peaceful life, appreciating art. His home is full of expensive and original art.

Thaddeus is unlike his father and brother and, after his father's death, he sends Miss Morstan some extremely precious pearls. When he learns that his brother Bartholomew has discovered the treasure, he immediately establishes contact with her and takes her along with him to demand a share in the Agra treasure.

Bartholomew Sholto



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Bartholomew Sholto is the twin brother of Thaddeus Sholto. He was Major Sholto's favourite son and is as greedy as his father. He has a disagreement with his brother for helping Miss Morstan and detests the idea of writing to her. Major Sholto died before disclosing the location of the Agra treasure but Bartholomew recovers it after much difficulty. Soon after this, he is killed by Tonga, the associate of Jonathan Small when both of them come to Pondicherry Lodge, after learning that the treasure has been found.

Athelney Jones

Athelney Jones is the police officer of Scotland Yard. His method of investigation is different from those of Holmes which is because of the way he has been trained. He confirms order and structure. At the beginning of the novel, we find him conceited and he dismisses Holmes's presence at Bartholomew's residence. A quick conclusion that he made makes him arrest Thaddeus Sholto and Bartholomew's gatekeeper.

Jonathan Small

Jonathan Small is the wooden-legged man who is the main antagonist of the story. He was in the British army and was posted in India. He seems to be a very unlucky man who lost his leg in the Ganges to a crocodile attack. It was during his posting at the Agra fort in India during the Indian mutiny that he met Abdullah Khan, Mahomet Singh and Dost Akbar. Small along with these three others planned to kill Achmet and take away the treasure which he was bringing to the Agra fort for protection. Readers are informed about Jonathan Small through the other characters even before his appearance in the book. It was he who was at the window when Major Sholto was on his death bed. His enmity was with Major Sholto and not his son Bartholomew because he felt that Major Sholto deprived him and his partners of what rightfully belonged to them. He expresses his anger with Tonga when he learns that Bartholomew has been killed. It was not his intention to kill Bartholomew as he had no grudges against him. He is one of the members of "The Sign of the Four" and he is depicted as loyal to the group as he always acts on behalf of the four. Although he committed a crime to get the treasure, he believes he has a right to it.

Tonga

Tonga is Jonathan Small's loyal companion, completely devoted to serving him. Tonga never leaves his side ever since Small nursed him back to health. He helps Jonathan Small in breaking into Bartholomew's residence and he is the one who kills Bartholomew. He is described as a savage islander and a black cannibal. And in the novel, he is described in the most despicable manner suggesting the prejudices the British society harboured against the natives. When Watson first sees a glimpse of Tonga, he says he saw "a dark mass which



looked like a Newfoundland dog” (Doyle 99). During the pursuit of the *Aurora* in the river, the first description of Tonga according to Dr. Watson is full of prejudice.

Modern readers will find the narrator’s descriptions of Tonga disturbing. He is depicted as the image of evil and a pre-civilized being.

5. THE AGRA TREASURE

It is important to think about the place of the Agra treasure in the novel. Remember Jonathan Small’s description of the treasure – full of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and other precious stones. The treasure chest is itself a work of art. However, it brings nothing but misery to everyone. The rajah’s servant, Achmet is killed by Small, Dost Akbar, and the two security guards, when he brings it to Agra. All the four men who killed him end up in the jails of the Andaman Islands. Major Sholto, out of his greed, takes it with him to London but can never bring himself to enjoy the treasure. He dies a guilty man and his son, Major Morstan is accidentally killed when he lands up in London to claim his share of the treasure from his friend. Bartholomew Sholto is killed during Small’s attempt to reclaim what, he believes, is rightfully his. Eventually, the contents of the treasure chest are thrown into the river Thames, when Jonathan Small realizes that he is about to be arrested.

The question of the true owner of the treasure is never raised and even Dr Watson believes that Miss Morstan is a rightful heir.

Long Answer Questions

1. How does the figure of Sherlock Holmes represent the reason and logic that the Empire stand for? Discuss.
2. Elaborately explain Dr. Watson’s character as a foil to Sherlock Holmes.
3. Comment on the colonial prejudices present in *The Sign of the Four*.
4. The mystery of the Agra treasure comments on human greed and desire. Comment using suitable examples from the text.
5. What opinion do you form of women characters in Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four*.
6. Discuss the novel with respect to its title.

Suggested Readings

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Sign of the Four*. Insight Public: Kozhikode, 2021. Print.
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3. THE HOUSE OF FEAR

Ibn-e-Safi

(Translated by Bilal Tanweer)

Dr. Anamta Rizvi

STRUCTURE

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
3. Detective Fiction
4. The Plot
5. Detailed Summary
6. Characters
7. Summing Up

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This lesson will enable you to:

- Understand the basic principles of detective fiction
- Recognize Ibn-e Safi as a pioneer in the field of detective fiction in Urdu literature
- Comprehensively summarize the novel with special attention to the unraveling of the mystery

1. INTRODUCTION

Asrar Narvi, was a fiction writer, novelist and poet of Urdu who wrote under the pen name Ibn-e-Safi. He, along with his family moved to Pakistan in 1952, after the partition of India. He started his career at a very early age and went on to become one of the most sought-after writers in Urdu Literature. He majorly wrote detective novels, and he garnered much fame and praise for his writing style and interesting plotlines. His novels held elements of mystery,



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adventure, suspense, romance and comedy, making him one of the most distinguished writers of his period. His fame primarily rests on the 125-book series *Jasoosi Dunya* and on the 120-book *Imran Series*. With the success of these series, Safi became known as a detective writer.

Born in 1928 to Nuzaira Bibi and Safiullah, Safi was brought up in humble settings in a small village of Nara in the Allahabad district. Interestingly, his parents named him Asrar, which means “secrets” or “mysteries” in Arabic. Little did his parents know that this name will have an ever-lasting impact on the profession he would choose to be in. The village in which Safi grew up was already very rich in literature and culture. Many famous names had emerged from that village, making the soil of that village fertile in learning. This environment had a great impact on Safi, and he too grew up with a penchant for reading and writing. Talking of his childhood, Safi once stated:

My father was fond of reading; therefore, the house was full of novels and ancient mythology books but I was not allowed to even touch any of those. So, I used to steal a book or two and pretending as if I was going out to play, I used to sneak up to the roof. Once on the roof, I used to be gone for the whole day. Eventually, one day I was caught red handed and the parents had an argument over it but finally the verdict was in my favor. My mother said, ‘He is at least better off than the kids who spend their days playing *gilli-danda* or marbles in the streets.’ Then there were no holds barred and I was completely drowned in the stories. (Safi X).

He eventually went to Allahabad to get his higher education, where he got more exposure to literatures in different languages. This broadened his horizons and widened his imagination. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Agra University. In 1948, he started his first job at Nikhat Publications as an editor in the poetry department. His initial works date back to the early 1940s, when he wrote in British India. He also studied at Allahabad University where he was class fellow of Professor Mohammad Uzair and one year senior to Mustafa Zaidi. After the independence of India in 1947, he began writing novels in the early 1950s while working as a secondary school teacher and continuing part-time studies. After completing the latter, having attracted official attention as being subversive in the independence and post-independence period, he migrated to Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan in August 1952. He started his own company by the name of Asrar Publications.

Like many of the writers of that period, Safi was also deeply affected by the horrors of Partition. The gloom and despondency that Partition brought in is reflected in the following words of Safi:

The chain of dreams had broken. It seemed as if some wizard like Afrasiyab had caused a rain of magic knives upon all of society (a reference to the sorcerer



Afrasiyab in the Tilism-e-Hoshrubah); as if some ‘she’ had been charred in fire... (a reference to Rider Haggard’s *She*); as if the coffin of ancient Kallikrates had been stoned (ancient sources identify Iktonis and Kallikrates as architects of the Parthenon)...and Love would never reign in the Hateland again. (Safi xi)

What led Safi to writing mystery novels was his endeavor to bring in novelty and freshness to Urdu literature. Until Safi introduced detective fiction, Urdu literature was going through a relatively low phase and hardly anything new was being written. Safi’s writing was like a breath of fresh air as he brought newness and novelty to Urdu literature.

