



ROBERT GALBRAITH'S *THE CUCKOO'S CALLING* – A COMPELLING CONTEMPORARY WHODUNIT

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ABSTRACT

*Detective fiction is a genre that deals with crime, its detection, revelation of the criminals, and their motives. Detective fiction and crime fiction come under the category of popular culture. The popularity of detective fiction proves that people find it an intellectual activity to involve themselves in the stories where they also try to solve the crime. They feel a route of escape when they engage in intellectual activities like these. At the end of every detective story, the private detective presents us the real killer or culprit with substantial evidences which have escaped the notice of the ordinary eyes. Whodunit originated during the Golden Age. In “Whodunit” crime fiction the puzzle and the mystery element form the central focus. The term was coined in the 1930s. Doyle’s Holmes, Poe’s Dupin and Christie’s Poirot are the well-known detectives who are unusually observant and deductive in general. Contemporary whodunit with a credible back story is gaining widespread attention among the readers. The aim of this paper is to analyse Galbraith’s novel *The Cuckoo’s Calling* as a contemporary Whodunit. *The Cuckoo’s Calling* is a 2013 crime fiction by Robert Galbraith, the pseudonym of J.K. Rowling. It is the first novel of Cormoran Strike series and was followed by two other novels – *The Silkworm* (2014) and *Career of Evil* (2015). The novel’s opening paragraph sets the mood – mystery and thrilling. In the centre of the road, a corpse lies covered by a white cloth and the entire story is dedicated in finding the murderer of this dead person – Lula Landry. Robert Galbraith uses the classic conventions of Whodunit and presents the novel as a compelling contemporary whodunit suitable for the current generation.*

INTRODUCTION

Detective fiction is a genre that deals with crime, its detection, revelation of the criminals, and their motives. Detective fiction and crime fiction come under the category of popular culture. The popularity of detective fiction proves that people find it an intellectual activity to involve themselves in the stories where they also try to solve the crime. They feel a route of escape when they engage in intellectual activities like these. At the end of every detective story, the private detective presents us the real killer or culprit with substantial evidences

which have escaped the notice of the ordinary eyes. It also offers a platform for the analysis of psychoanalytic features of a person.

Crime fiction deals about the stresses or the reasons that would make a person kill another. Edgar Allan Poe is considered to be the Father of the Crime Fiction and Agatha Christie is considered to be the “Queen of Crime”. Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) is considered to be the first detective novel in English. Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh were the writers whose works constitute the Golden Age of Crime Fiction. The Golden Age was generally considered to be the period between the two world wars and was mainly dominated by the British female authors.

Whodunit originated during the Golden Age. In “Whodunit” crime fiction the puzzle and the mystery element form the central focus. The term was coined in the 1930s. Doyle’s Holmes, Poe’s Dupin and Christie’s Poirot are the well-known detectives who are unusually observant and deductive in general. Contemporary whodunit with a credible back story is gaining widespread attention among the readers. The technique of cause and effect is used to investigate the crime. The criminal who commits the crime is always considered to be an outsider. In a Classic whodunit, the number of suspects is limited. There are various types of detective fiction - Country-house mystery, locked-room mystery, and Snowbound mystery. Science of deduction is followed in solving the crime.

Hard-boiled fiction is another subgenre of detective fiction which differs from the whodunit in the frequent use of realistic descriptions of fights that takes place between the culprit and the detective who usually faces the opponent single-handed. Hard-boiled detective fiction was very popular during the war period in the United States. The hard-boiled detectives are referred as the private eyes. John Daly’s Race Williams is considered to be the first hard-boiled detective hero. The setting is very important when it comes to hard-boiled fiction. Agatha Christie’s novels are very popular in this aspect. Van Dine, Stout, John Dickson Carr, and Ellery Queen popularised American detective fiction.

The aim of this paper is to analyse Galbraith’s novel *The Cuckoo’s Calling* as a contemporary Whodunit. *The Cuckoo’s Calling* is a 2013 crime fiction by Robert Galbraith, the pseudonym of J.K. Rowling. It is the first novel of Cormoran Strike series and was followed by two other novels – *The Silkworm* (2014) and *Career of Evil* (2015). The novel’s opening paragraph sets the mood – mystery and thrilling. In the centre of the road, a corpse lies covered by a white cloth and the entire story is dedicated in finding the murderer of this dead person – Lula Landry.

