



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ANALYZING THE CRIMINALIZATION OF RACE IN THE AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF DETECTIVE AND CRIME FICTION

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Abstract

In contemporary times, detective and crime fiction has become more of a platform for social, and political commentary and raising awareness, than merely serving as a mode of entertainment. However, this was not a change that occurred overnight, but rather a result of a series of changes that disrupted the social balance over a period. In American culture, this trend began in the mid-twentieth century when crime fiction was concerned not alone with the display of individuals and crime but moreover the process of criminalization. In the US, this related to the process of ascribing an 'inherently criminal identity' to certain racial groups, to promulgate racial differences, thereby leading to a discourse on racialized crimes. This change in the social and political realm of the American society was promptly reflected in the works of detective and crime fiction. As such, this paper aims to analyze the criminalization of race in the American culture in the twentieth century, alongside the significance of detective and crime fiction in portraying the same.

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Introduction:-

As each social practice is a product of an impactful historic event or evolution, it is not surprising that the criminalization of race began having prominence in detective and crime fiction after the second Great Migration and the Civil Rights movement took place in the US.¹ These events caused significant racial and economic unrest in the society as well as political anxiety among the conservative and liberal parties, thereby, birthing issues that needed social dialogue and awareness. As a result of racial discrimination, 'race' itself came to be associated with crime. For instance, certain types of crimes, especially the ones of a more serious nature such as robbery, homicide, and drug trafficking were associated with the racial 'others' such as the blacks and Hispanic population, over the American whites, who were considered as racially superior.

This paper will assess the emergence of racial criminalization as a product of racial othering. It will also study the development and usage of elements such as 'blackness' and 'whiteness' in detective and crime fiction. Further, this paper aims to highlight how authors ascribing to the genre of crime fiction in America, used their works differently to signify the element of racial criminalization.

¹ibid. 704

Racial Othering and the Onset of Racial Criminalization

In general, race and ethnicity are distinct terms, wherein the prior refers to the colour of the skin and the latter refers to the ancestral nationality of a population.² However, as both race and ethnicity are social constructs, there have often been debates about the precise nature of their definitions. As such, for the purpose of this paper, race will be used as a common term for both race and ethnicity.

As a result of racial discrimination, following the post war racial politics, race, and crime became closely connected. For instance, one's race became a determinant of the probability for them to be associated with a certain crime. The victims of such racial discrimination and othering were primarily the blacks. To be black was enough to raise suspicion in the US during the twentieth century. While a general principle of law establishes the right of 'innocent until proven guilty', for the blacks, the application was informally reversed. They were the first to be associated with a crime and the last to get acquittal.

Despite the blacks being the prime victims of racial discrimination and criminal association, they were not the only race that suffered this differential treatment. In the 1900s, there were several European immigrants, such as the Italian and Irish immigrants, who were also victims of racial criminalization as they did not fit in the American society. However, their 'white race' and ancestry placed them on a higher level than the blacks concerning racial othering. It was believed, that, unlike the blacks, the European immigrants' association with criminality should not be seen as an inherent and inborn characteristic, but rather because of their economic depravity.³ Meanwhile criminality came to be seen as a biological as well as cultural trait amongst the blacks. While blackness and black criminality carried on through the course of the twentieth century in the US, criminality associated with the European immigrants began to lose significance in society when such a population received the recorded status of being white, giving rise to the concept of "Caucasian whiteness".⁴ This shows that although foreign white racialization was indeed a prevalent and concerning issue, it took precedence over black racial discrimination, due to the element of whiteness.⁵

Detective and crime fiction, in the early twentieth century was primarily concerned with the portrayal of white characters. Black characters were not even referred to let alone demonized. This was also pointed out by Frankie Y. Bailey in, *Out of the Woodpile*⁶ (1991), wherein, she stated that in the early twentieth century American detective and crime fiction, black characters were only given marginal roles such as housekeepers, waiters, clerks and so on. The predominant 'whiteness' of the early twentieth century fiction has been related to nativist populism by Sean McCann. He believed that in that era, racial opposition had become insignificant in the context of a market-based economy. This happened against the backdrop of the New Deal in the US, in the 1920s, whereby, class politics took precedence over racial issues. As such, the recognition of the European immigrants as 'whites' was the racial as well as the economic exclusion of the blacks.⁷ This, in turn, resulted in deviance from matters of racial opposition in the world of fiction, because owing to a vast expansion of whiteness, racially centric issues were not garnering much attention.

