



## DETECTION OR ENDLESS DEFERRAL/ABSENCE IN DETECTIVE FICTION: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S AND THEN THERE WERE NONE

POLİSİYE ROMANDA YAKALAMA YA DA SONSUZ KAÇMA/KAYBOLMA:  
AGATHA CHRISTIE'NİN "AND THEN THERE WERE NONE"  
BAŞLIKLİ ROMANI

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### Abstract

Detective fiction, one of the most popular genres of the novel, is grounded on the concepts of crime and detection. The rise in detective fiction is followed by the surge of theories on this genre, particularly informed by (post)modern readings. Agatha Christie, "the Queen of Crime", not only contributed to the founding of the conventions of the genre, the "rules" of the "game", but she also defied and subverted the very codes of the genre during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Therefore, Christie's novels can be read as the decoding or deconstruction of the genre as well. Christie's *And Then There Were None* depicts the double-faced nature of truth or detection, as it reflects the endless doubling and deferral of presence/absence, criminal/victim, and lawgiver/lawbreaker. The nursery rhyme "Ten Little Indians" ("niggers"/"soldiers"), which is central to the novel, is a centripetal as well as a centrifugal force serving as the element through which meaning disseminates into others inside and outside. The rhyme enacts the fluid nature of signifiers of truth through the doubling of binaries such as innocence/guiltiness, childhood/adulthood, nurturing/indifference, white/black, self/other, primitive/civilized, and presence/absence. The rhyme, as well as the narrative is integral to moral, psychological, sociocultural, racial, and colonial/imperial implications. Even lacking a detective, this detective novel epitomizes detection as evasion or absence. The aim of this paper is to inspect the detective genre with a view to the performative, slippery, and ludic aspect of detection/truth as well as the dissemination, deferral or "purloining" of meaning through *And Then There Were None*.

### Öz

Roman türünün en popüler alt-türlerinden biri olan polisiye roman, suç ve yakalama kavramları üzerine kurulmuştur. Polisiye romanın yükselişini bu türü irdeleyen ve özellikle (post)modern yaklaşımlara dayanan kuramlara duyulan büyük ilgi takip etmiştir. "Polisiye türünün Kraliçesi" Agatha Christie, bu türün Altın Çağında başlıca kaidelerini, "oyun"un "kural"larını koymakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda türün kodlarını sorgulamış, tersyüz etmiştir. Bu nedenle Christie'nin romanları polisiye türünü deşifre edici ya da yapıbozucu yaklaşımlar olarak da incelenebilir. *And Then There Were None* romanında gerçeğin ya da suçluyu yakalamanın ikiyüzlü doğası, varlık/yokluk, suçlu-kurban, yasa yapan/yasa çiğneyenin sonsuz ikiliğinde ve sürekli elden kaçmasında görülür. Romanın merkezinde bulunan çocuk şarkısı/tekerlemesi "Ten Little Indians" (Niggers, soldiers) [On Küçük Yerli/Zenci/Asker], anlamın içerde ve dışardaki başka anlamlara dağılmasını gerçekleştiren, merkezkaç ve merkezci kuvvettir. Bu çocuk şarkısı, gerçeğin göstergelerinin akışkanlığını, masumiyet/suçluluk, çocukluk/yetişkinlik, korumacılık/kayıtsızlık, siyah/beyaz, ben/öteki, ilkel/uygar ve varlık/yokluk gibi ikili zıtlıkların yerdeğiştirmesi yoluyla sahneler. Tekerlemenin yanı sıra anlatımın kendisi de ahlaki, psikolojik, sosyokültürel, ırksal ve sömürgeci/emperyal anlamlar yüküldür. Dedektiften yoksun olan bu polisiye romanda gerçek kavramı, kaçma ya da kaybolma olarak temsil edilir. Bu makalenin amacı polisiye türünü, gerçeğin edimsel, kaygan ve oyuncu yönleri açısından ve *And Then There Were None* romanında anlamın dağılması, ötelenmesi ya da "çalınma"sını "teftiş etmek"tir.

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Detective fiction, established on the motif of "crime and detection", has appealed to numerous readers over the ages being connected with the essential human condition which involves humanity's endless quest for truth/detection in a world dominated by the eternal strife between self and other, good and evil, innocence and crime, where truth is contingent and resists detection. Detection is constantly deferred in literary texts, thereby turning out to be a dissemination or proliferation of meanings, selves

or reality. In other words, detection proves to be impossible or unstable as it is revealed in the very mechanisms of the genre, which relies on concepts of absence, play and suspension. Christie's *And Then There Were None*, which may be considered the epitome of the novels of crime and detection, depicts the undetectability of truth as it deals with the constant play of signifiers of truth, reflecting a society in which the boundaries between the respectable and offender are blurred, and no one is exempt from crime. The sense of deferral can be seen in the vacillation and doubling of the binary opposites in that binaries such as suspect/criminal and victim, crime and justice, criminal and judge, criminal and detective, homely and unhomely, host and hostile are destabilized and reversed within the drama of the text. Dissemination pervades the entire novel, including textual/intertextual elements such as the alternative titles of the book, the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Niggers" (or "Indians"/"Soldiers") which (de)frames the narrative, the (false) letters, the absent host(ess), the setting, the Epilogue and the last part (that is the manuscript). The text is further connected with (inter)textual elements such as the War, sociocultural, psychological, racial and imperial discourses. Focusing on the theories of crime and detective genre, and referring to the views of theorists such as Derrida and Bhabha, this paper argues that crime resists detection and Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* embodies the ambivalence and complexity of truth/detection.

The terms "crime fiction" and "detective fiction" are two overlapping genres which are often used interchangeably. To distinguish between the two terms, it may be assumed that crime fiction is an umbrella term for crime in general whereas detective fiction is particularly concerned with the process of detection and/or detectives. Crime fiction is considered to have risen in literary status since the 1960s with the blurring of the borders between high and low literature. However, as Priestman points out, it was only after the 1980s that crime fiction and theories on crime genre developed moving away from detective or mystery fiction which established the rules and theories of the genre in the interwar years or the Golden Age (Priestman 1). In other words, the term "crime fiction", which is a broader term has replaced the term "detective fiction" and crime fiction proliferated in social/cultural terms, including various media (2).