The buzz in the street was like the humming of flies. Photographers stood massed behind barriers patrolled by police, their long-snouted cameras poised, their breath rising like steam. Snow fell steadily on to hats and

shoulders; gloved fingers wiped lenses clear. From time to time there came outbreaks of desultory clicking, as the watchers filled the waiting time by snapping the white canvas tent in the middle of the road, the entrance to the tall red-brick apartment block behind it, and the balcony on the top floor from which the body had fallen. (Galbraith 1)

The girl who dies is Lula Landry, the famous model who is at the zenith of her modelling career. Almost everyone believes that Lula has killed herself because such is the cruelty of the modelling world which is full of loneliness and self-loathing and she seems to be so consumed by it. But her brother John Bristow is of a different opinion. Three months later, he approaches a detective claiming that Lula is killed by someone and the only evidence he has is the camera footage which has been diligently examined and neglected by the police men.

And the detective is Cormoran Strike, the ex-SIB investigator who has lost a part of his leg in the bombing in Afghanistan. After this, he retired to London leading a life of Private Detective. Strike himself has a shady past. His father is a famous rock star and his mother is a groupie Leda Strike who is known for her notorious way of living. He also has a half-sister Lucy who is married and leading a happy life. Strike and Lucy are raised by their Aunt Joan and Uncle Ted. Soon after the news of his mother's death reaches Strike, he discontinues his education at Oxford and joins the army where he is celebrated a hero. But everything changes once he loses his leg and the only saving grace in his lonely life is long-term girlfriend Charlotte who breaks up with him in the beginning of the novel, proving her point by attacking him literally. At this juncture, Strike meets Robin and John Bristow who presents him an intriguing case to solve.

Robin Ellacott, a 25 year old comes in search of Cormoran Strike as the Temping Agency has sent her to work for him a week. She is just engaged to her boyfriend Matthew and until she settles for a proper job, she chooses to be temping for the present. The first meeting between Robin and Strike is an unusual one. And the way the author describes Strike is to paint him as a bully and the effect is immediate. For he accidentally attacks Robin mistaking her for Charlotte, his ex-ladylove who is the reason for his bloody appearance. "Her accidental assailant was massive; his height, his general hairiness, coupled with a gently expanding belly, suggested a grizzly bear" (Galbraith 15). Strike has to put up with the hysteric Charlotte. They have broken up and caught up many times during the past few years and he himself could not understand how they were together in the first place. "Once, after a particularly vicious row in their mid-twenties, she had climbed on to a rooftop, where she had swayed drunkenly, vowing to jump" (Galbraith 17). And very soon, we come to know that Strike is thrown away by Charlotte from her house and he starts living in his office, sleeping in a camp bed and eating cheap takeaways. All of this is known to Robin and she decidedly is professional. Robin is included in the service and initially Strike hopes to be free from her within a week but the relationship turns out to be more.

John Bristow is the brother of Lula Landry. He comes to Strike for help not only because he is a detective but also a close friend of his brother Charlie Bristow. Charlie died in an accident – while riding bicycle in a quarry. And because of this reason, Strike accepts the case. Also for the amount of money that would wipe Strike's present worries. From John, Strike comes to know more about Lula. Sir Alec and Lady Yvette Bristow adopt John and Charlie. But when Charlie dies at the age of nine, Yvette is disheartened. Alec suggests that they adopt a little girl and thus comes Lula into the family. By nature Lula is very stubborn and her stubbornness grows with the unconditional affection of her parents. When she comes to know of her true parentage and that her biological mother is still alive, Lula does not want to be with her adopted family. But after meeting her biological mother Marlene Higson, Lula changes her mind and she searches for her father and suddenly one day she dies. John firmly believes that she has been murdered by someone as Lula is a headstrong girl who is not afraid of her problems. All he has to vouch for this is a video:

The Runner was a tall black man, whose face was concealed by a scarf and who appeared on the footage of a camera on a late-night bus which ran from Islington towards the west End. He had boarded this bus around fifty minutes before Lula Landry died. He was next seen on CCTV footage taken in Mayfair, walking in the direction of Landry's house, at 1.39 a.m. He had paused on camera and appeared to consult a piece of paper (poss an address or directions? Bristow had added helpfully in his notes) before walking out of sight. (Galbraith 57)

Strike goes through John's notes and comes to an understanding that nothing given by John is going to be useful since these details have already been clearly investigated by the Policemen. But in order to solve his problems, Strike acts a little selfish and promises John that he would do his best. Strike uses deduction and psychological profiling as his main tools.

