

Ethnocentrism: White Man's Burden on Doyle

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INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the term White Man's Burden is associated with the general Imperialistic attitude of Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is also the title of a poem by Rudyard Kipling which deals with the American- Philippine war, wherein he sides with the American Imperialism and supports it, simultaneously praising the responsibility of the white nations for carrying the burden of "civilizing" "the half-devil, half-child". Ethnocentrism exists when a society considers that they are superior than the others in social, psychological, educational, political, economic terms etc. the ethnocentric mind of the British can be considered as a basis of their attempt to establish colonies across the world. The tendency arose in the imperialist minds that it is their duty to civilize the uncivilized. But ironically, the process was characterized by extreme brutality and exploitation which lead to rise of a global hegemonic system. This basic division between the so called civilized and uncivilized itself is artificially constructed and established only because of the existence of an ethnocentric way of thinking. They shouldered the responsibility of civilizing the other and referred to it as the "White Man's Burden". The major weapon of the Colonizer can be considered as Knowledge. They controlled the amount and type of knowledge that was made accessible to the colonized. They were fed with information that only the colonizer wanted to spread. By preventing the accessibility of knowledge, which in turn was manipulated, helped them to retain their global domination. The slaves were forced to believe their masters and demote themselves as weaker race by questioning and doubting their own moral and ethical values and considering them as weak and hailing the foreign as superior.

A CASE STUDY OF THE SIGN OF THE FOUR AND ITS ETHANOCENTRIC**NARRATIVE**

The ethnocentric attitude of a Victorian mind could be deciphered from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*, his second novel from the Sherlock Holmes series. It was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly* in the year, 1890. The story happens in the year 1888, a period when British empire was hailed as the colonial power across the world. The setting is that of Victorian England and thus very contemporary. A young woman named Mary Mortstan, who later become the wife of Dr. Watson, approaches Sherlock Holmes to solve the mystery surrounding her father, Captain Morstan, who has been away from her since her childhood. Sherlock Holmes accompanied by Dr. Watson, his partner and friend decides to solve the mystery. Later it is known that her father is dead and there is an issue of a hidden treasure behind the death. Jonanthan Small, the antagonist, explains about his association with Captain Morstan, Major Sholto and the three Indians who helped him hide the treasure. Small met Major Sholto and Captain Morstan met them while he was imprisoned at the penal colony on South Andaman Islands and offer them a share from the treasure if they helped him and his partners escape. But Sholto deceives them and escapes to England with the treasure hoping to monopolize it for him. Morstan comes to know this and dies due to a sudden heart attack, during a conversation between him and Sholto. This fact along with the information about the treasure is hidden from Mary and is later revealed to her by Bartholomew and Thaddeus, Sholto's sons after his death due to a panic attack after seeing Small near his window. Small has returned for revenge and get his treasure back along with Tonga, an Andaman resident. Tonga kills Bartholomew with a poison dart and retrieves the treasure along with Small, whom are chased by Holmes and his accomplice, is killed during the pursuit. Small confesses of throwing the treasure in Thames. And finally there is no more treasure in the end. Mary accepts Watson's proposal and Holmes returns to drugs as he was in the beginning of the novel.

The background of the novel is multicultural and intercontinental. Throughout the novel the influence of the East is visible. But the way in which it is portrayed is what seeks attention. The

eighteenth and nineteenth century England was at the pinnacle of their colonizing glory. It was described as the land where sun never sets. They had colonies across the Globe and India was one of them. The Western intellect always carried White man's Burden upon them, believing that it is their responsibility to enlighten the other world. The othering then comes in the term of color, knowledge etc. They used Knowledge as a weapon. In the particular novel, Sherlock Holmes is an embodiment of logical reasoning and knowledge. He is the man of England owing across the country without any barriers, solving cases that is impossible to solve. Every other character, even if it is the old lady, is either well educated or knowledgeable with higher standards. Taking minor characters into consideration, the servants are mostly from the east and they serve as the servants and butlers to their English masters. But nowhere we see an Indian or anybody from the Orientals having a major role other than being servile and subservient. They are also seen as manipulative and possessing crooked mind sets.

Though Doyle's ethnocentric mind is not explicitly revealed from the novel, his characterization, situations, descriptions and diction throws light into the otherwise concealed cultural discrimination. At the introduction scene of Mary Morstan, she is portrayed of having wearing a turban, which is, without doubt an eastern tradition long with having large blue eyes: "Her face had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion, but her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents, I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature" (6; Chapter 2). The blue eyes is an archetype used while describing the notion of western beauty. The combination of turban and blue eyes can be deciphered as representation of the juxtaposition and a peaceful and aesthetic co-existence of two entirely opposite cultures. From which we can also understand that eastern dressing styles might have influenced the British society at that times and only the upper class society had the opportunity to live by enjoying the exoticism of the orientals. Possessing something which was from the Orientals was considered as a sign of prosperity and richness even if that is

in terms of art, lifestyle etc. Doyle, portraying an upper class scenario, tries to bring in the flavor of east in everything he touch, starting from the description of the house of Thaddeus:

We were all astonished by the appearance of the apartment into which he invited us. In that sorry house it looked as out of place as a diamond of the first water in a setting of brass. The richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries draped the walls, looped back here and there to expose some richly-mounted painting or Oriental vase. The carpet was of amber-and-black, so soft and so thick that the foot sank pleasantly into it, as into a bed of moss. Two great tiger-skins thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury, as did a huge hookah which stood upon a mat in the corner. A lamp in the fashion of a silver dove was hung from an almost invisible golden wire in the center of the room. As it burned it filled the air with a subtle and aromatic odor.(11; Chapter 4)

Mostly the Indians are portrayed as loyal and obedient servants. Sholto addresses his servant Lal Chowdar as, “my faithful Lal Chowdar” and goes on describing how he wasn’t reluctant to hide the body of Morstan without further questions or waiting for further explanations. Through this situation Doyle has intelligently tried to expose not only the loyalty and subservience of an Indian servant but also his cunningness and readiness to involve in crimes.

