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The Colonial Project and *The Sign of the Four*: A Narrative Purging of the ‘Other’

RANJANI KIDAMBI¹

ABSTRACT

Like many of the literary works produced in the late 19th to mid-20th century, Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* reflects the colonial project in a myriad of ways. Written a mere few decades after the 1857 Rebellion, and with a decidedly orientalist perspective, the work inculcates a specific breed of colonial anxiety prominent in the instability of Britain in the late 19th century. More specifically, this paper claims that the entry of Tonga and the Agra Treasure into London are events that precipitate British imperial anxiety within the narrative, and their respective arcs in the story – Tonga’s death and the loss of the treasure – are allegories for the ultimately unachievable desire to purge the colonial from the empire’s home bounds. This paper goes on to explore the imperial edifices and constructions developed within *The Sign of the Four*.

Keywords- The Sign of the Four, Colonialism, Colonial Anxiety, Orientalism

¹Ranjani Kidambi, student at Jindal Global Law of School, Sonipat, India.

Sherlock Holmes – consulting detective, “the last and highest court of appeal in detection” (Doyle [1890] 2020, 148), and Arthur Conan Doyle’s most famous character – has appeared in four novels and fifty-six short stories set in the years spanning the late 19th and early 20th century, which were periods of immense change in in England. Between the rich historical context of Britain’s expansion of its colonial power, and the social context of England’s growing population and subsequent increase in poverty and crime, the fictional detective had plenty of background to draw from for his adventures. In *The Sign of the Four*, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are called upon to investigate the mysterious circumstances surrounding the Agra Treasure, which was brought to England from India through a series of deceit and betrayals. The ensuing incidents – from the murder of Bartholomew Sholto to Tonga’s shooting and the apprehension of Jonathan Small – explore the ideas of greed and foreign invasion while steeping it all in cultural context. This paper claims that the entry of Tonga and the Agra Treasure into London are events that precipitate British imperial anxiety within the narrative, and their respective arcs in the story – Tonga’s death and the loss of the treasure – are allegories for the ultimately unachievable desire to purge the colonial from the empire’s home bounds.

Set sometime in 1887-88, *The Sign of the Four* more than acknowledges the relevance of the colonial project to its plot. The story opens with Holmes recreationally injecting himself with cocaine, a drug with clear orientalist overtones. Although initially touted as a miraculous substance in the 1880’s, the medical community changed their tune as cocaine’s degenerative effects came to light and it was henceforth viewed as an undesirable remnant of Britain’s colonial pursuits (Keep and Randall 1999, 209). *The Sign of the Four* was published in 1890, right at this turn of cocaine’s reputation. The various geographical settings also echo the cultural zeitgeist. Thaddeus Sholto’s apartment in the “sorry,” “ill lit and worse furnished” house, was richly decorated with the “richest and glossiest of tapestries,” Oriental vases, and a hookah and tiger skins which “increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury.” (Doyle [1890] 2020, 167-168) Bartholomew Sholto’s residence – curiously named Pondicherry Lodge – was also decorated with Indian tapestry and carpeted with cocoa-nut matting ([1890] 2020, 182). Further, setting the theft of the Agra Treasure against the backdrop of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 – right when Britain’s power in its colony was being threatened – is significant in that it sets the stage for the chaos it will come to cause upon reaching Britain. At every turn, the story

throws up oriental imagery, conveying an invasion of the East into Britain. As the story unfolds, it is made clear that this invasion is to be treated as malevolent and undesirable.

The power of the Agra Treasure to tempt with its excess and exotic origins is made meaningful by the choice to have its theft occur during the Rebellion. The unmanageable pandemonium the Treasure finds itself in while in India – not to mention the betrayal it inspired within Major Sholto before it left the country – is given natural continuation upon being brought to England by the major (Keep and Randall 1999, 212). Jonathan Small's quest for revenge upon being cheated of a share of the Treasure results in two deaths in London – Major Sholto's unintended death due to shock and Bartholomew Sholto's murder. It is also worth noting that throughout the effort to retrieve the valuables from Small, there is never any mention of returning them to India; Mary Morstan is consistently referred to as its rightful owner, despite only having a claim to it because of her father's involvement in an unscrupulous conspiracy. This reflects the general attitude of the colonial project, as voiced by Small – the British's goals in India primarily involved enhancing their own wealth (Doyle [1890] 2020, 251). The arrival of the Agra Treasure into Britain signalled anarchy and disarray that eventually could only be quelled by its submersion in the Thames, from where it could never be recovered.

Tonga, despite being central to moving the plot forward – he was, after all, Bartholomew Sholto's killer – is barely a character as he is bestowed with very little agency and is largely replaceable. Upon first setting eyes on him, Watson describes him as “a dark mass” and mistakes him for a large dog; after being recognised as a man, he continues to be described as a “savage, distorted creature” having a face marked with “bestiality and cruelty.” ([1890] 2020, 234) Acknowledging but setting aside the overt racism of the depiction, Tonga's eerie eyes and “animal fury” are a distilled echo of the era's accounts of the Sepoys' rage during the 1857 Rebellion (Keep and Randall 1999, 214). This parallel aligns with how his description seeks to establish Tonga not just as a foreigner, but as a dangerous ‘other’ that strikes fear and must be struck down – clearly indicated by Holmes' willingness to shoot him while attempting to track Small and Tonga using a sniffer dog, far before their encounter on the Thames ([1890] 2020, 205). Despite the disdainful attitude extended to him throughout the narrative, Tonga's few actions are not driven by any meaningful personal motivations like Small's are. He is first the poor, injured patient, then loyal friend, of Jonathan Small. His decision to leave his island home and come to England was entirely influenced by Small's desires, who then made a living by displaying Tonga at fairs as an anomalous freak, calling him “the black cannibal.” ([1890]

