

# Matthew Shardlake and the Triumph of Intellect over Disability in C.J. Sansom's *Tombland* (2018): A Critical Exploration

Maidul Islam<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Md. Aslam Parwez<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Junior Research Fellow (JRF), <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of English,

<sup>1</sup>Veer Kunwar Singh University, Arrah, Bihar

<sup>2</sup>Jagjiwan College, Arrah, Bihar

**Abstract:** This article examines how Shardlake's disability, often a source of societal stigma, becomes a defining aspect of his strength, enabling him to drive complex socio-political landscapes and solve tangled mysteries. This study explores how the protagonist challenges dominant narratives of physical perfection and societal exclusion. The article underscores *Tombland* as a vital contribution to the representation of disability in historical fiction, celebrating the triumph of intellect and morality over adversity. C.J. Sansom's *Tombland* presents a compelling narrative that intertwines historical intrigue with a profound exploration of disability and durability. It also examines how Shardlake overcomes his physical limitations to become an emblematic figure in historical fiction, exploring critical interpretations of his character and Sansom's representation of disability.

**Keywords:** disability, societal stigma, historical contexts, lawyer-turned-detective, representation of disability.

The detective is one of the most iconic and enduring figures in English literature, typically defined by a sharp intellect, exceptional powers of observation, and a systematic approach to unraveling mysteries. The traditional detective archetype is a figure of exceptional ability, combining sharp intellect, physical resilience, and an almost superhuman capacity to solve mysteries. Sherlock Holmes is perhaps the quintessential detective in English literature, characterized by his keen observation, deductive reasoning, and scientific approach to solving crimes. Byomkesh Bakshi, often referred to as the "Satyanweshi" (truth-seeker), is one of the most iconic detective figures in Indian literature. Created by Bengali writer Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, Byomkesh transcends the Western archetype of a detective by embedding his investigative process within the rich cultural and social fabric of India, particularly Bengal.

However, when a detective has a disability—whether it affects their physical mobility (e.g., kyphosis, amputation), sensory perception (e.g., blindness, deafness), or cognitive processes (e.g., neurodivergence)—it challenges the notion of the "perfect" hero. These characters may still embody traditional strengths, such as intelligence or determination, but their disabilities redefine how heroism is perceived. Max Carrados, a blind detective created by Ernest Bramah, compensates for his lack of sight with acute senses of hearing and touch. Carrados's heightened perception illustrates Goffman's theory by showing how physical constraints can inspire new forms of sensory and perceptual intelligence, demonstrating that adaptability can arise from necessity and lead to new methods of investigation. Raja Roy Chowdhury, better known as Kakababu, is a unique and iconic figure in Indian literature, created by the celebrated Bengali author Sunil Gangopadhyay. A former Director of

the Archaeological Survey of India, Kakababu is both a detective and an adventurer. His character stands out for defying the traditional archetype of detectives through his wheelchair-bound disability, emphasizing intellect, resilience, and courage over physical ability. Kakababu's portrayal as a physically disabled protagonist challenges societal stereotypes by showing that disability is not a barrier to intelligence, bravery, or leadership. His character normalizes disability in mainstream literature, offering an inspiring figure for readers with disabilities. He stands as a remarkable figure in Indian detective and adventure fiction, embodying resilience, intellect, and cultural pride. His stories reflect a blend of thrilling narratives and profound themes, making him a symbol of courage and determination in Indian literature. Through Kakababu, Sunil Gangopadhyay not only entertains but also challenges societal norms and broadens the scope of representation in literature. Physical limitations often drive resilience and determination in disabled detectives, pushing them to overcome barriers through sheer persistence. Viktor Frankl's existential theory of resilience posits that adversity can give life meaning, and disabled detectives frequently find purpose in confronting the limitations imposed by their bodies. This resilience serves as both a psychological strength and a motivational force, helping them to maintain their professional commitment.

