

# Anti-Detective Fiction as History: An Analysis of Victorian Reality and Postmodern Narratives

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Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things, As willingly as one would kill a fly,  
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed, But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*)

Jack the Ripper, is considered to be one of the most notorious serial killers in the annals of criminal history. He can be seen as an epitome of the Human belief system; he is the perfect exemplification of the anti-establishmentarian attitude as he broke the Cartesian epistemology of “I think, Therefore I am”, to “I kill, therefore I am”. While there are numerous conspiracy theories surrounding who the ripper is even after 129 years, he is yet to be found. Jack the Ripper was identified by his style of killing in the year 1888 with five consecutive killings to his name. He killed women who were around 25 - 45 years old and left them disembowelled in the streets of London. He wrote gruesome letters to Scotland Yard which was investigating the cases; it is these letters and a few DNA samples that exist as the only collected evidence till date. With these conspiracy theories and interludes, a gamut of Jack the Ripper stories have been published by numerous crime writers till date, the most recent work being *I, Ripper* by Stephen Hunter in the year 2015. While numerous arm chair detectives have tried to close the case of the Ripper, what has always astonished the readers and general public is the stand taken by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle during the period of the Ripper killings. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was already a successful detective story writer during this period and he had already published *A Study in Scarlet*. Despite writing the Holmes stories, it is surprising that he never mentioned a word about the Ripper in his works. This among many other theories, led to assumptions that Conan Doyle himself might be the serial killer. This paper focuses on the counter-historical evidences, that were published as works of fiction in a later period dealing with Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, the detective created by Doyle. The writers of

Ripper killings have used the fictional interface of the Sherlock Holmes stories to create a fictional construct, by interpolating the historical facts related to the Ripper, his victims and the lives of the investigators, who could never find this notorious psychopath during their and during his life time. Among many such theories exist the idea proposed by Conan Doyle of “Jill the killer”. And of course, the other obvious assumption of what if there was no Ripper?. Such non-canonical theories are analysed in the course of this paper. The blurring of fact and fiction is prominent in case of the Ripper killings as numerous confirmed evidences are being rejected with scientific epistemology reaching its peak in contemporary times.

The New Historicism is the theory of contemporary skepticism. It operates on the notion that history is ultimately a narrative; a discourse that is coloured by the prejudices and opinions of the writer of history. There is a negation of the ideology propounded by German historian Van Ranke that foregrounds the authenticity of history. Like the Postmodernists, the New Historicist theorists also reject history as a meta narrative and they probe into the possibility of petit récits that are inquired with the aid of non - canonical pieces of evidence like letters, memoirs, journals and pamphlets. As Stephen Greenblatt and Catharine Gallagher write in *Practising New Historicism*,

When the literary text ceases to be sacred , self - enclosed and self justifying miracle, when in skeptical mood we foster it begins to lose at least some of the special power ascribed to it, its boundaries begin to seem less secure and it loses exclusive rights to the experience of wonder. (Practising New Historicism, 12)

The blurring of boundaries between the canon and the non canon; history and literature; fact and fiction is the zeitgeist of our age. Interrogating the Meta narrative of history and creating the petit histoire was ushered into the field of historiography by Michel Foucault, who foregrounded the subversive elevation of mini institutions in order to establish that history ultimately was a construct and / or narrative. His books like the *Birth Of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish* locate the writing of micro history, a concept also advocated by the French historian Carlo Ginzburg. It is at this

junction that the factuality and authenticity of historicity becomes a problematic enterprise. The notion of history from above is cast away and *Alltagsgeschichte* as envisioned by Hans Medick and Alf Luedtke is prioritised in contemporary times. It is at this juncture that one has to locate the investigation into the Ripper killings. A study of the counterfactual nature of this criminal enterprise and probing into various conspiracy theories that abound on the fringes of official history can be termed a New Historicist attempt at centralising a hitherto marginalised perception. Popular opinion of those times cast suspicion on various persons, including Sir William Henry, the popular children's writer, Lewis Carroll and even the poet, Francis Thomson. Later writers cast aspersions on other people too. However, the most likely perpetrator of the multiple murders may be a person who was in those times, the one most distanced from them. He is a person who was highly regarded in the field of crime writing and history records that he was even consulted unofficially to provide a psychological profile of the killer. He is none other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The New Historicist venture therefore is to probe into records of non canonical sources to provide evidence implicating Conan Doyle as the actual murderer.

