

Disability in Dystopia: Navigating Disabled Suspects in Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's *Chiriyakhana (The Menagerie)*

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Abstract

Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's *Chiriyakhana (The Menagerie)* constructs a quasi-dystopian microcosm—*Golap Colony*—where “outcasts” live under the paternal surveillance of a retired judge. This article reads the novel through disability studies to examine how disability, disfigurement and muteness/deafness are mobilized as evidentiary signs within detective plotting. Drawing on Mitchell and Snyder's “narrative prosthesis,” Garland-Thomson's theorization of the “staring” encounter I argue that *Chiriyakhana* both exploits and interrogates ableist assumptions: the colony becomes a biopolitical enclosure that equates social deviance with corporeal difference, while the investigation repeatedly mistranslates disability into motive, guilt, or red-herring. Through close readings of characters such as Panugopal, Rasik Lal, and Nepal Gupta, the article demonstrates how the detective's truth-seeking gaze stands problematic. While *Chiriyakhana* resolves the crime, it leaves unresolved questions about justice, visibility, and epistemic violence.

Keywords: detective, fiction, disability, narrative, justice

I

The detective genre, with its hallmark combination of intellectual prowess and physical agility, has traditionally privileged able-bodied protagonists who embody the archetype of the strong, masculine hero. Globally, detectives in literature are typically portrayed as physically robust individuals, mirroring ideals of power and control. Such characters reflect a narrative convention that aligns mental acuity with physical ability, presenting detectives as figures of authority and idealized masculinity and as Susanah B. Mintz observes “it is something of a staple in detective stories that anybody is capable of doing anything.” (22)

Disability, when represented in detective fiction, tends to be associated with antagonists, reinforcing stereotypes that link physical impairments with deviance or criminality. Ria Cheyne, in her seminal work *Disability, Literature and Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* (2019) explores how ‘the narrative deployment of disability’ in crime fiction concerns itself with associating the category of disability with an inherent criminality and disorder. She writes,

The authorial attribution of disability to criminal characters draws upon cultural framings of disability as fearful and sinister, enhancing the anxiety which crime fiction seeks to evoke. This narrative deployment of disability also draws upon the association of disability with chaos and disorder, under which the disabled body/mind is positioned as inherently unruly. In crime fiction, the disabled perpetrator both embodies and creates disorder, the deviant disabled body/mind mirroring the deviance from social rules and norms involved in criminal acts. (Cheyne 70)

Barker and Murray also observes this perception to be rooted in historical and cultural stigmatization, where disability is not merely seen as a bodily limitation but also as a form of "otherness" that unsettles societal expectations of order, control, and normalcy (4). Drawing upon Lenard J. Davis's idea of 'normalcy' and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's concept of the 'normate', Barker and Murray observes that both are "ideological and bureaucratic constructions, defining a subject position that might appear to be straightforward and understood by all, but in fact is a fabricated state that disavows difference." (3) Such conventional framing tends to pathologize disability, linking it to criminal behavior by portraying disabled characters as morally ambiguous, emotionally volatile, or excessively cunning, thus reinforcing problematic stereotypes that associate physical or mental difference with deviance. They rightly observe,

Every character in popular fiction who was understood to be criminal because of, say, a facial disfigurement, or heroic because they challenged the perceived limitations that come with living "confined to" a wheel chair, could now be seen to be the products of ableist cultural assumptions about what kind of body or mind was normal and what were seen to be the terms of any difference from such norms. (Barker and Murray 4)

European detective fiction has more often than not exploited this trope and portrayed disability through a lens of criminality, reinforcing negative stereotypes. This trend can be traced back to the works of early masters like Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie. In Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator's obsession with the old man's vulture-like eye—a likely sign of cataracts—drives him to murder, equating the man's physical difference with malevolence. Similarly, Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Crooked Man" features a physically deformed character, Henry Wood, who is depicted as embittered and vengeful, his disability serving as a visual marker of his moral corruption. Agatha Christie's "The Pale Horse" introduces Thyrsa Grey, a character with a limp who orchestrates a series of murders, perpetuating the trope of the disabled villain. These narratives contribute to a problematic and reductive portrayal of disability, where physical difference is often synonymous with moral deviance and criminality, thereby reinforcing prejudices rather than challenging them.

