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Wealth and Entitlement in Detective Fiction: Britain's History of Pillage in India

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"Does a nation inherit the evil of its forbearers if it accepts benefits derived from the crime?" (Reed 287).

This paper deals with the subjects of wealth and entitlement in detective fiction, for which two novels, namely *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins and *The Sign of the Four* (1890) by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle will be used as primary texts. The basic arguments of this paper are to trace colonial and precolonial pillaging of India (as presented in the text) and to look at how the idea of 'earning' wealth is related to the mere dislocation of production of wealth. In the course of the paper, London will be interpreted as a sight of an empire built upon pillage and loot and, at times, even founded upon crime.

In both these novels, the plot is influenced by the events of a mutiny or uprising, most of it has to do with plunder and loot. Thus, it becomes crucial to briefly locate the structure of balance between Britain's imperial ventures and its subsequent effects upon the empire. It has been argued that the classical colonist-colonised relationship between the empire and India came forth only post 1857. India was expected to survive by itself and also support the cause of the empire. India was both a ground for raw material and a market for manufactured goods, the profits from which never filled its own coffers. Surprisingly, there was no import duty on trade affairs (in British India) even though other colonies exercised it. Through India's export trade, Britain maintained its own deficit with other countries. This is in keeping with the opium wars[1] that Britain fought with China to ensure its trade market did not remain one-sided and dependent with the export of tea, porcelain, etc., thus, ensuring that China opened its markets for opium import. Bandyopadhyay describes how India was comfortably drained of its wealth:

> There were several pipelines through which this drainage allegedly occurred, and these were interests in foreign debt incurred by the east India company… irrigation, road transport… the government purchase policy of importing all its stationary from England… paying for secretary of state… military personnel. (Bandyopadhyay, 123)

The real money transfer occurred through the sale of 'council bills'. These were bought by buyers of Indian goods in London (in sterling) who got Indian rupee in exchange.

[1]First opium war: 1840-1842; Second opium war: 1856-1860.

Post the Battle of Plassey, in 1757, "The entire contents of the Bengal treasury were simply loaded into 100 boats and punted down the Ganges from the Nawab of Bengal's palace to Fort William, the company's Calcutta headquarters." (*The Guardian*)

In the novella, *The Sign of the Four,* Sherlock Holmes is called upon by a lady by the name of Ms. Morstan (Dr.Watson's future wife) who is troubled by some letters that she has received. A woman of limited means and employed as a governess, Miss Morstan, is the only child of her father, Captain Morstan, who serves in the British army in India. She has been receiving rare pearls to undo the wrong done to her father, which the sender claims to be her fair share. The story revolves around the valuable 'Agra treasure' which belonged to a King of northern provinces of India and the truth about the means of its attainment remains dubious. This treasure is being transported by his servant, Achmet Singh, who is waylaid by Jonathan Small, Dost Akbar, Abdullah Khan, and Mahomet Singh, who later swear a pact of honest division of the loot amongst themselves and call it the 'sign of the four.' This very treasure, now buried in the fort of Agra, is further divided by them to incorporate a fifth share to gain freedom while serving as prisoners in the Andaman. While the novel compliments the marvellous expertise of the detective, it is interesting to note the tremendous amount of riches that flow through the text in the form of the 'Agra treasure' and the strange claims that people lay on it.

There seems to be an unusual culture around the luxurious case containing the Agra treasure decorated with Benares metalwork. The looters discovered it at the time of the Mutiny of 1857. The treasure is introduced by name in the later part of the book. It is believed to have belonged to a *Rajah*[2] of 'some' northern province of India who has inherited some of the money from his father and hoarded the rest. In the face of the mutiny, he is protecting his riches by placing part of it, that is, the Agra treasure with the British. The first claim made upon the money is by the *Rajah* who, as mentioned, is probably not the real owner of the money. As Doyle quotes, "There is a rajah in the northern provinces who has much wealth, though his lands are small" (79). Who owns it then? It is not revealed to the reader. The treasure contains:

> … one hundred and forty-three diamonds of the first water… 'the Great Mogul' and is said to be the second largest stone in existence… ninety-seven very fine emeralds, and one hundred and seventy rubies... There were forty carbuncles, two hundred and ten sapphires, sixty-one agates, and a great quantity of beryls, onyxes, cats'-eyes, turquoises, and other stones… there were nearly three hundred very fine pearls (Doyle 82-83).

