

## Politics of Power Ploy in Praveen Radhakrishnan's Detective Fiction *The Adventure of Black Drop* (2011)

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### Abstract

*Power struggles are one of the most common themes in literature. The perspective to envision the relationship of power with humanity in a vicious cycle has been the focus of Praveen Radhakrishnan's fiction. His debut, *The Adventure of Black Drop* (2011), has the trace of power politics at various levels in terms of mental aptitude, gender, and class. These three layers of Victorian England offer a closer look at how power is intertwined with the fabric of society. Apart from being a detective novel that deals with the story of nineteenth-century England, the story shows the reality of power's nature transcending centuries by upgrading itself as per the evolution of humans. This research article holds a thematic study accentuating the author's opinion on how power circulates across societies and explicates them. This is clarified using the close reading technique in deconstructing the power play present in the novel.*

**Keywords :** power, humanity, vicious cycle, mental power, gender-biased power, class-based power, reality.

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### **Introduction:**

Human communities have existed and evolved with a powerful man leading them with his wit, strength, and life. This clarifies the prevalence of legends and myths among communities irrespective of the differences in culture and customs. Even though power is often associated with the efficiency of a responsible leader, human desire eventually took a wrong turn and fell to its addictive nature. Power, which was once given to the capable, was made to switch hands, preferably to descendants, stating the significance of preserving the bloodline of the person in power. With power transference arose jealousy, unfair and partial treatments, rivalry, and diabolical plots to destroy others. It is after observing this Lord Acton, a Historian, in *The Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton* comments on power thus: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (372).

Praveen Radhakrishnan, an Asian author, researches the origin and development of power in his graphic novel series, *The Hunt for the Lion*. The novel pictorially etches the fact that "Human nature is essentially unchanging" (Barry 17). The first sight of power is shown in the first scene, where the picture of light occupies the entire page itself. This represents either the presence of God or the power of Sun to symbolize nature over the triviality of life. Following this, a fasting sage and a wish-granting God occupy the next representation of power in the hierarchy. Thus, power politics continues in binaries between nature and man, humans and animals, civilized and uncivilized, and races, plus the list continues along with the evolution of humans. To cut the long story short, power exists in every circle of life by positioning itself in every intersection that is available in the society. So, when it starts driving humans, the harmony of humanity is put at stake, making reality bitter and pessimistic. It is due to this, the twenty-first century is pushed into the pit of existentialism, absurdism, and atheism. Sandwiching such a strong message within the colorful pages of this graphic novel has a purpose, and its inevitability is depicted again in Radhakrishnan's extension of Sherlock Holmes.

The detective novel, *The Adventure of Black Drop* (2011), is the author's debut novel written using his pen name, Radkris. This novel has traces of power structure that act as the backbone on which the storyline stands and makes complete sense. This research article intends to highlight power circulation in the intellectual boundary, i.e., the deducing skill of Sherlock Holmes, in a stereotypical gender-biased representation of characters, and in the political arena of Victorian England. Unlike other Sherlock Holmes stories, this novel attempts to show him in action by solving a series of murders, which without doubt leads him to his arch enemy, the great Mathematician Moriarty.

### **Methodology And Literature Review:**

Thematic analysis is carried out by employing close reading techniques to understand the elements of storytelling. The narrative elements such as plot, character, diction, theme, and setting contribute to the efficient delivery of the narrative. It marks the author's craftsmanship and establishes his stance in the

frontier of fiction.

Sherlock Holmes belongs to the canon of detective fiction. As a legendary figure of the genre, he led the genre to its Golden Age, creating a legacy with “gathering clues and solving crimes as if they were puzzles the reader can solve with the detective.” (Martin 1). The researcher has traced the development and inspiration of this Sherlock Holmesian extension in one of her articles titled “The Search for A Man of Feeling within Sherlock Holmes in Praveen Radhakrishnan’s *The Adventure of Black Drop*”. She has analyzed the obsession that the audience and critics alike hold against Sherlock towards his grumpy nature.

### **Result And Analysis:**

The tale begins with a smoky opium den, hinting at the *Black Drop* used in the title of the novel. The action begins when a man is shot at in an East End Valley, and his association with opium invites Scotland Yard police to the crime scene. When the case seems tricky, Lestrade has to call for Sherlock Holmes, the ambitious detective, to look into the matter. At the same time, Mrs. Mary Stride, the cousin of Queen Victoria, is murdered, and an innocent man, Shinwell Johnson, is arrested as the murderer. Holmes soon finds that Johnson is not the culprit but is falsely accused. In order to do justice and save the innocent, he breaks into Newgate prison and rescues him. During this attempt, he is joined by his foil, Mr. Hiten, and they end up saving Johnson and survive a subway accident. Following that, the untimely death of a beadle makes it seem like a suicide or an unfortunate death by food poisoning. Holmes unravels the crafty conspiracy behind the beadle’s death as well. On the other hand, a slight stumble against a man in a crowded walkway in Piccadilly sends him to his death. Holmes finds these murders interesting, as they have opium and Moriarty in common.

