

# A Comparative Study of Santosh Wagh and Inspector Gowda: Exploring Detective Archetypes

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## Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Santosh Wagh from *Private India* by Ashwin Sanghi and James Patterson and Inspector Gowda from Anita Nair's *Chain of Custody*. By examining their character traits, investigative methods, personal struggles, societal contexts, and how they align with classic detective archetypes, this study highlights the distinct ways these characters embody the evolution of Indian detective fiction. This analysis seeks to underscore how the blending of personal conflict and broader social critique contributes to the richness of the genre.

**Keywords:** Indian detective fiction, crime-solving, detective archetypes, societal critique, urban crime

## Introduction

Detective fiction has long relied on archetypal characters to explore themes of crime, justice, and morality. Traditionally, detective archetypes include the “hard-boiled detective,” the “brilliant sleuth,” and the “cynical cop,” each serving as a lens through which the complexities of human behaviour and societal structures are examined (Cawelti 25; Scaggs 32). Santosh Wagh, from the *Private India* series, and Inspector Gowda from Anita Nair's *Chain of Custody*, embody aspects of these archetypes while also presenting unique characteristics shaped by their specific socio-cultural environments. This paper aims to analyze their respective roles as modern Indian detectives, exploring how they align with and deviate from traditional detective archetypes.

## Detective Archetypes: An Overview

Detective fiction is built on specific archetypes that have evolved over time, providing readers with a variety of character types to relate to and explore themes of morality, justice, and societal issues. The “brilliant sleuth” archetype, epitomized by characters like Sherlock Holmes, is characterized by extraordinary intellectual prowess, keen powers of observation, and deductive reasoning (Knight 14). These characters often possess eccentric habits or aloof demeanours, suggesting a separation between their intellectual pursuits and everyday social interactions. Holmes, for example, displays meticulous attention to detail and an almost superhuman ability to solve complex cases using logic and observation, setting a standard for the detective archetype (Cawelti 106). Later iterations of this archetype, such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple in Agatha Christie's works, also exhibit these traits, emphasizing the detective's role as an intellectual who operates outside the norms of society.

The “hard-boiled detective” emerged during the early 20th century, influenced by the gritty realities of urban life. Characters like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe are marked by a tough, street-smart approach, often navigating morally ambiguous settings that blur the lines between right and wrong (Scaggs 58). Unlike the brilliant sleuth, the hard-boiled detective operates in a world rife with corruption, crime, and vice. They are cynical, world-weary, and sometimes prone to violence, reflecting the disillusionment of the time. Their investigations typically involve seedy urban environments, where law enforcement is either ineffective or corrupt. These detectives adhere to their own moral codes, which often place them at odds with societal norms, depicting a complex struggle between justice and survival.

The “cynical cop” archetype shares similarities with the hard-boiled detective but is rooted within the framework of law enforcement. Characters like Inspector Rebus and Harry Bosch embody this archetype, portraying seasoned police officers who work within a flawed justice system, driven by personal ethics despite systemic corruption (Scaggs 58; Knight 42). They often wrestle with bureaucracy, facing the limitations and failures of the institutions they serve. Their narratives delve into themes of justice, morality, and societal decay, often highlighting the tension between upholding the law and confronting ethical dilemmas.

These archetypes not only define the detectives but also set the tone and thematic focus of the narratives. In contemporary detective fiction, writers increasingly blend these archetypes, creating complex protagonists shaped by their backgrounds, personal struggles, and socio-cultural contexts. For instance, modern detectives might possess the intellectual sharpness of the brilliant sleuth while exhibiting the hardened, world-weary attitude of the hard-boiled detective. This blending of archetypes allows for a more nuanced exploration of crime, justice, and the human condition within diverse settings (Cawelti 112).