Having mentioned the ambivalence concerning the definition of the genre of crime or detective fiction, it could well be said that a sense of deferral dominates the genre. In Rzepka's words, "If the term 'crime fiction' is a bit vague, 'detective fiction' is

*downright slippery*" (Rzepka 2). Investigating the differences between crime and detective genres, Heta Pyrhönen states that the focus in crime fiction is on the motives of the criminal, that is, the question "whydunit" rather than the detective and "whodunit" unlike the novels of detection: *"By relegating the detective interest to the sidelines, crime fiction focuses on a criminal's mind and deeds"* (Pyrhönen 44).

Reflecting on the idea that detective fiction has attracted critical theories more than crime fiction, held by such critics as Heta Pyrhönen, Rzepka says:

[...] this may be because this analeptically engaging feature of the detective plot has made it so much more interesting to theorists of language, form, and representation – to narratologists, structuralists, and postmodernists – than crime fiction in general (Rzepka 3).

Christie's detective fiction falls into the "Golden Age" of detective fiction which covers the period between the First and Second World Wars, however they extend into the postwar era, and are regarded as representative of the "country-house murder" or the whodunit. Yet Christie is also considered eager to "subvert" the very genre of the "whodunit" (Scaggs 26). The reasons for the failure of the Golden Age fiction or the whodunit to survive the postwar period, as Scaggs articulates, could be that the whodunit was seen as characterized by an ordered, quiet and certain world, which was incongruous with the contingency of the postwar reality (29). The survival of the hard-boiled fiction in this period unlike the whodunit could be connected with their cultural, ethnic, and gender value which corresponded more to postwar climate (30). Golden Age novelists, including Christie are often criticized for dwelling too much on the mystery plot at the expense of character development (35-36). Golden Age fiction, as well as Christie's novels are regarded as conservative and representative of the upper-middle class status quo in that they are believed to be secluded from the anxieties of the social and economic realities of the early 20th century such as the Great War and Depression era (47-48). As Scaggs comments, Christie's interwar fiction particularly is considered *"to exclude from the positively Edwardian world they create all the devastation of the Great War and the social and economic upheaval of 1920s and 1930s depression"* (48) and her rural settings, like those of much British Golden Age novels are marked by a nostalgia for a return to an old, secure and ordered world (50).

Foreignness is a central element of crime/detective fiction. As Colin Watson remarks, British detective fiction between the world wars was mainly influential in empowering Englishness by excluding foreign lands and the foreigners. The quiet

and narrow middle-class setting of Christie's interwar stories, called "Mayhem Parva" by Watson, served to prop up the British middle class world (Watson 169-171): *"For the detective story was playing an increasingly important part in the attempts by the middle class to restore its nerve and to take its mind off the irrational and disconcerting things that other people, in other places, continued so wantonly to do"* (167). The prevalence of xenophobia or the fear of foreigners was represented in Christie's fiction including the novel explored in the present study. Watson notes *"Mrs Christie's awareness of how widespread in the England of 1936 was xenophobia, her own disapproval of which she implied"* (174). Racism was another aspect of detective fiction in-between the 1900s-1950s, as racial fear and the association of race with crime was a dominant motif: *"the fact of a public generally unaware of the ugliness of ethnic intolerance"* (123). Investigating the role of foreigners in crime fiction from the 1900s to 1950s, Margaret Sönmez pinpoints the conservative role of crime fiction in relation to empire, gender, and race, which serves to maintain the status quo in that crime fiction from the 1900s to the 1920s in particular "exhibits an underlying fear of change with respect to empire and gender roles", as well as it displays "stark racism" (Sönmez 77). Furthermore, detective fiction from the 1930s to World War II, including Christie's novels, portrayed foreigners less than before and foreigners appeared in the novels of the period as "red herrings" so as to promote "social coherence" (Sönmez 79).

Although Christie's novels are criticized for lacking character development and for being removed from the social-cultural reality of the period, it can be argued that social-cultural issues including race and war are reflected mainly through characters' consciousness, which Christie inspects closely and in detail as her novel studied in the present paper is concerned. That is to say, one can detect the sociocultural landscape of the era by contemplating her narrative. However not so obvious or direct, the traces of cultural and social issues are disseminated throughout the dialogical connections within Christie's text.

The place of crime/detective fiction in literature, and particularly the debates over whether detective fiction can be classified as high or low literature and if it has modernist or postmodern aspects have been examined by many critics. The place of detective genre in the literary canon and in literary theory is as ambivalent and resistant as the genre itself. The present study will look at the tensions within the genre both imposing and subverting the very assumptions it relies upon, the

modernist-postmodernist aspects and look at the ways in which detection turns towards anti-detection or a postmodern play of deferral.

Stressing the complex and fluid nature of the connections between genres and literature, including the relations between modernism and postmodernism Laura Marcus writes,

Detective fiction has been central to psychoanalytic, hermeneutic, structuralist, semiotic, and poststructuralist narrative theories, and has been deployed both to secure and to trouble literary borders and boundaries, including the distinction between high and low literature and the divide between modernist and postmodernist fiction (Marcus 245-246).

The connections between detective fiction and postmodernity, particularly postmodern fiction shows that fiction of detection like postmodern literary texts aim to detect truth and provide solutions only to subvert or deny it. William Spanos conceives of the anti-detective story as the "archetype of the postmodern literary imagination" which defies reason, and aims "to evoke the impulse to "detect" and/or to psychoanalyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause of the neurosis)" (Spanos 154). To illustrate it, Spanos refers to Christie's fiction as he writes, "just as though Agatha Christie's detective, on the verge of unmasking the villain, had himself suddenly turned criminal" (155).

