

Re-defining Detection: Investigating the Impact of Astrology in Manjiri Prabhu's The Cosmic Clues(2004).

Krishnaja mol K

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
Amritapuri, India

Dr Beena S Nair

Assistant Professor Senior Grade
Department of English
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
Amritapuri, India

Abstract

Modern detective fiction is noticeable for its wide variety of methods and techniques. Since 'astro-detective fiction' is a developing area, contemporary writers including Manjiri Prabhu use the scope and possibility of female astro-detectives, which seems to be a novel approach in literature. The present study focuses on Manjiri Prabhu's The Cosmic Clues(2004) and critically observes the different faces of female psyche and its unimaginable strengths and weaknesses. By introducing a female detective who solves cases by reading horoscope of suspects and detecting the criminal mentality of women in contemporary world, Prabhu subverts the gender roles and expectations.

Key words: astrology, astro-detective fiction, gender, horoscope.

Re-defining Detection: Tracing the Astrological Approach in Manjiri Prabhu's The Cosmic Clues.

Detective fiction is the most intelligent invention that resulted in learning and entertainment. The genre was under the dominance of male writers and it was only by the 20th century that women writers started to attempt this genre. Even though they followed the male writers initially, many of them adopted their own techniques and methods gradually. Literary critics often placed detective fiction under the control of patriarchy. According to Dorothy L Sayers, one of the eminent mystery novelists of the twentieth century, female sleuths are too intelligent, beautiful and too interested in marriage and a really brilliant women detective is yet to be created. In 1864, Andrew Forrester Jr introduced Mrs Gladden probably the first female detective. Later Agatha Christie introduced Miss Jane Marple, the spinster detective who appeared in 1928 in "The Tuesday Night Club". She is a legendary sleuth who finds satisfaction in her village geography, knitting, gardening, bird watching etc. and solves cases with her brilliance and female intuition.

Indian literature always gained inspiration from the Western literature and literature from many other cultures. The female sleuths introduced by the modern writes were intelligent and very good observers of human behavior and thus their method of collecting proofs and solving crimes were always unique, novel and interesting. The 21st century Indian literature is noted for its women writers who created efficient and eminent sleuths with enthusiastic and energetic attitude towards the crime they investigate and the society in which they live. As the advancement of science and technology create more intelligent criminals, detectives must use some methods that are beyond the control of human intellect and something related to human intuition and cosmic powers.

Astrology, which studies the stars, planets, asteroids etc., is a combination of science and art and its origin can be traced down to Mesopotamia Civilization and it gained public attention with the conquest of Alexander the Great. A school of astrology was established in 1908 in Los Angeles and it was legalized in New York in 1920. By 1940s it was accepted worldwide and it grows along with the scientific innovations. There are different branches of Astrology - Natal Astrology, Horary Astrology, Event Astrology, Mundane Astrology, Medical Astrology, and Relationship Astrology. Forensic Astrology, the most advanced branch of Astrology, uses the techniques to investigate crimes like kidnapping, murder, serial killings, attacks, etc. Forensic Astrologers never replace the police department or FBI or private detectives, rather they assist them to solve the issues.

Astro detective fiction is a developing genre that is modelled upon the forensic astrology and it follows the investigation of the protagonist who employs astrology to solve the crimes and to identify the suspects or criminals. Forensic Astrology analyses horoscope, which contains the future and biographical details of a person which is determined by birth time, star, date of birth and many such minute things that predicts the nature and future of a person. It uses various techniques including charts-event chart, last seen chart, horary chart etc. to solve mysteries behind the crimes.

Stevens Forrest's *Stalking Anubis* (2002) and *The Inner Sky* (2012), Alan Annand's *Scorpio Rising* (2011), and Joyce Mason's *The Crystal Ball* (2013) etc. are notable works in this genre. Manjiri Prabhu is a widely appreciated Indian writer who adopted a novel method of blending science and tradition in her writings, and attempted astro detective fiction in Indian literature. Prabhu's *The Cosmic Clue* (2004) and *Stellar Signs* (2015) give a detailed description of the methods adopted by Sonia Samrath, the protagonist and also these novels show the impact of Stellar Investigations Detective Agency in Astro detection. She uses her intuitions and solves cases with the aid of astrology and her intelligence. Sonia's confidence in astrology and her record of investigation seems to be a wonder in this modern and technologically advanced world. Her experience in criminology and criminal psychology also helps her in solving mysteries.

