

Chitra Sankaran, *Void of Reason*. UK: New Dawn Publishers, 2012. 408 pp. ISBN 9781-908462-06-0.

Despite the remarkable creative boom in Indian English fiction from the 1980s onwards, we have not got enough bang for the buck in detective genre. The crime fiction racks have been dominated by foreign classics such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), considered to be the first detective fiction, and Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), regarded as the first modern detective novel, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and Agatha Christie's *Poirot* and other writers of that ilk following their trail. In the last couple of years the detective genre has seen many titles, but the long-felt void in this segment in South Asian Anglophone postcolonial fiction has been filled by Chitra Sankaran's *Void of Reason*. With neat technical competence and meticulous finesse in interweaving the novel's suspense and denouement she has managed to get a foot in the door of the Great Detectives Club. More positively, she is familiar with the novel's transnational setting to do best justice to the crimes committed in Singapore and India. Unlike common or garden crime thrillers by Ashok Banker, Madhulika Liddle, Manisha Lakhe, Sankaran refrains from dishing out disposable merchandise in a pastiche plot. The novel stays firmly within the bounds of the genre with brisk narrative pace, elegant prose, gripping plot and strong characters. For good measure, the author subverts the conventions of deductive and syllogistic scheme of classic or Golden Age detective fiction by engaging ontological and epistemological presuppositions of human existence as well as duly accommodating the experience of the marginal, subaltern and disenfranchised subjects that interrogates the primacy accorded to Western rationalism. Thus culturally and philosophically, she expands upon the rich tradition of crime stories.

Put simply, a detective story is a type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. The traditional elements of the detective story are: (1) the completely credible crime; (2) the likely suspect or suspects at whom circumstantial evidence points because in the course of the investigation, the readers are apt to jump at the wrong clues; (3) the bumbling cops who fail to figure out and nail the culprit; (4) the observant and eagle-eyed investigators; and (5) the startling and ingenious resolution of the puzzle, whereby the detective reveals how the real culprit was identified. Detective stories frequently operate on the principle that the evidence purportedly true is distracting and eventually irrelevant.

Void of Reason opens with a well-planned and perfectly executed murder in a plush apartment in Singapore. As Inspector Tan Chwee Chen finds it, the brutal murder has "occurred in the least likely place too – in the pristine, highly secure, exclusive, pent-house suite of a leading business magnate, Rishi Ronat?"

(2). While looking for clues to the horrific homicide in his exchange with Christopher Lim, manager, *Ronat Enterprises*, who had requested him recently for a routine investigation in the operations of Gandhi Ashram – a religious retreat situated in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India – which is a recipient of the charitable donations of Rishi Ronat’s company, Lim shares his interest in the Indian organisation with his friend Inspector Tan because the Singapore-based company has “decided to extend the donation indefinitely.” We get to know through the conversation re-run that Rishi Ronat during his visits to the Ashram happened to meet Maya, his future wife, there. She was raised in the orphanage and school run by the Ashram. As Inspector Tan and Sergeant Kumar go into Lim’s clean and conscientious mission, strange connections between the Ashram’s religious head, Acharya, whose murder is the novel’s central mystery, and the major characters like Krishna, Arun, Maya and Vishwappa unfold. The other incidents that have fuelled the plot dynamics and triggered Rishi Ronat’s concern about the goings-on in the Ashram are the murders of Sudha and Periyamma. As Lim gets in touch with Sub Inspector Selvi and the ASP Pratibha John to puzzle out the tangled web of crimes with exacting professionalism and mutual trust and confidence, the likely suspect, Krishna, turns out a plausible distractor and the confession comes from an unlikely source. When the investigators zero in on Arun, Maya’s paraplegic brother, Vishwappa spills his guts and owns up to killing the three victims. Asked about his motive by an extremely perplexed ASP Pratibha John, Vishwa, with his eyes fixed on Arun, says: “I didn’t want my son to get cheated yet again in life” (339). By now there is sufficient evidence to confirm that Vishwa is Arun’s father. In addition to Lim and the relevant liaising investigators in India with Interpol’s aid, Rishi Ronat has also commissioned a private detective agency to identify nefarious criminals in the Ashram and coordinate their intelligence. Eventually, the scraps of intelligence splice up and the hinges are there for hugely compelling murder mystery.

Apart from the vigilant scanning of the narrative and adroit manipulation of language, a very strong point in Sankaran’s detective package is its characterisation. Both Selvi, a tough female police officer breaking the barriers of gender, and Lim, Confucius-like Tai-Chi practitioner, have unrelenting determination and exemplary élan to fill the bill. Their compelling portrayals testify to immense elasticity of the genre in startlingly fresh situations. Impelled by the competing understandings of social realities of Singapore and India, Lim holds his own and turns his professionalism to good account. Lim can cross and straddle geographical and social as well as psychological barriers. He is not lost in a transnational or postcolonial space. Similarly, Selvi can rise to the challenge amidst substantial handicaps and compete with her global peers. The shady goings-on of the Indian ashram awash with mystery, murder and financial shenanigans are uncovered in a probing mode. The secret which is the

mainspring of the action is the Acharya's relationship with Maya, Krishna, Arun and Vishwappa. There are cleverly constructed clues to the suspects but the real killer remains an unlikely one till he springs up on his own to disentangle the knots. Perhaps he realises that his application for permission to take the pistol to Singapore will soon be traced by the police.