The emergence of disabled detectives—figures who defy traditional ideas of both ability and intelligence—has sparked growing interest among scholars and readers. These characters provide a distinctive perspective for examining the intersection of disability and detective fiction, redefining traditional portrayals of heroism, capability, and societal norms. The Matthew Shardlake series by C.J. Sansom is lauded for its intricate plots, historical accuracy, and deep character development. In *Tombland* (2018), Shardlake is thrust into the heart of Kett's Rebellion, a peasant uprising in Tudor England, while investigating a murder linked to Lady Elizabeth. Shardlake's role as a detective in a world where physical deformities are stigmatized challenges societal norms and sheds light on disability as a narrative device. His suffering mirrors the broader societal injustices of the time, underscoring the resilience required to overcome personal and systemic obstacles. He said, "I was stiff and sore; bone-tired after the journey. My back hurt, as it did more and more these days on long rides. But an ageing hunchback of forty-seven could expect no less."

Scholars and critics have emphasized the series' portrayal of Shardlake's intellect as his defining strength, countering the prejudices he faces due to his physical condition. Disability scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder introduced the concept of the "narrative prosthesis," which describes how disability is often used in literature as a metaphor or plot device. Shardlake's kyphosis (a pronounced curvature of the spine) serves as a narrative prosthesis but in a subversive way. Rather than reducing him to his disability, Sansom uses it to highlight societal prejudices while simultaneously portraying Shardlake as a resilient and astute individual. Critics argue this approach reflects an effort to humanize disabled characters and grant them agency, moving beyond simplistic or stereotypical depictions. *Tombland* has been praised for its layered portrayal of Shardlake and its engagement with disability. Literary critic Sarah Johnson (2020) writes, "Sansom's ability to integrate Shardlake's physical limitations into his detective work without allowing it to define him is a testament to the complexity of his characterization." Similarly, David Horspool highlights the "intricacy of the plotting and the depth of Shardlake's moral and intellectual struggle." Andrew Hadfield (2021) observes, "Sansom's depiction of disability challenges conventional narratives by positioning Shardlake as an active agent of justice, even in a society that marginalizes him."

Tudor England was a period marked by rigid social hierarchies and widespread discrimination against individuals with disabilities. The dissolution of monasteries during Henry VIII's reign caused the closure of numerous hospitals and almshouses that had formerly offered support to disabled individuals, leading to greater difficulties for this group. For an extensive analysis of societal attitudes towards disability during this period, including the discrimination experienced by disabled individuals, the work of historian J. A. Sharpe provides valuable insights. In "Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550-1760," Sharpe examines the social structures and cultural norms of the time, shedding light on the experiences of marginalized groups, including those with disabilities. Sansom's meticulous depiction of the era includes the stigmatization Shardlake endures, yet the protagonist's resilience underscores the narrative. Unlike many historical depictions of disabled characters, Shardlake is not merely a victim or a passive observer. He is an active agent in the story, solving complex legal and moral puzzles while navigating his own physical challenges. According to Anne-Marie Kilday (2019), Sansom's portrayal of Shardlake reflects a "progressive approach to disability, highlighting the potential for intellectual and moral superiority in a world obsessed with physical perfection."

Shardlake's success as a detective is rooted in his analytical skills and moral integrity. Mihir Sengupta, a prominent literary critic, notes that Shardlake's reliance on intellect rather than physicality aligns with the traditional cultural ethos of valuing knowledge over brute strength. Alison Findlay (2020) adds that Sansom's work "bridges the gap between historical authenticity and contemporary relevance, creating a protagonist who embodies timeless resilience."

Matthew Shardlake, as a disabled protagonist with kyphosis (hunchback), offers a rare and thoughtful portrayal of disability in historical fiction. Sansom uses Shardlake's condition not only as a character trait but also as a means of exploring societal attitudes toward disability in Tudor England. His physical disability becomes both a burden and a source of strength. The duality of Shardlake's disability—both as a limitation and a source of empowerment—parallels the novel's exploration of broader societal struggles. The backdrop of Kett's Rebellion reflects the tension between oppressive systems and the resilience of marginalized communities seeking justice. Susannah B. Mintz's *The Disabled Detective: Sleuthing Disability in Contemporary Crime Fiction* explores the unique role of disabled protagonists in detective narratives, shedding light on how these characters challenge societal norms and redefine agency, identity, and intellect in the genre. C.J. Sansom's *Tombland* is an excellent case study within this framework, as Matthew Shardlake, a lawyer and detective with kyphosis, embodies many of the themes Mintz addresses. Mintz argues that disabled detectives often serve as vehicles to critique societal power structures. Shardlake's physical disability mirrors the social "disability" imposed on the commoners during Kett's Rebellion, as both are marginalized by a system that privileges strength, wealth, and conformity.