By nature methodical and thorough, Strike had been trained to investigate to a high and rigorous standard. First, allow the witness to tell their story in their own way: the untrammelled flow often revealed details, apparent inconsequentialities that would later prove invaluable nuggets of evidence. Once the first gush of impression and recollection had been harvested, then it was time to solicit and arrange facts rigorously and precisely: people, places, property... (Galbraith 36)

Lula's boyfriend Evan Duffield is the prime suspect of the case. Because after having a public row with him, Lula goes to her place and within few hours she is dead. Another suspect of the case is Tony Landry, Lula's maternal uncle. He is also a lawyer and treats John very distantly. He is one of the suspects because on the day of her death, Lula calls him

several times, but he doesn't pick up. Another number which is frequent in her mobile is her boyfriend's number. Both of them do not pick up and the same night, she dies. But when Strike meets Evan, he dismisses him as a suspect.

Strike lit a cigarette and read through Duffield's statement again. He was a man with a violent temper, who had admitted to attempting to force Lula to remain in the club. The bruising to the upper arms of the body was almost certainly his work. If, however, he had taken heroin with Whycliff, Strike knew that the odds of him being in a fit state to infiltrate number 18, Kentigern Gardens, or to work himself into a murderous rage, were negligible. Strike was familiar with the behaviour of heroin addicts; he had met plenty at the last squat his mother had lived in. The drug rendered its slaves passive and docile; the absolute antithesis of shouting, violent alcoholics, or twitchy, paranoid coke-users. Strike had known every kind of substance-abuser, both inside the army and out. The glorification of Duffield's habit by the media disgusted him. There was no glamour in heroin. Strike's mother had died on a filthy mattress in the corner of the room, and nobody had realised she was dead for six hours. (Galbraith 200-01)

Guy Some is Lula's designer friend who is also convinced that Evan must have killed her. Since Lula had been happy during the last few months and she is on the verge of becoming more popular because of her recent contract. Lula's Apartment at Kentigern Gardens is a posh one. Other than her, the Bestiguis and the rapper Deeby Macc live there. Deeby Mac has once dedicated a song for Lula and Freddie Bestigui ogles at Lula at every possible moment and even tries to get her to sign his film but of no avail. Derrick Wilson is the security guard of the place. Lula's early life is rough and she comes across as a careless person who doesn't care about herself and also about those who care for her. She has attempted suicide many times, run away from schools, and even supported herself for a quite a time as a prostitute. She is also affected by bipolar disorder.

Rochelle Onifade is the poor girl who is helped by Lula. Lula used to take her to shopping, and introduced her to her friends. But all Rochelle needs is a life like Lula's. She is also very jealous of Lula and thus when Strike contacts her, she doesn't come across as a person who has lost her friend. Instead throughout the meeting she seems impertinent and impatient. She refuses to cooperate with Strike and soon after meeting him she calls somebody and tells him about Strike. When Strike questions her about this, she acts indifferent. And within a week, she also turns up dead drowned in a river. When Strike meets Tansy, she reiterates the same story adding that she heard Lula say that she has already left everything to her brother. With her is Ursula, her friend whose husband is Cyprian May.



Her antipathy towards Strike seemed to have evaporated. He was not surprised; he had met the phenomenon many times. People like to talk; there were very few exceptions; the question was how you made them do it. Some, and Ursula was evidently one of them, were amenable to alcohol; others liked a spotlight; and then there were those who merely needed proximity to another conscious human being. A subsection of humanity would become loquacious only on one favourite subject: it might be their own innocence, or somebody else's guilt; it might be their collection of pre-war biscuit tins; or it might, as in the case of Ursula May, be the hopeless passion of a plain secretary. (Galbraith 182-83)

Prior to her death, Lula is busy in finding her biological father. She finds her father Professor Josiah Agyeman. She also learns that he has a family and that she has a half-brother Lieutenant Jonah Francis Agyeman. On the day of her death, Tony reveals the truth about Charlie's death. It is John who pushes Charlie in the quarry. After hearing this, Lula decides to leave her property to her brother Jonah. Since for quite some time, John has been pushing her for the money and new contracts. And it becomes the end for her.