The conceptualisation of "narrative prosthesis" by Mitchell and Snyder unmasks a longstanding narrative strategy that has repeatedly exploited the metaphor of disabled bodies in order to gratify what they identify as literature's temptation toward the exotic or the alien (55). According to Mitchell and Snyder, bodies marked by difference have been relentlessly

employed in literary narration as cultural signs of deviance, functioning less as lived embodiments than as symbolic excess. This deep-seated reliance of storytelling on disability, they argue, operates as a “device of characterization and narrative ‘rehabilitation’”, a mechanism through which narrative coherence is restored by instrumentalizing bodily difference. This process is what they term the “materiality of metaphor”, wherein disability acquires meaning not as a social or embodied reality but as a textual function. (57) Elaborating on this point, Mitchell and Snyder observe:

Since what we now call disability has been historically narrated as that which characterises the body as deviant from shared norms of bodily appearance and ability, disability has functioned throughout history as one of the most marked and remarked upon differences that originates the act of storytelling. Narratives turn signs of cultural deviance into textually marked bodies” (56).

To treat disability as a metaphor, however, is to evacuate its capacity to situate a fictional character within a community of disabled individuals or within a recognisable social world. Disability, when reduced to metaphor rather than understood as a social identity, ultimately affirms the existing social order and leaves intact the very stereotypes it appears to mobilize. Such representational strategies foreclose the possibility of resistance or re-signification, ensuring that disability remains an object of narrative consumption rather than a site of social critique. Extending Mitchell and Snyder’s argument, Kelly Kane goes so far as to claim, “This treatment of disability is, in its own way, as comfortingly unrealistic and as immediately gratifying as pornography”. (7)

However, within the corpus of Bengali detective fiction, disabled characters are rarely present, largely due to the genre’s preoccupation with featuring hyper-masculine heroes engaging in physical and intellectual battles against equally ‘able’-bodied villains. Bengali detective stories, rooted in both colonial and postcolonial traditions, often emphasize an idealized masculinity that embodies strength, agility, and a sharp intellect. This archetype of the male hero—exemplified by figures like Hemendrakumar Roy’s Jayanta Manik duo and Satyajit Ray’s Feluda—prioritizes bodily prowess as part of the hero’s appeal and capability in overcoming adversaries. In these narratives, detectives and villains are typically portrayed as physically able, rendering disability largely a non-issue or irrelevant within the genre. This lack of representation reflects an underlying cultural notion that perceives disability as incompatible with the heroism and dominance expected of protagonists.

II

Interestingly however, there is a very curious example in the fictional world of Bengali detectives where the question of disability constitutes a crucial thematic element. *Chiriyakhana* (translated into English as *The Menagerie* by Shreejata Guha), Sharadindu Bandyopadhyaya’s Byomkesh fiction, published in 1953, incorporates disability within its narrative framework. In this section there is an attempt to read *Chiriyakhana* in the light of

the above theoretical propositions to explore the ways in which the text reflects broader cultural anxieties, where disability becomes a marker of social failure or trauma, casting disabled bodies as “othered” and untrustworthy figures.

Chiriyakhana stages a Byomkesh Bakshi investigation within a bounded, tense habitat—part farm, part refuge, part panopticon—curated by Nishanath Sen, a retired judge who collects people with “pasts.” The very title in English, “menagerie,” codes residents as specimens, inviting the gaze to classify them as types: the disgraced doctor Bhujangadhar, the eccentric scientist Nepal Gupta, the “fallen” actress Sunayana, the scarred or speech-impaired Panugopal. In a nutshell, Nishanath Sen summons Byomkesh to his colony, worried about threats, identities, and an old scandal involving an actress named Sunayana. Soon Sen is murdered; later, Panu—a deaf-mute resident who *witnesses* the crime—is also killed. Byomkesh uncovers layers of disguise and eventually reveals Dr. Bhujangadhar Das as the murderer, while Banalakshmi is unmasked as Sunayana, her face transformed via plastic surgery to escape the past.

Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay’s description of Golap Colony initially unfolds through the language of order, productivity, and cyclical routine. Nishanath Babu’s unhurried account of the farm—where “*flowers bloom, vegetables grow, chickens lay eggs and the milk is turned into butter and ghee*”—constructs an image of organic regularity and economic self-sufficiency. (Bandyopadhyay 367) The daily dispatch of goods to Calcutta and the ownership of “*two stalls at the municipal market*” situate the colony within the circuits of urban capitalism, rendering it legible as a smoothly functioning economic unit rather than an aberrant social space. This pastoral-industrial rhythm produces an appearance of equilibrium that borders on the utopic.

