

# The Geopolitics of Revenge and Justice in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*

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## Abstract

*Geopolitics deals with the role of geography in politics. It is related to the power that geography provides to the actors. Literature also includes geography (setting), which happens to be of great importance in power relations. A fictional work explores the role of geopolitics in the activities of the characters. Agatha Christie's murder mystery novel Murder on the Orient Express covers the geopolitics of revenge and justice. The geography of Eastern Europe helps the characters seek revenge and justice for a past act of injustice. This research deals with the geopolitics of revenge and justice which is an intrinsic subject of the study of this novel and it has not been analyzed yet. The research question of this research is: how does geopolitical situation help people take revenge and provide justice for an unjust crime? The research claims that geopolitics has a great role in providing the chance for revenge and justice to the victim for whom the state is unable to do so. The geopolitics of Yugoslavia supports the murderers to take revenge on Rachett and give revenge to Armstrong's family. America is an advanced and powerful country where the relatives of the Armstrong family cannot take revenge and give justice to that family, then they choose the geography of Yugoslavia which is a powerless, backward East European country. It is a hinterland geographically where the police force cannot spread its duty all over its territory. When the train reaches this area, the murder is done because the murderers think neither the police nor the detective would be on the train in that locality. They choose Yugoslavia for the crime because they can exercise power to take revenge on the murderer and give justice to the victim's family.*

**Keywords:** Crime, geopolitics, murder, power, Yugoslavia.

## Introduction

Agatha Christie's crime fiction *Murder on the Orient Express* is a novel of revenge and justice. The novel, set in some parts of Asia and Europe, revolves around crime and investigation. The train Orient Express is the close setting that "functions as a net ensnaring the characters who are the different nationalities, social classes, places of residence, ages and fortunes" (Madoeuf 55). Rachett (aka Cassetti), one of the passengers, is killed mysteriously on the train in the night when it is snowbound between Vincovci and Brod, a remote no-man's-land, at about midnight. By utilizing evidence and intelligence, the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot solves the mystery but he decides to keep it from the knowledge of the state police. Though America does not directly take place as the setting, it plays a significant role in the novel. The twelve passengers on the train equally take part in the murder of the antagonist

Rachett who is en route to Europe escaping from the punishment for the crime of kidnapping and killing a three-year-old girl, Daisy Armstrong, even after getting the demanded ransom by the Armstrong family. This case is heartbreaking because the innocent girl Daisy is killed mercilessly; her mother is deeply hurt by her killing and dies by miscarriage; her father Colonel Armstrong shoots himself to death and the family nurse commits suicide after she is suspected of assisting the murderer. Rachett becomes the cause of the destruction of the Armstrong family, but he easily gets released from prison by bribing the police and concerned authorities. The Daisy family does not get justice from the side of the government. So, the twelve people concerned with the Armstrong family make a civil jury and take revenge to give justice to Daisy's family. The geopolitics of Yugoslavia supports them to take revenge on Rachett and give justice to the Armstrong family.

Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* has been acclaimed as a great crime fiction since its publication in 1934. The train Orient Express is the title as well as the setting of the novel. "From its creation to the present day [the train Orient Express] has been the setting and source of endless stories, from journalistic accounts to novels, from history of fiction, with themes of adventure, luxury, politics, dreams, exoticism, travel or nostalgia for times past" (Madoeuf 53). The train setting is great in the novel because it "allowed for people [characters involved in the murder] with very different backgrounds to be together for long enough for the crime to take place and for there to be a variety of motives for Poirot to sort through" (Elizabeth 11). *Murder on the Orient Express* is also based on an amazing journey that starts in Syria on Sunday morning and finishes in Croatia (then Yugoslavia) the following Wednesday. Forensic science elements have been used more notably in this novel than in Christie's other detective novels. The role of 'fastidious and eagle-eyed' detective Hercule Poirot is of great importance because he rigorously investigates the murder of Rachett. "He finds many clues, but individual clues point to thirteen other passengers on the train, and no two of the clues point to the same person" (Rollyson 2041). He eventually solves this insolvable case by establishing that the murderer is connected to the kidnap and murder of a young heiress years earlier.