Tonga is Small’s Andaman associate who steals treasure from Bartholomew and murders him. He is the perfect example of stereotyping based on race by Doyle. He is typed, starting from his physique. He is addressed as “little devil”, by Small as he blamed him for the death of Bartholomew. Towards the end of the novel there is an another description by Small about Tonga:

He was sick to death, and had gone to a lonely place to die. I took him in hand, though he was as venomous as a young snake, and after a couple of months I got him all right and able to walk. He took a kind of fancy to me then, and would hardly go back to his woods, but was always hanging about my hut. I learned a little of his lingo from him, and this made him all the fonder of me. (49; chapter 12)

He also goes on to explain that Tonga was devoted to him and was servile. The place where Small meets is described as a “little clearings was infested with wild cannibal natives, who were ready enough to blow a poisoned dart at us if they saw a chance” (47; Chapter 12). The natives are imposed of cannibalism and being uncivilised, who are ready to attack at the sight of a white man. They are compared to nothing more than animals. Tonga’s dedication and devotion is exploited by Small for his personal gains and we see that the author gives no emphasis on this particular point.

John McBratney, in his essay, “Racial and Criminal Types: Indian Ethnography and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*” states that:

The discourse of racial type exerts a decisive guiding force on much of the Holmes canon. In *The Sign of Four*, we can see this influence in the description of the Andaman Islanders that Holmes reads to Watson to prove his hunch about the ethnicity of Sholto's murderer. This description appears in a work that Holmes identifies as “the first volume of a gazetteer which is now being published” (127; ch. 8). The Indian gazetteers were vast, alphabetized summaries of geographical, historical, and ethnographic information about the subcontinent. The particular work that Holmes retrieves is probably meant to be the first volume of *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, compiled under the direction of William W. Hunter and first published in 1881.

The above mentioned Gazetteer provides an image of the inhabitants of Andaman Islanders. The reader after reading the information would be dragged into the conclusion that the Islanders are barbaric, uncivilised and even their physique is contemptuous. It can be considered that the writer might also have exaggerated the description for various factors like popularity, sensationalising etc. along with a racist mentality which isn’t explicit. McBratney also comments that, “The idea of hierarchy is also present in the gazetteer entry. In Hunter's *Imperial Gazetteer*, the Andamanese are described as “a very low type” (284).

Through the words of Jonathan Small, Doyle gives an image of a white man’s view of the east in general. He describes it as the “fever-ridden swamp”, as he worked “under the mangrove-tree, all

night chained up in the filthy convict-huts, bitten by mosquitoes, racked with ague, bullied by every cursed black faced policeman who loved to take it out of a white man". A prejudiced, frustrated and racist view of a white man who is forced to live under the power of the one whom they are supposed to rule are visible through these lines.

Small describes the city of Agra "as a great place, swarming with fanatics and fierce devil-worshippers of all sorts", in contrary to Worcestershire, where "the life of a man seems a great and a sacred thing". Along with that the two Sikh men are also described as being fierce looking talking English "pretty well", but jabbering in their "queer" Sikh lingo all night. The story which he narrates depicts him as helpless prisoner who was forced to involve in the crime, committed by the two Indians themselves, for the sake of safeguarding the fort.

The treasure, acknowledged as the Agra treasure, if belonged to Mary, would make the richest "heiress in England". The treasure itself can be perceived as a symbol of the Indian richness itself and whoever possesses the wealth becomes the all-powerful and Mary is the rightful heir to the treasure. Therefore, with her presence described as angelic, Mary can be considered as the representation of England itself. Thus England becomes the rightful heir of the exoticism.

CONCLUSION

A contradictory perception of an ethnocentric mind is seen throughout the novel. While Doyle flaunts the exoticism and orientalism and their influence on the western world, his prejudiced point of view of the east is also visible. The words reveals the racist perception which is consciously or unconscious developed through an excessive ethnocentric thought, along with the idea of knowledge being used as a weapon to establish the cultural division and emphasize the British's cultural superiority.

Through intricately woven characters and social settings Doyle's ethnocentric perspective is exposed. He presents an upper class society in England where all the servants, criminals and the evil are especially people from the East. Even though the so-called antagonist, Jonathan Small

is a typical English Man, the people who lure him into crime are Indians, so even in that circumstance he can't be blamed for being completely guilty. The servants in every house is either a subservient and obedient Indian who is loyal to his master and they are portrayed in such a manner that they wear their own ethnic wear, which makes them completely out of place in that particular surrounding, which simultaneously makes them special and intends to send a message that they are in a society where they are not supposed to be or will never be. The homes are describes in such a manner that they are adorned with decorative from the east, from which we might understand that the English society then flaunted their possession of anything that is eastern.

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