The novel *The House of Fear* belongs to his series of novels called Imran series. Here, the detective is Imran, who is a genius but acts as a fool, and the one who solves all complicated murder mysteries. Before writing the Imran series, Safi wrote a number of novels that were included under the heading of *Jasoosi Duniya*. Both the series garnered immense praise and became a huge success during that period. As detective fiction in itself was a new genre, and the readers soon developed a huge liking towards such kind of writing. Written on similar lines as Arthur Conan Doyle’s series of *Sherlock Holmes*, Safi’s detective novels compounded the elements of Urdu literature and English literature, and gave Urdu detective fiction a completely new identity. He achieved critical success, and commercial success in equal measure. Many of his works have been translated into different languages, and critics and scholars have evinced a deep interest in his writings.

Ibn-e-Safi’s main fictional characters, Colonel Faridi (also known to readers as Colonel Vinod when the series was translated into Hindi from a press in Allahabad) of *Jasoosi Duniya*, *Ali Imran of Imran Series* are men of honour whose moral universe is guided by the principle of justice. Refusing to align themselves with communal antagonism of their times, they seek peaceful co-existence. What makes them remarkable is their intelligence and their quick and incisive wit. Ibn-e-Safi’s novels abound in refreshing humour and wit. His fictional world is populated by many fascinating supporting players as Black Zero, Juliana Fitzwater, Safdar Saeed, and Sir Sultan, each character having a distinct trait. His larger-than-life villains like Sing-Hi, Finch, Gerald Shastri, Qalandar Bayabani, and Doctor Dread transcend national or religious stereotypes. Even places he describes can be anywhere in the world such as Zeroland and High Circle Hotel. Having said this, one has to acknowledge that even Ibn-e-Safi’s novels are more of thrillers than stories of detection and scientific problem-solving as is evident from their titles like *Purasrar Ajnabee*, *Raqqasa Ka Qatl*, *Khooni Patthar*, *Khaufnaak Hungama*, and *Laashon Ka Abshaar*. The commercial success of Imran series amongst the masses was such that even after Ibn-e-Safi’s death, it was continued by Mazhar Kaleem (1942-2018) who wrote the later issue of stories in the series.



3. DETECTIVE FICTION

Detective Fiction is a sub-genre of crime fiction or mystery fiction. Detective novels, as the name suggests, have a detective as the protagonist who solves simple or complicated cases. These novels are categorised by the features of mystery, murder, adventure, charade, enigma, and secrecy. Such features in a detective novel certainly make for an interesting read and are rated highly on popularity charts. The element of surprise and the eagerness to know ‘what happens next’ keeps the reader on an edge right till the end. This is one primary reason that detective fiction eventually became one of the most favourite genres and gained wide readership. The first detective story was “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” by Edgar Allan Poe, published in April 1841. The profession of detective had come into being only a few decades earlier, and Poe is generally thought to have been influenced by the *Mémoires* (1828–29) of François-Eugène Vidocq, who in 1817 established the world’s first detective bureau, in Paris. Poe’s fictional French detective, C. Auguste Dupin, appeared in two other stories, “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1845) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845). The detective story soon expanded to novel length. The greatest of all fictional detectives, Sherlock Holmes, along with his loyal, somewhat obtuse companion Dr. Watson, made his first appearance in Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and continued into the 20th century in such collections of stories as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894) and the longer *Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). So great was the appeal of Sherlock Holmes detecting style that the death of Conan Doyle did little to end Holmes’s career; several writers, often expanding upon circumstances mentioned in the original works, have attempted to carry on the Holmesian tradition.

4. THE PLOT

The House of Fear revolves around the mystery of dead bodies, with identical dagger marks exactly 5 inches apart, in an abandoned house. The detective-protagonist is Ali Imran, a highly qualified criminologist, who solves the mystery. Imran takes centre stage as the principal character; all other characters only exist to showcase Imran, a deliberately irritating personality who talks absolute nonsense and gibberish at times. Fayyaz is the one who is working on this case, and he seeks Imran’s help in solving these murders. The plot is well crafted and the seriousness of the murders is subdued by several humorous moments and jokes cracked by Imran. Just like in any other detective novel, the case gets unravelled slowly, but in a very interesting manner. The novel has many other characters like Rabia, Lady Jehangir, who might have a small role but they are crucial and important in unveiling



the mystery. The author succeeds in creating intense suspense in the novel and when the mystery finally gets resolved and the main culprit is found, it brings in an element of shock and surprise to the readers. The last few chapters disclose that the motivation for the murder was primarily because of some important papers that belong to the Foreign Office, and were stolen by criminals. Imran, who plays the fool, comes out as a very courageous, audacious and intelligent detective.

5. DETAILED SUMMARY

Chapter 1:

The first chapter begins with Imran getting ready to go somewhere. While settling his tie, he feels agitated and is exasperated that he is unable to settle his tie. His struggle with his tie exhibits his childish behavior, suggesting to the readers that he is an immature grown up. However, as the novel progresses, readers get to know that Imran is a genius. He deliberately adopts an avatar which makes him look like an utter fool. He purposefully tries to keep this demeanor so as not to reveal his true genius as this helps him conceal his real identity. In the first chapter, he exchanges funny conversation with his servant. Imran projects that he has a problem of being forgetful and absent-minded. When his sisters come to remind him that he had promised to go to the movies along with them, he pretends to have completely forgotten and tells them that he was going to buy cloth of a kurta for their servant. The sisters get annoyed with him, but also laugh at his humorous self. The following words in the first chapter introduce Imran to the reader:

Imran's appearance belied his actions. His age was around twenty-eight. After completing his MSc from a local university, he went to England where he did a PhD in sciences. Imran's father, Rahman, was the Director General of the Intelligence Bureau... Everyone in the family was unhappy with his attitude. He had started acting like an absent-minded fool, especially after his return from England, so much so that even servants took advantage of him all the time. (Safi 9)

Check Your Progress

1. How does the novel begin?
2. Why does Imran portray himself as a fool?
3. Who is Imran's father?



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In this chapter, the character Fayyaz is introduced, whose role can be considered similar to that of Dr Watson in *Sherlock Holmes*. He is the one who brings complicated murder cases to Imran, as he believes that Imran is capable of solving these cases given his superior mental skills. Imran however continues to behave in an eccentric manner with Fayyaz as well, who tolerates his useless banter as he is aware that Imran puts on a charade of a fool to conceal his genius self. The murder case gets disclosed here when Fayyaz brings Imran to an old building. Fayyaz tells him that a murder has occurred in a building that had remained closed for about five years. Fayyaz gives the details of the murder in the following words:

Listen: the murderer struck once. Then measured a distance of five inches from the wound and struck again. And then he measured the same distance again and struck the third time. He was also careful about striking in one straight line- not an inch up or down. (Safi 15)

Imran then jokes for a while and then enquires about the owners of the building. He gets to know that the building is owned by a reputed Judge of the town, who is also Fayyaz's neighbor. Here again Imran jokes and says that he wants to marry the Judge's daughter, Rabia, who was blind in one eye.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is Fayyaz?
2. Why is the murder a mysterious one?
3. Who owns the building where the murders occur?

Chapter 3

The next day Imran visits Fayyaz's house. Both, Rabia and Fayyaz's wife, find Imran strange because of his odd behavior. Rabia is there as a guest. Initially Imran expresses his displeasure in seeing Rabia as he was not prepared to meet her but later, he interacts and flirts with Rabia throughout the dinner. This chapter discloses the mystery of the house. When Imran asks information about the house, Fayyaz replies:

Actually, it was the property of one of his (Judge's) friends. And the friend had bought it from someone else. They were old friends but their jobs had distanced them. About five years ago, Judge sahib received a letter that was written to him from that very building. His friend wrote to him saying that he was extremely unwell and would probably not live much longer; and he wanted to tell Judge Sahib something



important before dying... By the time he reached, his friend had passed away. He discovered that his friend had lived in the building but he never found out what he wanted to say (Safi 26).