Yet, it represents the empty wealth, which just changes hands from one 'robber' to the other, each of whom considers it his own. This idea is reiterated by Watson when he says, "Thank God!" on hearing about the treasure's loss because its looming shadow had become a hindrance between his chances of a relationship with Mary Morstan. Jonathan Small is tricked by Major Sholto who runs away with the treasure and the former's entire life is spent in pursuit of revenge and the 'fair share' of which he attains none. At the end of the story the treasure is drowned and spread across five miles on the bed of river Thames, most definitely not in a place where it belonged.

[2]*Editor's Note (herein after called Ed. N.):* King.

The fate of the treasure is much like the unfair economic setup shared by Britain with its colonies. Wealth that is produced in Indian colonies is transported to Britain in the form of rich silks, muslins, gems, etc. London seems to be no less a recreation of the fabled east, given that a whole area in the city is named, 'Pondicherry lodge'. It is laying claim over a land through its name. Nonetheless, the most poignant example of this dislocation of wealth is the room of Thaddeus Sholto, as he himself puts it: "An oasis of art in the howling desert of South London" (Doyle 17). Sholto's room is a celebration of luxury and decadence as perceived in the days of the Raj:

> The richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries draped the walls… to expose some richly-mounted painting or Oriental vase. The carpet was of amber-and-black... Two great tiger-skins thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury, as did a huge hookah... A lamp in the fashion of a silver dove was hung from an almost invisible golden wire in the centre of the room. (Doyle 17).

All these elements suggest a re-creation of the lifestyle enjoyed by the rich *zamindar*[3] class of India, a hookah smoking Sholto seated amidst his own creation of a mini East. This opulence suggests a kind of moral degradation which makes him desire more riches, an element which is more pronounced in his twin, Bartholomew Sholto. Bartholomew lays personal claim upon the treasure without any knowledge of its origins and meets a tragic end. Whereas, Thaddeus, who wants to share with Morstan her 'rightful' claim survives. Men like Bartholomew and Captain Sholto represent the nature of the Raj towards the colonies, with an assumption that the East is a wild exotic space to loot riches and collect mementos from. They assume that an entitlement goes along with the possession of the treasure. Similar is the case with Achmet Singh, who promises a reward to Small and his companions if they grant protection to him and 'his master's' belonging, whereas ethically he is not in a position to do so. Post the quelling of the mutiny, it is heard that the Rajah is exiled from the country and can no longer hold land or property. The mutiny sets new parameters to the establishment of land policies.

Metcalfe writes that it was Lord Canning who realized that small native states or provinces (like the one belonging to the *Rajah* here) were 'breakwaters to the storm' of mutiny and decided to enable policies that would create support for these states in contrast to previous annexationist methods. The government of India derived maximum revenue from land. The process of defining land rights made British instrumental in restructuring class structure, thereby their dominance in society. From the *ryotwari* system[4] (which proved disastrous for north-western provinces and Punjab), revenue collection moved to the *talukdari* system[5]. The British gave up attempts at any kind of peasant reforms and agreed to a subtle manner of revenue collection through *taluks*[6], to whom people were already accustomed. It was after the anarchy of Oudh (Awadh) (1857-8) that the ideals of peasant proprietorship were discarded and *talukdars* were able to resume control of the estates. *Talukdari* system also agreed with the "laissez-faire" system of political economy, thus finding support from many quarters. Prior to the mutiny, the now deposed *Rajah* (from *The*

[3]*Ed. N.:* a landowner, especially one who leases his land to tenant farmers.
[4]Direct collection of land revenue from individual cultivators by government agents. The system was devised by Capt. Alexander Read and Thomas (later Sir Thomas) Munro at the end of the 18th century and introduced by the latter when he was governor (1820–27) of Madras (Chennai).
[5]The talukdar or the administrative head would be responsible for the collection of taxes.
[6]*Ed. N.:* administrative districts for taxation puropses

Sign of the Four) and said 'owner' of the treasure must have been a part of the *ryotwari* land revenue collection himself. There is a possibility that the riches were hoarded out of the labour of generations of peasants of his estate. Given that the aftermath of the mutiny did not work well for him, only the name of place where his treasure was looted, that is 'Agra,' stuck on.

