



Roth suggests that ‘detective fiction is always engaged in a veiled form of colonial discourse.’ Taking this statement as your starting point, analyse the part played by colonialism and colonial relationships, and/or relationships between foreign and domestic more generally, in the texts you have studied.

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Marty Roth’s suggestion that detective fiction is ‘always’ engaged in a veiled form of colonial discourse is a broad generalisation, followed by little substantiation.¹ Even disregarding non-canonical detective fiction novels which may have no inference of colonial discourse, classic detective fiction which disregards colonial discourse exists; G. K. Chesterton’s *Father Brown Mysteries*, whilst often playing upon dynamics between French and English relations, rarely delves into an engagement of colonial discourse. Roth nevertheless highlights an important element of classic detective fiction in emphasising the prevalence of colonial discourse in the genre. This essay will subsequently explore this feature through an examination of the way colonial discourse catalyses more fundamental features of detective fiction, explaining its prominence within the genre. In order to understand this dynamic between colonial discourse and detective fiction, Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, Conan Doyle’s ‘The Sign of Four’ and Sax Rohmer’s *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* will be explored. They will then be discussed in regard to the way this fiction creates a motif of invasion and how this facilitates the genre’s composition of order, disorder and the restoration of order. The final aspect of the essay will take this discussion regarding colonial discourse and the more general concept of foreign invasion a step further. Here, a reading of Douglas Adams’ *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* will be undertaken to examine how more recent detective fiction deals with the dynamic between domestic and foreign spheres, and how this relates to Roth’s initial assumptions.

In discussing the contribution of culture to colonialism, Edward Said draws upon the ‘Eurocentricism’ found in imperialist literature, which took the colonised and ‘subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe’.² This textual reinforcement of racial and cultural identity through a colonial discourse has been highlighted in early forms of detective fiction by a variety of critics. Klein asserts that depictions of foreigners such as ‘African American characters in the mystery and detective fiction of writers in the United States and in England reflected the class and racial/ethnic biases rooted in centuries of colonialism and empire building’.³ The contribution of this form of colonial discourse is, for Said, to create a ‘slowly built up picture with England – socially, politically, morally chartered and differentiated in immensely fine detail’.⁴ Abdul R. Janmohamed

¹ Marty Roth, *Foul & Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.246.

² Edward W. Said, ‘Yeats and Decolonization’ in *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p.72.

³ Kathleen Klein, *Diversity and Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press), p.187.

⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), pp.95-96.

develops this, discussing colonial discourse as attempting to mask the 'contradiction between the theoretical justification of exploitation and the barbarity of its actual practice' by 'obsessively portraying the supposed inferiority and barbarity of the racial 'Other', thereby insisting on the profound moral difference between self and Other'.⁵ It is this colonial dynamic between the constructions of a superior domestic 'Self' and foreign, inferior 'Other' which will be initially examined in works of detective fiction.

Although critics such as Priestman have argued for the 'powerfully anti-imperialist subtext' of *The Moonstone*, Collins' partially sympathetic attitude towards the three Brahmins does little to avoid a reinforcement of colonial stereotypes.⁶ Whilst Murthwaite provides a less naive understanding about the Brahmins than Betteredge, his discourse nevertheless dissociates them from any 'English' sense of humanity and morality: 'In the country those men came from, they care just as much about killing a man, as you care about emptying the ashes out of your pipe'.⁷ Whilst praising their dedication to their caste, the narrative deprives them of a sense of humanity in regard to the lives of other humans. The stark distinction between traditional English morality and the very foreign ideologies of the three Brahmins is thus firmly communicated to the reader, reinforcing the distinction between the English 'Self' and the foreign invading 'Other'. Indeed, historical events such as the Indian Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 would furthermore 'heighten Orientalist fears and fantasies', meaning that *The Moonstone's* invocation of this 'Oriental complex of fears and suspicions in the persons of three sinister Brahmin jugglers' only ten years later, would be all the more evocative and negatively loaded for contemporary audiences.⁸ Even subtle, stylistic choices such as the negatively connoted use of 'betray' to describe Ezra Jennings' inability to disguise his 'Oriental origin', immediately designates his Oriental origin as a fault.⁹ Indeed, whilst Jennings' solving of the mystery has been cited as an argument for the positive reflection of the foreign 'Other', his entire character and narrative is marginalised to a few pages. Jennings' potential subversion of traditional ideas about Orientals is left unfulfilled.