In the context of Indian detective fiction, such as the characters of Santosh Wagh and Inspector Gowda, these archetypes provide a foundation for character development and thematic depth. While Wagh carries the analytical traits of the brilliant sleuth with a touch of the hard-boiled detective’s personal struggles, Gowda embodies the cynical cop archetype, navigating a flawed system while confronting the moral complexities of crime in his society. Thus, the use of these archetypes in modern detective fiction continues to evolve, offering layered perspectives on the interplay between individual detectives and the societal challenges they face.

### **Character Traits and Alignment with Archetypes**

Santosh Wagh in the *Private India* series combines elements of the “brilliant sleuth” and “hard-boiled detective” archetypes. His analytical mind and meticulous approach to crime-solving echo the “brilliant sleuth” archetype. Wagh, like Holmes, relies on observation, logic, and forensic science to piece together clues (Cawelti 123). However, Wagh also aligns with the “hard-boiled detective” archetype due to his personal struggles and gritty experiences. His alcoholism and inner demons add a layer of complexity to his character, reminiscent of the emotional turmoil often found in hard-boiled detectives. Wagh’s background as a former Mumbai cop provides him with a street-smart perspective, enhancing his ability to operate in Mumbai’s morally ambiguous and chaotic urban landscape.

Inspector Gowda, on the other hand, embodies aspects of the “cynical cop” archetype. As described in Nair’s *The Chain of Custody*, Gowda is a world-weary police officer who navigates a justice system riddled with corruption and societal decay. His cynicism and frustration with the bureaucratic limitations of law enforcement mirror the struggles of classic cynical cops like Inspector Rebus (Knight 35). However, Gowda’s character is also deeply reflective, and his nuanced understanding of societal issues adds depth

to his portrayal. According to the *Comfortably Numb* review, Gowda “continues to be a complex soul, with a lot of introspecting,” illustrating his sensitivity to the challenges surrounding his investigations, particularly in cases involving vulnerable populations (*Comfortably Numb*).

Nair herself highlights Gowda’s role in exploring “the darker aspects of the human psyche” (*Storizen*), reinforcing the idea that his character goes beyond a mere archetype, embodying the complex realities of law enforcement in contemporary India. While he carries the hallmarks of a “cynical cop,” his willingness to confront his personal flaws and his dedication to justice present a modern, multifaceted interpretation of this archetype.

### Investigative Methods

Santosh Wagh’s investigative style aligns with the “brilliant sleuth” archetype through his emphasis on logic, observation, and forensic analysis. As the head of the Private India agency, he employs resources and technology beyond the reach of standard law enforcement, enhancing his ability to solve complex cases. His methods reflect a mix of traditional detective work and the innovation often attributed to brilliant sleuths, but his personal turmoil introduces a hard-boiled edge to his character (Scaggs 102).

In contrast, Inspector Gowda’s approach aligns more closely with the “cynical cop” archetype. Gowda’s methods are deeply rooted in the realities of police work in India, involving intuition, street-level investigations, and navigating bureaucratic obstacles (Knight 75). His holistic approach to crime-solving, particularly in *Chain of Custody*, focuses on the socio-economic conditions that enable crimes such as human trafficking. Nair describes Gowda as delving into “the darker aspects of the human psyche” (*Storizen*), showcasing his ability to navigate the complexities of crime while contending with systemic corruption. His approach is marked by pragmatism and a deep sense of moral duty, reflecting his ongoing struggle to bring justice to a flawed society.

### Personal Struggles and Growth

Both Wagh and Gowda are shaped by personal struggles that deepen their characters and align them with traditional detective archetypes. Wagh’s battle with alcoholism and guilt places him firmly within the “hard-boiled detective” tradition, where inner conflict and emotional turmoil often drive the narrative (Cawelti 145). This internal struggle adds tension to Wagh’s professional life, as he seeks redemption through his investigative work.

Inspector Gowda, embodying the “cynical cop” archetype, contends with a fractured marriage, the pressures of a corrupt justice system, and the emotional toll of investigating heinous crimes. According to Nair’s interview with *Storizen*, Gowda’s flaws and introspective nature are crucial to his character, as they allow him to “delve into the twisted strands of darkness within the human mind” (*Storizen*). His personal and professional challenges intersect, emphasizing his role as a detective who not only navigates the complexities of crime but also confronts his own moral dilemmas.