The closest biographical source related to Conan Doyle and his adventures regarding the "Great Wyrley Outrages" is provided by Julian Barnes in his semi-fictional narrative/memoir titled *Arthur and George*. It retells the story of Arthur Conan Doyle and his struggle for the freedom of falsely accused George Edalji. In the course of the narrative, Barnes relates a series of slashing of horses, cows and other animals, taken from actual historical records and also from anecdotes provided by the little narratives of the Victorian Age. The New Historicism places utmost importance of the role of the Anecdote in recreating histories. In the essay "Counter history and the Anecdote", Gallagher emphasises on the role of the anecdote as a signature motif of New Historicism. Similarly, Aram Veesser in his article "History of Anecdote", in his seminal book, *New Historicism*, emphasises the historicity of the anecdote. He states that the anecdote is both historical and personal and in this sense, it is rooted in the 'real', a highly important New Historicist term. For example, Stephen Greenblatt interrogates the relationship of Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth I as being highly problematic. He goes on to say that the dynamics of their relationship cannot be measured from official historical documents. Greenblatt refashions Shakespeare as a misogynist and to provide evidence for the same, he cites a non canonical essay found in an obscure journal of the

Elizabethan Age. Written by Simon Forman, the essay describes a dream narrated to Forman by Shakespeare where in his usual style of using puns, Shakespeare finds himself on top of Elizabeth, an obvious sexual innuendo. This is how any account of Conan Doyle should be interpreted too. In historical records, the slasher was a psychopath and significantly exhibited all the traits of psychopathy from the pleasure of mutilating other living beings, to having an aura of superficiality around him. These descriptions perfectly suit the character of Edalji in *Arthur and George*. He is delineated as a person who is anti-social and has a history of troubled sexuality. The question naturally arises as to why Doyle, wanted to free a person with all the traits of being a psychopath. Is he then, creating a sense of Agency in his defence of Edalji? In New Historicist terms, Agency is the subversive ideology that is created for the evasion of one's reality. For example, Shakespeare created glorious heroines in his Comedies. Yet, as a misogynist, he also writes the highly patriarchal *The Taming of the Shrew*. Thus Shakespeare becomes a 'subversive agent' whose agency resonates through the ages (Stephen Greenblatt, *Resonance and Wonder*) and finally is unveiled in our age. This is the Vital scope of New Historicism. Seen in this light, Doyle's defence of Edalji, a known psychopath is contrasted with the creation of Sherlock Holmes, who himself is a blur between a psychopath and a sociopath. He is the epitome of the anti-social detective, who never exhibits any emotional feeling towards anybody and even his empathy is restricted to Watson. When accused of being a psychopath, Sherlock Holmes rejects the accusation by stating "I'm not a psychopath, I'm a high-functioning Sociopath...". Yet, his character possess a strong tendency to destroy and mutilate human body and other objects, as in many occurrences he is shown pounding the skull of a dead body with hammer or collecting body parts as memorabilia and practising stabbing techniques with corpses.

While Sherlock Holmes is a mere fictional construct, solving crimes in his unique ways; what if his creator Conan Doyle was the notorious Jack the Ripper is a question that has haunted numerous followers of Ripper killings. While there is absolutely no authentic evidence to support the claim, apart from mere conjectures. However it is these conjectures that have provided New Historicism with alternate possibilities and notions. The foremost hypothesis regarding the Ripper killing case was based on the letters claimed to be written by Ripper. The most famous of these let-

ters, titled “Dear Boss”, mocks the authorial institutions like Scotland Yard and states, “Now they say I am a Doctor, Ha, Ha”. This statement and numerous eye witness accounts state that the possible murderer carried a bag, which was similar to ones carried by doctors. With this description, it is to be noted that Arthur Conan Doyle becomes a perfect fit, since he was a well known practicing doctor, and was also a detective story writer, thus making him someone familiar with criminals and crimes. It is after all Conan Doyle who states, "Deceit is an impossibility, in case of one trained in observation and analysis" through Sherlock Holmes. In the contemporary age, this ‘what if’ probability has questioned the veracity of history and in an effort to identify the true ripper killer, a humongous number of arm chair detectives work for this cause. There are even numerous blogs and contra factual theories that claim The Real Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle as the serial killer - Jack The Ripper.