However, this apparent idyll is unsettled by Nishanath Babu’s subsequent characterization of the colony’s inhabitants:

All the people who work under me in Golap Colony, apart from the gardeners, belong to a respectable class of society—but each is different or odd in his own way. Not one can be called a straight or simple person. The usual ways of earning a livelihood are closed to them. So they have all congregated on my doorstep. I give them a place to stay, food to eat and some pocket money every month. These are the terms under which they work at the farm. It is a little like a sanctuary... Some are handicapped by one physical disability or another and are, therefore, unable to work at normal jobs. For example, Panugopal—a perfectly healthy lad, but he has a hearing problem and his speech too is laboured; he has defective adenoids. He is illiterate. I have placed him in charge of the dairy and he is content looking after the cattle. (Bandyopadhyay 366)

While he insists that those under his supervision “belong to a respectable class of society,” the qualifier that follows—“each is different or odd in his own way” and that “not one can be called a straight or simple person”—marks a decisive shift from productivity to deviance. By declaring that “the usual ways of earning a livelihood are closed to them,”

Nishanath Babu naturalizes their exclusion from normative social and economic life. Disability, difference, and social nonconformity are thus collapsed into a single category of unfitness for the outside world.

Nishanath Babu's account of Panugopal provides one of the clearest instances of biopolitical regulation in *Chiriyakhana*. Within a Foucauldian biopolitical regime, such classification enables the production *docile bodies*. Nishanath Babu's decision to place Panugopal "in charge of the dairy" exemplifies this logic of differential allocation. The assignment is framed as benevolent—Panugopal "is content looking after the cattle"—yet this apparent contentment masks a deeper process of normalization through containment. His labor is carefully calibrated to his perceived limitations, ensuring productivity without challenging the hierarchy that marks him as permanently subordinate.

The symbolism of Panugopal's proximity to the cattle is particularly telling. His association with the mute, voiceless animals—and his residence beside the stable—effectively collapses the distinction between human and animal within the colony's classificatory order. Communication impairment thus becomes the basis for spatial segregation. This dehumanisation is further reinforced when, at a certain place in the story, the narrator describes Panugopal's voice as follows: "In response, a shrill goat-like bleating came from Panugopal's throat." (381)

Another significant aspect of Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's representation of disabled and disfigured bodies is the affective economy of shock and horror that accompanies their visual apprehension. Physical impairment and disfigurement are repeatedly framed as spectacles that unsettle the observer. It is argued that disability exists only in relation to what is deemed normal in an abelist society and it is a category that remains "chimerical outgrowth of human fascination with, and also terror of, human variation". (Mintz 22) While tailing of the spectacle of 'extraordinary bodies' Rosemarie Garland-Thompson observes that there is an eternal sense of discomfort associated with the sights of deviant bodies. She says, "Scrupulously described, interpreted and displayed, the bodies of the severely congenitally disabled has always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions and fantasies." (56) However, congenial or accidental, the Garland-Thompson's observation becomes relevant with all sorts of physical impairment. Deviant bodies are essentially sources of a stark cultural apathy.

Ria Cheyne, in her detailed engagement with the affective dimensions of disability within the horror genre, argues that disability has long been entwined with cultural registers of fear and unease. Horror, she suggests, frequently imagines disabled characters through the lens of the grotesque, positioning bodily and cognitive difference as sources of affective disturbance. As Cheyne observes, "Disability's entrenched associations with both fear and vulnerability have attained it a central, though rarely acknowledged, position in the horror tradition." (29)

In *Chiriyakhana* the narrator's description of two other major disabled inhabitants of Golap Colony - Rasiklal and Nepal Gupta evokes a sense of shock and horror at the sight of their respective impairments. Rasiklal De was in charge of the vegetable stall at the Hogg Market. At first meeting with Rasik, Ajit the narrator underscores his sense of pathological shock in the following way, "At this point, my eyes fell on his right hand and I started. Except for the thumb, the hand had no other fingers—as if they had been chopped off with a single stroke." (376) Similarly, the narrator portrays the impaired Nepal Gupta, former professor of chemistry in the light of fear and anxiety at being exposed to something that lies outside the horizon of bodily normalcy,

Nepalbabu was Nishanathbabu's age, but built like a thug. His complexion was a coppery brown; one side of his face had a rough, pitted texture, probably because of the burns sustained in the explosion. Perhaps, the face he had been born with wouldn't have been quite so terrifying; but the way it was now, was enough to send a shiver down one's spine. (384)

Such portrayal thus exposes the prevalent cultural anxiety that is associated with the discourse of severed body. There are also further nuances in the characters of Nepal. His liking of the game of chess and his scientific knowledge is indicative of a shrewd psyche that can be filled with possible criminal plotting of highest merit.

