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“Fight Him with His Own Weapon”: The Fluctuating Role of the Holmesian Detective

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Sherlock Holmes is a character adored the world over for his great abilities of observation and deduction. Despite being a beacon of British intellect and rationality, the character of Holmes has been frequently adapted by different cultures and identity groups. These adaptations often translate the character of Holmes into their own context, changing the location, the time, or even the central character in the story to better realize their own ideas or values. Two such adaptations are the Holmes radio story "The Vanishing White Elephant" by Dennis Green and Anthony Boucher, and Sanjat Ray's story *The Emperor's Ring*, both of which take place in India, far from Holmes' native green isle. While the first of these stories deals with the character of Holmes directly (changing only the location), the second introduces an entirely new character as the story's central player in the form of Feluda, a young Indian man who derives his inspiration from the great detective. It should also be noted that the Feluda story takes place at the time of writing (around the 1960s) while the Holmes story takes place during the timeline of the original canon. This means that both stories present vastly different depictions of India and its relationship to both itself and Britain. Despite these differences, there is a clear pattern between these two stories in terms of how they both give interesting insight into the role of detective, the duties the role entails, and how one executes those duties. Together, "The Vanishing White Elephant" and *The Emperor's Ring* make far clearer the differences in detective characteristics

present between Holmes stories and postcolonial Indian adaptations, which speaks to how the role of and purpose for a detective was changed through adaptation of the character of Sherlock Holmes.

In her article *Pathological Possibilities: Contagion and Empire in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Stories*, Susan Canon Harris makes note of Holmes' role as a British savior; that is, a hero who will protect the realm and act as "the doctor who can cure England's Empire-derived ills" (Canon Harris 460). The British people were eager to conquer new lands and expand the British Empire, but they were also afraid of the dangers of "'infection of British normalcy'" posed by the "'alien contagions'" that were the colonies (Canon Harris 449). As Canon Harris points out, such a threat was a recurring element in the original Holmes stories, especially in such early ones as *The Sign of Four*, but this concept (and permutations of it) have found their way into later adaptations of the Holmes character as well. Since these colonial outsiders are often foreign and misunderstood, it makes perfect sense that Holmes, an agent of order, would be the one tapped to handle the chaos that may arise from these mysterious, foreign figures.

As a result, Holmes' role as keeper of Imperial order can be seen especially clearly in *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* episode "The Vanishing White Elephant". In the story, Holmes is called by an ailing maharaja to help prevent his untimely death. A sacred white elephant has died and, according to an old legend, the maharaja soon will follow. Before Holmes is able to do anything, the maharaja is killed by his scheming brother who is next in line for the title. Holmes is a paragon of British order, existing to put things in their proper place in relation to Britain. This is seen especially well at the end of "The Vanishing White Elephant" when Holmes confronts the villainous new maharaja. But in this story, Holmes' cherished order is thrown out the window because of one simple fact: the villain had become "a ruler with all

powers, including that of the police" ("The Vanishing White Elephant", 22:08-22:14). When Holmes threatens to make a full report of the story's events to the British commissioner, the villainous maharaja simply laughs him off, claiming that the commissioner would be "no more effectual than the great Sherlock Holmes" ("The Vanishing White Elephant", 22:26-22:37). Holmes realizes that he would not be able to effectively end this problem, and so resolves to fight the new maharaja "with his own weapon" by calling on the old maharaja's advisor Mata to end the new one's reign ("The Vanishing White Elephant", 22:43-22:46).

Canon Harris clearly defines a Holmesian detective by their ability to maintain British order and fight off the evils of the colonies which England brought upon itself and in "The Vanishing White Elephant", it becomes even more apparent that this is the role that Holmes is struggling to fulfill as times change. Holmes had to come to grips with the fact that "the civilized laws of the occident" cannot be enforced in India in its current state ("The Vanishing White Elephant", 22:43-22:45). The type of heroic detective that Holmes is only works when British order is in danger, otherwise, they have nothing to protect while they detect. This story, while short, gives great insight into the already evolving attitudes toward the British colonies and the role of the detective in relation to them. In "The Vanishing White Elephant", Holmes is called upon by the maharaja, an Indian official, not a British one in an attempt to keep the order of India intact. The conflict is entirely based in and affectual to India. The outside repercussions of the events in the story are very little. Perhaps most significant, however, is the fact that although it is Holmes who solves the mystery, the problem is resolved by Mata, the late maharaja's friend and advisor. The methods of murder, on the other hand, come from the West and cause great harm to the established order in India. Neither Holmes nor the laws of Britain can remedy this situation. While this story takes place during the timeline of the established Holmes canon, it was