The chapter ends with another discovery of the key of the house. As soon as Fayyaz hands over the key Imran says that the key was not an original but was in fact a duplicate one. He says so as he observes some wax particles stuck in it.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Judge Sahib become the owner of the house?
2. Who is Rabia?
3. What does Imran say about the keys of the house?

Chapter 4

The house also has a grave which is taken care of by a grave keeper. In order to begin solving the murder case, Imran and Fayyaz go to the house where the murder has taken place. When they reach the house they discover that one more murder has taken place as another man lay dead. Similar to that of the previous murder, the dead person has three wounds on his back. The murdered person was a young boy and seemed from an upper class. The murdered boy held a paper in his hand which is taken out by Imran with much difficulty. He doesn't inform Fayyaz of the paper and quietly keeps it in his pocket.

Check Your Progress

1. Who takes care of the grave in the house?
2. What do Imran and Fayyaz find when they visit the house again?
3. What does Imran take away from the hands of the murdered boy?

Chapter 5

From the fifth chapter the solution to the mystery begins to unravel. Imran goes to a night club called Tip Top Nightclub. There he meets the Deputy Director of the Intelligence Bureau who had been his father's class fellow. He exchanges a few words then goes on to sit with Lady Jehangir, whom he had once dated previously. For a significant time, he indulges in a flirtatious conversation with Lady Jehangir and then manages to make his way into her



home. At her home, there occur some funny scenes between Lady Jehangir and Imran, and then they go to sleep in separate rooms.

Check Your Progress

1. Where does Imran go at night?
2. Whom does Imran meet at the Tip Top Nightclub?
3. How does Imran make his way into Lady Jehangir's house?

Chapter 6

In chapter 6, we come to know the reason for Imran's visit to the Tip Top nightclub. He had already known that Sir Jehangir, Lady Jehangir's husband, was not in town. When Imran was sure that Lady Jehangir was sleeping soundly, he enters Sir Jehangir's library very stealthily. There he discovers that the piece of the paper that he had procured from the dead boy's hand had the same stamp as that of Sir Jehangir's letterhead. This stamp was the insignia of Sir Jehangir's ancestors and their services during the Mughal period. He then rearranges the papers and leaves the library. There seemed to be a relation between the murdered boy and Sir Jehangir and Imran starts thinking about it. After returning to his home, he again goes to the house of murder. In the village he meets a man from the family of the person who had sold the building to Judge sahib's friend. This man reveals that Ayaz sahib had bought the building from them eight years ago. Just before he died, he had transferred the house legally to his friend, the Judge Sahib. Although Ayaz Sahib had lived in the building for three years, no one in the village knew much about him. He however had a servant, who looked after a mysterious grave in the building and still lived in the front part of the building. Here, Imran gets to know there was also a mysterious grave and the servant looked after it. On enquiring about the grave, he gets to know that that grave was suddenly discovered by Ayaz sahib when he had a dream about it. The original owners of the building had no knowledge of this grave. Imran also gets to know that the room in which the murdered bodies were found were plastered by Ayaz sahib himself. Imran then goes to talk to the grave keeper. The grave keeper reveals to him that one day the Judge Sahib's daughter Rabia had brought a man to the room where the murder had occurred, and two days later the murdered body was found.

Check Your Progress

1. What did Imran find in Lady Jehangir's home?
2. Who was the original owner of the building?
3. What did the grave-keeper tell Imran about Judge Sahib's daughter, Rabia?

**Chapter 7 & 8**

Chapter 7 is very light hearted. Imran and Fayyaz exchange a few words where Imran expresses his desire to meet the Judge Sahib to solve the murder mystery. Chapter 8 begins with the pursuit of solving the case. Imran and Fayyaz go to the Judge sahib's house. Rabia, the Judge's daughter, is also present. Imran and Fayyaz question the Judge sahib on how the house was passed on to him from Ayaz. He states that he met Ayaz some thirty years back in very strange circumstances. One day, while studying law at Oxford University, the Judge Sahib had got into a fight with an Englishman due to some misunderstanding. This fight occurred in the East End of London, where men were quite uncivilized. The fight between Judge sahib and the Englishman got ugly. Suddenly, a man tore from the crowd to save Judge sahib, and that was Ayaz. That was how they met for the first time. Seeing Ayaz, the Englishmen fled, as if a wolf had barged into a flock of sheep. That was the beginning of their friendship but he never got to know anything about Ayaz's personal life. When Fayyaz comments that he was a saint, which was believed by the villagers as well, the Judge sahib replies that he does not believe this. He maintains that though Ayaz was a good man, he was not a saint. The conversation with Judge sahib ends, and Fayyaz and Imran take their leave. On the way-out Imran spots Rabia, who is heading somewhere in her car. He requests Rabia to give him a lift. In the car, after a bit of light hearted conversation, he asks Rabia where she was on the night of fourteenth. Rabia gets a bit flustered with this question as she did not expect Imran to have any knowledge about it. They stop to have a drink at Café Nebraska where Rabia recounts the entire incident to Imran. She tells him that two months previously she had met a man at Sir Jehangir's birthday party. The man had taken the keys to the house from Rabia, got duplicate keys made and then returned them to Rabia on the eve of the fifteenth. She then reveals that she met him at Tip Top Nightclub.

Check Your Progress

1. Under what circumstances did the Judge Sahib come in contact with Ayaz?
2. What does Imran ask Rabia in the car?
3. How was Rabia involved in the murder case?

Chapter 9

Now that Imran had crucial pieces of information about the murder, he started re-arranging these pieces in his mind, in order to deduce the motive and the perpetrator behind the crime. He started to wonder what possible connection Sir Jehangir might have in this matter. As Imran was brooding over this, Rabia suddenly comes and tells him that the man who got



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Rabia in this mess had just entered a bar. Imran then asks Rabia to leave and follows the man into the bar. He sits at another table, opposite to that man. A while later a second man comes and sits with the first man. Imran was clearly able to overhear their conversation. The two talked about how everything was becoming a mess. They talked about how they needed to finish a task today. Having gathered all this information, Imran calls up Fayyaz to tell him that a police patrol must be around the house of murder within the next one hour. He again goes to eavesdrop on the two men's conversation. In their conversation, they keep referring to an old man. The two men then leave in a car and Imran follows them in another taxi. They stop at an alley and enter. For a while, Imran loses them but then he sees an old man and instinctively follows him in a desolate alley. Imran sees the man entering a house. He reaches the house too and as he was pressing his ears to hear the conversation, two men suddenly open the door and pull Imran inside. He starts acting like a fool. He is taken into a room where seven men are sitting. The old man seemed to be the head of this gang. Imran continues to behave like a stupid fool. As soon as the men try to catch him, he pulls out a doll from his pocket, presses the doll's tummy and yellow smoke comes gushing out. Due to the smoke everyone starts coughing and become unconscious. Imran then hits the electric lamp and the place is plunged into darkness. Imran quickly grabs the old man's bag, which he had been eyeing, and runs away from there. He somehow manages to get out of the house, takes a taxi and heads out to his home.

Check Your Progress

1. What conversation did Imran overhear between the two men?
2. How did Imran escape from the criminals?
3. What did Imran take away from the old man?

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 reveals the murder of another young boy and his body is found just some distance from the house of murder. The dead man is wearing leather pants and beige jacket, he is the same man that Imran had earlier followed from the bar. The man seems to have been shot with a gun to his right temple, but the village people deny hearing any gunshot. Fayyaz sets out for Imran's home. When he reaches there, Imran again teases Fayyaz with his nonsensical banter. Then later gives him the bag that he had taken from the gang the previous night. On examining the papers, Fayyaz reveals that these papers belonged to the Foreign Office. Fayyaz then mentions that these papers were stolen seven years ago from a responsible officer of the Foreign Office. He was murdered and these papers were stolen from him.



Along with that officer, another man was also travelling, but somehow that man got lucky and escaped. But no one was ever able to find that man and it was assumed that he was killed too. Imran then tells Fayyaz to take the leather bags and papers while he tends to some other work.