Mukherjee argues that *The Moonstone* acted as a 'model for British fiction of crime for the rest of the imperial era', making it 'more and more possible for fiction to interrogate, not only colonialist/imperialist ideology, but also its metropolitan context'.¹⁰ Whilst Mukherjee's following use of Sherlock Holmes as an example is correct in that it may question the metropolitan context of such fiction, the presence of unquestioning pro-imperialist and racist themes can nevertheless be found in the Sherlock Holmes stories. In 'The Sign of Four' these motifs appear throughout, constructing the Eastern foreigner as distinctly inferior to the superior Westerner. The detachment of Tonga's ethnicity is encoded subliminally in the discourse, the distal demonstrative used to describe Tonga as from '*that place in Africa*' [my italics] emphasising the disengagement of Africa in relation to England. This foreignness is moreover described in association with Tonga as a 'little, blood-thirsty imp' and a 'black cannibal', repeatedly interlarding Tonga's inferiority and animalism with his foreignness.¹¹ The imperialistic connotations of Tonga needing the authority of Jonathan Small's control are further suggested by Small himself: 'he was devoted to me and would do anything to serve me', emphasising the need for the foreign 'Other' to be ruled.¹² This theme is further present in the negative discourse regarding India as a source of immorality and

⁵ Abdul R. Janmohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory' in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Bill Ashcroft et al. (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), pp.22-23.

⁶ Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p.13.

⁷ Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. Steve Farmer (Hertfordshire: Broadview, 1999), p.130.

⁸ Rzepka, p.102.

⁹ Collins, p.343.

¹⁰ Upamanyu Mukherjee, *Crime and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2003), p.188.

¹¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Sign of Four' in *Selected Stories*, ed. S. C. Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1998), p.203, p.147.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.200.

disruption: 'The city of Agre is a great place, swarming with fanatics and fierce devil-worshippers'.¹³ Ronald Thomas argues that through discourse such as this, Doyle 'helped to transform reluctant approval, indifference, and direct criticism for imperial policies into general reverence, enthusiasm, and even hysteria in the British popular imagination'.¹⁴ This essay's examination of Doyle's construction of Tonga and the Indians as savage, immoral and in need of Western control fits closely with this idea, highlighting the prevalence of colonial discourse.

Roth's identification of colonial discourse in detective fiction seems ostensibly supported through an examination of *The Moonstone* and 'The Sign of Four'. The use of colonial discourse extends further, however, beyond that of simply reflecting contemporary racist and imperialist views. Further analysis of *The Moonstone* and 'The Sign of Four' reveals that colonial discourse fits into a wider element of the detective genre, which manoeuvres the English nation and English identity against an invading foreign element. The result of this is the need for a detective role and the subsequent restoration of order through the punishment or expulsion of the foreign intruder. In *The Moonstone* this stimulus for disorder can be found in the invading elements of the Indian diamond and Brahmins. Betteredge's description of the 'quiet English house suddenly invaded by a devilish Indian Diamond' typifies the juxtaposition of foreign and domestic elements which are conveyed as creating conflict in the domestic English environment.¹⁵ In 'The Sign of Four' this takes similar form through the invasion of England by Tonga and the Indian treasure. The threat that these pose to Miss Morstan is exemplified in Watson's feeling that '[i]t was soothing to catch even that passing glimpse of a tranquil English home in the midst of the wild, dark business which had absorbed [them]'.¹⁶ The 'hall-light shining through stained glass' and 'two graceful, clinging figures' embody the stable and moral 'English home', the only 'half-opened door' highlighting the imposing threat caused by the 'wild' and 'dark' outside.¹⁷ Indeed, in both stories the English home reflects a 'shared theme of foreign threats to an outwardly stable British household', arguably a microcosm of the invasion of the English nation by a colonial, foreign 'Other'.¹⁸

The disruptive nature of the foreign elements is further embodied in the key relationships of each story. As the diamond of *The Moonstone* temporarily fractures the relationship of Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder, the Agra treasure not only initiates the disorder and crime, but 'intervened like an impassable barrier' between the relationship of Miss Morstan and Watson. In both stories there is a clear construction of a disparate juxtaposition between Oriental incursion and English domestic stability, which emphasises that this contact breeds the criminality of detective fiction. Cawelti discusses a similar concept in detective fiction involving a 'chaotic outer world that has penetrated the quiet order' and must be brought 'under control' in regard to the criminal and crime.¹⁹ Whilst Cawelti uses it in regard to the murderer and their need to be removed by the detective, it also applies to an examination of the foreign 'Other' in detective fiction; the invading element disrupts peace and must be omitted by a form of authority before stability can be re-established. In the case of detective fiction this authority takes the form of the detective, whose need is exacerbated by the compounding of domestic crime with abnormal foreign invasions.

¹³ Ibid., p.181.

¹⁴ Ronald R. Thomas, 'The Fingerprint of the Foreigner' *ELH*, 61/3 (1994), p.658.

¹⁵ Collins, p.88.

¹⁶ Doyle, p.121.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Priestman, p.16.