Emphasizing the parallels between popular and postmodern, particularly the "metaphysical" or anti-detective novel, Marcus demonstrates that the motif of doubling in characters is central to postmodernist crime fiction as it "plays with the concept of the mirrored selves of detective and criminal", where the killer turns out to be the detective (Marcus 255). The ludic aspect of detective fiction, based on "play" was also highlighted by postmodern theorists and writers (262).

The "double plot" is another central element of detective fiction, which shakes the notion of a fixed truth and emphasizes the polyphony and heteroglossia of possible narratives. The plot of detective novels contain double narratives of plot, as the first narrative gives a rough and also deceptive account while the second provides a detailed explanation of the story. The element of duplicity, as Cawelti puts it, is in line with the (post)modern reader's "scepticism" and the continuous need for the search for truth "though truth is precarious and always elusive" (Cawelti 11-12).



The elements of subversion and inversion which are integral to postmodern literature can be seen in not only postmodern detective novels but in the traditional or Golden Age examples as well, since the detective genre is constructed on the principle of game. Kathleen Owen mentions the subversion of the rules of traditional detective fiction such as lack of narratorial authority and lack of solution: *“private solution or no solution; the violation of trust by the narrator, who has concealed an important piece of information; and the emotional attachment and regret the detective feels toward the criminal rather than the victim”* (Owen 79). The subversion of the traditional role of the narrator as a reliable figure in traditional detective fiction is also at stake in the novels preceding the postmodern as well, as Owen illustrates with Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in which the narrator proves to be the murderer contrary to the reader’s expectations (79).

The ambiguities and deviances governing the detective genre, as Lee Horsley demonstrates, include the duplication of detective-criminal-victim and the resistance to or absence of a solution to crime:

There are, for example, ambiguities inherent in the doubling of the detective and the murderer; there are numerous narratives in which the classic triangle of victim - murderer - detective is destabilized by changes in the role of the protagonist; and apparent narrative closure often co-exists with the representation of crime as irresolvable and omnipresent in modern society (Horsley 29).

The meta-fictional, self-reflexive aspect of the novels of the Golden Age, including Agatha Christie’s fiction involve *“characters often comment[ing] self-consciously on the fictional devices of the novels they inhabit, drawing attention to both the artificiality of the genre and the contrived nature of the crimes represented”* (31).

The increasing cultural significance of detective fiction, John Cawelti believes, is due to *“the gradual assimilation into our idea of literature of popular genres that used to be sharply separated from the literary mainstream, most notably the detective story”* which *“has been reflected in the frequent use of detective story patterns by major modernist and postmodernist writers”* (Cawelti 5-6). *“The remarkable ethnic and gender diversity of recent detective stories”* and *“the remarkable flourishing of regional and local detectives”* can be seen as the distinguishing aspects of the (post)modern international detective fiction (8). The *“subversive element”* in detective genre, Cawelti thinks, *“has manifested itself in the*

*genre's increasing openness to women and minority groups" (6). The genre's special appeal to women is also noted by Cawelti, as he states "women had an influence on the development of the detective story much greater than they had in any other literary genre except the romance", the reasons of which can be partly connected with the fact that "Even in the early days, the detective story strongly attracted women writers, perhaps in large part because, as an area of literature considered mere entertainment, it was more open to women than was "serious" literature" (6).*

Reading Christie's novels as *"a mere textual background between author and reader, Ina Rae Hark calls attention to the difficulty of the task of the reader to attain meaning where innocence and crime are interwoven and everyone is a possible murderer" (Hark 112). The "unreadability" of Christie's texts, Hark states, is also manifest in the "written confessions as suicide notes" by for instance "the judge" in And Then There Were None which also shows that "her [Christie's] books are about text, not crimes, and that her rationale for choosing murderers who affront readers' preconceptions is about reading mysteries, not about identifying criminals" (114-115).*

The concept of genre has been destabilized mainly through poststructuralist and deconstructionist approaches to literature. Accordingly, binaries such as presence/absence, high literature/low literature, writing/speech have been unsettled or dismantled. In "The Law of Genre" (1980), Derrida articulates the idea that there is no pure genre. He pinpoints the fluidity and heterogeneity of genres within the same expression which argues that genres are pure or not [to be] mixed: *"Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity" (203-204). However, he reverses his original statement by demonstrating that it is "impossible not to mix genres" (204). Thus, genres are not homogeneous but involve an impurity at their core: "what I shall call the law of the law of genre [...] is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy" (205). Texts are distinguished from one another through the genre it is involved in however they do not "belong" exclusively to genres. In other words, there is always a fissure at the heart of literary genres, what Derrida calls "corruption, contamination, decomposition, perversion, deformation, even cancerization, generous proliferation, or degenerescence" (204). Genres are like "floodgates", crossing of which is "deformation". As Derrida puts it: "this clause or floodgate of genre, at the very moment that a genre or literature is broached, at that very moment degenerescence has begun, the end begins" (213).*

Lacan's 1956 "Seminar" (1956) on Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1845) and Derrida's "The Purveyor of Truth" (1975) are among the early examples of the academic or critical appreciation of the genre of crime or detective fiction, thereby contributing to its conception as serious literature. Poe's text is about the "displacement of a signifier", the purloining of a letter. As Derrida notes: "*Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always capable of not arriving there*" (Derrida, *The Purveyor of Truth* 66). In other words, the wholeness of the letter or unity of meaning can never arrive as it is already conditioned by predetermined "divisibility", "ever-possible partition", and "dissemination". The law of the signifier, of truth, of the letter, thus, is always at the risk of mutilation. The text "The Purloined Letter", for Derrida, is imbued with "indirection" or deferral: "*a labyrinth of doubles without originals, of facsimile without an authentic, an indivisible letter, of casual counterfeits [contrefaçons sans façon], imprinting the purloined letter with an incorrigible indirection*" (109-110).