The only witness in the case who claims that Lula has been murdered is Tansy Bestigui, wife of Freddie Bestigui, the producer. She repeatedly says that she heard a man's voice in Lula's apartment and the man and Lula argued about something before Lula fell from her balcony. Though Freddie Bestigui has no direct involvement in Lula's murder, he comes across as a shadowy person. He hides the important evidence from the police investigation. His wife is an addict and they have frequent rows between them. It is one such night when Freddie as a punishment pushes his wife outside the balcony. Tansy hears the argument in Lula's apartment and she pounds the balcony window. Freddie opens the window only to find his wife running down to tell the watchman about Lula. Since Freddie already has a violent history, he does not want to be dragged into this too. Hence he diverts the attention of the investigators and shuts his wife up in revealing the important matter that could have been helpful in identifying Lula's killer. But this does not go unidentified by Strike. Strike confronts him and gets the truth out of him.

Ciara Porter is the model friend of Lula from whom Strike comes to know about Rochelle. He also comes to know about the "will" which is signed by Lula on the way from the boutique Vashti to her home. It is a blue paper which says that Lula has left everything to her brother and she asks both – Ciara and Rochelle to sign that. Without knowing the implications, both sign them and the same night, Lula is killed. There is another person who witnesses the will. It is Mia Thompson, the worker in Vashti who pesters Lula for a modelling opportunity and stumble upon the will accidentally when Lula makes it in the dressing room. Strike finds this will in the handbag of Lula in her mother's place. In addition to this, Strike also recovers Lula's computer and notes that certain folders have been deleted.

It is utmost impossible as the whole time her laptop is in her mother's place. After piecing everything together, Strike identifies the real killer – John Bristow.

'No matter how much you've fawned over your mother, and played the devoted son, you've never come first with her, have you? She always loved Charlie most, didn't she? Everyone did, even Uncle Tony. And the moment Charlie had gone, when you might have expected to be the centre of attention at last, what happens? Lula arrives, and everyone starts worrying about Lula, adoring Lula. Your mother hasn't even got a picture of you by her deathbed. Just Charlie and Lula. Just the two she loved.' (Galbraith 527)

John Bristow is a troubled soul who longs for his mother's love but he is not able to experience that since he is always in a periphery with Charlie and Lula on the scene. Added to this is the money which he would be amassing from the death of Lula. When he comes to know about Lula's biological roots and her brother Jonah, John suspects that Lula's money will go to him. So he kills Lula, tries to frame Jonah so that he would be clear to amass Lula's money. Hiding in her flat, he pushes her. He also makes his secretary Alison Cresswell help him in the pretext of a romantic relationship. Alison who really loves Tony agrees to help John in this case. John says that the entire evening he was with his mother. But his mother who is actually under the effect of drug could not differentiate between morning and evening. After killing Lula, he comes to his mother's place, changes the time and makes it look like he has been with her the whole day. The only mistake which he does is breaking up of the vase in Deeby Mac's apartment from which water droplets fall on the floor and makes Wilson remember it at the exact moment of Strike's questioning. He has been hiding in Mac's apartment, kills Lula and when Wilson goes up to see what happened, he runs for his life. It is him that is seen running in the camera footage another one is Jonah who comes to Lula's place to talk to her but runs from the scene soon after he sees Lula fall.

When Strike confronts John, a physical altercation follows in which Strike gets wounded severely but is saved by Robin and he records everything that has happened with John. And so the murderer is acquitted and the Strike wins his case too. At the end of the novel, Robin chooses to stay back with Strike since investigation and solving a crime is what her utmost interest is. Strike is happy too as she is the most competent assistant.

The novel also throws light on the other side of the glamorous modelling world – with its bitter truth and harshness. Almost everyone in the “high fashion society” is bogged by many problems – drugs, violence, loss of one's own self and above all loneliness. Galbraith brings this out through the characters of Lula, Duffield and Guy Some. Even Strike Always surrounded by the paparazzi which robs them of their privacy, these people are in constant observation and criticism. This also contributes to the loneliness of Lula which she already has been accustomed to.

