



The Detective Genre in Azerbaijani and English Literature: Structure, Themes, and Narrative Strategies

Ilhama Mammadova¹

¹ Lecturer, Nakhchivan State University, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2787-5037>

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Abstract. *The detective genre occupies a distinctive position in world literature as a narrative form that combines formal structural rigor with profound cultural specificity: while its plot architecture — crime, investigation, and resolution — remains remarkably stable across literary traditions, the social meanings it encodes vary deeply with the cultural, political, and institutional contexts in which it is produced. This article presents a comparative analysis of the detective genre in Azerbaijani and English literature, examining the structural conventions, thematic preoccupations, and narrative strategies that characterize each tradition. The English tradition is traced from its foundational formation in Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle through the Golden Age puzzle narratives of Agatha Christie to the moral complexity of later crime writing, while the Azerbaijani tradition is examined through its Soviet-era emergence in the work of Jamshid Amirov and its post-Soviet international expansion in the prolific oeuvre of Chingiz Abdullayev. Drawing on structuralist narratology, genre theory, and postcolonial perspectives on popular literature, the analysis demonstrates that the two traditions share the genre's fundamental dual-story structure — the story of the crime and the story of the investigation — while diverging significantly in their construction of the detective figure, their treatment of justice and the state, their representation of social order, and their narrative handling of suspense and resolution. The article argues that the Azerbaijani detective tradition, far from being a derivative imitation of Western models, constitutes a creative adaptation that reconfigures the genre's conventions to articulate distinctively national experiences of law, morality, and social transformation. The comparative study of detective fiction thus offers a productive lens for understanding both the universality of narrative form and the cultural particularity of its realization.*

Keywords: *detective fiction, Azerbaijani literature, English literature, comparative literature, genre theory, narrative structure, crime fiction, popular literature*

1. Introduction

The detective genre presents comparative literary scholarship with a uniquely instructive paradox. On the one hand, it is among the most rigidly conventionalized of all narrative forms: its structural grammar — a crime committed, an investigation conducted, a truth revealed — has remained recognizably constant from its nineteenth-century origins to the present, across every literary tradition that has adopted it. On the other hand, it is among the most culturally revealing of popular genres,

because the way a society imagines crime, investigation, and justice exposes its deepest assumptions about social order, individual agency, state authority, and moral truth. The detective story is therefore simultaneously universal in form and particular in meaning — a combination that makes it an exceptionally productive object for comparative analysis (Todorov, 1977; Knight, 2004).

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the detective genre in two literary traditions that have rarely been examined together: the English tradition, in which the genre achieved its classical formation and global diffusion, and the Azerbaijani tradition, in which the genre developed under markedly different historical and institutional conditions — first within the ideological constraints of Soviet literary culture, and subsequently within the transformed literary marketplace of the post-Soviet period. The comparison is illuminating precisely because of this asymmetry. The English detective story emerged from and reflected the social conditions of Victorian and twentieth-century Britain: an industrialized, urbanized society with an established professional police force, an adversarial legal system, and a reading public anxious about crime and reassured by narratives of its rational resolution (Symons, 1985). The Azerbaijani detective story, by contrast, emerged within a Soviet literary system in which crime fiction was ideologically suspect, was permitted only within carefully policed boundaries, and was required to affirm the moral authority of socialist legality — and it subsequently evolved, after 1991, into a vehicle for exploring the dislocations of post-Soviet society and the position of Azerbaijan within a globalized world.

The aims of this study are threefold: to delineate the structural conventions that the two traditions share, demonstrating the remarkable stability of the genre's narrative grammar across cultural boundaries; to identify the thematic and ideological divergences that distinguish the two traditions, particularly in their construction of the detective figure and their treatment of justice, state authority, and social order; and to argue that the Azerbaijani detective tradition constitutes not a derivative imitation of Western models but a creative adaptation that reconfigures the genre's conventions to articulate distinctively national concerns. In pursuing these aims, the article draws on structuralist narratology (Todorov, 1977), the social history of crime fiction (Knight, 2004; Symons, 1985), and scholarship on popular literature in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts (Olcott, 2001).

