



**Tracing Justice and Morality: An Excavation of Human Psyche in Agatha Christie's
*Murder on the Orient Express***

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Abstract

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is undoubtedly one of her greatest mystery novels. The novel with a Belgian detective Hercule Poirot as the protagonist is a homicide puzzle. It comes under the detective genre of literature. It is a famous mystery crime fiction that revolves around a murder of a wealthy American criminal, Samuel Ratchett. An injustice was caused in a kidnap of Daisy Armstrong and the crime of Ratchett is a result of the long lost justice. The novel is analysed with a psychological view of Freudian theory. It investigates the motives behind crime. It aims at exploring the themes of justice and vengeance as instigated by Christie in the novel. The paper also examines how the novelist manipulates the reader into sympathizing with the murderers. Through a critical view the novel's plot and nature of the characters are analysed.

Keywords: kidnap, injustice, crime, investigation, revenge, morality, psychology, trauma.

Agatha Christie was the English legendary British mystery writer known for her 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections, particularly revolving around fictional detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss. Marple. Christie known as the Grand Dame of mysteries and the "Queen of Crime" was the representative of the Golden Age of detective fiction. Detective fiction is one of the most popular literary genres in recent years and Christie's detective stories are the most famous ones. Her works were translated into numerous languages making it the third most widely published book after *The Bible* and after Shakespeare. Her works were based on the influences of World War I and World War II.

Agatha Christie pleased readers with a variety of detective stories, experimenting with setting, detective characters and crime depiction. Christie has entered new contexts,

including feminism, interwar trauma, and critical representations of Empire. The majority of her stories revolve around a small group of people. Christie's superpower is her psychological depth. In her stories, materialistic profit and personal revenge have been major incentives.

Agatha Christie's 1934 novel *Murder on the Orient Express* is a homicide puzzle with a Belgian detective Hercule Poirot as the protagonist. It is a famous mystery crime fiction that revolves around a murder of a wealthy American criminal, Samuel Ratchett. The novel was inspired by Christie's own international train travel experiences. In her autobiography, Agatha Christie states that: "Plots come to me at such odd moments: when I am walking along the street, or examining a hat shop with particular interest, suddenly a splendid idea comes into my head" (390). Agatha Christie perfected her guessing for readers by creating a puzzle in the novel.

Agatha Christie loved the Orient Express and first travelled on it in late 1928. She made note of the details of the carriages and clues such as the position of door handles along the train to be featured in her novels. In 1929 the Simplon Orient Express was snowed in for five days at a small station in Turkey. This incident inspired Agatha Christie, although she chose Yugoslavia as the location for her 1934 novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. The kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's child, a case that had rocked the nation was also a motivation for the novel. In fact, the first known murder on the train did not occur until one year after the publication of her novel.

The novel commences with a fashion similar to the plots of other mystery stories. It introduces many characters in the beginning as for the readers to glance at their behaviours and mannerisms. The story gradually develops into a locked room mystery as a person named Samuel Edward Ratchett is found stabbed to death in a running train. The plot thickens when Hercule Poirot is assigned a case of finding the murderer. The twist at the end not only comes as a surprise, but it is far ahead of its time as the twelve suspects were found to be guilty of murdering Ratchett. Each suspect took a turn stabbing Cassetti, who was travelling and using a name Ratchett, which he has only recently adopted.

Poirot interrogates and explains the motive for each of the characters. He finds

that, years prior Ratchett had been acquitted of murdering a young girl named Daisy Armstrong after holding her for ransom. Her family and their employees were the victims of a heinous crime committed by Ratchett, were seeking revenge and then executed it by each booking accommodation on the Orient Express. The death of Daisy Armstrong affected all twelve suspects in some way. It leads to the denial of justice and as a result the revenge takes place.