The conventions of a detective story are given by Knox in his ‘Detective Story Decalogue’ which includes the following:

- I. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story [. . .]*
- II. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course [. . .]*
- III. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable [. . .]*
- VII. The detective must not himself commit the crime [. . .]*
- VIII. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader [. . .]*
- IX. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind [. . .]*
- X. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepare for them [. . .] (qtd. in Scaggs 37)*

These are the most important conventions and Galbraith seems to have followed this code strictly with the slight exception of portraying Robin as the most observant and logical assistant. She plays the key role of providing information that Strike uses to zero-in-on the killer. The killer as we know in the end is John Bristow. He has been introduced in the very end itself. The place of action – Lula’s apartment as the scene of crime is very well constructed. It provides with no room for a murder at all. Though Strike has identified the killer already, he does not reveal it till the very end. It is when he confronts John directly we come to know that John is the real killer. And in the confrontation, Strike offers each and every evidence he has gathered against John and he explains them to John to the point. Though the idea of confronting the killer might seem exaggerated, it is what we call the signature moment of these hard-core PIs. They tend to get amusement in the darker sides of the life as such is their comic-relief.

The name that is synonymous with the science of deduction is the renowned Sherlock Holmes. Strike is very close enough to occupy the next place to Holmes. “...is part old-school private eye- a hard-luck tough guy with an almost existential take on life. And he’s part British-style Sherlock, using logic and deduction, not physical intimidation, to put together the puzzle pieces of his case” (Kakutani 1). Galbraith offers similar descriptions of Strike – he is alone without anyone to share his life with, poor, smokes a lot and highly impersonal. But his gifts are his extraordinary ability to solve crimes. Though his mere appearance might intimidate anyone, courtesy army, he is not the one to engage in violence readily. He solves his cases by his mere logic and deduction and nothing else. Much of the novel’s description is on the methods used by Strike in revealing the truth. His style of investigation is the speciality of his method.

When it comes to the development of the story, each crime fiction must develop on its own. Since the whole story revolves in solving the crime, there is no other way for the story development save its own. Tzvetan Todorov's structural analysis offers many ideas on the duality of the detective fiction. "In Todorov's analysis, the crime story contains two stories: the first is the story of the crime, and the second is the story of the investigation" (Scaggs 2). In *The Cuckoo's Calling*, this duality is followed and preserved to the end. The first half of the novel is dedicated to the description of Lula's murder and the introduction of the suspects involved in her killing. And the second half of the novel is full of investigative procedures mainly psychological profiling done by Strike in order to reveal the killer. In hard-boiled fiction, there is no union of lovers at all.

In contrast, no romantic resolution is offered in hard-boiled fiction. Rather, the impossibility of romantic resolution parallels the impossibility of resolving the criminal problem and restoring social order, and it is for this reason that the tough-guy detective, despite his (and more recently her) well-concealed romanticism, is invariably single. (Scaggs 47)

It is no deniable fact that Strike is attracted to Robin. The two things that are keeping him from getting attached to Robin are – his recent break-up with Charlotte that is well known and well avoided by Robin and Robin's engagement to Matthew. Matthew comes across as a possessive and controlled fiancé of Robin. He is neither okay with Robin's enthusiasm for the profession nor her praise of Strike. Strike only too aware of all this becomes emotionally detached from Robin and though he always expects her to be rid of his service, he seems delighted to see her continue as his secretary. His attraction towards Robin is evident when he gawks at her figure in Vashti when she tries on a green dress and has to control himself from remarking her looks at that moment. It is the same dress which he gifts her after solving the case. Galbraith decidedly keeps her hero single till the end.

Robert Galbraith follows the classical conventions of the whodunit detective fiction and renders it as a contemporary detective story that presents us with the highly enigmatic but compelling British sleuth Cormoran Strike who has already swept our hearts away with his methods and conduct. The novel which is packed with thrills and mystery at every turn of the page, builds up in a logical way, allows us into the worlds of the characters and ends up revealing the killer. And sure, many sequels are to follow this whodunit mystery and Cormoran Strike is very close to being the Contemporary Sherlock with his compelling methods.



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