*Murder on the Orient Express* is a celebrated novel that many critics have analyzed from different perspectives. Jesper Gulddal presents a "counter-investigative" reading of the novel and "uncovers how this novel systematically undermines the authority of the detective protagonist" (3). He shows Hercule Poirot as a strongly prejudiced person from the beginning. His last verdict is also prejudiced as he decides to conceal the real identity of the murderer. Other critics Atika Pertiwi and Cita Hikmah Yanti describe the Deixis used in the novel that has a connection "between language and context" (88). They analyze the deixis used in utterances of the main character Hercule Poirot. They are namely personal deixis, temporal deixis, and spatial deixis. The deixes help to identify the dominant person, dominant place, and dominant time. L. Filiz Ozbag analyzes the patterns in the novel. The novel has three sections and twenty-four mini-sections and these sections and mini-sections have coherence in the matter of context. Ozbag explains this symmetry as follows:

- a) Poirot solves an 'unexplained incident' in the first mini-section and solves an 'incident the truth of which will not be explained' in the last.
- b) In the second mini-piece, all the characters meet on the Orient Express. In the penultimate

mini-section, all passengers gather in the restaurant.

- c) In the ninth piece, Poirot begins an 'investigation'. The ninth piece from the last is 'evaluation of data'.
- d) 'Red kimono' is mentioned for the first time in the tenth piece; in the tenth piece from the last 'red kimono' is found.
- e) Right in the middle of the novel 'Jury of Twelve' which is directly related to the solution of the murder and crucial in the way murder is committed is mentioned. (12)

This symmetry in the structure shows a pattern in the novel that shows the great skill of Agatha Christie in writing the novel. Similarly, the next critic M. Alexander analyzes the rhetorical structure of the novel and finds out that Agatha uses such structure to persuade the reader the truth Poirot's arguments incorporate. In his view, Agatha is "One of the greatest reader manipulators to be found in the various genres of fiction" (25). This quality of Agatha invites readers' engagement and scrutiny.

Revenge and justice are two main thematic aspects of the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. Geopolitics also plays a great role in the novel for revenge and justice. The murder of Rachett (Cassetti) takes place on Brod in Yugoslavia (Croatia), but all the characters involved in the crime are from outside of it. The murder is a planned action of the passengers of the train and it takes place after all the concerned people aboard the train. When *Tauras Express* arrives at Konyo, Hercule Poirot overhears Miss Debenham and Colonel Arbuthnot talking together. Miss Debenham says, "Not now. Not now. When it is all over. When it is behind us -then-" (Christie 7). This conversation indicates that the killing of Rachett is an already planned action and they had chosen an appropriate geography for the event that they have planned. Then the questions arise: Why did they choose Yugoslavia for the murder of Rachett? What is the politics behind this intention? Though the characters that are involved in the murder are American, Swedish, German, British, Italian, French, Greek, and Belgian, why did they choose Yugoslavia (Croatia) for the murder of Rachett? This paper tries to answer the research question: how does a geopolitical situation help people take revenge and provide justice for an unjust crime? The paper claims that geopolitics has a great role in providing the chance for revenge and justice to the victims for whom the state is unable to do so.

## Theoretical Framework

Geopolitics is related to the influence of geographical factors in politics. In other words, it is the politics related to geography that describes the role of geography in politics. According to the classical definition, geopolitics is related to the state territory and its people. However, the concept of geopolitics has changed over time. Colin Flint opines that in contemporary politics, geopolitics requires more than one meaning, "First, we must note the connection between geopolitics and statesmanship: the practices and representations of territorial strategies. . . . Second, geopolitics is more than the competition over territory and the means of justifying such actions: geopolitics is a way of seeing the world" (13). Geopolitics is concerned with territorial strategies and means of approval of actions done. In the age of globalization, there is the great relevance of international boundaries. Klaus Dodds describes two distinct understandings of

geopolitics, “First, geopolitics offers for many a reliable guide of the global landscape using geographical descriptions, metaphors and templates such as ‘iron curtain’, ‘Third World’, and/or ‘rogue state.’ . . . Second, we could focus our attention on how geopolitics actually works as an academic and popular practice” (4-5). In his opinion geopolitical activities are not only concerned with states and governments, they are also related to individuals and non-governmental organizations. In Karl Haushofer’s view geopolitics is to “investigate the relationship of political events to a significant part of the earth’s surface” (qtd. in Cahnman 55). He explains the relationship between political events and geography. Similarly, Charles B. Hagen claims, “Geopolitics . . . observes and speculates upon the influence of geographical necessities upon political events and changes in political forms of states” (484). Geopolitical factors may be important to create tensions, but they may be important to provide resolution. Geopolitics shows a strong relationship between geography and power. In other words, geography is helpful to exercise power. Geopolitics is related to geography and geography is related to power, which directly relates to knowledge. Foucault asserts, “There is no power relation within the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose, and constitute at the same time power relations” (27). In this sense, geopolitics is also related to power and knowledge.

