



# Race And Sherlock Holmes: Interrogating The Politics Of Ethnicity In Select Fiction Of Arthur Conan Doyle

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Racial prejudices against the natives are very much evident in the fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes' actions often show him to be the man of empire. In some fiction like, "The Five Orange Pips", we find Sherlock Holmes vocal against the racist organization Ku Klux Klan. This paper seeks to attempt a study which questions the politics of racism in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. At the same time, the study tries to point out a different Sherlock Holmes, who acts against racism.

**Keywords:** Race, Prejudice, Fiction, Natives, Empire

In Culture and Imperialism, Edward W. Said compares Rudyard Kipling's Kim to the Sherlock Holmes fictions, and identifies Arthur Conan Doyle as an imperial writer, whose primary interest is to uphold and sustain British law. Said opines: "[The] union of power and knowledge is contemporary with [Arthur Conan] Doyle's invention of Sherlock Holmes (whose faithful scribe, Dr. Watson, is a veteran of the North West Frontier)...a man whose approach to life includes a healthy respect for, and protection of, the law allied with a superior, specialised intellect inclining to science...Kipling and Doyle represent for their readers men whose unorthodox style of operation is rationalised by new fields of experience turned into quasi-academic specialities. Colonial rule and crime detection almost gain the respectability and order of the classics or chemistry." (Said, 184)

Readers have been observing prejudices and detrimental views against the Orientals and Eastern natives in the stories written by Doyle. One should note that these stories were written when British ambitions were at their peak and when they were expanding their empire to foreign lands. Many British officers were posted in these foreign countries and they were introduced to races they previously knew very little of. In many stories it has been emphasized that the people coming back from these countries to London may be influenced in an evil way and may pose a threat to the peace in London. People of London who were culturally blind to the people in the east were threatened by the arrival of people from the East. Majority of the clients Holmes serve are shown to belong to the upper rungs of the society.

Similarly, frequent use of outsiders as villains can be seen. In "The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips", a notorious racist organization from America, Ku Klux Klan forms part of the story and is the reason for turmoil in British Empire. Holmes is always the protector of Englishmen and women against these external threats. Interracial marriage is shown in a very sensitive manner in "The Adventure of the Yellowface". The story revolves around a woman who secretly visits someone in the middle of the night. When the woman's husband takes the case to Holmes, he investigates and finds that the woman actually meets her daughter from a previous marriage to a black person. Since her daughter was black, the woman was not able to accept her publicly. The way this was handled in the story was appreciative. It reflects how intolerant and culturally blind the people were in Victorian society and at the same time the story has empathy towards the mother. But there are other instances when it has been often observed that the author has organised his pattern of writing in a way that reflects his discerning and arrogant views regarding characters belonging to culture and race other than those of England. Some critics have been harsh on Doyle for the choice of words Holmes uses in order to describe the black child's physical appearance (Espinosa 332). The aided partner of Holmes, Dr Watson, has his background as an army surgeon in the Northwest Frontier. He is said to have fought against the Indians and Afghans during the period of western invasion, withstanding strong against the mystical curses (Nugraheni 27). In The Sign of Four Tonga, an aboriginal tribal boy is shown to be a very notorious person. That part is understandable. A person belonging to any ethnicity and race can be notorious. But to describe Tonga in a manner as Caliban was described in Shakespeare's The Tempest was the reason why Doyle faces criticism (Kristensen 1590). There have been numerous references within the story where Dr Watson had been referring

to Tonga as hideous, ugly, or even scary. The term savage was even used by Dr Watson to call Tonga in certain areas, which showcases the lack of respect shown towards the native tribal dwellers. Another author who wrote around the same time as Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs often referred to African people as savages and cannibals in his books. One can argue that Doyle may not be a racist as his portrayal of the racist American group, Ku Klux Klan in "The adventure of Five Orange Pips" was not in a positive manner.

However, the underlying racism and overriding domination are quite visible in where every property and policy of the Indians is treated as the Britishers'. The physical features of the people in the East have been attached to many criminals in the Holmes canon. The physical features of people in the East have been described as if they were civilizational degeneration. Not only Tonga, portrayal of Indians and people from the East in negative light is prevalent throughout the stories in the Holmes canon. The Sign of Four is set in India and hence gave Doyle enough instances of mentioning events that occurred in India. British women were said to be unsafe in India. The freedom fighters have been termed as rebels. While describing the "Great Indian Mutiny of 1857", Jonathan Small tells how "one month India lay as still and peaceful as Surrey or Kent, the next there were two hundred thousand black devils let loose, and the country was a perfect hell." (Doyle 232).

When Small strikes his deal with the Punjabis at the Agra fort to steal the treasure from an Indian king, one of the Punjabis makes a comment on the trust issue: "The Sikh knows the Englishman and the Englishman knows the Sikh." (Doyle 235). These examples are symbolic of dependence between the Empire and its colony.

Events such as the Cawnpore massacre are mentioned and only one side of the coin is shown. Dr Watson having returned from the war in the East throughout the Holmes Canon keeps giving references of people in the East. He refers to them as "Murderous Ghazis" in A Study in Scarlet. Mari Isokoski explains that Doyle takes an evolutionary point of view in stating that Dr Roylott in The Sign of Four was contaminated by living in India. Dr Roylott was described to go back to an earlier stage of human civilization, having spent time in India. His stay in India is described as the reason his primitive nature has resurfaced (Isokoski 47). Similarly, in "An Illustrious Client", Baron Gruner, a rich Scandinavian Lord is shown to be influenced in an evil way due to his stay in Africa. The foreign characters in Holmes stories are often shown as the cause of disturbance and turmoil. Representation of people from foreign lands in disrespectful manner can be seen in the entire Holmes canon. Significantly, a number of criminals in the Holmes narratives have strong links with the former British colony of the United States of America that serves to Doyle's prejudice against the colonised individuals in general. Abe Slaney of "The Adventure of the Dancing Men", Enoch J. Drebber, Joseph Stangerson and Jefferson Hope of A Study in Scarlet. James Calhoun of "The Five Orange Pips", the Mormons prophets Brigham Young and his Elders of A Study in Scarlet and Councillor McGinty of The Valley of Fear are Americans depicted as criminals. Importantly, though Holmes calls Professor Moriarty as "the Napoleon of Crime" (Doyle 656) in "The Adventure of the Final Problem", the British criminal's activities are restricted to only three stories: "The Final Problem", "The Adventure of the Empty House" and The Valley of Fear.

Doyle's underscoring of the Oriental link of criminals like Tonga and Dost Akbar depicts the common imperial perception that evil is typical of the Oriental psyche. In A Passage to India, E.M. Forster depicted Indians in a similar manner as slothful, hypocrite, unpunctual people. Doyle posits Christianity as the predominant religion for the colonisers over the non-Christian religions like Hinduism and Islam in The Sign of Four and Mormonism in A Study in Scarlet. Converting the religious faith of the colonized people served the purpose of colonizers because the colonized people, when taught in Christian doctrines felt a type of religious unity with the colonizers. In The Sign of Four, Jonathan Small reposes faith in Tonga, but still he views him as a "hell-hound". Although the colonizers changed the faith of the native people, the seed of mistrust was still in them. According to Edward Said, a person from the East is "first an oriental, second a human being and last again an oriental." (Said 102).

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