Very significant here, is to note that, the narratorial voice more often than not also on the same train with the common societal perceptions in terms of the narrator's response to the issue of disability. Also at some places of the story, there are occasional glimpses of empathy towards the disabled characters and this pertinent ambivalence within the story turns the narrative's the politics of representation all the more problematic. However, this particular aspect of the story may be dealt with later in this article.

III

Having delineated the novel's broader engagement with questions of disability, it now becomes necessary to situate this study within the framework of the detective's investigational gaze. Byomkesh Bakshi—famously known as *Satyanweshi*, the "truth-seeker"—occupies a privileged epistemic position within the narrative, one traditionally associated with rationality, moral clarity, and the restoration of social order. Gautam Chakraborti in his article "The Bhadrakok as Truth-Seeker: Towards a Social History of the Bengali Detective" (2012) assesses that Byomkesh's selfhood remains largely Europhone and "his socio-cultural project identifiable with post-Enlightenment Rationalism". (258) According to him, Byomkesh has 'a passion for individual justice and a love for the exotic' (Chakraborti 267) This article, however, seeks to interrogate the limits of that position. Does Byomkesh's investigative vision genuinely penetrate the surface of disabled embodiment to apprehend truth, or does it merely reproduce the normative assumptions that render such bodies perpetually suspect? Can justice be said to be fully served within a narrative where disability repeatedly functions as a site of misrecognition?

At one level, justice appears to be restored. The mystery is resolved, the murder is explained, and the real culprit is apprehended. Yet beneath this apparent closure lies a more layered ethical and epistemological problem. The process of detection itself exposes how investigative logic is shaped by ableist frameworks. This process read corporeal difference as clue, deviation, or red herring. Rather than wholly transcending these biases, the detective's gaze often remains entangled in them. This certainly raises troubling questions about the nature of truth-seeking. *Chiriyakhana*, therefore, does not merely stage the triumph of reason but it subtly interrogates the moral authority of the detective figure and his engagement with disability.

The detective's investigative gaze in relation to disability can well be understood by the theoretical formulations of 'staring' by Garland-Thompson. In her foundational work *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Garland-Thompson defines staring at its most basic form as "a universal part of our cognitive architecture that natural selection has bequeathed us" (17) and it is "an ocular response to what we don't expect to see." She further explains,

...staring is a physiological response. Disturbances in the visual status quo literally catch our eye, drawing us into a staring relationship with a startling sight. Staring is a more forceful form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, and other forms of casual looking. Staring is profligate interest, stunned wonder, obsessive ocularity. (13)

Staring however, as she thinks has deeper socio-cultural implications that goes beyond mere looking at something for long. How atypical bodies elicit a regulatory, investigative gaze that polices difference has been one of the major concerns in Garland-Thompson's work. She considers disability a condition that people usually tend to hide from the everyday public sight "sometimes through semantic slights-of-hand, sometimes through normalizing medical procedures that erase disability, and sometimes through closeting our conditions." (20) Hiding disability has turned it more into an exotic category rather than a fundamental aspect of our embodiedness. (21) She writes,

Rather than accepting disability and accommodating it as an expected part of every life course, we are stunned and alienated when it appears to us in others or ourselves. 6 When we do see the usually concealed sight of disability writ boldly on others, we stare in fascinated disbelief and uneasy identification. Why, we ask with our eyes, does that person with dwarfism, that amputee, that drooler, look so much like and yet so different from me? (21)

Therefore, the chance encounter with disability within everyday social space often transforms it into an object of staring,

In detective fiction we see, as part of the investigative procedure, the detective gets a licence to stare at the possible suspects. It is a sort of penetrative gaze that not only examines the physical presence of the suspects but also marks them as objects of forensic scrutiny. And it is at this point, the detective's involvement with disability becomes problematic. The body

of the disabled suspect becomes a clue and the marker of one's disability grabs the scrutinizing eye of the detective in no time.

As the detective plot intensifies, Byomkesh Bakshi begins to systematically assemble a list of possible suspects. He carefully correlates individual characteristics with potential motives. Significantly, the initial focus of suspicion falls upon Panugopal, the mute dairy attendant, and Nepal Gupta, whose burnt face marks him as visibly anomalous. From the outset, an atmosphere of pervasive suspicion envelops all the inhabitants of Golap Colony, yet this suspicion is unevenly distributed, clustering most densely around bodies marked by disability or disfigurement.