written in the mid-1940s, only a couple of years before India gained its independence from Britain. The solution does not come from Britain, but must come from India. Clearly, the mindset of autonomy and empowerment for India is already making its way into stories that once held a very different message about the "brightest jewel in the diadem of the British Empire" ("The Vanishing White Elephant", 6:01-6:05). These changing views seem to be borne out of a belief that India could run itself, since Britain really could not do anything significant to interfere with its established order. If a detective is meant to be a paragon of order, there must be a detective who is wholly involved and invested in the conflicts that face their nation. This is not the case with Holmes. This belief was certainly present in "The Vanishing White Elephant" where the ineffectiveness of Britain in solving colonial problems was placed front and center. It was certainly exacerbated by the fact that the original maharaja died by eyedrops poisoned with something Western, dispersed via the eyedropper Watson had given the maharaja for his pink eye. Both problems were of Western origin, but the forthcoming solution would not be. Between this and Holmes' ineffectiveness Green and Boucher seemed to be arguing for a new form of detective, one that could interfere meaningfully in problems such as the one they penned. Thankfully, this new detective was not far from becoming a reality.

Diverging a bit from Canon Harris' colonialism point, Suchitra Mathur's article *Sherlock Holmes's Indian Incarnation: A Study in Postcolonial Transposition* looks at Holmes through the lens of postcolonialism and its effects on India. Mathur claims that Feluda, the main character in *The Emperor's Ring* is an example of postcolonial colonial mimicry, a practice where former colonies reproduce objects, styles, or attitudes from the colonizer. Mathur paints Feluda as a secondhand remake of Holmes that retains many detective characteristics and simply places them into an Indian hero rather than a British one thereby shifting the "center of authority" to

somewhere “that is firmly rooted within the indigenous soil” (Mathur 92). While Mathur’s claim has merit, I would instead argue that Feluda is not an example of postcolonial mimicry but of a former colony reinventing an aspect of the culture that they were once subject to in order to further cement their own status as an autonomous, individual, independent nation. Mathur actually touches upon this in their article when they point out that “the Feluda stories, while mimicking Holmesian detective fiction in their skeletal framework, completely indigenize the genre in all its narrative details” in a manner that challenges the former colonizer (Mathur 98). However, they then return to focusing on Feluda as a postcolonial mimic, not the reinvention of the detective character suggested by the pattern of character changes in “The Vanishing White Elephant” and *The Emperor’s Ring.* Feluda does not enact this change to the very concept of what it means to be a detective by simply mimicking Holmes, but by reinventing both the detective character and their methods.

This is made especially evident by the myriad differences between Holmes and Feluda. While a mimic would be expected to have some differences, on the whole, they would be more similar than not to the figure they were mimicking. This is not the case with Feluda and Holmes. Both figures are singular in their methods and approaches toward solving mysteries and crimes, there are also a number of personal differences which further separate the two characters. For example, in the Feluda story, the character is shown to be a younger, more jovial figure. Evidence for this can be found in several places throughout *The Emperor’s Ring*, but it is perhaps most prominent when he remarks to Topshe that “‘The culprit doesn’t get warnings and threats, silly!’” (Ray 24). This statement gives the reader an idea of both Feluda’s personality and his age. Feluda takes his role as a detective seriously, but is willing to make jokes and have fun on the job. Holmes, on the other hand, could derive some enjoyment from his work, but

ultimately it was something he needed to do. It was an integral part of his identity and this was how he expressed that. With Feluda's more laid back attitude, we see that a detective need no longer be a somber, tortured middle-aged figure, trying to get his fix of brainwork. Instead, we are given a young, vibrant individual who takes a great deal of pleasure in his work who appears just similar enough to the original thing for the connection to be visible. This is perhaps best represented by the moment in *The Emperor's Ring* where Feluda uses a tooth powder tin (an established, British item) to conceal a strong pepper that he uses to disorient attackers. The pepper is very different from the tooth powder the tin originally held, but it has its own great merits which Feluda uses to his advantage Holmes is the metaphorical tin, while Feluda is the pepper. He is a completely original thing hiding beneath the surface of an established entity.