2. Theoretical Framework: The Poetics of Detective Fiction

The theoretical foundation of this analysis is Tzvetan Todorov's celebrated account of the typology of detective fiction, which identifies the genre's defining structural feature as its duality of narrative: every detective story contains not one story but two — the story of the crime, which is absent, finished before the narrative begins, and reconstructed only through inference; and the story of the investigation, which is present, unfolds in narrative time, and has as its content precisely the reconstruction of the first story (Todorov, 1977). This dual structure explains the genre's distinctive epistemological character: the detective story is fundamentally a narrative about narrative, a story about the recovery of a hidden story, and its central pleasure lies in the gradual transformation of mystery into knowledge.

Todorov's typology further distinguishes the principal historical forms of the genre. The whodunit, perfected in the English Golden Age, maintains the strictest separation between the two stories: the crime is entirely past, the detective is invulnerable, and the narrative interest lies wholly in the retrospective logic of deduction. The thriller fuses the two stories: the crime and the investigation unfold simultaneously, the investigator is at risk, and prospective suspense replaces retrospective curiosity. The suspense narrative combines elements of both. This typological vocabulary provides

the comparative instrument of the present study, since — as the analysis will show — the English and Azerbaijani traditions distribute themselves differently across these forms, and the differences are culturally significant.

The structuralist account is complemented by the socio-historical approach developed by Stephen Knight (2004) and Julian Symons (1985), which reads the conventions of crime fiction as ideological constructions that respond to the anxieties of their producing societies. On this view, the classical detective's triumphant restoration of order is not a neutral narrative convention but a reassurance ritual: the genre stages the threat of social disruption precisely in order to contain it, affirming that crime is individual rather than systemic, that reason can master disorder, and that the social world is ultimately legible and just. The comparative question that this framework generates — and that this article pursues — is what happens to this reassurance structure when the genre migrates into a society whose experience of law, state authority, and social order differs fundamentally from that of its English birthplace.

3. The English Tradition: From Ratiocination to Moral Complexity

3.1 Foundation and Classical Formation

The English-language detective tradition begins, by scholarly consensus, with Edgar Allan Poe's three tales of ratiocination of the 1840s — "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) — which established in remarkably complete form the conventions that would govern the genre for a century: the eccentric amateur detective of superior intellect (C. Auguste Dupin), the admiring companion-narrator, the baffled official police, the locked-room puzzle, and the climactic explanation in which the detective reconstructs the hidden story of the crime (Poe, 1841/1975). What Poe invented as a philosophical exercise in the dramatization of analytical reason, Arthur Conan Doyle transformed into a cultural institution. The Sherlock Holmes stories (1887–1927) gave the genre its most durable icon: a detective whose method — the inference of large conclusions from minute physical evidence — embodied the Victorian faith in empirical science, and whose London practice positioned the detective as the protector of a recognizably modern urban society against the disorders concealed within it (Doyle, 1892/1981; Knight, 2004).

The interwar Golden Age, dominated by Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and their contemporaries, brought the whodunit to its formal perfection. Christie's novels — from *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) through such structural masterpieces as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *And Then There Were None* (1939) — refined the genre into an elegant game played between author and reader, governed by conventions of fair play: all clues available to the detective must be available to the reader, and the solution, however surprising, must be retrospectively logical (Christie, 1926/2002). The social world of the Golden Age whodunit — the country house, the closed circle of suspects, the restoration of bourgeois order in the final chapter — encoded, as Knight (2004) has argued, the conservative reassurances of interwar middle-class England: crime as individual aberration, detection as the triumph of reason, and society as fundamentally sound.