2020, 266) Although Tonga committed the murder of Bartholomew Sholto, once again, he did it to please Small. Tonga is eventually shot down by Holmes, killed in the very chapter he first appears without ever having spoken a word in the text. He has no distinctive characteristics that are not rooted in racist stereotypes of eastern cultures. He is thus entirely replaceable, and finally, disposable, as his body falls to the bottom of the Thames upon being shot and killed.

Both Tonga and the Agra Treasure are seemingly expelled from the narrative for all the anarchy they brought to English shores, but the shadow of them persists. The Agra Treasure is never recovered and handed over to Mary Morstan – Small scatters and throws it in the river such that it can never be found and utilised, to spite his captors. Tonga, too, tumbles into the Thames after being shot. Interestingly, while referring to the dead Tonga near the end of that chapter, Watson says, “Somewhere in the dark ooze in the bottom of the Thames lie the bones of that strange visitor to our shores.” ([1890] 2020, 237) The jarring and singular usage of the present-tense highlights the lingering presence of this subdued colonial element (Keep and Randall 1999, 217). Falling into the Thames only to remain irrevocably lost at the bottom is hardly a thorough expulsion – the Treasure and Tonga continue to lurk beneath the surface, still within the bounds of the empire.

While looking into Tonga and the Agra Treasure’s roles in the allegory of invasion, colonial anxiety, and expulsion, it is also worth noting Holmes and Watson’s role in protecting the normative order and countering colonial violence. In the mind of the late nineteenth-century Victorian, crime and revolution were inextricably linked as both threatened the existing social order; incidentally, before Doyle had begun writing his Sherlock Holmes stories, Scotland Yard had suffered a scandal which lowered its reputation (Clausen 1984, 111). The public appeal, then, of a character who is a highly focused and skilled detective at a time when the upper classes felt like an imperilled minority, becomes evident. While Holmes himself is written as apparently classless, he symbolically protects an entire social order. Although detective fiction has the greatest potential to be preoccupied with moral concerns and commentary, the Sherlock Holmes books do not pose any difficult questions about classism or the justifications for the colonial venture; Holmes views each crime as an individual failing rather than an institutional failing, and by solving the crime and apprehending the guilty, he restores the normative order of things (Clausen 1984, 115). Moreover, Doyle frames Holmes’ deductions as being based in reason and observation, when they actually create the very distinctions which they claim to simply interpret, and contribute to constructing perceptions of normativity while allegedly

observing them (Jann 1990). Watson assists in upholding the prevailing social order within the narrative through his romantic sub-plot with his and Holmes' client, Mary Morstan. The tranquility of her English home is counterposed with the "wild, dark" nature of the violence Tonga inflicted, with the latter threatening the former (Mehta 1995, 634). However, by the end of the story, the threat has been subdued and Watson's engagement to Mary Morstan signals the restoration of English domestic tranquillity (Mehta 1995, 648).

Furthering the story's theme of the orient's invasion into and subliminal attack upon the empire, it is worth noting how Jonathan Small – a British man who is a criminal of a similar degree as Tonga – is portrayed as being victimised by the colony. His narration of the events that took place in India do not just focus on the tragedies that befell him, but on how they were inflicted upon him by Indians. When speaking of the time he served in an Indian prison after being convicted of Achmet's murder, he mentions "being bullied by every black-faced policeman who loved to take it out of a white man." ([1890] 2020, 245) As was the prevailing sentiment among the British at the time, Small treated the Rebellion of 1857 as a betrayal by their "own picked troops" that the British had armed and trained ([1890] 2020, 248). He described the convict-guard he killed while escaping the island with Tonga as "a vile Pathan who had never missed a chance of insulting and injuring" him ([1890] 2020, 265). Finally, despite also being a criminal involved in a murder, Small was portrayed far more sympathetically than Tonga throughout the story – in terms of appearance, intelligence, and agency.

Doyle's description and positioning of Tonga as the wild, dangerous Indian threat to English tranquillity, and the Agra Treasure as a mysterious motivator for malevolence of exotic origin sets the basis for their trajectory of being purged from the narrative. The cultural background provided by the Indian Rebellion of 1857 as the scene of the Agra Treasure's theft invokes the colonial anxiety felt by the British at the time and is mirrored in the way foreign elements in the novella threaten British order, having crossed the boundary into their land. The quest to restore order and settle the chaos caused by colonial elements is taken up by Sherlock Holmes, who stands as a protector of the Victorian social order and values. The ultimately apprehended Small, despite being the primary instigator of the violence that unfolded in London and the most personally motivated of the two, escaped with his life, while Tonga did not. *The Sign of the Four's* perceived threats from the east, although neutralised, are not quite expelled from the imperial imagination as much as they are hidden within it, as both Tonga and the Treasure meet the same fate – being enveloped by the Thames, where they will remain lost to the world.

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