

Beyond the *Bhadralok* Imagination:

Kiriti Roy, Mnemonic Failure, and Cultural Erasure in Bengali Detective Fiction

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Abstract—The historiography of Bengali detective fiction cannot be fully understood without considering the trio of Byomkesh Bakshi, Felu Da, and Kiriti Roy, yet the latter has largely vanished from Bengal's cultural imagination despite his initial popularity. While Byomkesh and Felu achieved enduring status as intergenerational icons, Kiriti's Eurocentric stylisation and detachment from cultural and political stakes prevented him from being inscribed into the long-term memory of the *bhadralok*. This study employs Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and Paul Connerton's theories of cultural memory to examine why some detectives become cultural fixtures while others fade. Byomkesh embodied the rational, morally sensitive *bhadralok* whose nationalist sympathies reflected colonial Bengal's anxieties, and Felu Da balanced cosmopolitan modernity with an insistence on defending India's cultural heritage, both generating symbolic capital that resonated with the middle class and was ritualised through adaptations in literature, film, and television. Kiriti, however, remained an imported figure, defined by props such as the pipe and overcoat rather than by any enduring cultural anchor. Close readings of *Raktamukhi Neela*, *Reshmi Phaansh*, and *Bottirish Singhasan* illustrate this difference: while Byomkesh and Felu are remembered through moral positioning, iconic gestures, and cultural pride, Kiriti's silence on nationalism and heritage rendered him a gentleman sleuth without the mnemonic triggers necessary to secure his place in collective memory. As Connerton suggests, forgetting emerges when tradition and locality are severed, and Kiriti epitomises this disjunction; in Proustian terms, his figure left behind no involuntary memory to recall him to readers across generations. Thus, Kiriti Roy was never entirely forgotten because he was never fully remembered, and his trajectory reveals the paradox of a detective once popular yet absent from posterity, emphasising the cultural politics of memory, forgetting, and symbolic capital in shaping literary legacies.

Index Terms—*Bhadralok*, Detective, Habitus, Madeline, Memory, Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

All The historiography of Bengali detective fiction remains incomplete without acknowledging the triumvirate of Saradindu Bandhopadhyay's Byomkesh, Satyajit Ray's Felu Da, and Dr. Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Kiriti, whose acceptance and popularity among contemporary readers cemented their place in the genre. However with the passage of time, while Byomkesh and Felu Da retained their cultural relevance, Kiriti's appeal waned from the memory of Bengali readers and audiences. Byomkesh with his quintessentially Bengali *bhadralok*'s perspective on crime and society and his latent nationalistic spirit etched a permanent position in the heart of his readers. While Felu's cosmopolitan flair balanced with his sense of rootedness and pride in the cultural heritage of his country earned him a cultural capital that aligned him with the "habitus" (*Outline*, Bourdieu) of Bengali *bhadralok* of his generation and beyond. Bourdieu defined "habitus" as "a system of durable and transposable disposition" that generates practices aligned with a class's social position (*Outline*, 72). Byomkesh and Felu Da were precisely such embodiments whose reasoning, language and moral positions resonated with the Bengali *bhadralok* class and were passed on across generations of *bhadralok* as their symbolic capital.

Paul Connerton on the other hand, informed us that the societies remember only through ritual repetition: "images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances" (*How Societies Remember*, 72). Bengal's popular detective tradition has been epitomised by the characters of Byomkesh and Felu Da who have been celebrated ever since their appearances in the respective novels, through innumerable invocations across films and Television series. Consequently, Felu Da and Byomkesh remained cultural fixtures for decades as iconic Bengali *bhadralok* detectives in their specific ways. In contrast, Kiriti Roy has hardly seen a few adaptations in the popular medium, suggesting his character never attained similar cultural capital as the other two icons. This contrast points out a larger enigma of cultural persistence: why did Felu Da and Byomkesh become intergenerational legends, while Kiriti's fame gradually faded? Kiriti's absence from cultural memory can be attributed to the lack of strong mnemonic anchors. As Connerton makes clear, forgetting occurs when tradition and locality are severed: "a major source of forgetting... is associated with processes that separate social life from locality and from human dimensions" (*How Modernity Forgets* 6). Such disjunction from tradition is precisely what shapes the character of Kiriti, whose detachment from cultural and national stakes prevented him from being inscribed into the long-term memory of the *bhadralok* imagination.

In fact Kiriti's popularity in his initial days was largely dependent on his Eurocentric stylisation- his overcoat, hat, crooked pipe and occasional grass slippers and kimono at home - all markers of a swashbuckling "gentleman sleuth" celebrated in the pages of Western literature. For a third-world readership of Nihar Ranjan Gupta, in the mid-twentieth century Bengal, who desired access to the privileges of the Western world, such markers were enough to captivate the attention. A tall, dark and handsome Kiriti thus remained an imported figure whose symbolic capital dissolved once the colonial allure of the West became more accessible to the average reader through cinema, television and finally through globalisation.