Check Your Progress

1. What happens at the beginning of Chapter 10?
2. What does Fayyaz say about the papers given to him by Imran?

Chapter 11 and Chapter 12

Imran comes to Fayyaz's house in a very exasperated state. For a while he jokes with Fayyaz then shows him the threatening letter that he had received.

Imran: if the leather handbag or its contents reach the police, then you'll be in trouble. It would be better if you return those, otherwise you will soon meet your death. Meet us near the Race Course tonight at eleven o'clock. Bring the handbag with you. Come alone. Otherwise, even if you bring along five thousand men, our bullet will find your chest. (Safi 94).

They both decide to go the house of murder. Imran tells Fayyaz to keep the guardian of the grave busy in a conversation while he searches the house. Imran searches the entire house while Fayyaz engages the grave keeper in a conversation. Suddenly, they hear a strange cry. The guardian immediately turns around. Behind him a large space could be seen in the wall. Fayyaz is surprised to see it. He had come to this room several times but he had never imagined that this room had a secret door. He went into the dark space and it felt to him as he was walking in a basement. After walking for a while, he comes across a stair-case and he starts climbing it. When he reaches the top, he finds himself rising out of the grave of a martyr. The tombstone lay open like the lid of a box. He finds himself in the room where the murders had happened. The grave keeper starts shouting that they had destroyed him. One of the walls of the room had three knives attached to it, which were five inches apart from each other. As Fayyaz moves forward to see it, he sees that there was a large compartment through which the knives disappeared. Suddenly, the grave-keeper hits Fayyaz and runs away. He jumps into the grave and disappears. At this point Imran enters and tells Fayyaz that he had mistakenly pressed a lever, which led to the discovery of the secret door. Imran, who was



looking for the rest of the papers of Foreign Office, was able to procure them as they were hidden in the house.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the contents of the letter?
2. What does Fayyaz see in the grave-keeper's room?
3. What does Imran tell Fayyaz?
4. What did Imran and Fayyaz find in the house?

Chapter 13 and Chapter 14

In chapter 13, Imran gets a threat call, wherein the speaker commands him to bring the leather bag with the papers and hand them over to him at the Race Course. Imran doesn't take the conversation with this man seriously and makes fun of him, and also demands ten thousand rupees in exchange for the handbag. He then says that he won't hand over the handbag at Race Course but at Tip Top Nightclub. In Chapter 14, Imran goes to the Tip Top Nightclub with the handbag where he greets Lady Jehangir. He then goes to the man who is waiting at a table for the handbag. Imran hands over the bag to the man, takes the money and tells the man to move out quickly.

Check Your Progress

1. What do the criminals tell Imran to do?
2. Where does Imran agree to hand over the handbag?
3. Who does he meet at Tip Top Nightclub?

Chapters 15, 16 and 17

The man comes out of the night club and sits in the car with his friends and opens the bag. To his utter surprise and dismay, as soon as he opens the bag, three frogs jump out, and there is a commotion in the car. The men are annoyed at the audacity of Imran and decide to take revenge on him for having treated them with such disdain. Imran is certain that the men will come back to the nightclub to look for him. Soon after the exchange, he calls Fayyaz to come and pick him up immediately. As he waits for Fayyaz, he sees the old man entering the club from whom he had taken the bag. The old man comes to Imran and digs in the revolver's barrel into him and threatens him. He asks Imran about the papers. With a sudden unexpected move, Imran punches the old man and snatches the revolver from him. Fayyaz and his men



enter at this moment and capture the old man and his two accomplices. Imran pulls off the beard from the old man, and his true identity is revealed as Sir Jehangir, who was a foreign spy.

In the final chapter, all the loose ends are neatly tied up. The person accompanying the Foreign Office secretary, who was killed, was Ayaz. He had half the papers and the secretary had the other half of the papers. The criminals were only able to get half of the papers and since then were in the pursuit of other half of the papers. Ayaz lays out a plan to get hold of the men who had stolen the papers. He buys the house in the village, discovers a grave and lays out a fool proof mechanism. But the servant dies unexpectedly. Ayaz then buries the servant and disguises himself as the servant. Before this he had legally transferred the house to Judge Sahib and got himself a room. Soon, he starts luring those men to come to the house. He made elaborate effort to make the criminals believe that the papers were hidden there. The papers were actually in the secret wall compartment. As soon as someone came close to the compartment, Ayaz would make ghostly noises from beneath the tombstone. As soon as the men got away in fear, the mechanism, set by Ayaz, would start functioning, wherein three blades would pierce the man's back. He did all this just to capture the chief, but in his scheme of things, he had not expected to contend with Imran. It is Imran who gets the papers from the criminals and also manages to capture them. The novel ends on a humorous note with Imran fooling once again with Ayaz.

Check Your Progress

1. What is found in the bag when the criminals open it?
2. What is the true identity of the old man?
3. What is the true identity of the grave-keeper?
4. What was Ayaz's plan to get hold of the men who had stolen the papers?

6. CHARACTERS

Imran: The protagonist of the novel is Imran, who is a detective by profession. He is a genius and has excellent skills of observation, which help him in solving complicated mysteries. His eccentricities hold similarities to that of Sherlock Holmes. Because he is a detective, he is conscious of not revealing his true identity and acts as fool so as to mislead people into thinking that he is just a stupid fellow. However, in reality he is a very intelligent man. Imran in true sense can be considered as a hero because he always lets the truth win. He



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might seem a bit eccentric, but he is an honest man with a kind heart. While he jokes around and makes fun of people around him, but he does all this in a light vein and never hurts anyone. He also acts as a rescuer to the damsel in distress, for instance he helps Rabia from a distressful situation and doesn't let her get involved with the case. While he jokes and flirts with woman, Imran never comes out as a womanizer. He is a loveable character with excellent wit, great sense of humor and high level of intelligence.

Fayyaz: Fayyaz is another important character in the novel. Imran and Fayyaz are excellent friends as well. Their relationship can be seen as being parallel to that of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, wherein Sherlock Holmes is Imran and Dr Watson is Fayyaz. He is the only one who knows the true identity of Imran, and, therefore, tolerates his eccentric behavior. Fayyaz is also an intelligent, wise man who responsibly carries off his duties and leaves no stone unturned in catching the real culprits. Fayyaz and Imran share a very deep-rooted bond of friendship, which reflects in their care and concern for each other.

Rabia: Although Rabia holds a small role in the novel, yet she is a significant character as she is the catalyst in the plot structure. She is the one who hands over the key to one of the criminals. However, she comes out as an innocent and simple girl.

Judge Sahib: Judge Sahib's significance as a character primarily lies in the fact that he is the legal owner of the house where the murders occur. However, in the novel he acts as a crucial character as he helps in finding the true identity of Ayaz.

Ayaz: Ayaz is the secret agent who used to work for Foreign Office. Throughout the novel, it is thought that Ayaz is dead but he is the one who is disguised as the guardian of the grave. He is an important character as he is the one who orchestrates the two murders.

7. SUMMING UP

Detective fiction falls under the category of popular literature, in which a crime is introduced, an unusually intelligent detective investigates the crime, and the criminal is revealed. In most of the stories the identity of the criminal is unexpected and startling. What holds our interest is the manner in which the clues are gathered by the detective and how they are pieced together to solve the crime. In our analysis of the novel *The House of Fear* we have seen how the various elements of this genre operate:

- There is a double murder in a vacant locked building, and both victims have three knife wounds five inches apart.

Genre Fiction



- Imran is brought in to solve this rather unusual crime, where there is no apparent motive.
- Although Imran most times plays the fool and exhibits odd, eccentric behavior, this is only a mask. Behind that mask lies a sharp mind that is adept at collecting various clues, finding a motive for the crime, and ultimately catching the criminal.

Work Citations

Safi, Ibn-E. *The House of Fear*. Trans. Bilal Tanveer. Noida: Vintage, 2009.