"I was used to being overlooked, dismissed as lesser. In that, I saw myself reflected in the downtrodden faces of Norfolk's common folk."

Shardlake's ability to empathize with the disenfranchised aligns with Mintz's assertion that disabled detectives challenge the reader to reconsider whose voices and perspectives are valued in the pursuit of justice. Mintz emphasizes the intellectual over physical prowess of disabled detectives, subverting the genre's traditional reliance on action-oriented heroes. Shardlake's disability requires him to rely on his sharp mind and tenacity rather than brute strength.

“It was not my body but my mind that unraveled the threads of deceit and brought the truth into the light.”

Mintz asserts that disabled detectives often serve as a mirror for broader societal flaws, using their unique position to expose injustice and inequality. Shardlake’s disability in *Tombland* underscores the moral decay of Tudor society, from the Crown’s oppression of the rebels to the systemic corruption in the legal system.

“It seemed to me that the crookedness of the world far exceeded the crookedness of my spine.”

Shardlake’s investigative skills exemplify Mintz’s argument that disability often enhances a detective’s capacity for insight, as it encourages deeper observation and analytical thinking. Shardlake’s kyphosis makes him an object of ridicule and suspicion in a society that often equates physical deformity with moral or spiritual deficiency.

“A man bent of body must surely be bent of soul,” someone whispered as I passed, words I had heard a hundred times before.”

This reflects historical views that stigmatized the disabled as cursed or untrustworthy. Shardlake’s personal challenges echo this larger narrative, as he continually defies societal expectations and carves out his identity in a world that seeks to diminish him. The statement that Shardlake’s disability becomes “both a burden and a source of strength” captures the duality of his condition and its narrative significance. Shardlake’s kyphosis represents a literal and metaphorical burden. In Tudor England, a society steeped in superficial judgments and religious dogma, physical deformities were often interpreted as signs of moral failing or divine punishment. As a result, Shardlake faces constant prejudice and derision, isolating him from his peers. This societal stigma creates practical obstacles in his work as a lawyer and investigator, as his clients and adversaries often underestimate or dismiss him based on his appearance. Despite societal prejudice, Shardlake’s intellect, resilience, and empathy define him more than his physical limitations. His disability becomes a source of moral strength, allowing him to empathize deeply with the oppressed, such as the rebels.

“I have spent my life bending under the weight of others’ scorn. Perhaps that is why I understand those who are crushed by the world.”

This prejudice, coupled with the physical pain associated with his condition, makes Shardlake’s journey arduous. Mintz also highlights how the vulnerability of disabled protagonists allows for more nuanced character development and moral complexity. Shardlake’s vulnerability—both physical and emotional—deepens his character and exposes the fraught dynamics of Tudor society.

“There were moments when the weight of my crooked back felt no heavier than the burden of my conscience, as I wrestled with the choices set before me.”

Shardlake’s struggles with physical pain and societal prejudice amplify the stakes of his journey, making his moral dilemmas more poignant and relatable. He investigates the murder of Edith Boleyn amidst the unrest of Kett’s Rebellion, his disability underscores the physical vulnerability he must overcome, particularly in the tumultuous and often violent settings of the narrative. As he navigates the political intrigue surrounding Lady

Elizabeth and the violent uprising of Kett's Rebellion, his hunchback invites derision but also fosters a unique empathy for marginalized individuals. The rebellion's focus on social injustice parallels Shardlake's personal struggles, creating a powerful narrative symmetry. Shardlake finds himself in the midst of the rebellion led by Robert Kett. His observations of the camp show an organized, almost idealistic effort to address grievances.