This changed in the governance of Jim Crow in the South and when the North experienced extreme residential and employment segregation of the blacks, eventually leading to black criminality.⁸ Racial discrimination against the blacks or the African American community, developed the elements of 'black criminality' and 'blackness' within detective and crime fiction. As these elements occupied their space within the ambit of crime fiction, several authors used these elements in their novels to bring to light their deviance and significance in real social life.

²Sampson, Robert J., and Janet L. Lauritsen. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Crime and Criminal Justice in the United States." *Crime and Justice* 21 (1997): 311-74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1147634>.

³Theodore Martin, "Crime Fiction and Black Criminality" *American Literary History* 30, no. 4 (October 2018): 708, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajy037>.

⁴ibid. 709

⁵Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2004), 56-90.

⁶Frankie Y. Bailey, *Out of the Woodpile: Black Characters in Crime and Detective Fiction* (Praeger, 1991).

⁷Theodore Martin, "Crime Fiction and Black Criminality" *American Literary History* 30, no. 4 (October 2018): 713, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajy037>.

⁸ibid.

However, while including the element of black criminality in their works, there were authors on both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand there were authors such as Highsmith and Hughes who conformed to the popular notions of an inherent association between blackness and criminality while on the other end there are authors such as Wright and Chester Himes and Harper Lee, challenging the ill notions of blackness being connected with criminality. This paper will assess the works on both such spectrums.

Conforming Blackness and Criminality

Patricia Highsmith displays and reaffirms the existence of an inherent connection between blackness and criminality in her novel *Strangers on a Train*⁹ (1950). This novel is based on a conversation between two strangers Guy Haines and Charles Bruno who meet in a train, wherein, the latter convinces the former to commit a double murder. Throughout the course of this novel, it has been reiterated how neither of these two characters fit the 'criminal type' or strike as someone who would normally be expected to fit the prototype of an 'obvious' murderer, because both characters were "white and wealthy", as opposed to poor and black.¹⁰ By repeatedly making a mention of the typical criminal type, which is racial in nature, Highsmith validates the stereotype in society with respect to black criminality. Moreover, by deliberately making her characters white and economically well off, she shows how there exists a hierarchy of racial codes prevalent in the American society as well as resurfacing in the system of law and order. This is because, owing to their race and economic background, the characters involved in the murder, were met with little to no suspicion despite a trail of obvious evidence against them.

Further, in her letters, Highsmith has also herself associated the black population with the element of criminality, by holding the predominantly black population of Newark, New Jersey, responsible for the high rates of crime associated with the city.

In her novel, *The Expendable Man*¹¹ (1963), Dorothy Hughes brings out the inseparable nature of criminalization and blackness. She does this by choosing a falsely accused black man (Dr. Hugh Densmore) as the protagonist of her novel. However, she deliberately conceals Densmore's race up until the first few chapters of her novel, to further lay emphasis upon the inherent connection of blackness with crime. Further, Hughes intentionally chooses Densmore to be a black and wealthy man who is wrongly convicted of a crime that was committed by a white bus driver, belonging to the working-class (Fred Othy). Hughes does this, to highlight how economic conditions in this case were completely overshadowed by the 'light' of race. This is because Densmore is suspected over Othy purely because of his black race, and the system fails to recognize how economic depravities are the real cause/ motive for crime, rather than race. Therefore, through this novel we see how even the law-and-order system prioritizes race as the prime element of suspicion within the ambit of crime, thereby reinstating the reversed principle of "guilty until proven innocent"¹² applicable to the blacks.

In her another novel, *In a Lonely Place*¹³ (1947), Hughes once again conforms to the popular description of the 'criminal type'. She lays emphasis on this by showing a white criminal, whose conviction is seen as shocking and unbelievable because he "does not look like that kind of man"¹⁴ due to his race.

Therefore, we can see that through their crime fiction novels, both Highsmith and Hughes reiterate and foster the inherent nature of the connection between blackness and criminalization. They do this by showing that when the identity of a criminal/killer is not determined, race is the prime and most targeted element in detecting such identity. As such, their works conform to the traditional view of racialized criminalization.

Debunking Racialized Criminality

While there were authors in the genre of crime fiction conforming to the views of relating blackness to criminality, there were also several authors writing crime fiction novels to debunk and expose the stereotype of racialized crime.

⁹Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train* (Harper & Brothers, 1950).