> The sheer excessiveness of the Agra treasure, its power to attract, to kill, and to elude capture, and, perhaps most significantly, its imminent return to the shores of Great Britain in the form of a murderous conspiracy, is symptomatic of its origin in the discursive unmanageability of the Mutiny. (Keep and Randall 212)

The second half of the Nineteenth century and the first half of the Twentieth saw many fictional renditions of the event of mutiny. These are enough evidence to read the extent of the changes it brought about in the empire's working. Some examples of this are Nisbet's work, *The Queen's Desire* (1893), Merriman's *Flotsam* (1896), Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), Lady Inglis's 1892 diary, and Lord Roberts's 1897 memoir. Colonists have attempted to quell the importance of Indian uprisings by referring to them as 'Mutiny,'[7] limiting them to military misadventures. However, the uprising may have had various methods of approach to 'protest,' defying the limitation of the term. The word 'Mutiny' severely constraints comprehension of an event that was much larger than the trouble with chewing greased cartridges.

"… these men that we fought against, foot, horse, and gunners, were our own picked troops, whom we had taught and trained, handling our own weapons and blowing our own bugle-calls" (Doyle 76) – there is a sinister dread among the British from the men fighting them, still dressed in red coats of the Raj army. In their essay, Randall and Keep make an interesting observation about how the empire or rather London in the novel is thrown off-guard, in an unexplainable uncomfortable space due to the mutiny. The geography of the city resounds with these uncertainties. The blindfolded trio in the carriage, Holmes, Watson and Morstan, are led by a street 'arab' into a strange eastern haven (Sholto's room) while two of the passengers are unable to recognise the geography of their otherwise well traversed city of London. London becomes a strange space an "unmapped and unknowable place of origin, the colonial periphery" (Keep and Randall 213).

Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) also deals with the ill-begotten inheritance of a rare gem that John Herncastle gives to his niece, Rachel Verinder, after being slighted by both his sister and niece. This gem, the Moonstone, has a history of its own. It was attained by Herncastle as loot in the Battle of Seringapatam (1799)[8] when he was fighting for the British army. This sacred yellow diamond, due to be delivered by Rachel's cousin and suitor Franklin Blake is guarded by three Indian Brahmin priests who are following the gem. Eventually the gem is stolen on the night of her birthday and the European detective, Sergeant Cuff, takes over the case. Suspicion falls upon Rosanna Spearman, a reformed thief,

[7]*Editor's Note (Herein after called Ed.N.):* The Indian Rebellion of 1857 is also called the Indian Mutiny, the Sepoy Mutiny, India's First War of Independence or India's first struggle for independence. It began on 10 May 1857, as a mutiny of sepoys of the British East India Company's army.

[8]Fictional rendition of the actual Siege of Seringapatam (5 April – 4 May 1799). It was the final phase of the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War fought between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Mysore. The British, with the allied Nizam of Hyderabad, won the war after breaching the walls of the fortress at Seringapatam and storming the citadel. Tipu Sultan, Mysore's ruler, was killed.

as well as on various members of the household and later Rachel herself. The other important characters in the story are Gabriel Betteredge, the family steward, Ezra Jennings, a man with a sordid past but a sound mind, assistant to the Verinder family doctor (Dr Candy) and Godfrey Ablewhite, Rachel's philanthropist cousin and the real thief. Yet, the most important story is that of the Moonstone itself. The Moonstone adorns the forehead of the Moon God, the statue of whom is moved to Benares from Somnath to escape being plundered by Mahmoud of Ghizni in the Eleventh century. From here it reached the hands of a high-ranking official in the army of Aurangzeb when they looted and destroyed temples. Thus it travelled from one 'lawless mohameddan' (Collins) to another eventually reaching Tipoo, the Sultan of Seringapatm, who had it engraved in a dagger. Herncastle ripped it from the dagger during the battle. The theft of the Moonstone then is a fabulous tale about suffering curse from wrongful acquisition of someone else's property. Here the curse is basically that of incurring debt and humiliation, for both Herncastle and Godfrey.