Sonia runs the agency with her own effort and also with the support of Jatin, an amateur. Inspector Divekar and the sub inspectors, Mohnish Rai, Vivek and Rita seek Sonia's advice and adopts their investigative methods in finding truth behind each mystery. India is a land of great saints, philosophers, scientists and other eminent personalities who made significant

contributions to the world. But, even in India, from the ancient period itself, society controlled women with its patriarchal rules and codes. The duty and role of women were always assigned by the male dominated society. The 21st century claims that, status of women have improved and women are in empowered state now. But media and surveys unveil the danger and risk in the survival of women folk in the present society. Manjiri Prabhu questions the restrictions imposed upon females by this society. Sonia's detective agency and her approaches challenge this established notions and bring doubts and questions regarding the possibility and scope of such an agency established by a woman like Sonia.

Sonia supports science and tradition at the same time. Even though she uses horoscope to solve crimes, she never rejects science. She applies criminology and criminal psychology many times to reach in a possible conclusion. She says:

What you call illusion is the result of this interaction of science with man! And yes, I do claim to use the science and knowledge of Astrology to solve the cases which come to me! Because I firmly and irrefutably believe that a horoscope is an X-ray of a person! You can even label it an almost metaphysical representation of the 'real you.' The point is not to substitute facts with the 'cosmic powers,' as you called it, but to use the planetary positions to guide the facts. (10)

Manjiri Prabhu shows her efficiency in blending different kind of investigative methods in a single book. The novel opens with a 'locked room mystery' mode where, Mr Ajay Patkar is puzzled by the murder of Satish who comes to his home. By observing the horoscope of everyone in the home, Sonia found the possibility of a criminal mind or tendency of murdering in Mrs Patkar's(Ajay's step mother's)horoscope and this hint helps the police to unveil the mystery behind Satish's murder. The murder is committed in circumstances under which it was seemingly impossible for the perpetrator to commit the crime or evade detection in the course of getting in and out of the crime scene. Since the room was locked, it adds complexity to the method of investigation and the situation demands something more than material proofs and that is what Sonia uses and proves with the help of astrology.

Indian culture is deep rooted in Vedic principles. The four great Vedas prove as sources for all the inventions and innovations all over the world. Indian medical system which has its root in Ayurveda is a remedy for almost all the diseases and accepted by efficient doctors as capable of offering permanent cure. Modern science and technology is not sprouted from nothingness and its roots are clearly visible in tradition and ancient culture. Astrology, even though rejected by scientists, is a belief system that tries to establish relation between astronomical phenomena and events or descriptions of personality in the human world. In *The Cosmic Clues*, Sonia blends science and astrology in a very efficient manner and thus she becomes a source of criticism for many modern investigators. She says:

Some may regard my technique of solving cases with a great deal of suspicion and perhaps even disbelief, because they don't believe in the science of Astrology. But, to tell you the truth, such an attitude bothers me the least. Such people are merely unaware that the Vedic Astrology principles and predictions are the outcome of thousands of years of statistical study of the magnetic cosmic forces and their effects on our lives. Anyway, my total belief in the

science of Astrology sanctions my modus operandi. To put it plainly, Astrology delivers the goods to those who believe and study it, and I believe, study, and practice it.(77)

Even though the story is purely imaginative, Manjiri Prabhu uses Sonia as a critic of the modern Indian society where all kinds of socially relevant issues such as treachery, superstitions, rapes, kidnapping, drugs trafficking, unhealthy marriages, exploitation in film industry etc. are most common. She uses her astrological skills to find out the mystery in Mr Tupay's family and the very complex relationships and death of Pradnya. The mystery behind the disappearance of Mr.Tushar Gulati is solved very efficiently by the strong opinion that even the twins never have same star and planet combinations.

