Imperial contradictions in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*

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Despite Britain's rapid territorial expansion and its marked success in establishing international colonies, the early nineteenth century British public held widely divergent views concerning imperialist endeavors. While the colonies retained their element of exoticism and decadence, attracting the British public to the idea of colonial enterprise, native insurrections against British imperial rule inspired fear within the British public. By calling the loyalties of colonial natives into question, and casting doubt upon the overall security of Britain, popular support of territorial expansion began to wane. To understand these contradictory popular responses to British imperialism, this article will undertake an analysis of Arthur Conan Doyle's popular piece of mystery fiction: *The Sign of Four*, a literary work written in the context of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. By reflecting contemporary attitudes held in response to British Imperialism, *The Sign of Four* provides a medium through which popular contradictory responses towards British imperialism can be critically examined.

Early nineteenth-century Britain was a nation characterized by its marked success in colonial enterprises, including rapid territorial expansion, the imposition of British culture upon indigenous populations, and the establishment of colonial government. British international achievements strengthened popular confidence in Britain's role as an imperial power and led to heightened mass endorsements of colonialism [1]. Popular support of the British nation soon became reliant upon the success of the Empire, as nineteenth-century British national identity grew inextricably linked with the nation's international achievements. Britain's imperial audacity was shaken however, with the advent of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the first major instance of native rebellion against British colonial rule [2]. While members of nineteenth-century British society continued to outwardly support British colonial endeavors and display a fervent interest in imperialistic sentiments, their enthusiasm was marred with a fear of the foreign, as the violent nature of the Indian Mutiny caused individuals to begin to question their security within the Empire [3].

This was the social context into which Arthur Conan Doyle released his second detective novel entitled *The Sign of Four*. This work not only provides its readers with an intriguing plot and memorable characters, but also with valuable insights into late Victorian culture. Doyle's *The Sign of Four*, is representative of contemporary attitudes held in response to the Indian Mutiny as his writing reflects the

ambiguities of societal perceptions about British colonies and the colonialist gesture in general. Doyle's work reflects societal attempts to reconcile these contradictory reactions to imperialism as it acknowledges both the fascination and fear commonly associated with British colonial enterprises and reveals the relationship between contemporary perceptions of public safety and these widely held conflicting imperial conceptions. By alluding to important historical events and analyzing the impact of these occurrences on Victorian society, *The Sign of Four* provides a useful medium through which late nineteenth-century British societal attitudes towards imperialism can be examined critically.

Although the Indian Mutiny facilitated the formation of societal anxieties within Britain, *The Sign of Four* suggests that late nineteenth-century British society continued to consider the colonies as attractive possessions [2]. Doyle's portrayal of India as an alluring and exotic milieu is characteristic of popular nineteenth-century colonial conceptions, as many Western artists and poets often romanticized the behaviors and environments characteristic of "Oriental" nations [4]. Evidence of the exotic and sensual appeal of the colonies can be found in the *Sign of Four*, as Miss Morstan's Indian accessories, including "a small turban of the small dull [grey] hue, relieved only by the suspicion of a white feather in the side" [5], immediately capture the attention of Watson and inspires his original attraction to her [6]. Societal fascination with the colonies is further accentuated in *The Sign of Four*, when Doyle associates

Indian artifacts with exoticism and luxury. Watson's description of Thaddeus Sholto's apartment demonstrates the Western tendency to associate foreign objects with decadence as he states, "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," [5]. Watson further reflects this tendency when he describes "a lamp in the fashion of a silver dove," stating that it, "[hangs] from an almost invisible golden wire in the centre of the room. As it burned it filled the air with a subtle and aromatic odour" [5]. Doyle's constant pairing of India with the exotic suggests that British society remained fascinated by Eastern colonies, and continued to enjoy moderate exposure to their unorthodox cultures.

In addition to satisfying British cultural curiosity, imperialism also provided members of nineteenth-century British society with desirable opportunities. Colonial sojourns encouraged British officials to travel abroad, and accentuated the possibility that such excursions could result in the accumulation of considerable wealth [3]. As previously mentioned, Britain's colonies were frequently associated with luxury, and coming into the possession of a large fortune while abroad was certainly a potential reality of nineteenth-century colonial service [3]. The societal awareness of the relationship between colonial expeditions and the possibility for social and economic advancement is reflected in Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. The frequency with which British officials made profits from their colonial sojourns is demonstrated by Doyle's fictional character Abdullah Khan, a Sikh soldier serving to protect the British fort of Agra. In his attempts to commission the help of British native Jonathan Small in their plot to take possession of the Agra treasure, Khan says, "We only ask you to do that which your countrymen come to this land for. We ask you to be rich" [5]. This passage, in assuming that even colonial natives are aware of imperialist economic opportunities available to British officials, suggests that all levels of Victorian society were aware of the financial opportunities provided by British imperialism. This popular association between colonial enterprise and economic prosperity thus made imperialism alluring to the British populace and reinforced a widespread societal fascination with the colonies.