Ilana Blumberg makes a critical observation with respect to the travels of the Moonstone in her essay. The Moonstone is an idea modelled around various fabled gems, especially the prized Koh-i-noor. The Koh-i-noor found its place in Queen Victoria's crown, the gem embodies the idea of gift and theft as being understood interchangeably with respect to colonial history. The attainment of the gem is reflective of the helplessness of the colonised and the prowess of the colonist. This fetish with diamonds is also seen in *The Sign of Four* where the Agra treasure contains a huge diamond of the first water, also called 'the great mogul'; having the great mogul is almost like having the *Mughal* empire in one's pocket.

The mutiny was often seen as an uprising that perpetrated the British domestic space. The incidents of Lucknow and Kanpur forts housing women and children, surrounded and plundered by Indian savages is well known. While these claims might, to some extent, be justified, their constant repetition seems to be a method to negate ages of perpetration by the empire into the colonized lands. It is ironical that not only the women and children need to be protected, they also need to be adorned with colonial 'gifts'. Both the Koh-i-noor and the Moonstone were worn by women, at least once.

The Moonstone being ripped off a dagger or the forehead of a God is the violation of its sacred value. This sacrilege is passed on to Rachel as a gift of 'forgiveness' for her and her mother's slight towards the uncle. Herncastle could only make a gift of it if he thought himself entitled to its possession, his assumption echoes with that of the imperialists who thought themselves to be the natural master to riches of the East. A gift, with its own market value, is exercised upon a promise of return; unlike the altruist self-sacrificing tradition of gifting as professed in Victorian culture, in the novel at least, it is the demand of an even-handed reciprocal exchange. Blumberg compares this process to the solemn Christian practice of Christ's sacrifice to grant grace to humankind. Whatever merit people earn through good deeds or charity, they will never surpass the sacrifice of God and salvation shall always remain a gift. In the novel, there are several gifts given, most of them with an intention of gaining something in return, the Moonstone is no different, if only as a means to incur curse and calamity.

The position that Collins takes here is quite novel for his times as he manages to club the acts of a British soldier (that of loot and murder) with the common denominator of plunderers and looters towards whom his opinion is less than lenient, "the Moonstone passed (carrying its curse with it) from one lawless Mohammedan hand to another" (Collins 1).

Unlike Doyle in *The Sign of the four*, who seems more concerned with the honesty of the pact (irrespective of whoever the treasure belongs to), Collins recognises the activities of the Raj as that of pillage and loot:

> … utterly false logic of imperialism: we are doing them a service. Wilkie Collins challenges this factitious binary in The Moonstone by constructing a private, domestic history as simultaneously imperial, collapsing not only home and away, but also private and public, and family and empire… (Free 2).

Collins provides the reader with a choice while systematically demystifying the legacies of the empire that provided a severely constrained narrative to the history of events. The Christian trope of carrying the white man's burden, of doing them a service for the higher values of altruism and charity are laid bare by a straightforward telling of a fitting singular event, i.e., the ways in which the Indian empire was looted for years. "In some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story, I have reversed the process. The attempt made here is to trace the influence of character on circumstances." (Collins, Preface) The same approach could be used for readers; they can choose if the entitlement of the gem (representative of the wealth of the colonies) transfers with the possession gained through force or vice versa. Otherwise, the benign nature of the colonist is kept at the forefront and the atrocities suffer a collective amnesia. To a western reader, the Battle of Seringapatam and subsequent pillage poses a sense of thrill and patriotic pride to the Coloniser. Tennyson's poem, "The Defence of Lucknow" (1902), is an example of the trend of thought and emotion: "Handful of men as we were, we were English in heart and in limb, Strong with the strength of the race to command, to obey, to endure…"

Collins presents the empire as an entity separate from the integrated nation space of Britain and allows Seringapatam a location and culture that belongs to the native; it is in opposition to Tennyson's claim of the Englishman's natural right to command. The situation of the imperial nation is like a "… scandal of a grasping nation overreaching itself, protected by the urgency of containment." (Free 343).

