



THE COMPANY'S DRUG: OPIUM, REVENUE AND THE COMPLICIT DETECTIVE IN ABIR MUKHERJEE'S *A RISING MAN*

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Abstract

*The addicted investigator is among the most portable conventions in crime writing, and in almost every instance the substance is read inward, as evidence of the detective's boredom, his grief, or his damaged masculinity. This paper argues that Abir Mukherjee's *A Rising Man* (2016) does something the convention does not ordinarily permit, and that the difference is a matter of economics rather than of psychology. Captain Sam Wyndham, newly arrived in Calcutta in 1919, is an opium smoker in a city whose government was for more than a century the largest opium producer and dealer in the world. His habit is therefore not a private failing set against his public duty; it is a transaction with the same administration that pays him. The paper reviews the criticism on the detective and the intoxicant, sets it against the historical scholarship on the Indian opium industry, and reads Wyndham's dependency as an index of institutional rather than personal pathology. It closes on the crime he cannot investigate, and suggests that the novel makes his habit a form of knowledge rather than a form of escape.*

Keywords

Abir Mukherjee; Colonial Crime Fiction; Opium; Addiction Narratives; Postcolonial Detective, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

A detective with a habit is now so familiar a figure that its oddity has stopped registering. The investigator who drinks too much, or who reaches for something stronger, arrives in a novel already carrying a set of instructions: that he is serious, that he has seen too much, that his disorder is the price of his insight. The convention is old and it is portable, and it has been carried into more or less every national tradition in which crime writing has taken root. What it usually means, at the same time, is remarkably consistent. The substance points inward; it tells us about the man, and rarely about anything else.

Abir Mukherjee's *A Rising Man* (2016) inherits this convention and then does something with it that the convention does not ordinarily permit. Captain Sam Wyndham arrives in Calcutta in April 1919, a former Scotland Yard detective and a survivor of the trenches, to take up a post with the Imperial Police Force. He is an opium smoker, and has been one since before he arrived. So far the figure is orthodox, and a reader schooled in the genre will assemble the usual explanation without being asked: the war, the bereavement, the insomnia, the wound that qualifies him to detect. The novel supplies all of that material and does not disown it. Why, then, should the convention need any further explanation here?

What the novel adds is a fact of political economy. Wyndham has come to a city administered by a government which was, for the better part of a century, the largest producer and dealer of opium in the world. The drug that consoles him for imperial service is a product of imperial service. His habit is thus not a private failing set against a public duty. It is a transaction with the same administration that employs him, conducted in a commodity that administration



manufactures, and this changes what the convention can be made to mean. Is Wyndham's dependency evidence about Wyndham at all, or is it evidence about the Raj?

This paper argues for the second reading, without discarding the first. It first reviews the criticism on the detective and the intoxicant in order to establish what the convention has been taken to signify, then sets that convention beside the historical scholarship on the Indian opium industry, which the literary criticism has almost entirely ignored, and reads Wyndham's habit against that history. It closes on the difficulty the reading produces, which is that a detective compromised in this particular way cannot investigate the one crime his own presence in Calcutta depends upon.

The Detective and the Intoxicant: A Review of the Criticism:

The scholarship divides, roughly, into three bodies of work, and it is worth setting them out in order because the third has never been brought into contact with the first two. The first and largest concerns Holmes. Cocaine enters the canon in the opening pages of *The Sign of Four* and has occupied critics ever since, chiefly as a question about the relation between stimulant and intellect. Pearce sets the habit against the pharmacological culture of the 1890s, a decade in which cocaine's dangers were becoming visible to the very profession Doyle had trained in, so that Holmes's syringe is legible as a contemporary hazard rather than as a period ornament. Fromm posits the stronger literary claim, arguing that the addiction functions as a cautionary counterweight to the detective's enlightenment rationalism rather than as a mere eccentricity, and that the drug therefore marks the price at which such rationality is purchased rather than the means by which it is achieved. Turner singles out the competing account in which cocaine symbolises the detective's dedication to his profession rather than his deviation from it, an ascendancy rather than a fall. Zieger widens the frame by attending to Holmes's pipe rather than to his syringe, and opines that nineteenth-century tobacco writing constitutes an early discourse of what she labels media addiction. Clausson, working on *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, situates the detective within the fin-de-siècle anxieties about degeneration without which the syringe is merely a curiosity.