It should also be noted that in the stories, Feluda puts a great deal of work into developing honing his skills and detective abilities, while Holmes is more or less just handed a great degree of skill that he simply refines to shine even brighter. He, as Mathur points out, utilizes Holmes' view of rational knowledge, but is able to take in far more than the great detective ever would. Feluda was often seen reading in order to increase his knowledge about any number of particular subjects. In *The Emperor's Ring*, Feluda connects with a character by the name of Mahabir by discussing the autobiography of a cricket player and, as a result, is able to get Mahabir to open up to him. Even here, we begin to see a newer type of detective take shape, one that is constantly researching for the sake of increasing one's knowledge bank and thus one's preparedness to face problems. More often than not, Holmes would be shown drawing upon existing knowledge to solve crimes and, only when faced with a problem for which he felt he needed clarification, would delve into research.

The question of what qualities make up a detective and the evolution of these qualities over time is the main focus of Stephen Joyce's *Authentic in Authenticity*. Joyce points out that, as public perception of what characteristics are desirable in a detective changes, so too does the definition of what the role means and entails. The main sources for his argument are the Basil Rathbone film series and the BBC's television show *Sherlock* and the drastic differences between the version of Holmes presented in both. While Rathbone was the stiff-upper-lip hero needed at the time, as the decades passed by, the type of detective that audiences wanted, needed, and best connected with was the tortured genius presented by such classic shows as *Sherlock* and *Elementary*. This relationship between the established hero and the newer reinvention is incredibly clear when we examine "The Vanishing White Elephant" and *The Emperor's Ring*. In the first story, Holmes was actually portrayed by Basil Rathbone, showing at once what kind of character listeners were given. Sharp, measured, urbane, and sophisticated, the Holmes of "The Vanishing White Elephant" was certainly in line with what the listening audience needed at the time having just lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War in quick succession. Holmes was a hero through and through, someone devoted to logical order and seeing justice done, no matter what. But this Holmes was also shown to be growing obsolete. The war was coming to a close and this master of justice and order just was not needed anymore. While Rathbone's Holmes would always occupy a nostalgic place in the hearts of fans, the world was changing and so were society's needs for what a detective was. Joyce says as much in his article when he claims that "Holmes is sanitized" (83). He is not the original Doyle creation, he is what the public think the creation is. He is built off of expectations and nostalgia, both of which change with time.

Enter Feluda, a new detective for a new, changing world. Feluda represented much of what Rathbone was missing in his Holmes. He was a young amateur, meaning he was easier for the readers to connect with. He was naturally a part of the decade his stories took place in, because that was when they were written. He was not created with what Joyce describes as "Victorian nostalgia or a post-Victorian age" in mind (Joyce 83). He was just himself, not a character thereof. Not only that, but Feluda represented a new kind of detective. As previously stated, he constantly tok in all kinds of knowledge and was far more cheery about his profession. But he also was someone who acknowledged his debt to those who came before. Feluda is a Sherlock fanboy up there with the best of them, a trait he displays early in *The Emperor's Ring* when he notes that a dog he and Topshe are hearing about is "the same breed as the Hound of the Baskervilles" (Ray 17). Holmes alway made a point of his own singularity, but Feluda always pays homage to what came before. This is a way for the nostalgic reverence for the past that was so prevalent in Rathbone's portrayal to make its way into the world of this new detective, showing its remaining importance in the public mind. That is not to say that Feluda was the most modest character in the world. He still had some Holmes-like arrogance that came with his quick mental and physical faculties. Feluda was someone who could quickly run "despite jostling crowds without colliding into anyone" (Ray 22). Clearly, this was the efficient speed the public needed in their detectives.

The India presented in "The Vanishing White Elephant" is a land that is vastly different that that which is presented in *The Emperor's Ring*. Looking back, this is quite fitting. The changes India would go through between these two stories speak greatly to the fluctuating nature of the world. Times change and with it, so do people. It is no great surprise that the detective and what role they play in the world would change as well. After all, if the order of the world

changes and a detective is one who must maintain order, then the detective must change as well. By examining “The Vanishing White Elephant” and *The Emperor’s Ring*, we were able to see some of that change in action, as the Holmes of “The Vanishing White Elephant” grew obsolete and Feluda stepped onto the scene as one in a long line of adaptations that would change detection forever. With both of these works, we are able to gain greater understanding of what being a detective means and how that role is fulfilled. Sometimes one can keep order by keeping to tradition, but most of the time, the only way to keep order is to let go of the past and fight the future with its own weapons.

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