One common trope in both the aforementioned novels is the use of opium, its addiction and its presence in the novels as a catalyst to events. *The Sign of Four* begins with Holmes injecting himself with cocaine and Watson expressing his displeasure at his "sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks." (Doyle 1). Holmes needs something to keep his mind occupied, for him it is either cocaine or a case engaging enough. When the Agra treasure case is successfully solved, he goes back to his cocaine bottle. Thaddeus Sholto is also given to addictions, like the hookah. Similarly, in *The Moonstone*, Ezra Jennings is a good man but cuts a tragic figure as an opium addict, eventually losing his life to the addiction. Jennings has a mixed parentage and like a colonial subject, he is shunned by society. His sordid past is his undeserved guilt, which the empire will not help to uplift. The theft of the gem from the Verinder house itself happens under a wrongly administered dose of opium. Collins was a laudanum addict and it seems that many of Jennings experiences with the drug are Collins's personal contributions. The various characters given to opium use seem to be paying for the sin of wrongful hoarding of wealth and its misplaced entitlement; for opium trade was the crown in Britain's export trade, given its addictive nature. "Opium steadily accounted for about 17-20% of Indian revenues… In

fact, the revenues don't account for entire profits generated [out of opium trade] - there was shipping, there were so many ancillary industries around opium."

Opium was also the reason for the then infamous opium wars Britain fought with China. Opium trade produced "the transient satisfactions by which the imperial imaginary sought to confirm its mastery..." (Keep and Randall). Holmes's body is punctured by the cocaine syringes and his drug use is an addiction, his body is like the sight of empire punctured due to its stint in wrongdoing while hallucinating a non-existent clarity, like Holmes, the empire yearns for 'mental exaltation'. Yet use of narcotics suggests being out of control and normal order, the need for an artificial stimulant is the weakness of the body, the empire is tripping over groundwork of its own making.

For a long time *The Moonstone*, being a novel, was not perceived capable of social criticism; it is only in the last three decades that such possibilities have been considered. The multiple narrators and their varied take on the plot allow the readers to choose their sides within the novel as it begins with an imperial siege. Yet, Collins manages to express guarded responsibility for the events of the siege and plunder. He does not read the theft as a romantic event far removed from the English soil but as a consequence of one's (Britain's) own doing. The public in the novel is deeply embedded in the private, the scandal in the family is the outcome of a scandal of the nation. "… the novel dismantles conventional distinctions between oriental and English" (Caren 240-241). India is perceived as a rare gem, an object to cherish, like the Moonstone. At the end of the novel, the return of the Moonstone to the deity's forehead is portrayed as a morally sound culmination of the stone's journey.

Collins and Doyle, through their characters in their respective novels, have managed to create space for speculation on the consequences of people's stint in empire. While opium abuse has been mentioned as, another common element is the presence of some deformity or disease in the self of characters. Herncastle's strange nature and Jonathan Small's wooden leg are examples of it. In Doyle's stories, *The Adventure of the Crooked Man* (1893) and *The Speckled Band* (1892), this feature is quite pronounced. In *The Speckled Band*, Dr. Grimsby Roylott, is the last survivor of an aristocratic family in Surrey and has practiced his profession in India. His behaviour is animalistic and he is given to strange fits of anger and violence; his greed provokes him to kill his own stepdaughter. While, in *The Adventure of the Crooked Man*, Henry Wood is a handsome sergeant in the British army in India who is transformed to a crooked hunchback post the events of the mutiny. The curse of imperialism comes forth as bodily deformation in these works.

Detective fiction is a vast genre. The mere fact that a novel like *The Moonstone*, which introduces itself as a 'romance' sets the platform for detective fiction somewhat explains its far-reaching effects and influences. This genre is an intrinsic part of popular fiction; Doyle and Collins manage to highlight crucial arguments through a very commonly read genre. Through a journey of thrill and suspense, detective fiction manages to address issues of precolonial and colonial pillaging, wealth and entitlement, colonial trade affairs, drug abuse, objectification of the East and the workings of a nation-state. When a genre manages to question the constraints of history and provide a new perception to one's surroundings, it can be deemed successful. Detective fiction has, for a long time, through suspense and thrill done just that. It has provoked us to think.

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