

# “The World is Shot Through With Crime”: Crime Fiction in the Postcolonial World

20/9/2017

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When Joseph Conrad’s Charles Marlow recounts his experience in the Belgian Congo, one of the most troubling scenes comes when he sees enslaved Africans at the first colonial station he comes to. The men are being forced to labor, ostensibly because they represent a danger to the colonists, but Marlow thinks to himself, “these men could by no stretch of the imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from over the sea” (13). Marlow’s realization that European law has classified the colonized as criminals, largely for merely existing, points the reader to one of the key injustices of colonialism: the language of crime has been used to solidify the imperial project and European domination.

In 1961, during the height of decolonization efforts, Frantz Fanon wrote, “Colonialism and imperialism have not settled their debt to us once they have withdrawn their flag and their police force from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved like real war criminals in the underdeveloped world.” This extraordinary claim of Fanon’s upends centuries of colonial logic; instead of the colonized being the criminals, Fanon, in his typically Manichean fashion, points the finger back around at the colonizers and the capitalists. “You’re the criminals,” he says. “You did this. And you owe us.”

Half a century after that, in Vikram Chandra’s hard-boiled detective novel *Sacred Games* (2007), the dying Indian intelligence officer K.D. Yadav muses about the presence of crime in his own world – a world that comes after 1947 and Indian and Pakistani independence, that comes after the Bandung Conference that condemned “colonialism in all its manifestations,” that comes after the rise of right-wing Hindu fundamentalism in India. “The world is shot through with crime, riddled with it, rotted by it,” Yadav thinks. “The Pakistanis and the Afghans run a twenty-billion-dollar trade in heroin, which is partly routed through India, through Delhi and Bombay, to Turkey and Europe and the United States. The ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence, in Pakistan] and the generals fatten on the trade and buy weapons and mujahideen warriors. The criminals provide logistical support, moving men and money and weapons across the borders. The politicians provide protection to the criminals, the criminals provide muscle and money to the politicians. That’s how it goes” (326). The contours of imperial legacies and postcolonial realities can be traced in Yadav’s understanding of crime without much trouble, even if they are not explicitly stated: after the formal fall of the British Empire, the installation of strongmen leaders friendly to the West and the ensuing unstable nature of postcolonial states opened the doors to corruption, crime, and a trading route that closely maps onto those used to such capitalistic success by the former British imperialists. It’s no longer the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, but the postcolonial permutation isn’t terribly far off.

We see, in this movement from the days of high imperialism of 1899 to the postcolonial reality of 2007, continually changing narratives about how colonialism is linked to concepts of criminality, but there is always a constant: the underlying assumption that these themes are inextricably linked. From Marlow’s observation of how the colonial state utilizes rhetorics of crime to serve its own ends to Fanon’s neat flipping of that black-and-white narrative to Yadav’s understanding of postcolonial state structure and corruption, no matter the

geographical or chronological setting, these writers and thinkers stay within the colonial/postcolonial framework in order to understand how crime shapes their contemporary world. And, I argue, this is for a reason: it is absolutely imperative we understand narratives and fictions about crime firmly in the context of imperialism and postcolonialism.

There is, of course, a well-defined and growing field of scholars who are doing this work in the context of high imperialism and the nineteenth century. Jon Thompson's *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (2003) is an early entry into the field, discussing linkages between crime fictions and experiences of empire. Caroline Reitz's *Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture* (2004) argues that the genre of detective fiction played a key role in the public acceptance of the British Empire, while in *Crime and Empire: The Colony in 19th Century Fictions of Crime* (2003), Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee makes the case that rhetorics of crime helped the imperial project solidify and cohere amidst the turmoil of the nineteenth century. There are a few recent books that think about so-called "international" or non-Western crime fiction in the contemporary era, such as Christine Matzke and Susanne Muehleisen's edited volume *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006) and Vivien Miller and Helen Oakley's (eds) *Cross-Cultural Connections in Crime Fictions* (2012). Ed Christian's (ed) *The Post-colonial Detective* moves to consider crime and detective fiction through an explicitly postcolonial framework, but as of yet, there is no sustained and intensive treatment of the intertwined issues of crime fiction, imperialism, and postcolonialism.

We need to read contemporary fictions about crime through a postcolonial lens. While this category may include what can be strictly classified as crime or detective fiction, there are many novels that hinge on episodes of crime that may not necessarily fall into these categories. Yet, understanding how these depictions of crimes may be linked back to and understood through imperial histories and colonial legacies opens up a new field of analysis for the both the fields of crime fiction and postcolonial fiction. As just one very brief example, think about Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017 and recently shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize). *Exit West*, a novel of the contemporary refugee and migrant crisis, would not be found under "crime" or "mystery" in a bookstore. Yet, the text relies on mainstream Western assumptions about crime – that refugees might be prone to commit crime, that migrating without papers constitutes criminal action, that somehow encroaching on arbitrary, imperially-defined national borders – in order to give the novel shape and move the plot along. In order to completely understand *Exit West*, and so many other contemporary fictions, we have to look at them through a lens which twines together the related concepts of crime, imperialism, and postcoloniality.

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