4. CRIMSON CITY BY MADHULIKA LIDDLE

Hema Sen

STRUCTURE

- 1.1 Introduction
 - 1.1.1 Check Your Progress
- 1.2 Learning Objectives
- 1.3 Plot Summary
 - 1.3.1 Check Your Progress
- 1.4 Textual Analysis
 - 1.4.1 About the Title
 - 1.4.2 Context and Setting
 - 1.4.3 Check Your Progress
 - 1.4.4 Crime and Morality
 - 1.4.5 Check Your Progress
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- 1.5 Significant Characters in the novel
 - 1.5.1 Muzaffar Jang
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 - 1.5.3 Suraj Bhan
- 1.6 Representation of Women
 - 1.6.1 Ameena Bibi
 - 1.6.2 Shireen
 - 1.6.3 Nilofer
 - 1.6.4 Check Your Progress
- 1.7 Summing up



1.1 INTRODUCTION

Crimson City is a historical detective fiction novel set in seventeenth century Delhi written by the Delhi-based novelist Madhulika Liddle. According to <https://madhulikaliddle.com/about/> her first historical detective fiction novel was titled *The Englishman's Cameo* and was published by Hachette in the year 2009. She is also known for her other four-book historical series *The Delhi Quartet*.

Crimson City has been included in the Generic Elective paper 'Genre Fiction' in an attempt to introduce students to the category of detective fiction as an important sub-category of genre fiction. Genre fiction, as the term implies refers to various categories of literature and each conforms to several commonly agreed upon characteristics of that particular genre. These characteristics can include things like character types, narrative structure and literary motifs. In other words, the simple distinguishing feature of genre fiction is that it has a clearly identifiable formulaic pattern and all examples of a particular category of genre fiction will more or less stick to the said formula. Standard categories of genre fiction include romance, science fiction, horror, fantasy and thriller among others. At times, we also get genres such as Young Adult fiction popularly known as YA which while being understood as a sub-category of children's literature also borrows from and often overlaps with the fantasy genre. Well known examples from the YA genre include *The Vampire Academy* series and *The Hunger Games* series.

The term genre fiction is often also used to describe popular literature. The very formulaic nature of genre fiction makes it very appealing to audiences who are interested in literature but not looking to get into what is traditionally considered classic literature. Often, genre fiction lends itself to much greater mass appeal than other types of literature and is thus also known as popular literature. It is also worth remembering that while for a long time the binary of classic literature (what is often considered high literature) vs. popular literature was upheld, this has been challenged in recent times. The idea that popular literature/genre fiction is somehow lower or inferior than high literature as it relies upon certain formulaic patterns of writing and mass consumption is being challenged these days. Genre fiction is being seen as a category of literature that is no less than high literature like that of William Shakespeare or T.S. Eliot.

In so far as *Crimson City* is concerned, one should keep in mind that this novel is a variation on the genre of detective fiction which in itself is part of the mystery writing genre. It clearly has a detective protagonist in the form of Muzaffar Jang who when faced with



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multiple mysteries in the narrative resolves all of them successfully. While keeping to the conventions of detective fiction, the author has introduced a slight variation in terms of the setting in the text. The text is set in seventeenth century Delhi which makes it more interesting and engaging for the readers by introducing them to both the everyday and the unusual in late medieval Delhi. It also has other features that are fairly common in detective fiction such as blood and gore of murder and a cat-and-mouse chase of the killer that we see towards the end of the narrative. All of these are discussed in the textual analysis section.

1.1.1 Check Your Progress

- What do you understand by the term “genre fiction”?
- What do you think are the attributes of Crimson City that make it a part of genre fiction?

1.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To understand how the evolving categories of genre fiction engage with contemporary social and cultural realities.
- To understand the strategies of narrative and themes this specific genre of fiction uses.

1.3 PLOT SUMMARY

There are multiple narrative threads in the text that together constitute the text but the primary one consists of the inter-linked murders of the merchant Aadil and the brothers Basharat and Parvez. The narrative gradually unfurls the motivation for these towards the end of the text but for ease in understanding, the plot shall be explained in a chronological manner here. Parvez’s wife Nilofer has good reason to seek an end to his life as he more or less coerced her into marrying him after implicating her brother Shamsuddin in a false case of theft. This, in turn is because even earlier in the narrative, he has behaved improperly with her by entering stealthily into the private women’s quarters and prying upon her in a state of semi-undress. All this information is provided to Muzaffar, Khan Sahib and Suraj Bhan by Ghulam Mustafa who is an acquaintance of Parvez’s from the time he lived in Surat. Assisted by her maid Ameena Bibi, Nilofer tries her best to help her brother after she realises, he is the one who in his quest for vengeance has accidentally murdered both Aadil and Basharat mistaking them by turn for Parvez.



The narrative introduces us to Aadil's murder through the figure of Khan Sahib who is going to the murder-site accompanied by Muzaffar. The primary narrative thread keeps popping up in the middle of other secondary threads in the narrative through important incidents such as the disappearance of Ameena, Shireen's visit to Nilofer and the servant girl Ismat's testimony but the thread is taken up again to be resolved only after the secondary mysteries in the text have been resolved. Another reason for the delay in the main mystery being resolved in the novel is Muzaffar's deliberate insistence on keeping away from any thing that can be seen as him encroaching upon the kotwali's jurisdiction after Khan Sahib's strict warning to him.

Eventually Muzaffar's worry about Khan Sahib regarding the Abdul Jabbar case makes him go to Khan Sahib where the latter is investigating Parvez's murder. Looking at the similarity in Aadil, Basharat and Parvez's murder, the two of them start to realise the nature of things and how Nilofer may have been working to protect her brother. Using Shireen they gradually plan out a trap for Nilofer and Shamsuddin who are finally apprehended at a sarai just outside Ajmeri gate.

The other two secondary narratives in the text are the kidnapping of Lakshminarayan's son Nandu and the murder of Abdul Jabbar; the bath-house owner. Of these two, the narrative concerning Lakshminarayan occurs earlier in the text and Muzaffar gets entangled in it when Aadil's clerk Suraj Bhan comes to him seeking help for Lakshminarayan. This time Muzaffar solves the mystery by recognising that the threatening letter was attached to a brick that was not thrown from the outside but dropped by Subhadra within the house to give an impression of it being flung from the outside. Realising that Subhadra is an accomplice, he also puts two and two together to figure out that she drugged Nandu in order to allow the kidnapper to carry away the child after climbing into the house through the terrace from the narrow lane that runs parallel to it. Jagannath being the prime instigator of the crime also becomes obvious once Muzaffar recognises that the amount that the kidnapper has asked for is exactly the same amount that he returned a few days earlier as part of an outstanding debt to Lakshminarayan. The only one who could have known that Lakshminarayan had that exact amount at his disposal was Jagannath himself. Finally, the whole story falls into place when we along with Muzaffar realise that Jagannath is a cloth merchant so it would be expected that he would have acquaintances in Katra Neel or the street of dyers one of whom he must have enlisted to write the threatening letter. The letter with its faint sliver of blue dye along the edge is what makes Muzaffar realise that the kidnapper is connected to Katra Neel in some way.



Finally, the narrative concerning Abdul Jabbar is the one that Muzaffar finds himself in when he along with his friend Akram tries to take a bath and relax a bit after a long and tiring day. He also has an additional interest in solving the mystery here after he is warned by his friend Akram that failure to catch the culprits could result in difficulties for his brother-in-law who is also the kotwal of Delhi. He does eventually manage to figure out that the killer and his accomplice are the servant Faraz and a relative out to take revenge for Faraz's son who died after being whipped by Abdul Jabbar as punishment for running across a horse's path.

1.3.1 Check Your Progress

- Who is Muzaffar Jung?
- Who is Khan Sahib and what is his relationship to Jung?
- What is the primary narrative thread about?
- What happens to Lakshminarayan and how does Muzaffar help?

1.4 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

1.4.1 About the Title

The title of the text acts as an anchor for the reader by providing him with a clue about the nature of the narrative even before one has actually begun to read the story. The city of Shahjanabad is described as jaw-droppingly gorgeous but at the same time it is permeated by a sense of ill-foreboding and the seamy underside of the city is always a source of anxiety for Khan Sahab, Muzaffar's brother-in-law as we get to know within the first few pages of the story. Soon enough, as the reader sees this particular assertion about the nature of Delhi is substantiated by the number of crimes that come to Muzaffar and Khan Sahib as challenges. The violent murders that are described in gory detail make the title quite apt for a narrative that describes crime in a city that is crimson with blood spilled of both innocent and guilty people.