While Doyle recognizes the exotic and economic appeal of the colonies, he also recognizes that popular imperial fascination is often experienced alongside strong feelings of fear, as colonial uprisings often, "placed British culture outside and beyond its 'proper' sphere of dominion and self-control" [7]. The Indian Mutiny, before its eventual suppression, caused British confidence in the Empire to waver, as Indian natives employed violent tactics against colonial officials [7]. Doyle recognizes the debilitating impact that the Mutiny has on the Empire, and thus makes reference to this important imperial turning point through the character of Small. Small's account of the Indian Mutiny

describes a level of violence as enacted by Indian natives that would both startle and unsettle British readers:

The whole country was up like a swarm of bees. Wherever the English could collect in little bands they held just the ground that their guns commanded. Everywhere else they were helpless fugitives. It was a fight of the millions against the hundreds [5].

The Mutiny revealed weaknesses in the British Empire and instilled a sense of uncertainty within British society, as many individuals lost confidence in their nation's ability to protect against foreign incursions into their homeland [8]. What augmented this fear of foreign encroachment was the increasingly negative portrayal of native Indians, as accounts of the Mutiny frequently described foreigners as inherently violent [1].

The Indian Mutiny marks a change in the way that members of British society perceived colonial natives, as contemporary descriptions of their insurrectionary behaviors ran contrary to pre-existing notions of Indian temperament [9]. Whereas the British had previously viewed colonial natives as innately subordinate and complicit, violent behaviors displayed within the Mutiny suggested that the 'primitive' nature of Eastern culture was intimately linked with criminal behavior [1]. After the Mutiny, British society began to associate Eastern cultures with degeneracy, savagery, and brutality, all of which were attributions that encouraged popular fear of the colonies and of their inhabitants. *The Sign of Four* reflects Victorian society's pervasive apprehensions towards Eastern culture, as Doyle submits to popular beliefs which emphasized the relationship between foreign characteristics and criminality. This can be seen most prominently in Doyle's description of Tonga, as Watson recounts that, "His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half animal fury" [5]. Doyle's portrayal of Tonga as primitive, animalistic and frightening is illustrative of popular conceptualizations of foreign figures during the nineteenth century, as the British populace frequently looked upon the colonies with apprehension and fear after the advent of colonial insurgency. The nineteenth-century British tendency to associate native physical characteristics with aggressive behavior can be further observed when Watson exclaims, "Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty" [5] upon his first encounter with this Andaman Islander. By incorporating such descriptions of natives without questioning their validity, *The Sign of Four* plays into Victorian society's fear of the foreign. These descriptions put forth to limit British contact with the colonies are indicative of the societal uncertainty surrounding imperialism.

In addition to recognizing society's inconsistent attitudes towards Britain's colonies, *The Sign of Four* provides further insight into late nineteenth-century imperial

attitudes by outlining the ways in which British society attempted to reconcile these contradictory beliefs. Through *The Sign of Four*, Doyle suggests that a reaffirmation of the internal security of Britain would dispel popular fears of foreign incursion and would endorse societal attraction to the colonies. Nineteenth-century British society, fearful of foreign encroachment due to the Indian Mutiny, needed to be convinced that British colonial possessions were not jeopardizing the safety of native British citizens before they could continue displaying unanimous popular enthusiasm for Empire [1].

The Sign of Four symbolically represents this widespread societal fear of homeland safety through presenting a situation in which a foreign intruder is indeed threatening the internal security of Britain. Appealing to the fears of his audience, Doyle's decision to place the colonial figures of Tonga and Small within British society addresses the popular fear that the pursuit of colonial enterprise will blur the boundaries between Britain and Empire and will initiate potentially dangerous interactions between the enlightened British, and the violent colonials [8]. While creating a scenario that would undoubtedly arouse anxieties in his nineteenth-century readership, Doyle offers consolation in the character of Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes, an unofficial representative of British law enforcement, maintains the safety of the British public as he takes pride in identifying and expelling dangerous colonial figures from Britain. Doyle's portrayal of Holmes as an accountable British protective force is representative of British society's increasing demand for their government to protect against foreign incursion. Holmes's efforts to maintain the internal sanctity of Britain can be observed in his shooting of Tonga, where the Andaman islander, "...whirled round, threw up his arms and, with a kind of choking cough, fell sideways into the stream" [5]. Tonga's death represents Holmes' purge of foreign presence within the Empire, symbolically quelling the colonial fears held by British society. Holmes, through enforcing an increasingly exclusive, defensive and conservative vision of Victorian British identity, represents reconciliation in societal attitudes towards imperialism [1]. Holmes's expulsion of foreign influences from the British Isles reflects British official efforts to dispel fears of colonial rebellion, and resume unconditional support of their nation's imperial endeavors.

Doyle's *The Sign of Four* can be regarded as a window into late nineteenth-century British attitudes towards imperialism. By acknowledging both the positive and negative British responses to the colonies, Doyle's work

reflects popular Victorian conceptions of Eastern culture. Doyle's work can further be utilized to examine the shifts in popular support for imperialism, as his work reflects the loss of societal confidence in the idea of Empire after the Indian Mutiny. This work is also representative of the consequent revival of colonial fervor as the idea of imperialism reached a climax at the beginning of the twentieth century due to Britain's new policy of stringent colonial administration [1]. Through its examination of popular Victorian responses to colonialism, *The Sign of Four* provides a useful resource for individuals seeking to understand how late nineteenth-century British society perceived their nation's imperial status.

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