The deconstructive subversion and play which destabilizes the hierarchies is reflected as the reversal and play regarding the binary opposites including the main terminology and theory of the detective genre. In other words, the conception of detection is fused with deception or the text displays the impossibility of "detection" which is already "deception", disappearance, or "différance". Detective fiction is built on "absence" in keeping with the deconstructive approach. Crime or the criminal in a detective novel is only to be detected at the end, which shows the foregrounding of absence, which structures detective fiction. Each clue to the crime and the criminal gives way to the traces of other ones, thereby deferring detection or truth. Detection, meaning or truth, proves to be a supplement, an appendage which is constantly deferred. As it is observed in *And Then There Were None*, detection or truth can only be reached, if ever, as a supplement, a letter in the sea. Absence is a precondition of presence or detection, and what is reached is the trace of traces. The hierarchies concerning the binaries of absence/presence, deception/detection, and criminal/detective are unsettled and blurred in the novel.

Christie's *And Then There Were None* was first published in the UK, 1939 under the title *Ten Little Niggers* (Bunson 18). However, as the word "nigger" was considered offensive, the novel was published under different titles. The first US version was published in 1940 under the title *And Then There Were None* (Bunson 18). In John Curran's words, the novel is "*Christie's most famous novel, her greatest technical achievement and the best-selling crime novel of all time*" (Curran 111). The



nursery rhyme frame is a poem by Septimus Winner titled "Ten Little Indians" published in 1868 (Bunson 18). The original version of the novel uses the word "nigger" while the later alternative uses of it are "Indian" and "soldier". While some publishers adhered to the original book and saved the word "nigger", others particularly used the alternative title *And Then There Were None*, the setting "Soldier Island" and the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldier Boys" due to the offensive implications of the words "nigger" and "Indian". Christie also wrote a stage adaptation of the same novel in 1943. In contrast to the novel, the play had a happier ending, which befits the last stanza of Frank Green's version of the Septimus Winner rhyme, in which one Indian boy is left and is married (19).

In her notes about the novel, Christie states that her motive was the "difficulty" of detection or impossibility of it: "*I had written the book Ten Little Niggers because it was so difficult to do that the idea had fascinated me. Ten people had to die without it becoming ridiculous or the murderer being obvious*" (Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* 488).

*And Then There Were None* deals with the story of crime committed on an island, where a judge proves to be responsible for the death of ten people, alleged to be criminals who have formerly escaped the Law. The crime or its detection is almost impossible as there is no witness, including the murderer but a manuscript written by the murderer and thrown into the sea. No one, no detective, not even Scotland Yard Commissioner or his assistant is able to detect the criminal and solve the mystery without the help of the murderer's confession found completely by chance. The victims are summoned or invited to the island, which is the main setting, by an anonymous person, through letters. When they reach the island they find a frame of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldier Boys" ("Indians"/"niggers") in their room, and when they gather for dinner, they notice ten little statues of ten little soldier boys ("Indians"/"niggers") on the table. During the dinner, an anonymous Voice coming from a gramophone charges the ten guests with specific crimes assuming the manner of a Judge in the Courtroom and then the ten guests die or vanish one by one, recalling the way each boy disappears in the nursery rhyme. The death/murder of each guest is accompanied by the disappearance of one china figure on the table. In the course of a chain of murders, each character/victim tries to make sense of their own experience on the island, try to figure out the identity of the murderer, strive to escape their own death, and attempt to confront their own guiltiness as well as comment on the others' alleged

crimes. The characters' confrontation with their offenses have legal, moral, psychological and social aspects. The whole narrative sounds like a series of dreams or a phantasm, a kaleidoscope of endless sketches or fictions of truth, concerning multiple "I"s on the "I"land.

The novel is told in omniscient third person narration. However, it also incorporates the first person account of the judge murderer, a manuscript signed by him and attached as a separate part of the novel. The omniscient narrator enters the mind of every character, recording the thoughts and feelings of the ten guests/suspects/victims. The views of the characters are narrated through free indirect thought and stream of consciousness technique.

Not only the content but also the form of the text contains digression and disruption as it involves a medley of texts and genres. The form of the novel betrays the idea of a pure form or genre, as it is comprised of letters, diaries, manuscripts, scenes, an epilogue, a play within a play or *mise en abyme*, a nursery rhyme or poem, a judicial case, a psychological/psychical case, and the news. In other words, the miscellany of texts in the novel is an evidence of the essential hybridity of the text and intertextual relations embedded in it. The novel has an episodic arrangement which resembles a play. Each chapter consists of sub divisions in the form of episodes which look like the scenes in a play. The text defies the notion of closure or solution as it lacks a single ending and there are two additional chapters including first the Epilogue and then the manuscript or letter which marks the ending.

There is not a detective in *And Then There Were None* as far as the plot is concerned but a group of previously exonerated criminals and a judge assuming the role of the detective as well as other characters. The only real detectives, namely a Scotland Yard commissioner and his assistant inspector, are to be found only in the Epilogue, as a supplement, outside the plot. The novel plays with the idea of detection or truth as it renders the judge volunteer to solve the crimes he is responsible for on the island. The game or irony is at the expense of the reader who learns at rest that the judge plays the roles of justice, criminal, suspect, detective, victim and narrator.

As in Christie's other novels characterized by games or puzzles, the element of play pervades *And Then There Were None*. Christie makes her reader guess the most likely suspect to be guilty, then first thwart their expectations by annihilating its possibility, and then reveal the most likely suspect as guilty. As Christie writes in

her *Autobiography*, when she took up writing detective fiction she thought the murderer or murder should first seem apparently detectable only then to prove undetectable although real: *"The whole point of a good detective story was that it must be somebody obvious but at the same time, for some reason, you would then find that it was not obvious, that he could not possibly have done it. Though really, of course he had done it"* (Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* 262).

Robert Merrill, focuses on the aspect of play in Christie's narrative and points out that in *Ten Little Indians [And Then There Were None]*, *"Christie's victory" lies "in forcing us to entertain unlikely solutions we cannot dismiss even though we cannot believe in them"* (Merrill 90). Right from the beginning of her narrative, Christie makes the readers suspect Justice Wargrave; however, she then absolves him through his death, only to reveal him guilty finally. The deferral of the identity of the criminal manifests the slipperiness or the play of detection/truth.