In the early part of the 20th century, Ronald Knox, a mystery writer who belonged to the Detection Club, a society peopled by such legendary mystery writers as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton and E.C. Bentley, wrote ten detective commandments. Although most of these rules have become outdated in current mystery fiction, Sankaran follows some of them and ingeniously adapts these conventions to the novel's setting and context. Without following the formal rules slavishly, she exercises compelling ingenuity in narrating the events of the crime and of the subsequent investigation. The identity of the unlikely culprit is concealed from the reader until the end of the book, when the method and motivation of the killer is revealed. Sankaran capitalises on the conventions to produce new and startling results with fresh technological forays like global interconnectedness keyed to concatenation of events. Verily, with various elements pinned under its skin, *Void of Reason* becomes a complex conflation of whodunit and locked room mystery with the elements of the "hard-boiled" school of crime fiction and bits of "police procedural." As a fascinating variation on the plot-driven whodunit genre, Sankaran's narrative is a riveting read although it is difficult to label her text under any particular brand of detective fiction. In other words, with its novel and promising premise – the premise that the scope of detective fiction is broad and expansive enough to accommodate socio-political analysis of transnational situations and locations – it is a path-breaking departure from the generic crime thrillers. Unlike the familiar detective fare, the novel entails more than casual browsing for its insightful cultural observation, complex thematic filigree and narrative management carried off with brio and flair.

Also, postcolonial noir is exploited by Sankaran to attempt a metaphysical detective novel, in which the detective grapples with the spiritual mysteries of the universe. Like Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), Sankaran's narrative insinuates God's "controlling yet shadowy consciousness" (cited by Savvas) behind the novel. In this context, this reviewer cannot quite agree with Wernmei Yong Ade's comments on Sankaran's novel in a recent review in *Moving Worlds*: "We are occasionally given insight into the mind of the killer, in the form of pseudo-philosophical rants stylized as journal entries. These however paint a scant portrait of a deranged fanatic, and might have been left out without compromise to the unravelling of the central mystery" (174). These insights provide clues for the reader as detective for how to interpret and approach the mystery of the novel. While the author is carrying the influences of British detective writers such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and

Margery Allingham as well as Ngaio Marsh (a New Zealander) in her bones, the mode of mainstream Indian English writing exemplified by R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Anita Desai is also in her blood. She melds these ingredients with incredible moxie and fine-tunes the story line with masterly finesse avoiding corny conventions and cliché. She can trawl through the data of cultural experience in India's Tamil Nadu state and Singapore with blasé aplomb and so her predilection for the cross-cultural setting and characters has a shaping coalition with the narrative trajectory of a well-rounded whodunit. The author defends the use of epigraphs and journal entries in these words:

I believe religion is becoming more divorced from that ideal and so extremism in many religions has made people more dogmatic. The quasi-religious ramblings of the mystery journal writer in the novel reflect how clinging to such dogma can lead to misogyny, hatred and deceit. I think the best kind of seeker looks for the truth in many places, from all great thinkers, not just religious figures like Jesus and the Buddha but also great poets such as Rumi and Shakespeare who reveal to us universal truths. In the book I refer to many principles which are particular to the South Asian religions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. I incorporated elements that are particular to the Tamil tradition which is something that just came to me in the writing. I also touch a little on quantum physics which is something that interests me increasingly, particularly how the idea of intention might affect matter. (“Sankaran’s ‘Void of Reason’ Murder Mystery Adds Intrigue to SRN’s Creative Works”)

Finally, Sankaran avoids formula writing in a detective format. Nor is she bound by a straitjacket. The novel exemplifies subtlety of characterisation with artistic freedom and plenty of creativity which comes alive with compelling credibility. Like a creative sonneteer, Sankaran accommodates the conventions and constraints of the detective genre with creative freedom to turn around the stylistic components of the genre with impressive flexibility. She has renovated the detective genre by reflecting on the conventions associated with the historical situations and socio-cultural realities around her, by breaking away from the normative cultural image of the detective characterised by “whiteness, heterosexuality and conventional masculinity” (Dony), thus paving the way for representations of cultural alterity and construction of geopolitical space. Sankaran handles the multiplicity of perspectives that originate from different geopolitical spaces. Her novel offers estimable evidence for providing the theoretical frameworks of the postcolonial and transnational detective fiction.

Works Cited

- Dony, Christophe. Rev. of *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*. Ed. Nels Pearson and Marc Singer. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. *Postcolonial Text* 5.4 (2009): 1-3. 12 June 2013.
<http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1197/1019>.
- James, P.D. *Talking About Detective Fiction*. UK: Vintage Books, 2011.
- Sankaran, Chitra. "Sankaran's 'Void of Reason' Murder Mystery Adds Intrigue to SRN's Creative Works." 11 June 2013.
<http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/srn/news/sankarans-void-of-reason-murder-mystery-adds-intrigue-to-srns-creative-works>.
- Savvas, Michael X. Rev. of *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*. Ed. Nels Pearson and Marc Singer. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. *Transnational Literature* 4.1 (November 2011). 12 June 2013.
http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/jspui/bitstream/2328/25518/1/Detective_Fiction_in_Postcolonial.pdf.
- Wernmei Yong Ade. Rev. of *Void of Reason*. By Chitra Sankaran. *Moving Worlds* 13.1: 173-74.

Murari Prasad
B.N. Mandal University, India