

Agatha Christie: The Woman Behind the Fame

Ruby Gupta

I was barely twelve when I fell in love for the first time. In love not with any human or living being, but a novel - Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. It was love at first read! The novel evoked such a delicious gamut of emotions that I simply had to experience it again. Soon I was addicted to Agatha Christie's murder mystery novels. Her novels made me feel more alive than I had ever felt in my life. The more I read her books, the more deeply I fell in love. It was rather strange that Christie managed to permeate the heart and soul of a little girl in India even though her writing, setting, characters, and plot were completely British. Yet, not for a moment did I feel a sense of alienation whilst greedily devouring her 'cosy mysteries'. Perhaps because I had grown up on a steady diet of my childhood best friends, the engrossing and enthralling tales by Enid Blyton.

I read numerous other authors along the way, but it is Christie who is entirely responsible for shaping my sensibilities as a writer. Her mystery novels have permeated my psyche so deeply that all my creative endeavours bear the indelible stamp of her works. All my novels have the characteristic Christie tropes of a complex plot, closed environment, multiple suspects, numerous red herrings, and the proverbial twist in the tale. Indeed, I owe a debt to Agatha Christie for inspiring me to become a mystery writer. I would repeatedly gaze in awe and admiration at the iconic Christie picture on the back cover of her novels and marvel at the calibre of this God-like being. I never thought of Agatha Christie as a mere mortal and had no opinion of her as a person. I knew little about her personal life. Truth be told, I did not try to find out much about her personal life either. For me, she was a brilliant mystery author, much loved and idolized.

When I was honoured as the International Writer-in-residence at the International Agatha Christie Festival in Devon, England (10-17 Sep 2022) I began exploring her persona. Agatha Christie the author is well known in every corner of the world. But Agatha Christie the woman remains an enigma. Not much is known about the woman behind the fame. Who was she as an individual, as a woman? Agatha has not helped in unravelling this mystery either. Rather,

like a true mystery author, she has covered her tracks cleverly behind a brilliant smokescreen of a carefully cultivated public persona by shunning the limelight and writing her autobiography. She took great pains to keep personal aspects hidden beneath a veil of mystery being the astonishing writer that she is. And yet the truth hides in plain sight amongst all the red herrings that she has so carefully strewn about in her life. The more I delved into Agatha Christie's life, the more I realized that she was indeed an ordinary mortal, albeit with an extraordinary talent which she strove hard to preserve and express.

For a start, take Agatha's words, 'I had a happy childhood'. This is not quite the whole truth, and there are cracks in this façade. Her childhood had trauma much like many of us have traumas hidden away in the recesses of our childhood. There is an association with the macabre in her early life. Herein perhaps lies the genesis of nursery rhymes having ominous overtones in several of Christie's novels. Her older sister Madge took great delight in sadistically traumatizing her. Madge would play disturbing mind games with the young Agatha. She pretended to have an evil twin who lurked around Agatha perpetually waiting to pounce upon her. Agatha completely believed her older sister and spent terror-filled nights in fear of this so-called evil twin of Madge. Their rambling home, Ashfield, with its nooks and crannies, turned into a sinister place in the dark at times. Agatha was somehow unable to share this ordeal with her parents. She also often had a recurring nightmare in which a gunman in military uniform threatened her family. Over the years, Agatha's fractured relationship with Madge progressed to a rivalry since both were talented writers. Though Madge did the world a favour by challenging eighteen-year-old Agatha to write a mystery novel.

This is an extract from a longer feature which Ruby Gupta produced for Agatha Christie Festival, following her International Residency during the Festival in September 2022

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