A particularly revealing moment occurs during Byomkesh's first encounter with Rasik Lal. The detective's attention is immediately drawn to Rasik Lal's severed fingers, which Byomkesh interprets as indicative of prior employment in a factory. The narrator says, "Byomkesh had also noticed the hand and asked in a calm voice, 'Were you employed in a factory earlier?'" (376) This inference gains weight within the narrative because Nishanath Babu had earlier received threats linked to disputes involving industrial spare parts and metal manufacturing. Rasik Lal's impaired hand thus becomes a visual clue, allowing the detective to translate bodily injury into occupational history and, by extension, criminal possibility.

Panu, as a deaf-mute and a crucial witness, is positioned in a deeply ambivalent way in the narrative. On the one hand, he functions as an important source of knowledge—someone who has seen and heard things that matter to the investigation. On the other hand, his sensory and speech impairments make him appear unreliable and fragile in the eyes of others. These impairments are repeatedly used to question his credibility and to mark him as the "weak link" in the chain of evidence. His vulnerability, produced by his inability to communicate easily or defend himself, ultimately leads to his elimination.

Byomkesh later expresses regret that he failed to understand what Panu was trying to communicate. He says,

That's where he died. It's my fault. I should have realized that if Panu really knew something of crucial importance, his life would be in danger. Why didn't I take preventive measures? Why didn't I bring him home with me yesterday? But yesterday Bijoy had remarked that Panu was an idiot and that, perhaps, he really didn't have very much to say. My mind was swayed by that logic ... (Bandyopadhyay 428)

This moment of belated realization exposes a critical limitation of the detective's truth-seeking method: despite his reputation as *Satyanweshi*, he is unable to fully read or listen to a disabled witness whose mode of communication falls outside normative speech.

IV

While defining “reflexive representations of disability”, Ria Cheyne says that such representations,

encourage the reader to reflect upon what they understand about disability and potentially to rethink it. Because dominant perceptions of disability in contemporary western culture are still generally framed in terms of loss, lack, and tragedy, such reflection has transformative potentials at both individual and social levels. While the production of reflexive representations is particularly closely linked to the textual misfit, genre fiction can also produce reflexive representations in other ways. (20)

This is essentially a call for a different representation of disability in genre fiction altogether. Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay’s *Chiriyakhana* remains suspended between what Mitchell and Snyder term *narrative prosthesis* and the possibility of *reflexive representations of disability*. This tension runs throughout the novel, producing a fundamental ambiguity in its ethical orientation toward disabled characters. While the narrative repeatedly mobilizes disability as spectacle, clue, and source of suspicion, it also intermittently gestures toward a more sympathetic, if still paternalistic, understanding of impairment. The moral and ethical position of the author, therefore, remains elusive rather than unequivocal.

This ambivalence is evident in the language through which Golap Colony and its inhabitants are described. Ajit’s observation is particularly revealing: “*I began to ponder over the various names that Golap Colony seemed to have accrued. Some called it a zoo, others called it a pen. I wondered what the rest of the inmates there were like. From the two specimen samples, I would say both its names were well-suited.*” The casual use of terms such as “zoo,” “pen,” and “specimen samples” unmistakably objectifies the residents, framing them as exhibits to be observed rather than subjects with agency. Disability and difference here become the basis for classificatory curiosity, reinforcing the logic of containment and display.

Byomkesh himself appears complicit in this rhetoric when he remarks, “*What else is it? A suspended doctor rattles off slokas in Sanskrit; a professor with a facial disfigurement plays chess with his daughter late into the night; the master is killed in a house whose doors are locked from the inside...What else could it be, but a human menagerie?*” Despite his status as *Satyanweshi*, the truth-seeker, Byomkesh momentarily reproduces the same taxonomic gaze that reduces bodily and social difference to a catalog of oddities. His description draws together disability, eccentricity, and criminal mystery into a single frame, underscoring how easily investigative rationality slips into spectacle.

Yet these moments of dehumanization are partially counterbalanced by Nishanath Babu’s paternalistic articulation of care, particularly when he remarks of Panugopal, “*He is a good lad, but God has been unfair to him.*” While this statement does not escape the logic of tragedy or divine injustice that often accompanies representations of disability, it nevertheless introduces an ethical register absent from the more cynical or voyeuristic descriptions offered

elsewhere. Nishanath Babu's sympathy, however limited, gestures toward recognition rather than mere classification.

Taken together, these conflicting discourses suggest that *Chiriyakhana* neither fully endorses nor fully dismantles ableist narrative conventions. Instead, the novel oscillates between exploiting disability as narrative device and exposing the discomfort such exploitation produces. This unresolved tension situates *Chiriyakhana* in a liminal space—one where genre expectations, ethical hesitation, and moments of reflexivity coexist without being fully reconciled.

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