John Marx analyses the English novels from 1890 to 2011 that deal with geopolitics and asserts that fiction regularly questions authority. In his view the question seeks to “intervene in governmentality and to renovate it” (217). Nattie Golubov defines the role of geopolitics in popular culture. He asserts, “Geopolitics, often considered to be the state-centric purview of powerful elites who actively shape the world while the rest of us watch on, ‘is about the assignment of values to places that matter and those that do not.’ In this view, popular culture also actively ascribes meanings to places literally ‘dividing the world up into spaces with which we associate values’” (348). Golubov claims that powerful elites shape the world. He also talks about the role of popular culture in ascribing the geopolitics. Popular geopolitics spreads geopolitical discourses to a wider audience, and it also disseminates the discourse of geographical determination, such as certain places and their peoples are judged to be safe, courageous, antidemocratic, or dangerous.

The literature reviewed above justifies that geopolitics must be considered in a broader spectrum. The concept of geopolitics is not only confined to politics; it can be used as a tool to analyze literary works because they talk about certain places and peoples and their behaviors.

### Textual Analysis

Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* also includes the influence of geopolitics on human activities. The novel is about crime, and the crime is done for revenge and justice for another crime done in the past. In the novel, geography plays a great role in the thinking of the characters. While the train is in Bulgaria, an elderly American woman Mrs. Hubbard referring to her daughter says, “You can’t apply American methods in this country. It’s natural for the folks here to be indolent.... I guess there’s nothing like education. We have got to apply our Western ideals and teach the East to recognize them” (Christie 19). In her view, there is

a difference between America and Western Europe. She opines that the geography of Eastern Europe has affected the education and thinking level of people living there. The passengers who take part in the killing of Rachett are very much aware of the geography of the Oriental place. They also know that the condition of the train is “an additional vector of disorder, bearing the enchantment and the curse of the mysterious and threatening world conjured up by its name” (Madoeuf 60).

America is an advanced and powerful country where the relatives of the Armstrong family cannot take revenge and give justice to that family, then they choose the geography of Yugoslavia which is a backward East European country and it is powerless. It is a hinterland geographically where the police force cannot spread its duty all over its territory. In the novel M. Bouc rightly says, “Another circumstance- passing through most countries we have the police of that country on the train. But in Jugo-Slavia, no. You comprehend?” (Christie 33). The planners of the crime should have known about this reality. Though M. Bouc argues, “It is not necessary that he should be killed on the Orient Express. There are other places” (55), the train is chosen because the Yugoslavian territory that it crosses is the suitable place for them to do the killing. In their view, neither the police nor the detective would be on the train in that locality. Talking with Hercule Poirot, Countess Andrenyi confesses, “I thought there were no detectives on the train when it passed through Jugo-Slavia -not until one got to Italy” (93). The planners had analyzed extensively the geography and politics of Yugoslavia before they decided to kill Rachett in that place. Colonel Arbuthnot, a participant in the murder, has returned from India on the train instead of ‘On the P. & O. boat’. In the interview with Hercule Poirot, he asserts, “I chose to come by the overland route for reasons of my own” (95). The reason behind choosing the Orient Express, an international train, for the crime is to internationalize the crime. As the train is related to many nations, the characters involved in the crime also belong to many nations. The season of the crime has also a certain meaning in the novel because the novel opens with describing the season as “It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria” (1). Winter season resembles the nature of crime which Rachett kills a three-year-old innocent girl in a cold-blooded way.

The novel is set in Eastern Europe, but America plays a great role. The passengers on the train are from different countries in Europe, but they know America and the Americans. In the course of the interview, Hercule Poirot asks Antonio Foscarelli, an Italian, if he knows about Armstrong's case, he replies philosophically, “Ah! Well, these things they happen in a great civilization such as America” (109). The novel serves as Agatha’s commentary on America, its diversity, and its troubled idea of justice. America is a melting pot where people of all classes and nationalities can be together. Such assembly is possible only in America. “In America, there might be a household composed of just such varied nationalities- an Italian chauffeur, an English governess, a German lady’s nurse, and so on” (197). They are workers and owners, but they have a commitment to accomplish a planned action for justice.

Hercule Poirot sums up that a wealthy person in America can acquire power by using his wealth and he escapes from the state ruling system. In his view, Rachett is an example. He points out, “But by means of enormous wealth he had piled up, and owing to the secret hold



he had over various persons, he was acquitted on some technical inaccuracy” (55). He further points, “He changed his name and left America. Since then he has been a gentleman of leisure, travelling aboard and living on his rents” (55). The novel critiques the existing ruling policies of America. It challenges the ruling system of neo-liberal America. The novel denounces the bureaucratic status quo and calls for a new kind of governance.