1.4.2 Context and Setting

The author builds up a world in the novel where morality is mostly in the grey to put it in the simplest manner possible. No individual or the circumstances that they are involved is an idealistic example of moral perfection in the text. We see this from the very first page of Liddle's narrative. The first scene in the novel is set in the Mughal court where the old and



ageing emperor presides over a court filled with courtiers who are busy either trying to mock each other or trying to curry favour with the emperor. If one takes the emperor as the leader of his people, then his physical frailty can easily be read as a metaphorical representation of the moral frailty of his people.

Our protagonist Muzaffar noticing the Muslim courtiers being nasty about the Hindu one paying respects to the emperor has a discussion regarding the role of religious bias which has been discussed in a section 1.4.6 of this material. Though it is important for us to note that Muzaffar's discussion with his brother-in-law isn't too optimistic either. He is merely told that prejudiced people exist everywhere in the world and that too much can't be done or changed about their ways of thinking or existing. Khan Sahib's lack of concern can perhaps be explained by the world-weariness of a man who has seen too much of the ugliness of humanity in his role as the Kotwal of one of the most important cities of the world in the seventeenth century. But his worry, as the reader soon discovers, is not laid to rest so easily. Muzaffar notices his brother-in-law worried and on questioning the latter says that the city of Dilli is "pure evil". (Liddle: 13). He goes on to make the rather ominous statement, "When the empire is tottering on the brink of collapse, it is hardly to be expected that its capital city will flourish." (Liddle: 13) This is said about the Mughal military campaign that is currently being led by the Shahzada Aurangzeb in Bijapur in the Deccan region. Khan sahib is of the opinion that the entire military enterprise is a waste of financial and physical resources, something that the empire can ill-afford during these times. This entire conversation is being carried by the two brothers-in-law in the beautiful Chandni Chowk area, the central artery of Shahjanabad. While the text specifically points out the beauty of the marketplace and energetic and happy youths peopling the area, the reader cannot shake off the sense that all of the wealth and splendour of the capital city of the Mughal empire can crumble any moment given the underlying moral decrepitude and the external threats to it.

1.4.3 Check Your Progress

- How does the author build up the setting, i.e., the city of Dilli for the reader?
- How is the title of the novel relevant?

1.4.4 Crime and Morality

Each of the three crimes in the text that Muzaffar gets himself involved in, knowingly or unknowingly all point to different aspects of the moral decay of the Mughal empire slowly inching towards its twilight years. However, this moral decay is not so simple as one would assume it to be. The author herself provides a key for figuring out the morality of crime in the



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text. The following extract is taken from a section of the text where Muzaffar tries to hunt down a leopard that is trying to attack a deer with fawn so that she may feed her own cubs. Khan Sahib stops him just in time and says the following to him,

“‘It is not always wise to assume that the predator is always guilty or the prey always the victim,’ he had said. ‘This world moves in strange and unpredictable ways. Each of us, human or animal, can be the prey and the predator by turn. Now this, now that. And there is often little one can do about it. The wise man does not interfere unless he can foresee every outcome of his actions.’

‘Surely that is impossible,’ Muzaffar had mumbled. ‘To foresee what may happen?’

‘Exactly. Which is why it is better to remain aloof.’ Khan Sahib had looked up, squinting at a bird of prey that wheeled slowly overhead in ever-expanding circles. ‘And remember one thing, Muzaffar: just because I say something, it does not necessarily mean that I am right.’ He had glanced back down at him and smiled, a rare smile of genuine affection. ‘Let no one dictate your every action. And,’ he had added, as he moved on again, ‘stand by your decisions, whether they turn out to be right or wrong.’” (Liddle 40)

As we shall see, Muzaffar will use these words to guide his own actions in the narrative even when he runs the risk of severing his relations with Khan Sahib. But the moral lesson in the story of the leopard and the deer is not just important for Muzaffar but even for the reader. Like this story, the crimes in the text make it hard to simply sympathise with the victim and vilify the criminal as a general rule.

The very first murder in the narrative; that of the merchant Aadil is a tragic case of mistaken identity. Both Muzaffar and his brother-in-law initially understand the murder as a robbery attempt gone wrong. But looking at all the expensive cloth left behind, this explanation does not make sense. Given that Aadil is described by his clerk Suraj Bhan as more or less a self-contained man with few enemies, the answer to the murder is not easy. The murder-mystery is introduced to the protagonist Muzaffar Jang and then left hanging for a long time until it’s resolved in connection with the murders of Basharat and Parvez.

The three sets of murders are interlinked in the text, as the reader eventually discovers. Seeking revenge Nilofer’s brother Shamsudddin has come looking for Parvez, but in a tragic case of mistaken identities that takes place not once but twice in the narrative -- first Aadil and then Basharat are mistaken for Parvez by Shamsudddin and murdered. Aadil is mistakenly murdered as he lives in a house that was earlier occupied by Basharat and Parvez. This is information that Muzaffar receives from Ameena but is only able to make sense of much later in the narrative.



Ameena who is Shamsuddin's accomplice points him towards Aadil's house expecting Parvez to be found there. She of course does not realise until its too late that she has pointed him towards the wrong house. Aadil's murder in many ways is an unlucky and tragic mistake that deprives an innocent man of his life.

However, it is in the primary narrative thread where one really sees the morally ambiguous tone of the narrative, that of the interlinked murders of the merchant Aadil and the brothers Basharat and Parvez. The narrative proper begins with Aadil's murder and then pauses on that front moving to other narrative threads such as those of the sahuakar Lakshminarayan and the hamam owner Abdul Jabbar. It is after Parvez's murder that Khan Sahib, Muzaffar and Suraj Bhan hear from Ghulam Mustafa what can be termed as the full explanation behind the murder of these three men. Parvez as we soon realise is not just a lecherous man who has forced Nilofer to marry him but also cruel as he cleverly conspires to have Nilofer's brother Shamsuddin put in jail for crimes that he did not commit. This is clearly done so that Shamsuddin who knows Parvez's true nature can create no further obstacles for him. While the reader certainly feels the weight of the gross injustice that has been done to Shamsuddin and Nilofer, it is also important to think about the ethical justification for the murders of the two innocent men, Aadil and Basharat.

The mystery surrounding the bath-house murder; that of Abdul Jabbar is also a good example of how the apparent villain is not always the actual villain in the story. It takes considerable effort on Muzaffar's part accompanied by his friend Akram to discover that the murder victim is not as innocent as he initially seemed. The watchman at the gate to Abdul Jabbar's haveli confides to a disguised Muzaffar the extent of Abdul Jabbar's cruelty which he has inflicted in the past upon his servants and continues to do so with impunity. While the gatekeeper tells tales such as a servant being gelded and another having ripe lemons squeezed into his eyes, the one that is most horrifying is the story about a servant's son being whipped to death for startling a horse by running across its path. A man such as this; who is seemingly well-connected and wealthy and has no fear of the repercussions of his actions will continue to do so until he is deliberately stopped. In fact, as Muzaffar discovers this last incident is what motivates the dead boy's father Faraaz to plan and successfully execute Abdul Jabbar's murder in the bath house. Muzaffar successfully unravels the mystery behind Abdul Jabbar's murder but at the same time does not hand over the murderer to the law enforcement mechanism. It is as Khan Sahib remarks to him that Muzaffar has good reason for protecting the murderer here. This tells the reader that at the very least, Muzaffar feels conflicted about handing over Faraz and his accomplice to the Kotwali.



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Apart from Abdul Jabbar's murder, the other criminal incident in the text that interrupts the inter-linked murders of Aadil, Basharat and Pavez is first the threat and then the actual kidnapping of Lakshminarayan's son, Nandu. This crime is where we see Muzaffar really using his observation and deductive skills to solve what is essentially a variation of the locked room mystery that of the child Nandu disappearing from what is mostly a completely locked house. The mystery is partly resolved when Muzaffar recognises that the maid Subhadra who is always with Nandu is an accomplice. Also, the kidnapper goes into the house by going through the lane that runs beside the house and then climbs up to the terrace.