Unlike Felu Da or Byomkesh, Kiriti lacked a strong association with *bhadralok* concerns of his time, which meant there were no lasting mnemonic triggers to secure his relevance in the cultural imagination of Bengali readers. Proust demonstrated in his celebrated work *In Search of Lost Time*, how cultural memory can be revived through sensory triggers: "the taste of little madeline had recalled Combray to me" (45). Thus, in Proust's terms, once the exotic of the Western fashion turned commonplace, nothing remained in Kiriti to "recall" him involuntarily to the cultural imagination. In other words, Kiriti Roy was never forgotten because he was never truly remembered. Connerton argued that memory depends on ritual, which Kiriti lacked; Proust emphasized the role of involuntary affective triggers, which Kiriti never evoked; and Bourdieu highlighted the need for alignment with "habitus," a space Kiriti never

occupied. Consequently, unlike Byomkesh or Felu Da, Kiriti remained a fleeting figure—confined to his time and absent from Bengal's cultural memory.

To bring out the striking contrast between Byomkesh and Kiriti we first focus on two stories from each detective's coterie with the same title: "Raktamukhi Neela". Byomkesh's "Raktamukhi Neela" (translated "The Deadly Diamond", Monimala Dhar) was published in 1937 followed by Kiriti's story with the same title (translated "The Blood Amethyst", Sharmistha Duttagupta) published in 1941. However, the similarity between these two stories was not confined to the title only; there was also a strong similarity in the plot. Interestingly in the climax of both the stories, the detectives appealed to the sense of ingrained superstition in their respective adversaries, regarding the ominous effect of the blood amethyst on its owners. While Kiriti made a half-hearted attempt to reason with Rustamji Meta before ultimately resorting to physically gouging the stone from the man's eye socket, Byomkesh, by contrast, engaged in a strenuous battle of nerves with the murderer Ramanath, eventually compelling him to surrender the hidden gem. Byomkesh's choice reflected on his *bhadralok* ethos- he was educated and rational but he was deeply aware of the cultural landscape around him. His method highlighted the performative confidence of a Bengali *bhadralok* (detective) who was morally and intellectually a superior to his adversary. Finally he won over the criminal mind by exploiting the latter's superstition- using mind over matter. In contrast, we have Kiriti, whose action made him more pragmatic like the Western detectives and less tied to the cultural self-fashioning of a *bhadralok*. His action was direct, physical and interventionist, as he took justice in his own hands.

According to Bourdieu, "Habitus is to be understood as a system of durable and transposable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, functions in every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions." ("Bourdieu's Class Theory", pp. 178–79) Byomkesh as a *bhadralok* detective carries the cultural "habitus" of the Bengali educated middle-class's valuing rational discourse, psychological persuasion and intellectual superiority over brute force. Kiriti, while also educated and sophisticated, is not characterised after similar self-conscious *bhadralok* mould as Byomkesh. The absence of *bhadralok* "habitus" in Kiriti explains why he does not project his intellectual superiority but prefers a straightforward physical action instead. In other words, lacking the *bhadralok* conditioning Kiriti is often freer to act physically than Byomkesh.

In another narrative of Kiriti Roy called "Reshmi Phaansh" ("The Mystery of the Silk Noose") we find the author divulge the detective's habit of engaging in regular *adda* sessions with Shashanka Chowdhury, "Sometimes the two men spent hours conversing in topics ranging from politics to cinema." (p. 53). Such *adda* sessions were quintessential practices of the Bengali people, where educated *bhadralok* would often engage in casual debates over literature, politics and culture. This information thus, nearly aligned Kiriti with the *bhadralok* "habitus" of Bengal; however, the author neither disclosed the detective's opinions on the contemporary political climate nor clarified his social standing in relation to this statement. Consequently, this withholding meant that Kiriti, despite his indulgence in the form of *bhadralok* culture (*adda*), was denied the voice of the *bhadralok* class. He thus remained a gentleman sleuth because of his education and social circle, but without the symbolic capital of expressed political or cultural authority that marks the *bhadralok* of any age.