¹⁹ John H. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p.97.

Auden frames the detective fiction novel by describing the 'peaceful state before murder' and 'peaceful state after arrest'.²⁰ An examination of colonial elements in the denouement of the stories reveals that the arrest of the criminal is not, however, the only action which must occur before order can be restored. Instead there needs to be an elimination of foreign elements that appear out of place in contrast to the 'peaceful and harmonious social order associated with the traditional rural society of England'.²¹ In *The Moonstone* order is only restored when the Moonstone has been removed from England and taken back to India. Once this is done the novel ends with the marriage of Franklin Blake, the news of Rachel Verinder's pregnancy and Betteredge's very conclusive final remarks: 'Ladies and gentleman, I make my bow, and shut up the story'; their story appears to end with closure and harmony.²² The epilogue which follows also does little to subvert the restoration of order in England. The Moonstone has returned to India and whilst the epilogue conveys that the mystery around the Moonstone may continue: 'What will be the next adventures of the Moonstone? Who can tell?', Blake will have 'lost sight of it in England... forever'.²³ The Moonstone is declared an Indian problem, geographically independent of England. This dependence of the expulsion of foreign elements for restoration of order is found similarly in 'The Sign of Four' as Small informs that Holmes and Watson can find 'the treasure where the key is, and where little Tonga is' – at the bottom of the Thames.²⁴ Only once the Indian treasure is lost and the invading foreigner killed is the story resolved, symbolised by the subsequent ability for the relationship of Watson and Miss Morstan to be fulfilled: 'Now that they are gone I can tell you how I love you'.²⁵

Whilst this essay has focused on detective fiction from the 19th century, the part played by colonial discourse continues into the 20th century. Although China was 'never colonized or directly subject to British rule', remaining 'part of the "informal empire" of British influence', Chinese people were nevertheless subjected to a similar colonial discourse favouring English superiority over Chinese.²⁶ Racist attitudes to Chinese immigrants in England from the 1880s to 1920s particularly propagated the idea of a 'yellow peril', which 'played upon fears that the world was about to be swamped by floods of Chinese who would destroy Western culture'.²⁷ This concept is manipulated in the detective fiction of Sax Rohmer, where his use of the Oriental villain Fu-Manchu 'catered to the racist and sensationalistic proclivities of his intended audience'. Throughout *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, for instance, the detective figure, Nayland Smith, makes it clear that solving the crimes of Fu-Manchu are part of the wider dynamic between Western 'white' self and foreign 'Other'; Smith fights 'not in the interests of the British Government merely, but in the interests of the entire white race'.²⁸ Indeed, Rohmer uses the loaded phrase 'white race' seven times throughout the novel, particularly in juxtaposition with Fu-Manchu, the 'head of the great Yellow Movement', who was 'writing his name over England in characters of blood'.²⁹ Regarding its implications for the detective genre, this functions similarly to the detective fiction of Collins and Doyle in that it exacerbates the disorder created by the criminal, by creating a greater danger to societal order; the invasion of Fu-Manchu and the Oriental

²⁰ Auden, p.16

²¹ Cawelti, p.98.

²² Collins, p.536.

²³ Ibid., p.542.

²⁴ Doyle, p.176.

²⁵ Ibid., p.174.

²⁶ Máire Ní Fhlathúin, 'The British Empire' in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. John McLeod (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p.27.

²⁷ Jenny Clegg, *Manchu and the 'Yellow Peril'* (Staffordshire: Trentham Books, 1994), p.ix.

²⁸ Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2008), p.x.

²⁹ Ibid., p.110, p.131.

‘Other’ threatens English and ‘white’ identity, making the work of the detective all the more essential.

Rohmer’s manipulation of colonial discourse can furthermore be discovered in the characterisation of Fu-Manchu, which collates subtle English attributes amongst the Oriental: ‘with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan... all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present’.³⁰ Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry appears particularly relevant for an interpretation of Fu-Manchu’s character here as it explores the potential for colonial discourse to subvert the colonisers’ own superiority. Bhabha writes that ‘colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed ‘Other’, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite’.³¹ This attempt to make the colonised like the coloniser, but slightly different, has the potential for subversion since the mimicking colonised ‘no longer remains the model colonial subject, because the product of mimicry is ultimately beyond the control of the colonial master’.³² In the character of Fu-Manchu, the colonised ‘Other’ has transformed from the inferior, savage character exemplified by Tonga in ‘The Sign of Four’, to a genius with a progressive and advanced intelligence normally associated with the detective hero; Fu-Manchu’s knowledge of ‘all the resources of science past and present’ is more akin to the characterization of Sherlock Holmes than the traditional foreign ‘Other’. Rohmer thus takes the exacerbation of crime even further by empowering the threat to England. This altering of the detective fiction genre’s manipulation of colonial ‘Other’ furthermore continues in the fundamental features of disorder and restoration discussed earlier. The success of Fu-Manchu and the longevity of his reign of terror reflect a different manipulation of the traditional concept of restoration of an ‘English’ order seen in the previous works of detective fiction. Each story ends with the possibility of Fu-Manchu’s return, *The Insidious Fu-Manchu* ending with Fu-Manchu trapped in a burning building, which ‘burned... to a shell about which held NO TRACE OF HUMAN BONES!’; order is only ever temporarily created, maintaining suspense and keeping readers interested over the series of stories.³³ The element of colonial discourse in detective fiction - though manipulated by Rohmer to different effect than Doyle or Collins - thus continues to play a characteristic role in the dynamics of the genre.