He also uses his observational powers to prove that the letter with its faint blue smudge comes from the Katra Neel or the street of indigo-dyers. He also puts two and two together to recognise that the merchant Jagannath is the one who has been threatening Lakshminarayan with Nandu's kidnapping in order to get back the ten thousand rupees that he had recently paid him in order to pay another merchant to whom a similar amount is due.

Lakshminarayan's story is also interesting for another reason. It is here that the author provides Muzaffar with justification for meddling in matters that his brother-in-law Khan Sahib has quite expressly forbidden him from. Lakshminarayan outlines quite clearly in his narrative his reasons for not going to the thana and requesting Muzaffar for assistance. Given that only a threat has been made and no crime has been specifically committed, Lakshminarayan correctly anticipates that the thana would not be too interested in his case. The threat of Nandu being kidnapped falls squarely into the grey area which consists of crimes that do not fall into the list of the thana's responsibilities. In many ways, Lakshminarayan's case justifies the need for individuals like Muzaffar Jang and the role that they play in society; that of fulfilling responsibilities that societally authorised guardians of justice are unable to due to various reasons.

1.4.5 Check Your Progress

- As per your understanding, do you think Muzaffar is justified in helping Lakshminarayan instead of directing him straightaway to the thana?
- Do you think Shamsuddin, Nilofer and Ameena are morally justified in their murders of Aadil, Basharat and Parvez?
- Why does Muzaffar take no action against Faraz?



1.4.6 Religious Co-Existence

This theme is introduced very early in the text in the first chapter itself. The author does not hesitate at all in portraying the prejudices that certain nobles at the court harbour towards the Hindus one of whom at the moment is paying obeisance to the emperor presumably as a precursor to seeking favour from him. Our protagonist Muzaffar who prides himself on his liberal stance towards religion takes exception to this and does not take long to complain to his brother-in-law about the injustice. His brother-in-law responds to him by saying that the world is filled with prejudiced people and that they don't change no matter what. The reader gets the feeling that this maybe the author's own point of view too. Those that are unwilling to change cannot be changed. His brother-in-law's voice comes out as the voice of reason here.

While Khan Sahib is reasonable and at the same time resigned to the presence of prejudice in people, we have also had characters in the text who yet provide hope that not everyone is filled with prejudice. The clerk Suraj Bhan is one such character. Both he and Muzaffar are similar in terms of their outlook towards religion. Muzaffar hesitates to offer him food when Suraj Bhan visits him in connection with Lakshminarayan's case. But Suraj Bhan immediately puts him at ease by saying that he is unlike the more hide-bound practitioners of his religion. It is also worth paying attention to the fact that Suraj Bhan trusts Muzaffar enough to come to him with a personal problem unconnected to Aadil's murder.

There are more incidents regarding the same theme of tolerance. Muzaffar does not hesitate to upbraid his wife Shireen for her attitude towards the Hindus when she is surprised by news of his interaction with the clerk Suraj Bhan and Lakshminarayan. This results in a somewhat serious dispute between the two with Muzaffar pointing how bizarre Muslim religious practices look from a Hindu perspective in response to her saying that the Hindus are a strange community with their weird ways.

But Muzaffar in turn, receives an important lesson in having his liberalism tempered by the time he spends with the money-lender Lakshminarayan, first preventing and later rescuing the latter's son Nandu. He returns home late in the day on an empty stomach after having solved the mystery of Nandu's kidnapping. While eating he has to explain to his wife in a somewhat abashed manner his reasons for remaining hungry till so late in the day, namely that Lakshminarayan while expressing profound gratitude to him had not offered any food to him because of conservative religious practices. These two incidents balance out the picture of religious liberalism and religious conservatism depicted in the text.



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The text as a whole provides a complex and nuanced picture of the religious fabric of society. On one hand, we have individuals such as Muzaffar and Suraj Bhan who are the torch-bearers of a certain kind of religious progressivism while on the other hand we have also highly prejudiced individuals such as the courtiers who do not hesitate to openly display their prejudice. We also see individuals such as Khan Sahib who while non-partisan himself is resigned to the existence of prejudice in others. Muzaffar's wife Shireen is also an example of an individual who while not biased against the Hindus is quick to make assumptions about them due to her relative lack of familiarity with them.

The final religious note of the text is the scene with the poet-mystic Sarmad making blasphemous statements sitting on the steps of the Jama Masjid with Muzaffar and Suraj Bhan watching him among many others. Both Muzaffar and Suraj Bhan fervently hope that the religiously tolerant Dara Shukoh's ascent to the Mughal throne will put an end to people's religious prejudices.

1.4.7 Check Your Progress

- Critically comment on the strategies used by Liddle to represent religious belief in the text.
- The text does not blindly support either religious conservatism or religious progressivism. Justify with examples from the text to substantiate your answer.

1.5 SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

1.5.1 Muzaffar Jang

He is who we as readers might understand to be the protagonist or the hero of the narrative. Aside from being an authorial spokesperson for political and religious liberalism in the text, he is also built up very much in the tradition of the detective hero from the European Golden-Age of Detective Fiction. A lot like Sherlock Holmes, he uses his sharp observation and deductive skills to solve the cases of murder and kidnapping that he is faced with in the text. His observational and deductive skills are on clearest display when he is confronting the threat of Lakshminarayan's son Nandu being kidnapped.

He is also the moral and ethical compass of the text in many ways. As has been discussed in detail earlier, Muzaffar is the text's standout spokesperson for religious tolerance. He is also clever enough, more than any other character in the text to recognise that



the victim is not always innocent. This is why he actively helps the murderer to evade the law in the Abdul Jabbar case. It is also important to remember that while Muzaffar is the protagonist of the novel, he is also not above making mistakes. His ideas on religious tolerance receive a good tempering when he is not offered food at Lakshminarayan's house after having rescued Nandu. He is also portrayed as unsure of himself at times. Overall, Muzaffar Jang is realistically characterised as an ethical and clever man who also has his moments of weakness.

1.5.2 Khan Sahib

Muzaffar's brother-in-law, Khan Shaib is a functionally important character in the narrative. As Muzaffar himself informs us, Khan Sahib is the closest thing to a paternal figure he has ever known. Muzaffar is also introduced to the crimes through him as he is also the Kotwal of the city. The fact that Muzaffar very often is quicker at understanding the cause-and-effect relationship of the crimes is a sore spot for his brother-in-law. One does not have to go too far to understand the reason for this. Muzaffar's popularity with many people, including those at his local thana among others in the city is the obvious reason. The risk of his clever bother-in-law outshining him is probably never far from Khan Sahib's mind. This is the only reason that the otherwise good relationship between the two brothers-in-law sours for a while in the narrative.

All of this helps the reader to understand Khan Sahib as a flawed character. While being prone to fits of jealousy and insecurity he has always tried to do right by his young brother-in-law. Initially of course Muzaffar ascribes Khan Sahib's grumpiness to the long list of duties that the Kotwal of Dilli has to fulfil.

“Muzaffar was well aware that the post of the Kotwal of Dilli was a coveted position, and yet one to be feared too. It was a post that could be exploited by the corrupt; a previous Kotwal had been hounded out of the city, disgraced publicly and flogged, for having misappropriated funds and accepted bribes. On the other hand, it was a post that came with a barrage of duties, all the way from preventing and investigating murders and thefts to registering the entry of outsiders, to ensuring shopkeepers used correct weighing scales, to organizing festivities and illuminations at Eid and Diwali. To making sure women did not ride horses, slaves did not abscond, and workers were paid fair wages for their work. It was a ludicrously long and complex list of duties.