The investigation is carried out by Poirot on the basis of psychology over physical evidence which enables him to handle it in a more holistic manner. The psychological perspective of Poirot brings him closer to discovering the truth behind the crime than a more surface-level investigation would. The novel's moralistic view is captured when Poirot discovers that Ratchett's killer is actually a group of people driven by a sense of moral obligation rather than an individual plagued by evil. Each of the passengers admits to their real identities as members of the Armstrong household, and they collectively express their desperation to punish Ratchett for his brutal murder of an innocent girl. Since the truth that Poirot finds is nowhere near the result he expected from his investigation, the subsequent step of ensuring justice becomes even more complex.

The kidnapping case of Daisy Armstrong is the initiative point of revenge in the novel. Then death of Susanne left a big wound for her loved ones including Pierre Michel her father and Cyrus Hardman her lover. This further leads to the expiration of Daisy Armstrong's mother, Sonia Armstrong and her unborn child who passed away in shock following the suicide of Daisy's father, Colonel Armstrong. The sense of revenge arises from power, hurt and anger. "Revenge is a kind of wild justice; " (19) says Francis Bacon. According to Bacon revenge turns a man into an unconstrained human being, who takes up the law in his own hands. The term wild is often connected with beastly behaviour. What differentiates humans from beasts is the conscience but in the novel these characters lose their humane side and expose their animalistic nature by killing a human being. During the first glance at the restaurant before boarding the train, Poirot comments on Ratchett's character as a savage and a wild animal. Poirot tells that: "It was as though a wild animal— an animal savage, but savage! You understand—had passed

me by The body the cage—is everything of the most respectable—but through the bars, the wild animal looks out.” (17-18). The term wild is connected with justice to define the cruel method used to attain justice. In the novel, the murder of Ratchett is considered as a wild form of justice because it compromises the conscience and morals to achieve a cruel goal.

The motive behind the crime of Ratchett is not lust or greed or anger but is a sense of retributive justice. The characters and decisions made in the novel revolve around a corrupt theme of justice that the passengers were clinging on it and this makes their actions morally acceptable. Agatha Christie introduced the concept of justice with its two types: legal and moral. Legal justice is depicted in Ratchett’s non executed imprisonment in regard to the Armstrong’s kidnapping case. As for moral justice, it is presented in the plotting and killing of Ratchett by the twelve passengers.

The passengers were on a mission to serve retributive justice to the man who caused their sufferings and miseries, as suggested in a journal by Kevin M.Carlsmith and John M.Darley: “Retributive justice is a system by which offenders are punished in proportion to the moral magnitude of their intentionally committed harms.” (194). In the novel, a group of people assume themselves to be the jury members as to carry out the justice that was denied long ago for the kidnapping and murdering of Daisy Armstrong. Jury refers to a group of citizens usually of twelve members who hear a case in court and decide whether the defendant is innocent or guilty. The people in the train acknowledge the crime as a form of justice. In a way, the twelve people on the train seem to be justified in Ratchett’s murder because the family is seen as getting some kind of justice as the law has failed to apprehend the killer.

Poirot sympathizes with the twelve passengers notwithstanding his profound and unbending aversion to the crime, for he believes that injustice has befallen the Armstrong family by law and the court system and justice has been served in unconventional manner through this self-appointed jury of twelve. The desire to exact justice with their own hands gave the murderers permission to plot the vengeful murder of a terrible killer. The last line of the novel expresses that, Poirot favours to pursue what is

morally justifiable over what is legally correct. He concludes that “. . . having placed my solutions before you, I have the honour to retire from the case . . .” (174). In a way it dismisses the executioners and condemns Ratchett for the monster of a man he is. By this Agatha Christie recognizes that justice does not always bring justice to the oppressed, but it is them who have to prove themselves justified. The novel successfully blurs the line between justice and revenge.