While portraying astrology as a method of investigation, Manjiri also shows the superstitious beliefs associated with astrology. Without understanding the relevance of the predictions, people jump into conclusions and invite tragic fate. The novel introduces Aarti Vaze, a young girl who invites Sonia for her marriage. Due to some intuitions, she collects the horoscope of all the members of her groom's family and along with the invitation card, she gives it to Sonia. Aarti's story reveals Prabhu's efficiency in dealing with mystery and suspense. The readers are introduced to a puzzling situation where the bride is killed immediately after the marriage. Later only Sonia unveils the mystery that Aarti is safe and the plotters were Pradeep, the groom and his adopted sister, who turns to be his lover. Their horoscope proved a criminal mind set for Pradeep and his lover, which Sonia confirmed through another police investigation. It was a priest's prediction that Pradeep's first wife will die and he can live only with his second wife that led to the cruel plot of murdering Aarti just after the wedding ceremony. This story sheds light to two major issues- how astrology can negatively influence people and how marriage spoils the dreams and hopes of girls, and also lead families to misery and chaos.

In many of the investigations, readers also get a chance to make their guess. Sitting in an arm chair reader also becomes a detective who thinks and travels along with the detective. Sonia follows a Sherlock Holmes style when she explains how she solves each case. She considers astrology as a wonderful guide which can lead her from doubts to clarity. She says:

But it's not as if I *hunt* for horoscopes at the first scent of a crime! I treat Astrology like a map *when* I arrive in a city—a map that will guide me and help me navigate myself in the desired direction. However, before I embark on the journey to that city, I need to gather information—knowledge about the journey as well as my destination. Initially, I work with facts and investigation. Then if I reach a deadlock or a fork in the road, I use my map—which shows me the precise route or alternate options. At the moment I am still at the predestination stage and I have no intentions of vaulting over facts!..(77)

Female intuition is a main factor that helps Sonia to achieve success in her investigation. Sonia, like Miss Marple, uses her intelligence, analytical and reasoning power etc.to find out the mysteries. Her enthusiasm to work in a colourful environment, her unique sense of music and dance etc. make her a person with very attractive personality. When Simran Singh, the female detective in Kishwar Desai's trilogy, depends smoke and drinks at the time of crisis,

she seeks the help of music and dance and it gives her hints and clues and also sharpens her concentration in reading horoscope.

The central concern Manjiri Prabhu discusses in *The Cosmic Clues* is the possibility of crime. More than the circumstantial murder or murder by chance, the novel introduces planned murders also which shed light to the criminal tendency that grows in modern society. Even though she introduced a female sleuth, Prabhu never tried to show only the positive sides of females rather she focuses on better as well as bitter sides of female psyche. At the end of many of the investigations in the novel, Sonia could identify many females with criminal mind set. As a woman she is more aware of the female psychology and the moments that can evoke a lady's mental strength. Extreme greed for money, extreme craving for love, or passion for something forbidden may often convert a female to a dragon and these are the tragic flaws Manjiri identifies in the female criminals in the novel. By portraying female as a detective and as criminals, Manjiri Prabhu subverted the gender expectations. All the female characters readers meet in this novel crosses the expected barriers and redefines their role and status with their performance. By exploring the astro detective method of investigation in *The Cosmic Clues*, Manjiri Prabhu establishes her strong position in contemporary Indian Literature and Female Detective Fiction.

Reference:

1. Ahlin, Charlotte. "11 Fictional Female Detectives You Need To Know - Who Aren't Nancy Drew." Bustle, Bustle, 16 July 2018, www.bustle.com/p/11-fictional-female-detectives-you-need-to-know-who-arent-nancy-drew-9712094
2. Forrest, Stevens. *The Inner Sky*. Toronto ; New York : Bantam Books, 1984.
3. Gulino, E. (2020). There Are 80+ Types Of Astrology. Here's Where To Start. Refinery29.com. Retrieved 24 March 2021, from <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/types-of-astrology>
4. MasterClass. "Mystery, Thriller, and Crime Novels: What's the Difference? - 2021." MasterClass, MasterClass, 5 May 2021, www.masterclass.com/articles/mystery-thriller-and-crime-novels-whats-the-difference#quiz-0.
5. Prabhu, Manjiri. *The Cosmic Clues: India's First Astro-Detective*. Jaico Pub. House, 2013.
6. Saleno, B. D. (2012). *Forensics by the Stars: Astrologers Investigates*. Bloomington: iUniverse, Inc.
7. Vandorpr. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." Vandorpr's Blog, 4 Nov. 2010, vandorpr.wordpress.com/2010/11/04/the-typology-of-detective-fiction/#:~:text=In%20Tzvatn%20Todorov's%20%E2%80%9CThe%20typology,lit.