This serial murder extends to having Queen Victoria on the list, but Holmes saves the Queen and England simultaneously. The narrative closes with Holmes solving the crimes and finding out the villain behind the mystery with no surprise. At the climax, he explains a part of the crime to the Queen when he saves her, but he saves the rest of his findings to be shared with Dr. Watson, his close associate and biographer. Despite all the heroic feats of the detective, the last page shows Holmes in a hurry on his heels to find Watson and that promises a sequel in due time as well. For the purpose of dealing with Dr. Watson, his feelings for Irene Adler, and his affection for Mrs. Mary Watson and her failing marriage to Dr. John Watson, the author has given Holmes the opportunity to handle multiple murders at the same time while also providing him with personal space to deal with these issues. This narrative may give the impression of being a fast-paced crime story; however, it is impossible to ignore the fact that power plays a significant role in the commission of these murders.

**Discussion:**

Doyle has written four novels and fifty-four short stories featuring Sherlock Holmes as the lead character. It is not only Dr. Watson's narration but also Holmes' revelation of the love for details in the climax that uncovers Holmes' mental work behind solving the cases. He elucidates his deduction skill with a series of keen observations of details in the crime scene, which most of the onlookers casually overlook. Crafting these stories, most often, with a single murder, Doyle, as the author, makes the deduction part sound more logical and less magical to the reader. Radhakrishnan does the same in this narrative with the series of murders in a single plot. He spares a little space for Holmes' observation, whereas a larger part of the novel focuses on showing him as a man of feeling. Due to multiple plots, Holmes is forced to give two explanations regarding the murders in this novel, one before Queen Victoria and the other to Watson in private. Although this is sidelined, his mastermind is the factor that has become the reason for the flourishing of the genre, detective fiction.

In order to differentiate his narration from his deduction, his explanation before the Queen is presented with the specifics of the time and location, and his deduction is presented in italics during the presentation. The use of Radhakrishnan's iconoclastic style is praised for its innovative approach, which consists of showing the action rather than recounting the action. A story is said to have a significant impact when it uses showing and telling in a discretionary manner, according to the theory of narratology. By utilizing italics to demarcate this distinction, the author has demonstrated that he is skilled in the art of utilizing this subtle combination efficiently.

LONDON, 1894

DARK ALLEY IN EAST END

*H: "It is an alley in East End, very coincidentally near an opium den."*

The ginger policeman was walking towards the shadow at the end of the alley.

*H: "It was a rather chilly night if my memory serves me."*

The ginger policeman sneezed very loudly, and his moustache fell off. Holmes quickly adjusted his disguise, and the ginger policeman walked into the shadow. (Radhakrishnan 227)

At the same time, in detailing the rest of his deduction and revealing his findings to Watson, Radhakrishnan records their conversation as dialogues instead of italicizing them as quoted above. This trait in narration serves its purpose by presenting the expected picturesque effect before the readers, making them participate in the ploy of Holmes in believing what he wants the audience to believe rather than the truth of the matter. This reveals him to be the man of power not only through intellectual means but also in manipulating masses to his benefit and the benefit of the Queen under the pretext of protecting the kingdom.

... He rang the doorbell.

An angry woman opened the door, speaking rather vehemently. “Must all of London fall sick this morning?” And then upon realizing who the visitor was, the tone softened. “Oh, It’s you Mr Holmes.”

“Morning Mrs Watson” said Holmes cordially. “How is everything?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that in all my life I would never have expected you to come here.”

“No apologies needed” (Radhakrishnan 86-87)

Prior to the climax, Holmes cautions the Queen regarding the serial murders thus, ““Of course, your Majesty. It is my duty”, said Holmes, bowing reverently. “Now before I start, I have to warn you that, due to the complexity of the case, I will have to switch back and forth in time, to the past and the recent past, in order to paint you a clear picture of what has transpired.”” (Radhakrishnan 224). This is the point at which he starts to give a detailed account of the events that have transpired and begins to make connections between the various events in order to explain the serial murders and the conspiracy that was planned against the crown and England. As he delves deeper into the narrative, the intricate web of relationships and motives begins to unravel, revealing how each character’s past decisions led to the catastrophic present. The reader is drawn into a labyrinth of intrigue, where every clue and misstep brings them closer to the shocking truth behind the murders.