Again, in contrast we have the character of Byomkesh Bakshi, who though refrained expressing any overtly political opinion in his initial narratives, but demonstrated a clear cultural positioning as the youth of a colonised nation since the publication of "Adim Ripu" (1955). This shift from his earlier avatar of an apolitical truth-seeker was obviously aided by the nation's independence from the colonial rule in 1947. Nevertheless, Byomkesh clearly expressed his alignment with the independent government of India through references to his friendship with Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel and other important people in the ministry. Interestingly such references had no direct influence over the plots of his narratives. However, as a *bhadralok* youth of Bengal it was impossible for Byomkesh to not have an opinion on the oppressive nature of the colonial rule. More so because he was characterised by Saradindu Bandhopadhyay as a morally conscious and socially sensitive individual who existed in the tumults years of India's nationalistic struggles. Saradindu might have resisted expressing Byomkesh's true emotions under the colonial rule fearing censorship from the colonisers, but once the nation was independent the Satyanweshi was free to show his preference for self-rule.

Irrespective of its year of publication, "Adim Ripu" was set against the backdrop of the years of India's struggle for independence. The story recorded Byomkesh's first act of defiance against colonial law through his association with Bantul Sardar, a local goon who supplied leftover American ammunition to natives for protection during communal riots. Byomkesh not only befriended him but also agreed to keep a pistol, in direct violation of British law. His arc of defiance culminated when he burned the promissory handnotes of the corrupt Anadi Sarkar, worth two lakh rupees, reasoning that such debts would only have burdened independent India with colonial liabilities in the future. Thus, Byomkesh aligned himself with the national sentiments and projected himself as a moral-political agent, not just a puzzle-solver. His reader, alongside Ajit, was glad to discover a new side to the Satyanweshi's character: one who subtly resisted colonial authority while affirming his allegiance to the nation. In Bourdieu's terms, such practices of Byomkesh embodied the "habitus" of the *bhadralok* class of his time, who were expected to be the custodians of the culture as well as active participants in the nationalistic narrative. In contrast, Kiriti remained a literary figure of refinement, self-control and adventure, but never became a representative of *bhadralok*'s anxieties and aspirations.

If Byomkesh secured his place within the *bhadralok* "habitus" of his age through his alignment with national sentiment and social sensitivity over the mere ritualistic observance of law, Felu Da too was firmly positioned as a *bhadralok* detective of his time. His cosmopolitan and modernist postcolonial persona was balanced by an uncompromising pride in his nation's culture and heritage. Consequently, Felu Da's plots repeatedly expressed his anxieties about the theft, smuggling and loss of Indian heritage. For example, in "Kailashey Kelenkari" ("A Killer in Kailash") he remarked on the black-marketing of idols ripped from Indian temples: "If these priceless statues keep leaving the country, soon we will have nothing left of our past" (Ray, 248). Thus, the character of Felu Da was clearly moulded by Ray to fit into the *bhadralok* "habitus" of post-independence India which not only coveted intellectual refinement but also took on the role of a custodian of the cultural heritage of the nation in the wake of colonial disposition. In Felu Da's case, detective work became an act of cultural defence against assaults on civilization, reinforcing the *bhadralok*'s self-image as the custodian of national identity. Consequently, his pursuit of the smugglers and counterfeiters was motivated not only by the crime itself but by the violation of the nation's historical memory. His anxieties therefore echo Bourdieu's insight that "cultural capital... is a power which defines and legitimates cultural hierarchies" (*Distinction*, 23).

Placed against Felu Da's attitude, Kiriti's indifference toward questions of heritage appears striking. In "Bottirish Singhasan" ("The Throne of 32"), he investigated the theft of a throne belonging to the deity of a zamindar household in Srinagar, a village in rural Bengal. Although the narrative briefly invoked a myth-o-historical background to explain the nomenclature of the artefact, this information was never developed further and remained a forced, out-of-context detail. Ultimately, the story unfolded as a tale of fantastical theft and eventual recovery, with Kiriti concentrating on the unusual circumstances under which the throne was stolen

from the palace's inner chamber. The narrative highlighted the perpetrator's use of mesmerism and cunning, culminating in his exposure before the detective. While Kiriti successfully recovered the stolen throne, he handled the matter with deliberate discretion, prioritising the preservation of the family's reputation over larger concerns of heritage, nation, or cultural continuity.

Kiriti's method was gentlemanly and noble, yet it accentuated his detachment from the *bhadralok* "habitus" of his time. For Bourdieu, "habitus" is a "system of durable, transposable dispositions" that shapes how individuals perceive and act within a given context (Outline 72). The *bhadralok* "habitus" of mid-twentieth-century Bengal was defined not only by refinement and gentlemanliness but also by a growing awareness of cultural identity, heritage, and national pride. Consequently, although Kiriti displayed discretion and nobility—forms of cultural capital linked to aristocratic values—he failed to convert them into the symbolic capital necessary to establish himself as a *bhadralok* detective of his time. By treating the lost throne merely as private property to be restored discreetly to its owners, he deliberately distanced himself from the broader political and cultural stakes that sustained the *bhadralok* worldview.