Poirot's two possible solutions; the real one and a false one, expresses the social concern of Poirot towards the people. He can either deliver the real solution to the police and to condemn the passengers to jail, or he can lie and protect them knowing that their actions restored the social order that Ratchett's crime destroyed. Poirot and M. Bouc's final decision to lie to the police highlights Christie's argument about the validity of moral acts of justice, even when those acts lead to a distortion of the truth. Through the novel, Christie tends to embrace morality as another aspect of justice, which is moral justice. She expresses that in certain circumstances morality foregoes legal justice and that moral fairness is an essential component in determining whether a murder is just or not.

The characters in the novel experience the dominance of trauma and the human psyche. The background of the murder on the train is a revenge taken for a child's death. The main motive of revenge is that, the murderers do not get a true justice for the previously done crime of Ratchett. With the gruesome murder of a child, the lives of twelve people are shattered. This proceeds to concealed motives, desires, loss and pain that are expressed in the forms of emotions, aggression and leads to revenge. Due to the character's loss and pain, revenge takes place. As a result, the novel deals with the psychological trauma. Agatha Christie demonstrates through her books, how characters may experience shame and anxiety as a result of the deceitful truth and superego breach. In the novel, the character's psychic structure of personality interacts with each other and the effects of one's emotions, motives and adjustment leads to anxiety and fear.

The emotional trauma that the characters go through the novel is the result of the emotional upsurge adversely affecting the process of reasoning and thinking powers, thus

leading to crime. The characters affected by trauma in the novel are Mrs.Hubbard, Greta Ohlsson, Antonio Fascarelli, Hector McQueen and Mary Debenham. Countess Andrenyi has symptoms of trauma as she stands alone and not wanted to get disturbed by other people. The loss of Sussane cultivated trauma in Pierre Michel, her father and Cyrus Hardman, who loved her dearly.

The characters in the novel, evolve into criminals because of the sociological factors, unconscious inhibition or psychic personalities. Based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach, the three components of personality theory that is: the id, ego, and superego can be used to analyze the crimes. Different types of psychological anxiety are caused by Freud's theory of personality, which influences an individual's motivations, needs, wants, and adjustment. All the twelve passengers of the Orient Express have a dominant Id showed by their determination to plan the revenge. They have a dominant Id because they only follow their own desire even though it is not morally acceptable in society.

Freud's theory of personality traits highlights the id-ego conflicts that arise in characters. The verbal conduct towards aggression, the sense of satisfaction that is received after Cassetti's murder, and the reaction of the characters reveal the suppressed anger they had for Cassetti. It is evidenced through the characters of MacQueen, Princess Dragomiroff, Colonel Arbuthnot, Colonel Andrenyi, and Mary Debenham. "If ever a man deserved what he got, Ratchett or Cassetti is the man. I'm rejoiced at his end. Such a man wasn't fit to live!" (85). "Princess Dragomiroff drew herself a little more erect. 'In my view, then, this murder is an entirely admirable happening! You will pardon my slightly biased point of view'." (119)

The violent behaviour exhibited by the characters results in representing the patterns modelled by real-life events. Violent criminal behaviour is an outcome of people's aggression. The complex relationship of the id, ego, and superego influences how individuals think about the world and approach problems. A rise in hostility makes it unquestionably possible for them to damage or kill anything that comes their way. The outpouring of emotional experiences can also take the form of verbal exchanges.



In view, the paper finds that the motive behind Cassetti's murder at the hands of the twelve passengers is a mixture of drives for both justice and self-retribution which can be served as a justified revenge. The fundamentals to explore the themes of revenge and justice in the novel is followed by the characters psychic zones that is the id, ego and superego, their feelings of anxiety, anger and fear, and essentially their aggressive behaviour. Psychoanalytic approach is used to identify the unconscious motives behind the characters thoughts and actions and to identify the real motive, justice or revenge, behind the twelve passenger's crime. It also expresses the incapacity to adapt to a given circumstance manifests itself in the forms of emotion, fear, anxiety, and aggression, and how these elements set the stage for the deceit that the characters in the novel employ.

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