### Societal Context and Thematic Focus

Both Santosh Wagh and Inspector Gowda operate in urban settings that act as microcosms for larger societal issues, yet they approach these environments and their complexities in distinctly different ways. Wagh’s investigations in Mumbai mirror the city’s chaotic blend of traditional values and modern challenges. Mumbai, known for its stark economic contrasts and social stratification, becomes the perfect backdrop for the crimes Wagh encounters. The nature of the cases he investigates often involves the city’s

elite, showcasing themes of power, corruption, and societal decay. This aligns with the noir aspects of the “hard-boiled detective” archetype. For example, in *Private India*, Wagh and his team are drawn into a complex web of serial killings that seem connected by a ritualistic pattern. His task is to identify the culprit and stop the escalating violence before it spirals into more chaos. As Wagh delves deeper into the case, he uncovers links between the murders and influential people in society, highlighting the pervasive corruption within the city’s elite circles. The eventual uncovering of the plot to bomb the city further emphasizes the noir elements of the story—where Wagh must combat not only the immediate threat but also the deeper rot within society. However, unlike the cynical cop, Wagh’s focus remains largely on solving the case at hand, reflecting the hard-boiled detective’s narrower engagement with the broader societal decay.

In contrast, Gowda’s Bengaluru is depicted as a city grappling with systemic issues such as socio-economic disparity and human trafficking. Gowda’s role as a police officer places him directly in the midst of these societal failures, embodying the “cynical cop” archetype who not only tackles crime but also confronts the structures that enable it (Knight 140). In *Chain of Custody*, Gowda’s investigation into a child trafficking ring pulls him into the city’s underbelly, revealing the harsh realities faced by the vulnerable in a rapidly urbanizing society. Unlike Wagh, Gowda’s battles are not confined to finding a single perpetrator; instead, he must navigate a justice system fraught with corruption, inefficiency, and apathy.

The narrative showcases Bengaluru not as a polished metropolis but as a city with stark socio-economic divides. Gowda’s encounters with trafficked children, corrupt officials, and apathetic societal institutions emphasize the depth of the city’s problems. For example, his discovery of a missing child leads him into the world of exploitation and illegal trade, where poverty-stricken families and systemic neglect fuel the trafficking operations. This grim portrayal aligns with the review from *The Literary Shed*, which describes Gowda’s world as “far different to the glossy, urbane southern Indian city that Europeans may be familiar with.” Gowda’s challenges, therefore, extend beyond the immediate crime to encompass broader systemic issues, such as how societal norms and economic disparities perpetuate the cycle of exploitation. This underscores his role as the cynical cop, often disillusioned with the system yet deeply driven to bring about justice, even if it means battling the city’s underbelly.

Therefore, while Wagh’s Mumbai revolves around a high-stakes murder investigation and eventual efforts to thwart a bombing, Gowda’s Bengaluru engages with deep-seated societal problems like human trafficking. Wagh’s focus on finding the individual culprits reflects the classic detective narrative, while Gowda’s struggle against systemic issues showcases the complexities faced by a modern, cynical cop in Indian urban crime fiction.

## Conclusion

Santosh Wagh and Inspector Gowda represent two nuanced interpretations of traditional detective archetypes within Indian crime fiction. Wagh blends elements of the “brilliant sleuth” and “hard-boiled detective,” shaped by his analytical skills and personal demons as he navigates Mumbai’s chaotic landscape. Inspector Gowda embodies the “cynical cop,” confronting the socio-political complexities of Bengaluru with a pragmatic approach rooted in the harsh realities of law enforcement. Their unique characteristics and approaches to crime-solving reflect the evolving nature of Indian detective fiction, where archetypes are adapted to explore deeper social critiques and personal conflicts within the urban Indian context.

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