As an extension piece, Radhakrishnan retains the originality of Arthur Conan Doyle’s characters and setting and designs a new plot. This demands care, and Radhakrishnan handles the plot, storyline, characterization, accuracy in setting, and the sociological themes with ease. In order to establish credibility, he carries the story in the same line as Doyle by featuring multiple male-centric plots. As it is the norm of detective fiction to depict more male characters in action and a few female characters as damsels in distress, this novel also retains that trend. Even though Doyle has had a female contemporary, Agatha Christie, who wrote excellent detective stories featuring Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, the famous female detective in action, he was less inspired by her stories. To challenge this gender-biased representation of the working of intellects over solving crimes, writers like Sherry Thomas and Brittany Cavallaro have rendered parodied female versions and teen versions of this detective duo.

Despite the fact that Doyle’s creation of Mary Morston and Irene Adler is striking, the recent writers who adapt various versions give equal significance to designing these female characters. As this novel is written in the twenty-first century, the author cares to show Irene Adler as a smart woman who is a veteran in disguising herself in crisis and passing off as another person without much notice. Her presence in this novel makes Holmes look like James Bond in action. When he loses her in the end, he is shown to be emotionally feeble. This is the main factor that most of the re-tellers wish to point out. Radhakrishnan has crafted such a tragic situation to make him feel emotions like a normal human despite his extraordinary intellect. One can feel the throbbing heart of Sherlock in the following lines: ““Irene!”

Holmes screamed out her name loud enough to wake up the dead. "Sherlock!" A moment later, Adler called out to him shrill enough to mortify the living" (Radhakrishnan 316).

During the same time period, when Adler passes away, he admits, "She will no longer be a surprise to me." That will be the last time that she will be one step ahead of me, Watson" (Radhakrishnan 318). On the one hand, this is a statement that is considered to be a significant tribute to the female characters that are featured in the detective narrative genre. On the other hand, the portrayal of a limited number of females in action does not do justice to the genre in any way. It is beyond reasonable doubt that one can concur with the assertion that detective fiction is not male chauvinistic but rather male-centric, and that this novel also appears to depict characters in a manner that is biased against women.

Last but not least, the entire narrative hangs on power politics, projecting Moriarty as a powerful figure who cannot be opposed outright. England, like any other nation, has faced power struggles in different forms. In the ancient days, power resided in the hands of the clergy when literacy was sheltered by monks in their monasteries. They designed rituals, practices, festivals, and papal indulgences to subdue the ignorant masses under their reign in the name of religion. Once when Henry VIII became the head of the Church of England, the Divine Right Theory was placed on the pedestal, and power resided with the Kings and Queens of England for some time. With the Long Parliament, Commonwealth Period, the Reform Bill, and the Right to Vote, people became aware of their role in the country and felt empowered more than ever. It is here; power shifted from monarchs and aristocrats to the abodes of common folk. When the elite saw this, in order to snatch power back from this huge chaotic mass, they introduced beverages and opium to corrupt them and keep them in ignorance. The fake promises of the Industrial Revolution and the imposing superiority of British Imperialism made the monarchs thirst for insatiable power lust. This narrative takes advantage of the sociopolitical situation that existed during the Victorian era and uses opium, specifically Black Drop, as a symbol of the power that white supremacists felt they possessed. This is a fact that is supported by the Opium Wars, and the novel also draws attention to this historical account. Furthermore, because power has taken shape to fit in the evolving society of mankind, the influence of mass media and social media, in terms of technology, is seen as the next face of power. This cannot be denied, as globalization has introduced technology dependency as a more vulnerable state than the territorial problems that arise across nations. This shift in power dynamics raises important questions about sovereignty and individual agency in the digital age. As societies become increasingly interconnected, the challenge lies in navigating these complexities while ensuring that technology serves to empower rather than control.

Taking this massive history of power's transforming element does not nullify the scrupulous nature of power in accusing innocents and ignorants of national crimes. One such example that the novel offers is the arrest and conviction of Shinwell Johnson. The idea of a common man taking the blame of a culprit in power

is made visible in this opening crime scene, and Holmes convicting Shinwell as innocent in the end, before the Queen and Watson, is a power-shadowed discourse. The following lines are uttered by Holmes in favor of Johnson before the Queen to prove his innocence: ““That was why there was very little blood on the jacket found on Johnson when he was arrested. It was in fact Kensington’s blood from a struggle when Johnson was kidnapped...” (Radhakrishnan 233). This unfortunate state prevails even in the twenty-first century, and today’s politics is no different from the Victorian unscrupulousness.