The text challenges the notion of detection through the conception of an impossible crime and in dealing with criminals who escaped punishment. The crime committed on the Soldier Island by the then unknown murderer is identified as *"cases that the law couldn't touch,"* as the Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard says to Inspector Maine (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 230). The judge's aim in committing/staging the crimes on the island is another example of cases that are untouchable by the law. His *"ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve"* (248) echoes Christie's aim in writing this novel.

The novel portrays the drama of the deferral and dissemination of an endless chain of signifiers. For one thing, the idea of deferral is manifest in the image of the unknown, absent and deferred host(ess), a *"Mr Owen-unfortunately delayed"* (24). The house like the absent host(ess) is hostile and uncanny. One of the characters', Vera Claythorne's first impressions of the house and of the guests reflect her anxiety and the absurdity of their condition: *"Everything – somehow-was a little queer. The absence of the Owens, the pale ghostlike Mrs Rogers. And the guests! Yes, the guests were queer, too. An oddly assorted party"* (27).

The series of signifiers regarding the ten characters' coming to the island and their stay there, namely their view of their condition on the island and their relationship with the unknown, absent host(ess) are inconclusive. Beginning with the letters or invitations which initiate their journey, the house, the absent host(ess), the nursery rhyme frame in the rooms, the ten-little china figures in the dining room, the gramophone or the unknown voice, that is, every signifier leads to

another without sense. Dissemination and doubling mark various elements in the text including character, setting, language, and meaning: The seemingly respectable and innocent guests turn out to be criminals; the same guests having escaped punishment for their alleged crimes, become victims; the judge proves to be a murderer; the murderer becomes the judge; the house transforms into a courtroom; the stage replaces the law court; crime and justice become a performance or play. All signifiers end up becoming another signifier or text, or a manuscript in a bottle, which is the final signifier. The manuscript bottled and thrown into the sea accentuates the slipperiness of detection/truth and the idea that meaning/truth may not always be reached since a bottle in the sea is hardly attainable.

The contingency of meaning can be seen in the anonymous, mechanical voice coming out of the gramophone that charges the ten guests/victims/suspects with certain crimes. The Voice can be considered a dissemination of the absent host and hostess, the law which charges those escaping the Law, the voice of the murderer/judge and the voice of the ten suspects/victimsaccusing each other and their inner voice charging themselves. The proliferation of the possible agents related with the voice indicates the indeterminacy of meaning: *"Into that silence came The Voice. Without warning, inhuman, penetrating..."* (37). The Voice continued: *"You are charged with the following indictments"* (37).

The Voice gives way to a law court-like space where the judge/murderer leads the legal proceedings and each suspect defends him/herself and blames the other. The Voice of the courtroom and justice then shades into the Voice of the detective. Each guest then assumes the role of the detective and tries to point at one another trying to solve the puzzle/mystery regarding not only the accuser, that is the absent Voice, but also detect possible crimes. One of the characters, Anthony Marston, in self-reflexive terms, considers the mystery they face in the island as a detective or crime story: *"Ought to ferret out the mystery before we go. Whole thing's like a detective story. Positively thrilling." [...]* *"The legal life's narrowing! I'm all for crime!"* (60).

The Voice then diffuses into the absent addresser in the letters. The letter(s) act(s) as purloined signifiers, following each other in a chain of signatures/names/voices. The addresser in each letter sent by the unknown host(ess) to the guests is obscure, ambivalent, exchangeable, that is to say, "purloined". The absent signifier, that is, the letter addresser is *"Ulick Norman*

*Owen-Una Nancy Owen-each time, that is to say, U. N. Owen. Or by a slight stretch of fancy, UNKNOWN!"* (49).

The nursery rhyme is integral to the personal history and psychology of each character, as it reminds them of their past, namely, the crimes they committed. The fusion of past and present, absence and presence is enacted through the nursery rhyme, which intrudes the characters' psyche. In Vera Clayhorne's stream-of-consciousness, it is evident that the nursery rhyme existing in the present constructs the past crime/truth concerning her. Vera's views preceding her suicide shows the uncanny coexistence of past and present, accentuating the precedence of past over present, of absence over presence, the unconscious over consciousness, the nursery rhyme or the letter over the narrative. The presence of the unconscious is reflected in Vera's somnambulism. She adjusts her fate to the lines of the nursery rhyme, and to the scenario/setting of death prepared for her as she sees a rope with a noose and a chair and then hangs herself remembering the past and her crime:

To sleep safely since she was alone on the island. *One little soldier boy left all alone.* [...] There were still three little china figures in the middle of the table. [...] The third little figure she picked up and held in her hand. She said: 'You can come with me. We've won, my dear! We've won!' [...] *Vera, little soldier clasped in her hand,* began to mount the stairs. Slowly, because her legs were suddenly very tired. *'One little soldier boy left all alone.'* How did it end? Oh, yes! *'He got married and then there were none.'* Married... Funny, how she suddenly got the feeling again that Hugo was in the house... [...] *'One little soldier boy left all alone.'* What was the last line again? *Something about being married-or was it something else?* [...] What was that-hanging from the hook in the ceiling? A rope with a noose all ready? And a chair to stand upon- a chair that could be kicked away... That was what Hugo wanted... *And of course that was the last line of the rhyme. 'He went and hanged himself and then there were None...'* The little china figure fell from her hand. It rolled unheeded and broke against the fender. Like an *automaton* Vera moved forward. This was the end- here where the cold wet hand (Cyril's hand, of course) had touched her throat...'You can go to the rock, Cyril...' That was what murder was-as easy as that! But afterwards you went on remembering...She climbed up on the chair, her eyes



staring in front of her like a sleepwalker's... She adjusted the noose round her neck (220-223) [emphasis added].