What unites this body of work, for all its disagreements, is that the drug is read as a fact about the detective's mind. It explains his boredom, or licenses his brilliance, or measures what his brilliance costs, and in every version of the argument the interest lies inside the detective's skull. The institution which employs him, pays him and defines the limits of what he may investigate is not, however, in question at any point.

The second body of work concerns the hard-boiled and its screen descendants, where the substance is alcohol and the reading is one of gender rather than of intellect. Gates, examining the three film versions of *The Maltese Falcon* made between 1931 and 1941, points out how completely the hard-boiled detective had become a model of American masculinity by the end of that decade, and remarks that drink functioned within the model as evidence of toughness rather than of weakness, so that the glass certified the man. Creeber has written twice on the British television variant, first on *Prime Suspect*, where he locates a whole "smoking-and-drinking end" of the police genre against which Jane Tennison's own consumption must be read, and then on *Cracker*, where Fitz's drinking, gambling and smoking are shown to reinstate a hard-drinking masculine type the series simultaneously criticises. Casey remarks the same logic in *Hannibal*, pointing out how routinely the genre's investigators are made addicts or alcoholics as a condition of their perceptiveness, so that the dependency arrives as evidence rather than as symptom. Alacovska, approaching from the sociology of authorship rather than from criticism, surmises that the "hard-drinking ugly old male detective" operates less as a character type than as a standing genre expectation, one which women writing Scandinavian crime fiction must either negotiate or



refuse before they can begin. Davies, on Vera Caspary, and Braithwaite, on the contemporary female investigator, extend the analysis to figures the convention was not built for.

The screen material differs from the literary case in one respect the criticism has not much noticed. On screen the substance is almost always visible, staged as an act of consumption rather than reported as a condition, and it therefore certifies the detective for an audience rather than explaining him to one. Perhaps that is why the screen convention has proved so much more durable than its literary ancestor. A glass is easier to photograph than a temperament.

Here too the reading runs inward, though the interior it describes is social rather than cognitive. Drink signifies a wounded or an authenticating masculinity. The detective's employer remains, again, outside the analysis. Sulimma's recent work on Sarah Schulman is a partial exception, since it reads addiction alongside gentrification and so admits an economic dimension, but the substance there indexes a housing market rather than the investigator's own paymaster.

The third body of work is historical and has developed with almost no reference to the first two. Richards's account of the opium industry in British India remains the standard economic history, and it establishes the scale of the thing beyond any argument, since opium was not a vice the administration happened to tolerate but an industry the administration itself ran, monopolised, taxed, and depended upon for a revenue it could not easily have replaced. Deshpande traces the state's changing attitudes to cultivation from 1878 onwards, and Sharma's work on the northeastern frontier shows how the figure of the addict was itself in part a colonial construct. Wright's study of the Indian opium den comes closest of this group to the literary, since it examines not the trade but the representation of the trade, and points out that the anxieties attaching to the den belonged to the coloniser rather than to the colonised. Majeed's essay on Gandhi, De Quincey and Hali is the most useful of all for present purposes, since it takes opium simultaneously as literary experience and as colonial relation, and opines that the addiction supplies a figure for the colonial bond itself, a bond in which dependency runs in both directions and neither party can withdraw without pain.

The gap is now visible, however, and it is a gap of disciplines rather than of evidence. The criticism on the addicted detective reads the substance psychologically and ignores the state; the criticism on colonial opium reads the substance politically and does not concern itself with detectives. *A Rising Man* is a novel which requires both, and which is unintelligible under either alone.

The Company's Drug:

The historical position is worth stating plainly, because it is the fact against which Wyndham's habit acquires its meaning. From the late eighteenth century the East India Company, and after 1858 the Crown administration which succeeded it, held a monopoly over opium production in Bengal and Bihar. The poppy was grown under licence by Indian cultivators, processed at government factories, and sold at government auction in Calcutta, chiefly for export to China. Richards demonstrates that the resulting revenue was not marginal but structural, one of the largest single sources of income the Indian government possessed at any point in its existence, and he adds that the trade's decline in the early twentieth century registered with the administration as a fiscal problem to be managed rather than as a moral relief to be welcomed.