Radhakrishnan maintains the typical portrayal of Indians in detective novels as a sidelined criminal character or as a less impressive one in this narrative. Johnson’s observation of Hiten when he sees him with Holmes follows thus: “And who is this queerly dressed black-guard? I think I’ve seen him before” to which Hiten’s vehement response, “Indians don’t look alike” (Radhakrishnan 58) is not at all a surprise to anyone who has read Doyle’s collection of the Sherlock Holmes series. Even though Johnson intends to reveal Hiten’s identity as a fellow prisoner in Newgate, his observation is easily misinterpreted (willingly) to mislead Holmes’ suspicion of Holmes on Hiten. This racist notion has been in the minds of the whites ever since the establishment of the East India Company in India. Moreover, Mr. Hiten taking Moriarty’s side symbolically means India’s colonial dependency towards the British. The racist supremacy of the colonizer over the colonized is deliberately shown in a few places, and the quoted lines are noteworthy to point out the predominance of power that existed at the political level.

The Queen beckoned Holmes closer and in a hushed tone asked him, “Mr. Holmes, did I do wrong in listening to an Indian? ”

Holmes replied quickly and assertively, “No, your grace. We did wrong in listening to this one Indian.” (Radhakrishnan 246)

Fortunately, Moriarty’s fame shadows his crime. Even Holmes has to wait for his chance to frame Moriarty as the mastermind behind these serial murders. Both the authors, be it Doyle or Radhakrishnan, prefer to keep Moriarty alive and leave Holmes in a pathetic situation after the climax. This once again reflects the power of the author, the position of the hero, and the pinnacle where the villain safely hides for the purpose of achieving a cliffhanger effect. In a recent interview with the researcher, Radhakrishnan shares his idea on crafting characters. Designing the villain must be done with care, because the greater the villain, the sharper the hero can and will be. According to Radhakrishnan, a hero is a mere reactionary, whereas the villain is visionary and self-motivated. Having all these justifications in position, the author hides Moriarty and reveals Holmes to be a bit moved emotionally.

As the introduction of Holmes is set by the usage of the pronoun “him” (Radhakrishnan 25), Moriarty’s introduction follows a phrase that is similar to that of J. K. Rowling’s introduction of Voldemort as “you know who” (Radhakrishnan 15). This technique effectively builds anticipation and intrigue around the villain, inviting readers to explore the complex nature of morality and heroism within the narrative.

By positioning Holmes as emotionally affected, Radhakrishnan suggests that even the most celebrated heroes carry their vulnerabilities, ultimately blurring the lines between good and evil. Not only that, but even Holmes' opinion of Moriarty is revealed as grand when he talks about him to Hiten for the first time. Those lines are reproduced to emphasize the power of a villain in the fictional reality.

Holmes replied under his breath. "Moriarty."

The Indian frowned his brow in concentration and repeated after Holmes to make sure he heard it right. "Moriarty?"

"Moriarty!" The name was uttered a third time in three seconds inside that compartment, but the third time it was exclaimed with fear. (Radhakrishnan 58)

### **Conclusion:**

With these three layers of arguments, the manifestation of power at different societal levels is highlighted. Power cannot be restricted to a particular group or sect because it seeps through any and every society that human civilization has seen. That is one major aspect that this detective novel puts forth to indicate and stress its inevitability. Besides, it also emphasizes the author's conscious effort to throw light on the vicious cycle that consists of power and humanity. In doing so, apart from the expected crime scenes and deduction methods at work, focusing on a universal yet profound theme strategically welcomes huge appreciations from the reading world as well. Apart from this rendering, a few scopes for further studies are recommended for future scholars. The list includes a New Historicistic study to deal with the historical background accuracy of Radhakrishnan's replica of the streets, description of architecture, etc., in this narrative; Reader's Response Criticism on the reception the novel receives from the reading community; and cognitive deconstruction on the deduction methods that Sherlock employs while solving cases. Thus, this article affirms that humans are shaped by power as they attempt to wield it, using Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes as epitomes of power. The novel reveals power not only as authority but also as a systematic ploy embedded in institutions, identities, and interpersonal relationships. By examining these dynamics, we gain insight into the complexities of human motivation and the moral ambiguities that accompany the pursuit of power. This analysis encourages readers to reflect on their own interactions with authority and the societal structures that influence their lives.

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