The final aspect of the essay will take the discussion regarding colonial discourse and the more general domestic and foreign dynamic a step further by examining the detective fiction of Douglas Adams. Although published much later than the work of Doyle, Collins and Rohmer, there are clear parallels between *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* and the more canonical works previously discussed. Similarly to *The Moonstone*, the story is set up through a prologue involving foreign events which give rise to the later mystery, in this case an alien explosion which eventually leads to the crime of the novel and the threat to humanity. This is then juxtaposed with scenes of domestic normality, Susan’s human relationship problems and the everyday features of a ‘doorbell’, ‘watch’ and ‘television’ setting up the typical domestic sphere which is to be disordered by the crime and foreign threat by aliens.³⁴ Akin to the Fu-Manchu stories the alien ‘foreigner’ furthermore wants to extinguish the human race, declaring its disgust for humanity: ‘the slimy things with legs... suddenly walking around as if they owned the place and complaining about the phones’; the detective story not only involves a murder, but the murderer’s threat to the entire human

³⁰ Ibid., p.21.

³¹ Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, *The MIT Press*, 28 (1984), p.126.

³² Pal Ahluwalia, *Politics and post-colonial theory: African inflections* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.35-36.

³³ Rohmer, p.245.

³⁴ Douglas Adams, *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1987), p.7.

race.³⁵ From this there is a clear preservation of the use of a foreign 'Other' to exacerbate the mystery and threat within the detective story.

Chambers discusses the need for detective fiction to adapt, focusing on detective fiction narratives which 'rewrite the classic crime novel, overturning the genre's usual stereotypical representations of formerly-colonized countries'.³⁶ This essay would argue that this 'rapid decolonization' over time will have an even greater impact upon the ability of traditional detective fiction to function; without the threat of a colonial 'Other', the crime is further trivialised and sense of fear decreased.³⁷ Rzepka discusses how 'postmodern detection has not found a broad market among ordinary fans of detective fiction, perhaps because it frustrates the middle-class urge for imaginative reconstruction and closure that traditional detection is designed to satisfy', but notes that exceptions to this are the popular *Dirk Gently* detective stories.³⁸ This essay would argue that rather than this being because of the 'middle-class urge for imaginative reconstruction...', it is because of the removal of colonial mystery which previously existed before the globalisation of travel and media. The *Dirk Gently* novels' success may therefore arise through its use of a new form of intriguing and threatening 'Other' – the threat of foreign terrestrials to the entire human domestic sphere. Whilst a transformation of Roth's ideas about colonial discourse, the dynamic conflict between domestic and foreign spheres nevertheless appears crucial, even without a traditional colonial context.

Through a close examination of the works of Collins and Doyle this essay has shown that colonial discourse in detective fiction not only reflects contemporary imperialist and racist views, but enables the form of the genre to function successfully. By inextricably blending the domestic crime with an invading threat from a foreign, colonial 'Other', the stakes are raised and the need for a detective figure strengthened. This concept was then examined further in relation to the restoration of order in detective fiction and the need for a purging of all foreign, invading elements before harmony can be restored to the domestic environment. By combining this exploration with the work of Sax Rohmer the potential for detective fiction to manipulate the threat and significance of the colonial 'Other' was conveyed, emphasising the importance of social context for popularising the detective fiction stories. Indeed, the final discussion of *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* supported the idea that a colonial discourse can be found even in contemporary works of detective fiction that appear to disregard traditional understandings of colonialism. Roth's indication about the engagement of detective fiction in a 'veiled form of colonial discourse' appears to hold little coincidental truth, but instead highlights a significant, functioning element of the detective fiction genre.

³⁵ Ibid., p.168.

³⁶ Claire Chambers, 'Postcolonial Noir: Vikram Chandra's "Karma"' in Nels Pearson & Marc Singer, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p.32.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rzepka, p.235.

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298 Roth suggests that 'detective fiction is always engaged in a veiled form of colonial discourse.'

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