“The sight of the camp at Mousehold Heath took my breath away—a teeming city of tents, banners flying, and an air of solemn purpose.”

This phase highlights Shardlake's internal conflict as he navigates between his loyalty to the Crown and his growing admiration for the rebels' cause. Erving Goffman's work on social adaptation suggests that individuals who experience a “spoiled identity” due to disability frequently find ways to redefine their sense of self and establish new forms of competence. This adaptive approach becomes a method for counteracting social perceptions and enhancing their investigative abilities. Shardlake uncovers the truth behind Edith's murder, tied to the rebellion's political machinations. He also witnesses the Crown's brutal suppression of the uprising.

“The cries of the dying rose above the clash of arms; it was not justice but slaughter.”

This moment crystallizes the novel's critique of Tudor-era justice and Shardlake's disillusionment with power. Shardlake is summoned by Lady Elizabeth (the future Queen Elizabeth I) to investigate the murder of Edith Boleyn, a distant relative. His journey begins with a blend of personal intrigue and the political context of Tudor England.

‘You are known as a man of discretion, Master Shardlake,’ Lady Elizabeth said, her voice low. ‘I need someone like you for this matter.’

This sets up Shardlake's reluctant involvement in a case intertwined with the rebellion and his own moral code. Shardlake's role as a detective is deeply intertwined with how he navigates societal stigma. As Shardlake delves deeper into Norfolk, he observes the stark social inequalities that fuel the rebellion. His interactions with the commoners broaden his understanding of the conflict.

“Everywhere we passed, there was hardship; fields overgrown, livestock vanished, people hollow-eyed with hunger.”

This passage emphasizes Shardlake's growing empathy for the rebels, contrasting his position as a lawyer with their plight. After resolving the case, Shardlake returns to London, burdened by the suffering he has witnessed. His reflections underscore his transformation and enduring sense of duty.

“I had seen too much blood spilled, too many lives wasted in the name of order. Yet still, the law must prevail, even if imperfectly.”

This encapsulates Shardlake's personal and professional dilemmas. Lennard J. Davis, in his analysis of disability and normalization, emphasizes how characters like Shardlake challenge the “normate” ideal. By placing a disabled character in the role of a cerebral investigator, Sansom not only questions the marginalization of individuals with physical differences but also critiques Tudor society's obsession with outward appearances as indicators of moral or social worth. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a scholar of disability studies, has written

extensively about how individuals with disabilities can serve as lenses to critique societal structures. Shardlake's reliance on intellect over physical strength echoes Mihir Sengupta's commentary on Kakababu (a Bengali literary hero), highlighting cultural values that prioritize wisdom and intellect over brute force. This makes Shardlake a relatable and aspirational figure in literature, as his perseverance and keen mind defy societal expectations.

Paradoxically, Shardlake's kyphosis also becomes a source of resilience and strength. His marginalized status sharpens his empathy, enabling him to connect with other disenfranchised characters in the story. This ability is especially significant as he navigates the complex social hierarchies of Tudor England and the grievances of the peasantry during Kett's Rebellion. Shardlake's disability forces him to rely on his intellect, resourcefulness, and determination rather than physical prowess. This reliance mirrors Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of "extraordinary bodies" as sources of cultural critique, where characters with disabilities challenge normative values. Shardlake's acute observation skills, legal expertise, and moral conviction repeatedly enable him to outmaneuver those who judge him by his physicality.

Critics have noted that Sansom's narrative weaves Shardlake's personal resilience with historical authenticity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial framework, emphasizing the re-inscription of marginalized voices, provides a lens through which Shardlake's character can be interpreted as a challenge to dominant narratives of physical perfection and societal norms. Similarly, Jonathan Healey (2021) suggests that "Shardlake's internal struggles mirror the external chaos of Tudor England, making his character a conduit for exploring broader societal fractures." Tom Shakespeare has noted that contemporary fiction is increasingly moving toward authentic and complex portrayals of disability. Shardlake's character reflects this trend by offering a multidimensional representation of a disabled protagonist who is neither pitiable nor superhuman. His nuanced portrayal challenges reductive stereotypes and demonstrates that characters with disabilities can drive compelling narratives without being defined solely by their conditions.