If it made Khan Sahib occasionally grumpy, Muzaffar should not be surprised...”
(Liddle:18)



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In the very first chapter, when Muzaffar displays his curiosity to accompany him to Aadil's murder, Khan Sahib visibly hesitates. He allows Muzaffar to accompany him but not before pointedly saying, "... But try and remember that I am the law. I am the official here." However, as the reader goes on to see, things take a turn for the worse between the two before improving. The next time Muzaffar visits Aadil's residence and helps Suraj Bhan with taking inventory, he receives a note from his brother-in-law that bluntly tells him not to poke his nose where it doesn't belong. Eventually the two reconcile to solve the trio of inter-linked murders in the text. Khan Sahib is a flawed but affectionate and paternal figure to Muzaffar.

1.5.3 Suraj Bhan

He is introduced to the reader as a competent, methodical and reliable man from the moment Muzaffar walks upon him and the chowkidar trying to open the lock to Aadil's house. The chowkidar takes a while to recover from his surprise but Suraj Bhan is quicker than him. Muzaffar is also all praise for Suraj Bhan's methodical approach in searching for anything missing in Aadil's house. In fact, Muzaffar impressed by the man's efficiency joins him in taking an inventory of the items at Aadil's house.

"Suraj Bhan had proved as efficient, as wise and canny as Muzaffar had first guessed him to be. More. Muzaffar was reminded of the conversation he had overheard at the Diwan-e-Aam. He wondered what those men would have thought of Suraj Bhan."
(Liddle: 65)

Thematically, Suraj Bhan's character is also important that he adds to the theme of religious tolerance in the text. With the exception of Muzaffar, he is the only other character in the text who upholds this ideal. Other characters such as Shireen struggle with this while Khan Sahib seems resigned to the existence of religiously prejudiced people. It is significant that the closing sections of the novel are devoted to Muzaffar and Suraj Bhan standing together and listening to the poet-mystic Sarmad loudly proclaiming on the steps of the Jama Masjid "There is no God." Suraj Bhan is one of the few characters who earns Muzaffar's respect in the text for his steady reliability, cleverness and religious liberalism.

1.6 REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

1.6.1 Ameena Bibi

She is introduced to the reader for the very first time as a woman seemingly lacking in sophistication and refinement standing outside the murdered merchant Aadil's house attempting to satisfy her morbid curiosity. Muzaffar does not take long to recognise her as a



tough and resilient woman who is also very sharp and has her wits about her. When she is surprised by Muzaffar in the street outside, her hand immediately tightens on her cane.

As the narrative unfolds, we realise that she is also a very loyal servant to her mistress Nilofer and will stop at nothing in order to avenge the injustice that has been done by Parvez to her mistress and her brother Shamsuddin. She is Shamsuddin's accomplice in the trio of murders in the text. The reader assumes that she is motivated to aid Shamsuddin in his quest for vengeance as she has been a guardian figure to the brother-sister duo and feels a strong sense of affection for them. Along with Shireen and Nilofer she makes up a trio of strong women characters in the text that the author has painstakingly created.

1.6.2 Shireen

Muzaffar's wife Shireen is described in the text as a woman who is his equal, both intellectually and morally. She is also an able companion and guide providing him with help wherever necessary. She is also an intelligent woman as is evident from the time when she is able to infer Khan Sahib's unhappiness at Muzaffar accompanying him to the scene of Aadil's murder, merely from Muzaffar's recounting of his experiences of the day to her. She also has an important role in the play in getting hold of Shamsuddin and Nilofer towards the end of the text.

Shireen's character is also important as part of the discourse on religious pluralism and tolerance in the text. While a generally affable and quick-witted character, she is surprised both by Suraj Bhan's visit to Muzaffar and Muzaffar's visit to Lakshminarayan. When Muzaffar questions her, she reveals her implicit assumptions about the Hindus that only exist due to her relative lack of familiarity with them. When Muzaffar points out the absurdity of Muslim religious practices from a Hindu perspective, she seems to agree with him. Yet, at the same time she does not hesitate to express her sympathy for Lakshminarayan after Muzaffar tells her about Nandu's kidnapping. Her approach to religious differences, as she puts it in her own words is to acknowledge differences but not to spurn simple humanity. Her character can also be seen as an example of the dangers of ignorance and the role it plays in creating prejudice in the minds of individuals.

1.6.3 Nilofer

Although Liddle's novel is filled with strong women characters, Nilofer is probably the strongest of them all. When Shireen initially introduces her to both Muzaffar and the reader, we are inclined to think that she is a supremely vain woman only concerned with her appearance and ornamentation. But nothing is further from the truth. As the reader soon realises, Nilofer and her brother are victims of gross injustice in the text. But that does not



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deter her. In fact, as soon as she realises Shamsuddin is in the city she does everything in her power to help him avenge both of them and even protects him to the maximum extent possible. She is even audacious enough to directly challenge Khan Sahib publicly when he searches her palanquin outside the Ajmeri gate and is unable to find Shamsuddin. The fact that she cleverly disguises her brother as one of the kahars or palanquin bearers and the two of them almost manage to escape shows just how determined and resourceful she really is.

1.6.4 Check Your Progress

- Discuss the significance of the female characters in the text.
- Write down short notes on the following characters:
Khan Sahib
Suraj Bhan

1.7 SUMMING UP

As has been discussed in the introduction, genre fiction is marked by its keeping to a set of standard and formulaic qualities of a particular genre. In the case of detective fiction, these include characteristics like the presence of character types such as the detective figure who is also the protagonist. Muzaffar Jang is the protagonist in this text and his sharp intellect and wit is quite evident just as in the standard detective character type. The companion or the “Watson figure” is also always present and always plays an important role in the narrative. In this case it is Khan Sahib who is important as it is through him that Muzaffar is introduced to the main mystery in the text. While he and Muzaffar have an initial falling out in the text, towards the end the two of them come together to solve the linked triple murder mystery.

Also, a detective fiction text cannot function without the presence of crime in the narrative. Often, the crimes committed are gory and violent. The unpleasantness of the murders is partly to create an element of frisson in the audience but also to justify the detective’s intervention often outside the purview of law. This is how the murders of Aadil, Basharat and Parvez are described in the text.

The investigation process is also a motif that we recurrently see in detective fiction. While we see the intellect and cleverness of the detective figure here, it is also filled with many setbacks. A few examples of Jang’s powers of observation and deduction include the time in the Abdul Jabbar murder case when in contrast to his friend Akram, Muzaffar notices marks of strangulation around the dead man’s neck. In the same case, he can connect



Shireen's perfume to the possibility of the murderer being from Kannauj and thereby to Faraz who also hails from the same place and has strong motivation to commit murder.

Without the solution, the text is always incomplete, and it is always presented to the reader for his/her mental satisfaction. The standard rule for the solution is that all the clues should be at the reader's disposal and the solution should be obvious to the reader in hindsight. In other words, he should be in the same position as the detectives. All this we see in *Crimson City* as Muzaffar figures out the Lakshminarayan and Abdul Jabbar cases in this way. In the case of the triple murder, we also see Muzaffar figure out how the first two murders were cases of mistaken identity. In fact, he figures out most of the case and prevents Shamsuddin escaping at the end. The only additional information that is provided at the end is Shamsuddin's motivation which the reader and the detective discover together.

A word about the story being set in seventeenth century Delhi. There are descriptions of the streets, the canals, the darwazas, the street vendors, the jewellery and the clothes specific to the time - all make the novel come alive with historical details. Though interesting, these details trip up the pace of the narrative and the reader must wait awhile before the story picks up again.

The setting of a text with a detective should always be kept in mind as it will always be a bleak world which will create a constant sense of unease in the characters as well as the readers. The State forces authorised to keep a check on crime are usually on the verge of being overwhelmed. In fact, it is this anxiety that justifies the detective figure's intervention in this text because the law-and-order machinery seems to be swamped by the spate of crimes.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

<https://madhulikaliddle.com/>

<https://scroll.in/article/1011442/human-nature-doesnt-change-madhulika-liddle-on-the-challenges-of-writing-historical-fiction>

<https://openthemagazine.com/cover-stories/crimson-city/>

Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction (1966)." *Crime and Media*. Routledge, 2019. 291-301.



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Disclaimer: In the present study material, Unit I and III have been written afresh and Unit II is under preparation