Two consequences follow for a novel set in Calcutta in 1919. The first is that opium in that city is not a foreign vice but a local industry, and its distribution is not clandestine in the way the London den of the imperial imagination was clandestine. The second is that a British officer in Calcutta who takes opium is consuming, at the end of a chain, something his own government has grown, refined and sold. The transaction is a small mirror of the larger one.



There is besides a fiscal question specific to 1919 which the novel never states. The opium revenue was by then in decline, under pressure from the international agreements which followed the Shanghai and Hague conferences, and a government in that position is not indifferent to the drug; it is anxious about it. Wyndham arrives at the moment when the substance he needs is becoming an embarrassment to the state that sells it, and perhaps something of that awkwardness attaches to him.

Majeed's formulation is the one this paper wants to borrow. Reading Gandhi against De Quincey, he finds opium serving as a figure for the addictive nature of the colonial relation itself, in which dependency runs in both directions and neither party can withdraw without pain. That is a literary argument made on historical material, and it supplies precisely the bridge the detective criticism lacks.

Wyndham's Habit:

Set against this, the psychological account of Wyndham's dependency looks true but insufficient. The novel supplies a personal etiology, and supplies it generously. The habit begins in a military hospital, and it begins as treatment:

They gave me morphine for the pain and I spent many days in a drug-induced fog... Sarah's passing had taken the best part of me with it, and now the days were empty and the nights populated by the cries of the dead, which nothing could extinguish. Nothing except the morphine. (Mukherjee 54–55)

Three causes are compressed here: the wound, the bereavement, and the war dead who will not be quiet. The passage would sit without alteration in any account of the damaged investigator, and the despair it produces is followed to its logical end a page later, when Wyndham recalls that "it was while staggering along Narrow Street one freezing December night... that I considered ending it all. It would be easy. Just a short walk into the blackness" (56). A reader who stops here has the familiar figure entire, and has not misread.

What the personal account cannot explain, however, is the sentence that carries him from one drug to the other. "When that ran out, I took to opium," Wyndham says. "Not as effective, but easy enough to get a hold of, especially for a copper who'd cut his teeth in the East End" (55). The clause is thrown away and it is decisive. His access to opium is a professional privilege. The policeman's knowledge of Limehouse, acquired in the course of policing it, is what supplies the policeman with his drug, so that the habit is from its inception a benefit of office rather than a lapse from it. Wyndham is not an addict who happens to be a detective; he is an addict by virtue of being one. The complicity this paper has been describing is thus already present in London, before the Calcutta posting gives it an imperial dimension.

That dimension arrives in the Turret Bazaar sequence, and it arrives as a point of law: Visiting an opium den certainly isn't illegal... Pure opium is energising. I didn't want a buzz. I wanted oblivion, and for that, you need the cheap stuff: the rough, impure, adulterated filth they'd serve in a dive like this. (112–13)

The first clause does a great deal more work than its casualness suggests, and it is the sort of clause a reader passes over on a first reading and cannot afterwards unsee. Wyndham is not breaking the law by being in this room, and he knows it precisely, in the way a policeman knows such things. The administration which employs him has grown the poppy, processed it, sold it at auction and declined to criminalise its consumption by men like him. His presence in the den is



therefore not a transgression requiring concealment, nor might even discretion of the kind an officer extend to himself, but a transaction which the state has arranged, priced and declined to prohibit. A dependency which is licensed in one body and policed in another is not a personal condition; it is a jurisdiction. Is it not striking that the genre's most private device should turn out, in this setting, to be an instrument of colonial law?

The rest of the passage sharpens the point in an unexpected direction. Wyndham does not want the good opium. He wants "the rough, impure, adulterated filth," and he wants it because oblivion, not stimulation, is the object. The distinction is a market distinction rather than a moral one, and in making it he is choosing the bottom of a market which the administration itself operates, grades and profits from at every level. Where Holmes's seven-per-cent solution is a precision instrument for a precise mind, Wyndham's adulterated stuff is a commodity graded downward for customers who want less consciousness rather than more. The two drugs index two entirely different relations to work, and only one of them is about intellect. Which of the two, one might ask, tells us more about the world its user inhabits?