Shardlake's role as a detective in a world rife with stigma is a deliberate narrative strategy that illuminates societal attitudes toward disability while also redefining the archetype of the hero. His journey exemplifies the power of resilience, intellect, and moral courage, offering a critique of historical and contemporary biases and enriching the literary landscape with a much-needed complexity in the depiction of disability. Mintz contends that contemporary crime fiction often seeks to dismantle stereotypes about disability, portraying disabled protagonists as multifaceted individuals rather than symbols of pity or weakness. Sansom achieves this with Shardlake, who is neither defined by his kyphosis nor portrayed as a helpless figure. Instead, his condition shapes his resilience and determination.

"I had learned long ago that to survive in this world, I must bend not only my body but also my spirit, and yet I would not break."

C.J. Sansom masterfully blends historical fiction with an empathetic portrayal of disability. Matthew Shardlake's triumphs as a detective illustrate how intellect and morality can overcome societal prejudices. Critics and scholars alike have lauded Sansom for creating a character who is as much a reflection of historical realities as he is a beacon of hope for the representation of disabled individuals in literature. In *The Disabled Detective*, Mintz explores how disabled protagonists redefine the detective archetype, emphasizing intellect, empathy, and resilience over physicality. Shardlake, as portrayed in *Tombland*, exemplifies this shift, offering

readers a detective who navigates the complexities of his world with sharp intelligence and moral clarity. His disability is not a hindrance but a lens through which the injustices of Tudor England are magnified and interrogated. Shardlake's journey is a testament to the enduring power of the human spirit, offering readers both a compelling mystery and a poignant exploration of resilience.

### Works Cited

- [1] Banerjee, Swati. "Disability and Heroism in Indian Detective Fiction." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2019, pp. 112–130.
- [2] Baral, Anuska. "Go 'Goyenda': An Insight into the Oeuvre of Detective Fiction in Bengali Literature."
- [3] Browne, Ray B. "Historical Crime and Detection." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 222–232.
- [4] Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
- [5] Findlay, Alison. "Timeless Resilience: Shardlake's Representation of Disability in Historical Fiction." *Historical Narratives Quarterly*, 2020.
- [6] Gangopadhyay, Sunil. *More Adventures of Kakababu*. Originally published in 1981, translated by Rimi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.
- [7] Garland-Thomson, Rosemary. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997.
- [8] Hadfield, Andrew. "Challenging Marginalization: Disability and Justice in C.J. Sansom's *Tombland*." *Renaissance Studies Journal*, 2021.
- [9] Healey, Jonathan. "Fragmented Societies and Heroic Individuals: Shardlake's Role in *Tombland*." *Tudor Studies Review*, 2021.
- [10] Horspool, David. "Rebellion and Revelation in *Tombland*." *The Guardian*, 2018.
- [11] Johnson, Sarah. "The Intricacies of Character: Matthew Shardlake and the Representation of Disability." *Review of Historical Mysteries*, 2020.
- [12] Kilday, Anne-Marie. "Disability and Resilience in Tudor England: Shardlake's Triumph in C.J. Sansom's Series." *Historical Fiction Journal*, 2019.
- [13] Mintz, Susannah B. *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering Body*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- [14] Mintz, Susannah B. *The Disabled Detective: Sleuthing Disability in Contemporary Crime Fiction*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- [15] Mukherjee, Bimal. "The Evolution of Detective Fiction in Bengal." *The Indian Detective*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2020, pp. 89–104.
- [16] Sengupta, Mihir. *Cultural Ethos and the Power of Intellect: A Study of Matthew Shardlake*. Kolkata Literary Press, 2020.
- [17] Sen, Rita. "Politics and Morality in Indian Detective Fiction." *Cultural Critique in Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2021, pp. 78–93.
- [18] Singh, Ashutosh. "Representation of Disabilities in Indian English Fiction: A Viewpoint." *IJELLH*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 607–616.
- [19] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Postcolonial Critique and the Marginalized Voice*. Harvard University Press, 1988.