3.2 Complication and Renewal

The subsequent history of English-language crime writing is, in large measure, the history of the progressive complication of these reassurances. The American hard-boiled school of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler relocated crime from the country house to the corrupt city, replaced the invulnerable reasoner with a morally compromised investigator, and represented crime as

systemic rather than individual — innovations that migrated back into British writing and transformed it (Chandler, 1950/1988; Symons, 1985). Post-war British crime fiction, from the psychological explorations of P. D. James and Ruth Rendell to the procedural realism of later police novels, increasingly subordinated the puzzle to the study of character, social context, and moral ambiguity. The trajectory of the English tradition can therefore be summarized as a movement from epistemological confidence to moral complexity: from a genre that asks "who did it?" toward a genre that asks "why was it done, and what does it reveal about the society in which it was possible?"

4. The Azerbaijani Tradition: From Soviet Constraints to Post-Soviet Expansion

4.1 The Soviet-Era Emergence: Jamshid Amirov

The detective genre entered Azerbaijani literature under conditions radically unlike those of its English formation. Within the Soviet literary system, crime fiction occupied an ideologically precarious position: the genre's premise — that crime is a persistent feature of social life — sat uneasily with the official doctrine that socialism was progressively eliminating the social roots of criminality, and the Western detective story's individualist hero was incompatible with the collectivist ethos of socialist realism. Soviet detective fiction was therefore permitted only in ideologically domesticated forms: the criminal was typically an enemy of the state, a saboteur, a foreign agent, or a residual element of the pre-socialist past; the investigator was not a private eccentric but a representative of Soviet legality — a militia officer or state security investigator; and the resolution affirmed not the brilliance of an individual mind but the inevitability of socialist justice (Olcott, 2001).

Within these constraints, the founder of the Azerbaijani detective novel, Jamshid Amirov (1918–1982), produced the works that established the genre in the national literature — most notably *Qara Volqa* (The Black Volga) and *Brilyant məsələsi* (The Diamond Case), which achieved enormous popular success among Azerbaijani readers in the 1960s and 1970s. Amirov, who drew on his own professional experience in journalism and his familiarity with the work of the republic's law-enforcement organs, constructed narratives that observed the obligatory Soviet conventions — the investigator as state representative, the affirmation of socialist legality — while infusing them with distinctively Azerbaijani material: the urban topography of Baku, the social textures of Azerbaijani family and community life, and a moral seriousness rooted in national ethical traditions. His novels demonstrate the characteristic strategy of Soviet-era national detective fiction: the use of the genre's ideologically approved framework as a vehicle for national self-representation, embedding the affirmation of Soviet order within a recognizably Azerbaijani social world.

4.2 The Post-Soviet Transformation: Chingiz Abdullayev

The dissolution of the Soviet Union transformed the conditions of Azerbaijani crime writing as profoundly as it transformed Azerbaijani society. The collapse of socialist realist constraints, the emergence of a commercial literary marketplace, and the opening of post-Soviet space to global cultural flows created the conditions for a new kind of detective fiction — and its dominant figure became Chingiz Abdullayev (born 1959), the most internationally successful crime writer to emerge from Azerbaijan and one of the most widely read detective novelists of the entire post-Soviet region. Abdullayev's vast oeuvre — well over a hundred novels, translated into many languages and selling in the tens of millions of copies — centers on his celebrated protagonist Drongo, an Azerbaijani-born investigator and former Soviet special services analyst who operates as an independent expert across the post-Soviet space and the wider international arena (Olcott, 2001).

The Drongo novels mark a decisive generic shift from the Soviet-era model. Where Amirov's investigators were embedded representatives of state legality, Drongo is structurally independent: a freelance intellectual whose authority derives not from institutional position but from analytical brilliance, encyclopedic knowledge, and moral autonomy — a configuration that recalls the classical Western detective far more than the Soviet militia procedural. Where Soviet detective fiction localized crime within a single, ideologically legible society, Abdullayev's narratives are emphatically transnational: their plots traverse the capitals of Europe, the conflicts of the post-Soviet periphery, and the institutions of international politics, representing crime as a phenomenon of a globalized and morally ambiguous world order. And where the Soviet genre was required to affirm the justice of the state, Abdullayev's fiction repeatedly stages the gap between law and justice in the post-Soviet condition — the corruption of institutions, the criminalization of politics, and the moral burden placed on the individual investigator who must secure justice in a world where the state can no longer be presumed to embody it.

