

A Touch of Noir

- OUT OF THE DARKNESS to the Dark Lord Sri Krsna -

by Suhotra Swami

(short Intro to intended book from 2000)

Noir ("black") is a French word that has come into usage among Anglo-American intellectuals. The starting point of this usage was the term *film noir*, which labels a genre of movies made from the nineteen forties until the early sixties. In the words of one commentator, this type of film "[quote the Chandler in Hollywood book]."

Double Indemnity (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1945) and *The Third Man* (1948) are considered classic *films noir*. [Check dates] Since many of these movies were based on books by "pulp fiction" authors like Raymond Chandler, the word *noir* has a literary as well as cinematic sense. As we pass into the twenty-first century, the *noir* style--once distained as cheap and vulgar, an art form fit for soldiers--is celebrated as philosophy. In books with snappy, filmic-sounding titles, academics find in *noir* a key to universal human experience. They tell us that *noir* depicts a truth that modern man tends to suppress: the world we live in is a dark labyrinth, a web of bondage, a nightmarish illusion. *Noir* is driven not for success (striking it rich and getting the girl), but for release.

The big question at this point is: what do the above two paragraphs have to do with Krsna? Well, for starters (and please don't smirk): like the French word *noir*, the Sanskrit word *krsna* literally means "black." As in *noir*, the release of the soul is a prime aim of Krsna philosophy. In chapters to come I'll develop this comparison. Will I spend time discussing old movies? Not much. The cinematic angle interests me only in this sense: *noir* is a philosophy that was expounded in motion pictures, hence it is very easy for people to grasp. The signposts of *noir* are signposts of modern culture. Referring to these signposts helps me keep this book both simple and appealing.

Though as a teenager I was a *noir* addict, I did not know then what the term *noir* signified. It came into common English usage after I joined ISKCON. In the old days, I guess I would have called a *noir* film or book a "hard-boiled melodramatic mystery." Nowadays, after more than a quarter of a century in Krsna consciousness, I still view the world through a hard-boiled lens: life's tough, even if you're a devotee. Every step is fraught with danger. Life in ISKCON certainly exhibits the elements of melodrama--suspense, sensational events, and startling coincidences.

And life's a mystery. Persons whom you thought you knew through and through, whom you trusted completely, may suddenly behave in ways that defy all logic and reason. Why? Even within the society of devotees we find this question hard to answer. I think the previous paragraph proves that no ISKCON devotee is a stranger to the *noir* experience, whether we know the word or not. After all, we're all party to the Krsna experience, of which *noir* is but a partial, mundane reflection.

A Touch of Noir explores the experience of Krsna consciousness, casting glances now and then at the *noir* version. In doing this, I hope to show that as a rule, life can be quite strange--even life within Krsna's own transcendental abode, what to speak of life in this material world. It is utopian to think that Krsna consciousness is supposed to smooth all the bumps in the road, make straight all the twists and turns, and hand us a neat formula that rids life of the unpredictable. "So we shall not expect that anywhere there is any Utopia", Srila Prabhupada wrote in a letter. "Rather, that is impersonalism. People should not expect that even in the Krishna Consciousness Society there will be Utopia."