The nursery rhyme is the embodiment of doubling or perpetual deferral of meaning as it contains the associations of the homely, cosy, innocent, nourishing, conscious and reassuring self alongside the spectres of crime, death, murder, guilt, evil, unconscious and experience, transferred to the Other. The rhyme mirrors the changing face of each beholder. In other words, the nursery rhyme can be considered the eternal battle ground of the binary opposites over each other in the individual and collective psyche. The self empowers, and nourishes itself while it wards off the criminal, foreign, unwanted, or unconscious onto the Other, that is, the nigger/Indian/soldier. The song/rhyme then serves as a mechanism to bolster the self by distancing and simultaneously reproducing its criminal Otherness. The nursery rhyme adorning children's imagination through a seemingly naive song, also inserts the evil as it reminds the minstrel song, carrying the traces of the criminal history of slavery.

The nursery rhyme determines not only the content but also the form of the novel in that the narrator's account mirrors the language peculiar to the nursery rhyme. The novel form gives way to the nursery rhyme, mingling the two genres. The following lines demonstrate the ghostly presence of the nursery rhyme in the narrator's and the characters' language and style. The rhyme patterns of the song recur by changing the form of the sentences in the central text. The responses of the ten victims/guests to the crimes are narrated by reproducing certain expressions in the language of the nursery rhyme: *"Six people, all outwardly self-possessed and normal"* (160). *"Five people, five frightened people. Five people who watched each other, who now hardly troubled to hide their state of nervous tension"* (174). *"Three people sat eating breakfast in the kitchen"* (201). *"Two people were standing looking down on a dead man..."* (216).

The sense of dissemination which is at the core of the novel further detects or scatters meaning as "dissemi-Nation". The concept of dissemination in the imperial sense can be traced to HomiBhabha's "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", in which the colonies function as supplements to the nation, characterised by heterogeneity. Bhabha illustrates his theory of dissemination with the British nation through the weather metaphor. He pinpoints the scattering of the British nation into its colonies and emphasizes its diverse supplements or doubles, including Africa, and India:

The English weather also revives memories of its daemonic double: the heat and dust of India; the dark emptiness of Africa; the tropical chaos that was deemed despotic and ungovernable and therefore worthy of the civilizing mission (Bhabha169).

The nursery rhyme, which frames the text, is embedded in social history and racial, national, colonial, and imperial issues. The nursery rhyme "Ten Little Indians [Niggers/Soldiers]" does not only disseminate the buried traces of the foreign, repressed memory of the ten suspects/victims relating to their crimes, but it also diffuses the foreign, suppressed double of the nation, namely, its imperial germs abroad. The foreignness of the colonial/imperial elements of the British nation is explicit in the locale, which is the island. The identity of the nation then dissolves/disseminates into the "Indian", "nigger", "soldier" selves/others overseas. It could well be argued that the ten little Indians/niggers/soldiers embody the imperial guilt traced through the disseminated signifiers. The detection of the individual's past along the ten suspects' crimes unravels the empire's past concerning its colonial others. The nursery rhyme is a telling signifier of selfhood, of identity, as it has the overtones of mothering, childhood, birth, and growth, and thereby stands for the nation. The nursery rhyme however also signifies the dispersion of the nation to the empire.

It could be claimed that representations of race and empire parallel those of crime in the text. Vera Claythorne's remark, "Our English summers are so treacherous" suggests the parallelism between crime/guilt and Britain, which recalls Bhabha's reference to English weather (17). The image of "sea" relates to the issue of race/empire as it calls to mind Britain's overseas colonies. As Vera before the mirror looks out of the window at sea, the sea not only reflects her personal guilt/memory, concerning the drowning of the child under her supervision but it may also echo imperial and racial guilt as well. Bloore's sironic remarks to the other suspects/victims indicate the guiltiness of not only the individual but also the British and humanity in general: "*What a duty-loving law-abiding lot we all seem to be!*" (57). In other words, Christie shows that no one is exempt from crime in society, and she reveals the masks crime or the criminal puts on, thereby emphasizing human corruption and hypocrisy.

In terms of the issues of race and empire, the text enacts the play of vacillating signifiers. The ambivalence of the binary opposites of innocence/experience, childhood/adulthood, and nation/empire pervade the

text. The nursery rhyme for instance, seems to signify not only the naive, happy, glorious and nostalgic memory of childhood or nation, but it also recalls the wild, dark, and guilty side of the adult or colonialism. The sense of modernity, enlightenment, civilization, innocence and perfection suggested through Vera's room, which is suffused with the images of excessive whiteness and light, is relativised through the "long mirror" and the nursery rhyme in the glimmering frame which reflects the simulacrum of the long history of imperial memory. The nursery rhyme arouses contradictory feelings in Vera in that it not only makes her uneasy but also smile; however, her smile yields to the painful memory of her guilt returning and surfacing with the room, the fireplace, the rhyme and the sea. The story of ten little niggers, Indians or soldiers resonate with colonial/imperial history, which is recorded in the individual's psyche as well as in social memory. The story of the ten little boys then is a slip-of-the tongue or the cryptic supplement, burying and uncovering the racial/imperial "burden" or "unconscious" of the white men, including the British Empire:

She[Vera] got up and walked restlessly about the room.

A perfect bedroom decorated throughout in the modern style. Off-white rugs on the gleaming parquet floor-faintly tinted walls-a long mirror surrounded by lights. A mantelpiece bare of ornaments save for an enormous block of white marble shaped like a bear, a piece of modern sculpture in which was inset a clock. Over it, in a gleaming chromium frame, was a big square of parchment-a poem. She stood in front of the fireplace and read it. It was the old nursery rhyme that she remembered from her childhood days.

Ten little soldier boys[nigger boys]<sup>1</sup> went out to dine;  
One choked his little self and then there were Nine.

Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;  
One overslept himself and then there were Eight.

Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon;  
One said he'd stay there and then there were Seven.

Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks;

<sup>1</sup> The original book, *Ten Little Niggers*, employs the expression "nigger boy" while the present book uses "soldier boy" (Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* 488).

One chopped himself in halves and then there were Six.

Six little soldier boys playing with a hive;  
A bumble bee stung one and then there were Five.

Five little soldier boys going in for law;  
One got in Chancery and then there were Four.

Four little soldier boys going out to sea;  
A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three.

Three little soldier boys walking in the zoo;  
A big bear hugged one and then there were Two.

Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun;  
One got frizzled up and then there were One.

One little soldier boy left all alone;  
He went and hanged himself and then there were None. (27-28).

The racial overtones of the nursery rhyme suggests the association of crime with race, namely the projection of guilt or crime on the coloured races, here African. The use of the word "nigger" also reveals how familiar and common the epithet was in the given period for the English characters, which implies that it was not considered offensive. The nursery rhyme functions as the unconscious of the English or white psyche, including the author herself, projecting their sense of crime onto their distant, black Other. However familiar and inoffensive the use of the word "nigger" in the novel seems, it contains the traces of racism and xenophobia.

There is also a pejorative reference in the novel to natives or Indians by some of the characters. Philip Lombard, in his defence of the charge laid against him regarding his abandonment of his soldiers to starve, justifies his criminal act by a racist remark: *"But self-preservation's a man's first duty. And natives don't mind dying, you know. They don't feel about it as Europeans do. [...] I left them to die"* (55).

The issue of race is also manifest in the characters' discussion of Lombard's alleged guilt regarding his men's death. When Lombard confesses abandoning 20 men to death, Emily Brent and Vera Claythorne take opposite stance. Vera seems to think it is fair to kill natives, as she says: *"They were only natives..."* (89), while Emily Brent criticizes her, claiming the fraternity between races. Claythorne's

response to Brent's reference to "our black brothers" reveals a sarcastic racist remark as she says: "*Our black brothers-our black brothers. Oh, I'm going to laugh. I'm hysterical. I'm not myself...*" (89).

The issues of self/other, nation/empire and race are also treated in the text through the house metaphor. The house stands for not only individual but also social, particularly national and imperial selves. The house thus not only incorporates the personal crimes and memory of ten suspects/victims but imperial memory as well.

It is observed that the seemingly quiet atmosphere of the novel as in other novels by the author turns out to be catastrophic, and nightmarish. Being an interwar era novel, it hosts the deadly, dark traces of the war by hinting at such concepts as betrayal, chaos, crime, uncertainty, and war. The war is another signifier deferred in the text, which is a ghostly absence in the unconscious of every character. The very name "Wargrave" referring to the judge/criminal, is laden with the associations of the dark, harmful, serious, and deadly aspects of the War, which may be a cryptic element incorporating the traumatic experience resonating in the collective unconscious. The person the victims/guests wait for is unknown and absent, as abstract as Godot, suggesting existential absurdity as well as the trauma of war. The absence of a host(ess) may suggest sense of alienation and lack of security in a mechanical and indifferent society torn by war.

Exploring the effects of World War I on the detective novels by British women in the 1920s and 1930s, Ackershoek maintains that the War gave rise to a new kind of detective that has a "thorough" and mainly "female" viewpoint in contrast to the previous male, authoritarian perspective, which diminished as there was "*a fundamental betrayal of trust, particularly of a paternal trust*" (Ackershoek 120-121). Although Christie's novels seem to be not affected by the War or by social change, Ackershoek states, "*the country-house settings*" depict "*not a securely powerful leisured class, but a class that is purposeless and doomed*" (124). The connection between the "ambivalence" of Christie's texts and their meta-fictional, theatrical aspects, which Ackershoek calls "Christian misdirection", is manifest in the country-house locale, which mirrors the duplicity and "unreality" of the society:

They [the country-house settings] are more like theatrical sets than real estates. The characters who inhabit them are known to each other only by virtue of the roles they play, roles that they resolutely pretend are real, though most of them have "offstage" activities,



carefully concealed from the other players [...] Murder disrupts this world because it calls attention to its falseness" (123-124).

The contingency of truth is further evident in the precedence of past over present, of writing over action, of ending over beginning and in the mingling and instability of time expressions. It is seen in the murderer's adjustment of his death to his account in a manuscript signed by him, bottled and disposed into the sea. His death or action is determined by his text. It is the letter or text that kills. Wargrave dies first in his manuscript, second in his *mise en scene* death, and third on his bed. In other words, the ending of the story precedes the beginning, since at the end there will be ten corpses left and an undetectable mystery, and there will be no other clue to meaning besides letters, diaries and notes:

There is, I think, little more to say.

After entrusting my bottle and its message to the sea I shall go to my room and lay myself down on the bed. To my eyeglasses is attached what seems a length of fine black cord-but it is elastic cord. I shall lay the weight of the body on the glasses. The cord I shall loop round the door-handle and attach it, not too solidly, to the revolver. What I think will happen is this.

My hand, protected with a handkerchief, will press the trigger. My hand will fall to my side, the revolver, pulled by the elastic, will recoil to the door, jarred by the door-handle it will detach itself from the elastic and fall. The elastic, released, will hang down innocently from the eyeglasses on which my body is lying. A handkerchief lying on the floor will cause no comment whatever.

I shall be found, laid neatly on my bed, shot through the forehead in accordance with the record kept by my fellow victims. Times of death cannot be stated with any accuracy by the time our bodies are examined.

When the sea goes down, there will come from the mainland boats and men.

And they will find ten dead bodies and an unsolved problem on Soldier Island.

Signed:

*Lawrence Wargrave* (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 249-250).

The metaphor of red herring reinforces the sense of endless dissemination rather than detection, thereby accounting for the proliferation of signifiers in the process of detection in crime. It demonstrates the elements of diversion, duplication, intertextuality, and play that is involved in the very act of detection. Red herrings dominate the novel, the murderer's account of his crime, the narrator's remarks about the crime, and the nursery rhyme. The number of the victims, for instance, is contradictory or unstable. The judge mentions ten victims in his confession, including Isaac Morris and excluding himself. Christie in her notes about the novel refers to ten dead people. The nursery rhyme deals with the death of ten niggers/Indians/soldiers. A red herring involves the number of the dead people in the text as there are eleven dead people including the murderer who is also one of the victims. The deaths on the island correspond to those of the ten little nigger/Indian/soldiers in the rhyme. However, there is a red herring, namely Morris or the murderer/judge himself.