5. Comparative Analysis: Structure, Themes, and Narrative Strategies

5.1 Structural Convergence: The Dual Story

At the level of fundamental narrative structure, the two traditions exhibit striking convergence — a convergence that confirms Todorov's (1977) claim for the genre's structural universality. Amirov's Soviet-era novels and Abdullayev's post-Soviet thrillers, no less than Christie's whodunits and Doyle's adventures, are organized around the dual story: a concealed narrative of crime that the present narrative of investigation progressively reconstructs. In both traditions, the investigation is structured as a sequence of hermeneutic operations — the discovery of clues, the interrogation of witnesses, the formation and elimination of hypotheses — that culminates in an act of narrative revelation in which the hidden story is told in full. In both traditions, this structure generates the genre's characteristic readerly contract: the implicit promise that the disorder of mystery will be resolved into the order of explanation. The stability of this deep structure across two such different literary cultures is itself a significant comparative finding: it suggests that the detective genre's narrative grammar functions as a genuinely transcultural form, available for appropriation by any literary tradition.

5.2 Thematic Divergence: The Detective, the State, and Justice

Beneath this structural convergence, however, the two traditions diverge profoundly in their thematic and ideological content — and the principal axis of divergence is the relationship between the detective, the state, and justice. The classical English detective is constitutively independent of the state: from Dupin and Holmes through the Golden Age amateurs, the genre's central figure stands outside the official apparatus, and his superiority to the police encodes a liberal individualist conviction that truth is the achievement of the free intellect rather than of institutional authority (Knight, 2004). The Soviet-era Azerbaijani detective inverts this configuration: Amirov's investigators are the state — their authority is institutional, their success affirms the system, and the genre functions as a legitimation of socialist legality. The post-Soviet Abdullayev model then performs a second inversion: Drongo's independence from any state reflects a historical condition in which institutional authority has lost its presumption of justice, and the detective's moral autonomy becomes the only reliable guarantee of truth in a corrupted institutional landscape.

This three-stage configuration — independence as liberal confidence, institutional embeddedness as socialist legitimation, independence as post-Soviet disillusion — demonstrates with exceptional

clarity how a single generic role can be reconfigured to encode fundamentally different relationships between the individual, the state, and justice. The same comparative logic governs the two traditions' treatment of the social meaning of crime. The classical English whodunit individualizes crime: the murderer is a moral aberration within a fundamentally sound society, and the resolution restores an order that was never seriously in question. Soviet-era Azerbaijani detective fiction ideologizes crime: the criminal embodies forces external or residual to the socialist order. Post-Soviet Azerbaijani crime writing, by contrast, systematizes crime: in Abdullayev's world, criminality is entangled with politics, business, and the state itself, and the resolution of any individual case leaves the larger condition of systemic moral ambiguity intact — a configuration that aligns the post-Soviet Azerbaijani thriller with the hard-boiled and post-classical phases of the Western tradition rather than with its classical formation.

5.3 Narrative Strategies: Suspense, Setting, and Cultural Self-Representation

The two traditions also diverge instructively in their characteristic narrative strategies. In Todorov's typological terms, the English tradition's classical center of gravity is the whodunit — the retrospective puzzle narrative — while the Azerbaijani tradition, in both its Soviet and post-Soviet phases, gravitates toward the thriller: narratives in which investigation and danger unfold simultaneously, prospective suspense dominates retrospective deduction, and the investigator is personally implicated in the action. This typological difference has cultural correlates. The pure whodunit presupposes the social conditions of its English formation — a stable order within which crime is an exceptional disturbance to be contemplated at intellectual leisure; the thriller form answers to historical conditions of instability, in which the boundary between order and disorder is itself in question.