While the Ripper killings were at their zenith, Conan Doyle was creating his masterful anti-social detective Sherlock Holmes. Despite this, though there are a gamut of canonical Holmes stories, there is no mention of this serial killer or any similar killers. This lacunae in history provides a gap in the canonical narrative that is exploited by numerous writers later. The fictional construct of Doyle is rewritten with interpolations and insertions with numerous possible solutions to the Ripper killings provided after detection by Sherlock Holmes. Roland Barthes in his book *S/Z*, differentiates between readerly and writerly texts. The writerly text provides with the scope for the Reader to involve himself and participate actively. It is only such a writerly text that provides *Jouissance* to the reader according to Barthes. The narratives of Conan Doyle are true representations of the writerly text. Adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes stories hold the Guinness record for stories with maximum reworkings. While the Holmes story as a detective genre have been mashed up with science fiction, historical romance, cyber punk literature, court room dramas, oriental tales and even supernatural stories, there are nearly ten works of fiction that deal with Holmes and Ripper.

In the book *Dust and Shadow*, Lyndsay Faye projects Holmes as the prime suspect in the killings that haunts the seedy streets of Whitechapel. Interestingly within the scope of the narrative, Holmes himself is suspected of being Jack the Ripper. Inspector Lestrade, Holmes’s nemesis in

many of his short stories, succinctly puts it that Holmes with his calculative genius is the only person who fits into the profile of the killer. This idea can be applied to the creator Conan Doyle too. With his ingenious mind and understanding of criminal psychology, Doyle is seen as the most important suspect in the research towards the Ripper Killings today. If this be true, then Doyle has perpetuated a subversive reversal of a prominent New Historicist notion; the concept of Cultural Energy, put forward by Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks. Gramsci postulates that the subversive writer provides the future readers with an idea of his position in the cultural space of his/her times; albeit in an implicit manner. Shakespeare is the master of such a cultural energy (Stephen Greeblatt, *Will In the World*). By hiding his real persona and masking it under the fictional guise of Sherlock Holmes, Doyle may have created a subversive persona and by doing this, he becomes an Organic Intellectual, who provides us with an insight into his psyche. In *Dust and Shadow*, in order to prove his innocence Holmes breaks every convention and finds unmask the killer, who is none other than Sergeant Button, a representative of Scotland Yard. The question arises whether Faye has unconsciously subverted the investigation by placing the criminal within the institution of the premier investigative agency of the world. In its vision, this novel humanises Sherlock Holmes and brings him down from his pedestal. The ripper killing is one incident where the criminal was never caught, because of the influence of press and public. The more attention the media provided in chasing the serial killer, the more conspiracy theories arose and diluted the case. It has always been doubtful that with confidentiality in the killings, the hoax letters could have been avoided. In the novel *Dust and Shadow*, Lyndsay Faye points out the same through Holmes, when he says, “Watson, if the newspapers could be punished for speculation, every publication in England would soon enough be bankrupted.” On the contrary Michael Dibdin in his novel, *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, creates a monstrous Holmes who suffers from schizophrenia and starts to brutally kill women, and calls himself Jack the Ripper. Again this portrayal is an extension of a loop - hole from the canon, where Holmes claims to Dr. Watson that if he ever commits a crime, no one can connect it to him. The beauty of refashioning the character of Holmes provides the antithesis between Lyndsay’s construct and Dibdin’s cosmos. While both the writers interpolate the same historical incident and fictionalise it, their creation is diversified in nature. Lyndsay creates Holmes with more humanistic traits,

As he passed a hand over his eyes, I recalled the he could not have slept more than twenty hours in the last seven days. For the first time since I had known him, Sherlock Holmes appeared to be exhausted by work rather than inaction.

states Watson with sympathy for Holmes, while in Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, he creates a diabolic villain who is killed by Watson himself in the Reichenbach fall.

Within its theoretical framework, New Historicism provides scope for interrogating the authenticity of history. It problematises historical notions and constructs and revisions an alternate historic-space which counters official ideologies. The attempt of the researcher in this paper was to apply the principles of New Historicism into a re-reading of the factual and the fictional in the life and literature of Conan Doyle. By attempting such an analysis, the paper highlights the notion of 'hidden history' that survives on the fringes of officialdom and the canon.

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