Hercule Poirot and M. Bouc are experienced characters who believe that different national geographies determine the behaviors of people living there. They are very much experienced characters who know much about the characteristics and behaviors of the people of different nations. They have the belief that the geography and politics of a nation determine the behaviors of the people living there. Hercule Poirot after interviewing MacQueen for the first time, talks to M. Bouc and says that he cannot be the murderer because there are several wounds in Rachett’s body. Then M. Bouc reacts, “It suggests rather the Latin temperament” (44). In his view nationality or geography affects man’s temperament. M. Bouc further guesses, “For my mind I will make a guess at the identity of the murderer. I say my friend, that it is the big Italian [Antonio Foscarelli]. He comes from America- from Chicago- and remember an Italian’s weapon is the knife, and the stabs not once but several times” (82). But after Antonio Foscarelli denounces the blame and departs, M. Bouc tries to assume Hercule Poirot that he is the murderer because “He has been a long time in America, and he is an Italian, and Italians use the knife! And they are great liars” (110). Antonio Foscarelli during the second interview gives the cause of his lie in the first interview. He claims, “Business reasons. Besides I do not trust the Jugo-Slav police. They hate the Italians. They would not have given me justice” (189). Hercule Poirot has certain views on English people. While interviewing Arbuthnot, he says, “But to judge of an Englishwoman is difficult. They are very reserved, the English” (96). M. Bouc also views that, “the English are extremely cold. It is not easy to bribe the English; they are unapproachable” (162). At the time Hercule Poirot interviews Mary Debenham for the second time in the presence of Colonel Arbuthnot, she breaks down suddenly, and Arbuthnot becomes angry and threatens him and goes out. After his departure, Poirot reacts, “I like to see an Englishman. They are very amusing. The more emotional they are, the less command they have of language” (186). While declaring his verdict, Hercule Poirot asserts, “And I know Englishmen of the type even if he had fallen in love with the young lady at first sight, he would have advanced slowly and with decorum, not rushing things” (198). In the same interview, Arbuthnot comments about Americans that “They’re so sentimental and idealistic” (97). Christie explains the two different behaviors of the English and American people. She asserts that geography plays a great role in shaping the characters of the people.

Geopolitics refers to the use of power by state actors and non-state actors. In America, the people who have wealth can exercise power unjustly by using loopholes to escape from crime. So in the novel, the passengers of the train choose a place where they can exercise power to kill Rachett. The geography provides them the power to take revenge and give justice to Armstrong family. The novel describes the situation of statelessness. The train is snowbound for more than 12 hours, but there is no inquiry from the side of the Yugoslavian government. The command over language depends on geopolitics. In the course of the investigation, Hercule

Poirot comes to the conclusion that when Rachett was killed at twenty-three minutes to one, there was another man in Rachett's room because "When the conductor came in answer to his bell..., it was a voice in French that told him that it was a mistake and he was not wanted. It was, moreover, a perfectly idiomatic phrase that was used not one that a man knowing only a few words would have selected. 'Ce n'est rien Je me suis trompé'" (151). It was true that Rachett was an American and could not speak French idiomatically because French was a foreign language to him.

## Conclusion

Geopolitics is the study of geography and power relationships. Literature also includes geography (setting), which happens to be of great importance for power relations and people's thinking. Agatha's murder mystery novel *Murder on the Orient Express* deals with the geopolitics of revenge and justice. The geography and the train setting in the novel are of great importance in providing power to the characters in the novel. The geography of Eastern Europe has affected the education and thinking level of people living there. Yugoslavia is a geographical hinterland where the police force cannot spread its duty all over its territory. The condition of the Orient Express also helps people execute their plans. So they select the East European wintertime setting to get power for revenge and justice. America is a sophisticated place where ordinary people cannot acquire any power whereas, Eastern Europe is a backward place where the state is unable to perform its duty well and ordinary people accomplish their intended activities according to their plans. America is a civilized country, but it has a troubled condition of justice. America is a melting pot where people of all classes and nationalities live together. The geopolitics of America assists a wealthy man in acquiring power by using his wealth, but the novel challenges the ruling system of neo-liberal America. The intended action is accomplished by selecting the appropriate geography. In the novel geography provides power to the characters to accomplish their planned action to take revenge on Rachett and give justice to the Armstrong family.

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