

Indian Elements in the Works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Dr. Shafiulla Alim Khan

Assistant Professor
N.M.D. College, Gondia

HHH

Abstract

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), the well-known author of detective stories and creator of world-famous detective Sherlock Holmes, lived and worked during the British occupation of India. Many of his stories display a clear presence of India, its history of the time, its people and culture. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze here, a British writer's views and opinions of India on the basis of his observations.

Keywords: Cawnpur, mutiny, khidmadgar, hukka

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has written about 56 detective stories and novels. Among these his novel *The Sign of Four* has a setting against Indian background. Story 'The Speckled Band' also narrates about the characters who have been to India and come back to England with certain elements which have clear Indian touch. These stories show how Britishers and their occupation of India resulted in exchange in many things related to socio-cultural and political ways of the two countries on the extreme corners of the globe. We can see this touch of east in the life of England through this Anglo Indian Literature and in the literature itself.

The famous companion of Dr. Watson also has Indian connection. In his very first meeting with Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes deduces from his darkened skin that he has been to Afghanistan. While serving in the battle of Maiwand Dr. Watson gets struck in the shoulder by a bullet. He is admitted to a hospital in Peshawar, a part of undivided India. In Peshawar he is further struck by enteric fever which is a fever relating to intestine and prevalent in Indian sub-continent.

The story 'The Speckled Band' is about a woman, Helen Stoner who is daughter of a Major in Indian Artillery. Her widowed mother marries Dr. Grimes by Roylott who has a successful practice in Calcutta, India (now Kolkata). Dr. Roylott was a short tempered man, angered with some robberies he beats his native butler to death and narrowly escapes capital punishment. However, he suffers a long imprisonment. He is so disappointed that he decides to return back to England. Helen Stoner explains her stint in India-

When Dr. Roylott was in India he married my mother, Mrs. Stoner the young widow of Major-General Stoner, of Bengal Artillery. My sister Julia and I were twins, and we were only two years old at the time of my mother's marriage. She had a considerable sum of money, not less than a thousand a year, and this she bequeathed to Dr. Roylott entirely whilst we resided with him, with a provision that a certain annual sum should be allowed to each of us in the event of our marriage. (100)

After an unsuccessful attempt to establish his practice in London he returns back to his ancestral house at Stoke Moran with the two stepdaughters. The narrative suggests that his Indian connection helps him to transport a cheetah, a baboon and a poisonous viper of Indian origin to his estate in Stoke Moran. The incidents in India and its tropical weather gave Dr. Roylott a furious temper which he carries to England. In his state he plans to kill the stepdaughters with the help of the poisonous snake so that he does not have to part with ancestral money bequeathed to them after their marriage. In fact he succeeds to kill the elder Julia when she decides to marry and he remains undetected because of his shrewd plan. However Helen Stoner approaches Sherlock Holmes when some similar incidents start happening to her which happened before her sister's mysterious death.

Sherlock Holmes being a genius detective solves the mystery of the crime as he has the knowledge of venomous snakes found in India and how they can be lured by feeding milk as a reward to attack on the target. Thus the story, *The Speckled Band* throws light on the presence of Britishers in India and how they took the knowledge of India to their own country in different forms.

One real life case solved by Sir A.C. Doyle playing a Sherlock Holmes also concerns a man of Indian origin. The fictitious detective Sherlock Holmes receives complaints of injustice and mysterious crimes to solve. Once, a similar complaint is received by the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes solves the case to establish justice through his impeccable power of deduction. George Edalji, a 27 year old man of Indian origin is wrongfully accused of crimes only because of his non-native origin.

Edalji writes to Sir Doyle requesting to clear him from the wrong accusations. The creator of Sherlock Holmes understands the injustice heaped on Mr. Edalji and using his prowess of deduction exposes the false accusations and within no time proves his innocence. This real case of investigation gets published in many papers and further establishes the reputation of Sir Doyle as a genuine writer of detective genre. A quote from an article of Hindustan Times under the title 'New book uncovers Indian mystery probed by Sherlock Holmes author' (ustantimes-com.cdn.ampproject.org) established this Indian connection of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

I think Indian readers will find it interesting that in 1907 Arthur Conan Doyle responded to a letter by a young Indian lawyer appealing to him for help to clear his name, and he took up the case", said Basu, the author of previous historical accounts such as 'Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan' and 'Victoria and Abdul: The Extraordinary True Story of the Queen's Closest Confident'. Even Jawaharlal Nehru, who was an 18-year-old student at the time in Harrow School in London, got fascinated with the case and remarked that George had no doubt been targeted because he was Indian. (ustantimes-com.cdn.ampproject.org)

The above quote establishes the condition of migrants in the country which ruled them and there are always people who fight for justice in spite of all cultural prejudices.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel 'The Sign of Four' establishes the Anglo Indian relationship in literature more strongly as seeds of the story germinate in the Indian soil. The story surrounds one Agra Treasure which was robbed by Jonathan Small with the help of three Indian Sikhs Mahomat Singh, Abdullah Khan and Dost Akbar from an Indian businessman Achmat during the mutiny of 1857. The online e-notes, The Sign of Four Summary - eNotes.com (www.enotes.com) put it-

Holmes enlists the help of the police to catch the barge, which carries one Jonathan Small and a pygmy man named Tonga. At the police station, Small explains that, while stationed in India, three Indian men bribed him to allow their escape when they murdered an emissary who carries the so-called "Agra Treasure" (from a tea plantation overseer fleeing from the Indian Rebellion of 1857). The plan ultimately fails, and the four men are arrested. Small goes to a penal colony where Major Sholto and Morstan are in stationed. Small bribes the two to let him escape to find the treasure in exchange for a promise of the proceeds. Sholto himself goes in search of the treasure but absconds with it rather than returning for Morstan and Small as promised. (The Sign of Four Summary)

The story and its Indian characters give an idea of Britishers' understanding of India. For example the three names Mahomat Singh, Abdullah Khan and Dost Akbar are mentioned as Sikhs by the writer whereas among these three, two appear to be Muslims. Anybody with long beard and a turban is considered as Sikh by the Britishers of those days. Nevertheless the glimpses of India can be seen in the writings of these British writers from their own understanding of India. The story of The Sign of the Four also gives an account of mutiny of 1857 from a Britisher's point of view. The cities like Agra and Cawnpur are mentioned in the novel because they were hotspots during the time of the mutiny of 1857. We also get description of various places of India and its islands. All these characters Mahomat Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar and Tonga narrate the understanding of Indian sub-continent and its islands by the writer.

It's apparent from the analysis of the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the elements of India in them while Britishers were leaving their ways of life during their occupation of the sub-continent the transaction was not entirely one sided as at the same time Indian ways were also making inroads in England. The novel, The Sign of Four shows how Major Sholto comes back to England with a Khidmadgar or a servant along with so many Indian articles like Hukka, Jewellery and some antique pieces. Apart from socio-political exchanges we can very well see linguistic exchanges also in these works of Anglo Indian literature. For example words like Ardali, Mughal, Bazar, Pyjama, Taknik (for technique) and scores of such words took place in the literature when words crossed the geographical and linguistic boundaries and mixed up with the other language.

Works Cited

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