The digressive or unstable aspect of detection is evident in the reference to "red herring" in the rhyme as well:

Four little soldier boys going out to sea;

A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three (28).

This scene refers to the moment in the story where the murderer inserts a "red herring" to divert the other suspect/victim's attention from himself, to prevent their detection of his crime, through a *mise en scene* of his own murder. The scene mirrors not only the nursery rhyme, but reveals the play of performative, contingent aspect of detection as well. As the murderer/judge confesses in his manuscript: "*the stage was set [...] I took up my pose of a murdered man*" (246). He also underscores the digressive function of his *mise en scene* as a red herring. Referring to the ensuing murder of the doctor/suspect, which he commits following his own false death, he judge points to the nursery rhyme to aid detection: "*He [Dr Armstrong] was still quite unsuspecting-and yet he ought to have been warned-if he had only remembered the words of the nursery rhyme. 'A red herring swallowed one...' He took the red herring all right*" (246). The judge's comments on the doctor's and the other suspect/victims' lack of attention to the metaphorical overtones of the word "red herring" in the nursery rhyme accentuates the polyphonic aspect of language and proves that meaning may not always arrive at its destination. The treacherous and unstable disposition of meaning is reinforced through the image of the crafty criminal. The *mise en scene* staged by the judge underlines the double face of the

criminal, wearing the theatrical mask, which incorporates his harlequin shades of criminal-victim, lawgiver- law breaker. The performative, fictional aspect of truth is extended, in the text, through the metaphor of the "artist". In his confession, the judge writes about his motives for crime:

I have wanted-let me admit it frankly-to commit a murder myself. I recognised this as the desire of the *artist* to express himself! I was, or could be, an *artist in crime!* [...]

I wanted something *theatrical, impossible!*

I wanted to kill... Yes, I wanted to kill [...] (239) [emphasis added].

The metaphor of "stage" promotes the idea of truth/meaning/law staged, which is constructed in numerous ways. The criminal judge's repetition of the stage metaphor in his references to his intrigues against his victim/suspects displays the ludic aspect inherent in crime and detection. The stage-crime analogy reveals the pre-planned, rehearsed aspect of crime, namely, its construction and staging. Justice Wargrave designs a murder, rehearses and then performs it, which is similar to the production of a play or art. The idea of staging particularly indicates the idea that crime may not always be detected as it may go unnoticed by law, as it is depicted in this text. The very experiment of the criminal judge to punish those offenders escaping the law justifies the idea that crime is already undetectable, thereby blurring the borders of the binary opposites of crime/detection, criminal/detective, criminal/judge, law, criminal/victim, guilty/innocent. That the narrative concerns *mise en abyme* is also evident in Vera's thoughts following her shooting of Lombard and supposing herself to be alone on the island, conceiving of their experience as a dream: "*The whole thing might be a dream...*" (220). The fictional aspect of reality is reinforced through the self-reflexive, meta-fictional elements as the murderer's statement that "*I enjoy reading every kind of detective story and thriller*" (238) and his aim to "*invent a murder mystery that no one could solve*" (248), which blurs the borders between actual crime and crime fiction, criminal and the novelist of crime fiction. The murderer becomes an author of crime fiction reproducing Christie's aim, while Christie or the author of crime fiction assumes the role of the criminal in her novels. In this game-like drama, there is a further doubling of psychologist and patient, or analysand and analyst, as the murderer even assumes the role of the psychologist, analyzes not only his own psyche but others as well. He refers to Vera Claythorne's death, for instance, as "*an interesting psychological experiment*" (248).

The ending of the novel or the murderer's confession reveals, the motif of the double, split-self, is a central motive for crime, while revealing the duplicity of truth. The cases of crime in Christie's novel accentuates the double nature of humanity, however respectable or ethical they seem. Judge Wargrave defines his double temperament as "*a mass of contradictions*" (237), which involves the coexistence of "the lust to kill" and "a strong sense of justice" (237). In his account of how he deceived his victims, he writes, "*it was inconceivable to him [Dr Armstrong] that a man of my standing should actually be a murderer!*" (244). That the crimes or the mystery on the island were unsolved without the murderer's letter justifies the undetectability of truth. That is to say, crime or truth can only happen or be detected after the nursery rhyme sets the scene and after the murderer's detective report/letter reveals the clues. The crimes or truths on the island are only possible through the texts preceding them, like the nursery song and the confession letter, which underlines their contingency.

The slipperiness of detection or dissemination of truth is also evident in the play version of the book *Ten Little Niggers*. Christie alters the ending of her novel to adapt it for the stage and adopts another version of the nursery rhyme. As Christie states in her *Autobiography*:

I thought it would be exciting to see if I could make it [*Ten Little Niggers*] into a play. At first sight that seemed impossible, because no one would be left to tell the tale, so I would have to alter it to a certain extent. It seemed to me that I could make a perfectly good play of it by one modification of the original story. I must make two of the characters innocent, to be reunited at the end and come safe out of the ordeal. This would not be contrary to the spirit of the original nursery rhyme, since there is one version of 'Ten Little Nigger Boys' which ends: '*He got married and then there were none*' (Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* 488).

To conclude, detective fiction delineates the complexity of the very nature of crime, assuming various individual, social, psychological, cultural, moral and physical manifestations, detection of which proves hard to attain, and incorporating ambivalent, (un)conscious and unstable traces or clues. It is observed that Christie's *And Then There Were None* depicts the manifold aspects of crime and the criminal, and the eternal suspension of detection or truth like a case study. The criminal case involves the chimerical doubling of innocence-guiltiness, victim-criminal, judge-suspect, and law-crime which resists detection and where

individual histories conspire with the social. In other words, the criminal island and the deadly nursery rhyme set the stage for the endless sea of eternally and inherently purloined "little" signifiers/detectors of truth which mirror the double face of innocence-crime and where there is no outside of crime or the criminal. Titles replace one another, words change faces, the Self shades into the Other, the past invades the present, the text becomes an inter-text, till all truths/fictions give way to each other, to another treacherous clue, "and then there were none".

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