¹⁰*ibid.*68

¹¹ Dorothy B. Hughes, *The Expendable Man* (Arizona: Persephone Books, 1963).

¹²*ibid.*236

¹³Dorothy B. Hughes, *In a Lonely Place* (Duell Sloan and Pearce, 1947).

¹⁴*ibid.*40

One such author whose works on this issue repeatedly received immense backlash and criticism was Richard Wright, an African American author. Through his novel, *The Outsider*¹⁵ (1953), he attempted to highlight that both outsider and criminal are terminologies which have been given a racial coloring to facilitate racial discrimination. As such, the blacks, solely by virtue of their race, have come to be recognized as both outsiders as well as criminals. One of Wright's most criticized novels against racialized criminality was *Savage Holiday*¹⁶ (1995). The unique factor about this novel was that it was his only novel which did not have any black characters. Wright did this because his primary aim was not to debunk and oppose the issue of black stereotyping within the ambit of crime and criminality, which had been raised by several other authors and failed to get recognition, rather, he wanted to show the 'universal' nature of crime, as opposed to its 'racial' nature. He does this by not focusing on whether the murderer (a white man) will finally get caught and convicted, but rather by focusing on whether people will believe that he is indeed the murderer, due to his whiteness. This becomes vividly evident, when the murdered himself confesses his crime to the police but is met with reasons by the police as to why he cannot be a murderer because he "looks like a solid citizen".¹⁷ This surfaces the inbuilt racial stereotype prevalent not just in the society but also the system of law and order, which leads to the assumption of white innocence as opposed to black guilt.

Both poverty and criminality became interchangeable terms concerning black population, and this was brought to light in Chester Himes's novel, *A Rage in Harlem*¹⁸ (1957), wherein he shows how poverty and criminality are popularly being used as interdependent terminologies to refer to the African American community which was racially segregated in the US. As such, he shows that by segregating this section of society and forcing them to live in economically backward conditions, the system itself is propagating them to associate with crime due to poverty. Himes also critiques racial criminalization in his novel, *Run Man Run*¹⁹ (1966), wherein, a white homicide detective falsely frames an innocent black law student due to the ease of suspicion that can be associated with him, owing to his 'blackness'. As such, the only thing this student is 'guilty' of, is his race.

One of the most popular fiction novels which was published during the Civil Rights Movement in America is *To Kill a Mockingbird*²⁰ (1960) by Harper Lee. This novel aimed to expose the Southern racist society in the US. In this novel, when an African American man named Tom Robinson is falsely accused of raping a poor white woman named Mayella Ewell, he is surprisingly defended by a white lawyer named Atticus Finch. Finch provides Tom with a fair defence, however, despite all the evidence pointing towards Tom's innocence, he is convicted by an all-white jury. This shows how African Americans were not provided justice due to their race. Further, white lawyers, who were considered 'better' lawyers by virtue of them getting better education and job opportunities than the blacks, refrained from taking on cases for the African American community. This is because they too were aware of the flawed law and order system, which made it impossible to prove a black man's innocent, not due to lack of evidence, but due to his overpowering 'black guilt'. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus too receives immense backlash for willingly defending a black man against a 'white woman'. This goes on to show how justice, fairness and equal opportunity were all buried under the burden of race in twentieth-century American culture.

Conclusion:-

The twentieth century American culture has been greatly impacted by racially centric issues which had a different significance in different periods of the twentieth century. Racial discrimination and racial othering birthed the elements of blackness and whiteness in the American culture, which were further associated with crime and criminality. In the 1920s when racial opposition was losing its significance in society, due to an inclusion of European immigrants, it lost its relevance within the realm of crime fiction as well. However, when issues of racialization rose to significance once again, in the 1940s and 50s onwards, the authors writing detective and crime fiction, used their novels to bring out different aspects of racialized criminality, aiming to reflect with or raise awareness amongst the US society regarding discrimination and prejudice against the black or African American community which was highly normalized and ingrained at the grass roots of the American culture. This shows the importance of detective and crime fiction, in possessing the ability to shape the social and political issues of society, beyond merely serving as a mode of entertainment.

¹⁵Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (Harper & Brothers, 1953).

¹⁶Richard Wright, *Savage Holiday* (University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

¹⁷Richard Wright, *Savage Holiday* (University Press of Mississippi, 1995) 221.

¹⁸Chester Himes, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957).

¹⁹Chester Himes, *Run Man Run* (1966).

²⁰Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

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