The novel's last word on the habit is a claim of mastery which its own figure withdraws. "The O was my servant, not my mistress, and it was best to keep it that way," Wyndham tells us. "Discipline was key. It was like crossing a river on the back of a crocodile... The trick, obviously, was to not get eaten" (245). The first sentence asserts control in the vocabulary of ownership; the simile that follows concedes that the thing being ridden is alive, hungry, and under no obligation. Is it possible to hear this and not hear the governing fantasy of the administration Wyndham serves, which also believed itself to be riding something it had mastered, which also insisted upon discipline, and which also proposed to cross a river it could not get out of? The novel does not draw the parallel. It does not need to.

April 1919 sharpens all of this. The novel is set in the weeks around the Rowlatt agitation and Jallianwala Bagh, the moment at which the administration's claim to be a government of laws became hardest to sustain. Vijay and Tripathi, in the only sustained published reading of this novel known to me, examine its handling of justice and racial politics, and surmise that the detective's procedures are repeatedly interrupted by the very colonial order which employs him, so that his failures of method are failures of position. Slavin posits the larger claim for the series as a whole, arguing that Mukherjee uses the historical crime novel to carry postcolonial critique to a mass-market readership which would not seek it out under any other cover. The opium, on the reading offered here, is where that critique is most economical, because it does not require a speech. It requires only that the reader know where the drug came from.

The Crime He Cannot Investigate:

A detective is defined by the scope of what he is permitted to detect. The classical form guarantees that the crime is solvable and that its solution restores an order worth restoring; the hard-boiled form withdraws the second guarantee while keeping the first. *A Rising Man* withdraws something further. Wyndham can solve the murder he is given. He cannot investigate the arrangement which brought him to Calcutta, which pays his salary, which supplies his opium, and which in the same month kills several hundred people in an enclosed garden in Amritsar.

This is the point at which the addiction does its most precise work, and where the convention this paper has been tracing turns entirely around. Because the substance is the administration's product, and because his access to it began as a perquisite of policing, Wyndham's need for it is a standing demonstration that he cannot separate himself from the thing he might otherwise judge. Every purchase is a small renewal of consent, and the renewals are frequent. The convention as the criticism has described it, in which the detective's habit certifies his independence from a compromised world, is here exactly inverted. Wyndham's habit is the



proof of his dependence, and the novel does not allow him the consolation of not knowing it. He knows exactly what he is riding, which is why he reaches for the crocodile.

Does the novel then convict its detective? Not quite, and the refusal is worth noticing; a cleaner verdict would have been a lesser book. Wyndham is permitted intelligence about his own position and is permitted to act decently within a system he cannot reform, and Sergeant Banerjee supplies the standing measure of what he cannot see. What the novel produces is not a verdict but a condition, and the opium is its most compact expression: an appetite created by an institution, satisfied by that institution, and impossible to renounce without leaving. How many of the administration's servants, the novel quietly asks, were in the same position without the wit to notice it?

It is worth adding that this reading gives the convention a use it has not previously had. If the addicted detective ordinarily tells us about a man, Wyndham's opium tells us about a revenue system, and the genre's most tired device turns out to be its sharpest analytical instrument simply by being placed in a city where the drug and the state have the same address.

Conclusion:

The criticism on the detective and the intoxicant has read the substance as a fact about the investigator: his intellect in the work on Holmes, his masculinity in the work on the hard-boiled and its screen descendants. That reading is not wrong, and *A Rising Man* accommodates it; the novel is generous with the materials it requires. The novel supplies Wyndham with a war, a bereavement and a wound, and a reader who stops there will have read something real.

The reading is nonetheless incomplete, and the incompleteness follows from a boundary in the scholarship rather than from anything in the novel. Opium in Calcutta in 1919 is not a private vice. It is an imperial industry, and the historical work of Richards, Deshpande, Sharma and Wright establishes the fact beyond argument, while Majeed shows what a literary reading can do with it. Placed in that setting, Wyndham's dependency stops being a flaw which qualifies him to detect and becomes a relation which prevents him from detecting the largest thing in front of him. He is the customer of the government he serves.

Two lines of further work suggest themselves. The first is comparative, and would test the argument against the later novels in the series, in which Wyndham's relation to the drug alters considerably. The second would ask a simple question of a large archive. How many other addicted investigators are placed, as this one is, inside an economy which produces the substance they consume? The convention has been read as psychology for a very long time, and perhaps too comfortably. It may turn out, in more cases than this one, to have been an account of employment.

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