Thus, Felu Da and Kiriti exemplified two contrasting attitudes toward heritage. Felu Da transformed his investigations into acts of defending cultural capital, thereby reinforcing his identity as a *bhadralok* detective whose refinement carried with it a sense of national duty. Kiriti, by contrast, embodied the figure of the gentleman sleuth, solving crimes with discretion yet remaining silent on the anxieties of a society invested in safeguarding its cultural memory. In other words, Felu Da aligned his detective work with the larger project of national identity, while Kiriti remained confined to an aristocratic register, deliberately avoiding cultural and political stakes.

The contrast between Felu Da and Kiriti Roy deepens when we observe their relationship with "colonial cosmopolitanism". Both detectives inherit an admiration for the West from their respective authors, but their responses diverge sharply. Felu Da openly acknowledged his fascination with London and Sherlock Holmes, embodying the *bhadralok*'s cosmopolitan aspiration. Yet, when confronted with racism, his response revealed an equally strong investment in national dignity. In "Felu Da in London", Archibald Cripps recounted how the Dexter family dismissed Indians as "niggers." Felu interrupted with a sharp rebuke: "'Niggers? There are no niggers in India, Mr Cripps. In fact, even in America, blacks are no longer called niggers'" (Ray, *The Complete Adventures of Felu Da*). When Cripps persisted, Felu abruptly ends the conversation: "In that case, I don't want this conversation to go any further. Thank you for your time." Even Lal Mohan Babu admired Felu's stance: "'What an awful man! But you set him straight, Felu Babu... putting an Englishman in his place here in London is no joke, is it?'" Felu's cosmopolitan admiration was therefore filtered through a *bhadralok* disposition that insists on dignity, a balance of colonial-acquired cultural capital and nationalist pride. As Bourdieu noted, "'habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions" that shape how individuals act in context ('Outline of a Theory of Practice' 72). Felu's 'habitus' equipped him to admire Holmes yet he rejected the colonial insult, embodying the *bhadralok*'s dual orientation.

Kiriti Roy, however, revealed no comparable negotiation. Despite emerging in the politically charged 1930s and continuing into early independent India, Kiriti never voiced opinions on colonial stereotypes, nationalist issues, or cultural identity. His persona was almost entirely defined by external European markers: his tall stature, pipe, and overcoat (Gupta, "Kalo Bhramar"). Such Eurocentric modelling reflected the archetype of the gentleman sleuth rather than the Bengali *bhadralok*. His silence on political or social questions exemplified what Bourdieu calls "'the limits of the thinkable'", where dispositions restrict the range of responses ('Distinction' 471). Unlike Felu, whose responses situate him firmly within the 'bhadralok' habitus, Kiriti's dispositions align him with a transnational model detached from Bengali cultural stakes.

This difference in cosmopolitan style directly connects to the problem of cultural memory. Felu's sharp rebuke of Cripps functions not just as a narrative episode but as a "ritualized performance of *bhadralok* dignity"—a symbolic act that fans, readers, and media adaptations repeatedly recall. Connerton's dictum that "images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances" (*How Societies Remember*, 72) helps explain why this moment of defiance is re-performed in adaptations and remembered in Bengali culture. It becomes a kind of commemorative touchstone.

Kiriti, by contrast, provided no such performative memory. His adventures, detached from nationalist or cultural commentary, left no symbolic gestures to ritualize. Nor did his props—the pipe, overcoat, magnifying glass—serve as Proustian triggers. Byomkesh's 'satyanweshi' identity and Felu's dialogues act like such sensory cues, involuntarily summoning memory. Kiriti's borrowed markers, however, faded to activate Bengali affect. Without nationalist defiance or culturally embedded rituals, Kiriti remained unanchored in the *bhadralok* 'habitus', and thus highly vulnerable to the "structural forgetting" Connerton associated with modernity's disjunction from tradition (*How Modernity Forgets*, 6).

In conclusion, Kiriti Roy was never entirely forgotten because he was never truly remembered. He was admired briefly as a figure of Western sophistication but failed to transform that appeal into lasting symbolic capital. His disappearance tells us something important — that cultural memory does not preserve figures neutrally; it preserves those who embody a community's sense of self. Byomkesh and Felu Da survived because they mirrored Bengal's evolving self-image — from colonial anxiety to postcolonial pride. Kiriti did not. His Eurocentric detachment made him unfit for the rituals of remembrance that sustain cultural icons. In that sense, the story of Kiriti Roy is not just about a forgotten detective; it's about the *bhadralok*'s journey — from imitation to introspection, from colonial mimicry to cultural confidence. His absence marks the moment when Bengal stopped looking outward for its heroes and began to find them within its own cultural memory.

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