Setting performs distinct cultural work in the two traditions. The English tradition's canonical settings — Holmes's London, Christie's villages and country houses — function as dense social microcosms whose legibility underwrites the genre's epistemological confidence. The Azerbaijani tradition deploys setting bidirectionally: Amirov's Baku grounds the Soviet-era genre in national space, making the detective novel a vehicle of national self-representation within the multinational Soviet literary system; Abdullayev's transnational geography, conversely, projects the Azerbaijani investigator outward into global space, staging the post-Soviet nation's claim to participation in international modernity. In both phases, the Azerbaijani genre performs a cultural function that the metropolitan English tradition never needed to perform: the assertion, through popular narrative, of national presence — first within an imperial literary system, then within a globalized one.

6. Discussion

The comparative analysis developed above supports three principal conclusions. First, the detective genre's deep narrative structure — the dual story of crime and investigation, the hermeneutic sequence, the contract of resolution — is confirmed as genuinely transcultural: it survives transplantation across maximal differences of language, literary system, and political order, functioning with equal efficiency in Victorian London and Soviet Baku. This finding reinforces the structuralist account of the genre while extending its evidential base beyond the Western corpus on which that account was originally constructed.

Second, the genre's surface conventions — the construction of the detective, the social meaning of crime, the relationship of investigation to state authority, the typological balance of puzzle and thriller — are revealed as highly sensitive registers of cultural and political context. The three configurations

identified in this study (liberal-individualist, socialist-institutional, post-Soviet-autonomous) demonstrate that the detective figure is not a fixed archetype but a variable position whose filling encodes a society's operative assumptions about truth, authority, and justice. The history of the Azerbaijani detective genre is, in this sense, a condensed history of Azerbaijani society's changing relationship to law and the state across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Third, the analysis warrants a revision of the diffusionist assumption that non-Western detective traditions are derivative imitations of Western models. The Azerbaijani tradition's relationship to the Western genre is better described as creative adaptation: at each stage of its development, Azerbaijani crime writing has appropriated the genre's transcultural structure while reconfiguring its variable conventions to articulate national experience — the negotiation of national identity within Soviet constraints in Amirov, the navigation of post-Soviet globality in Abdullayev. The genre's very conventionality, paradoxically, is what makes it available for such national resignification: because the form is universally legible, the cultural variations inscribed within it become precisely visible and meaningful.

7. Conclusion

This article has presented a comparative analysis of the detective genre in Azerbaijani and English literature, examining the structural conventions, thematic preoccupations, and narrative strategies of the two traditions. The analysis has demonstrated that the traditions share the genre's fundamental dual-story structure while diverging significantly in their construction of the detective figure, their treatment of justice and state authority, their representation of the social meaning of crime, and their characteristic balance of retrospective puzzle and prospective suspense. The English tradition's trajectory — from the ratiocinative confidence of Poe and Doyle through the formal perfection of the Golden Age to the moral complexity of later crime writing — reflects the evolving anxieties of the society that produced it; the Azerbaijani tradition's trajectory — from Jamshid Amirov's Soviet-era domestication of the genre to Chingiz Abdullayev's post-Soviet international thrillers — encodes, with equal fidelity, the transformations of Azerbaijani society across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The broader implication of the study is methodological: the comparative analysis of popular genres offers comparative literary scholarship a uniquely controlled instrument for investigating the relationship between narrative form and cultural meaning. Because the detective genre holds its deep structure constant across traditions, the variations it exhibits are interpretable with unusual precision as cultural signals. Future research should extend this comparative framework in several directions: the systematic study of the reception and translation of English detective fiction in Azerbaijan; the analysis of contemporary Azerbaijani crime writing beyond the Abdullayev model, including emerging authors and televisual adaptations of the genre; and the incorporation of the Azerbaijani case into the growing scholarship on world crime fiction, which has begun to map the genre's global circulation but has yet to give the post-Soviet Turkic traditions the attention they merit. The detective story, this study suggests, deserves recognition not as a marginal entertainment but as one of the most sensitive instruments available for reading the cultural histories of the societies that tell it.

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