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Snake Charmers and Charming Stooges:  
 ‘The Speckled Band’ as the *Oriental* Invention of a Western Imagination

Shortly after George Bush declared a ‘war on terror’, in the 2001 radio address to the United States, Laura Bush condemned the violence against women in Afghanistan. She said that the Taliban regime is in retreat since the USA begin its operations and all of Afghanistan, especially the women she emphasized, are rejoicing. Two decades later, the (on-going) ‘war on terror’ has claimed countless civilian lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US sanctioned drone strikes in Northern Pakistan wiped out entire villages and communities in the last decade. The Pakistani military acted as a proxy army to fight a proxy war that naturally led to the ‘Pakistani Taliban’s’ retaliation against the government—heralding a civil war that eclipsed most of my adolescence. What resulted, to put it succinctly, was the obliteration of generations under the guise of, borrowing from Gayatri Spivak, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (2009).

This is by no means the first time in history where a colonial power has plundered, assaulted, and usurped under the rubric of protection, help and assistance. Rather, the most common pattern of practicing colonial control is through the ‘Othering’ of certain individuals (or communities) and the ‘Saving’ of a group from these perceived Others. While reading ‘The Adventure of the Speckled Band’ in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle, I recognized some similar patterns of otherizing, saving and myth-making. In this paper, I will be arguing that ‘The Adventure of the Speckled Band’ can be read as an allegory for the British Imperial Empire’s ideological control over the production of the experiences, realities, and narratives about the subcontinent. I will be making specific references to what Edward Said calls “recurring images of the Orient”—or the way in which Dr. Grimesby Roylott becomes emblematic of the “European representation of the Orient” (1784). Related to this is also the place of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, the British, professional, superhero-esque duo who save their clients (and in this case, somewhat expectedly, a very frail and nervous woman) through solutions “always founded on a logical basis” (190). This is of course in contrast to the ‘uncanny’ mystique and mystery surrounding the ’tropics’ and the fear through which everyone in the story operates around the emblematic ‘Oriental’ figure: Dr. Grimesby Roylott.

This fear, arguably, is most conspicuous in Dr. Roylott’s stepdaughter, Helen Stoner (who shivers not from the cold, but “the fear, Mr. Holmes, the terror” (190)). Miss Stoner hires Sherlock and Watson to save her from a mysterious threat—a speckled band—that claimed her sister’s life a few years ago. However, this terror becomes secondary to the monolith, overbearing presence of her ‘brute’ stepfather. “He is a hard man,” Helen Stoner says to Sherlock after he discovers bruises of fingers imprinted on her wrists, “and perhaps he hardly knows his own strength” (200). Of course, Miss Stoner is neither the brown woman needing saving that Spivak referred to, not is she in anyway voiceless as the subaltern subject. But it is interesting to note that the things she does say are almost too conveniently placed in the ambit of what can be proclaimed as the “Eternal Feminine”, quoting Simone de Beauvoir (1214). She is a woman who has been “cruelly used”, “wanders about the metropolis” at odd hours to seek help from Holmes and has frightened eyes that look like those of some “hunted animal” (200/ 190). It can be argued that she seems to be a glaring caricature of a damsel in distress.

In *The* *Second Sex*, De Beauvoir delineates the process through which the Eternal Feminine is constructed in a patriarchal society: through a series of “myths that try to summarize her (a woman) as a whole” (1214). These myths also operate around the construction of “archetypes, each of which claims to incarnate (the Eternal Feminine’s) Truth alone” (1214). Hence an ‘Othering’ takes place much earlier in the story (earlier than the introduction to the supreme Other, Dr. Roylott): the veiled, wallowing woman stands in direct opposition to the masculine, rational superheroes who are able “to see the manifold wickedness of the human heart” (192). To quote Simone de Beauvoir: “To posit the Woman is to posit the absolute Other, without reciprocity, refusing, against experience, that she could be a subject, a peer” (1214). Rather than being a peer, Helen Stoner is an agitated, helpless young woman who seeks out Holmes hoping he would help save her or at the very least “throw a little light through the dense darkness which surrounds (her)” (191). The author’s—Arthur Conan Doyle—choice of words here is important: Helen Stoner is downed in black lace, covers her face with a black veil and her face and hair are both described as gray. She comes from a place of ‘dense darkness’ and after having met and spoken to Sherlock and Dr. Watson once, her “heart is lightened already” (201). Additionally, she is not the only Stoner woman with this disposition; the dead Stoner sister also held an equally subservient position, is even misunderstood in death, and diagnosed to have died from “pure fear and nervous shock” (211). Her last memory as quoted by Helen Stoner is that of “…a wild scream of a terrified woman” (197) and her last action being that of trying to light a match in the prodigious darkness around her (“In her right hand was found the charred stump of a match, and in her left a match box” (198)).

In contrast to this “dark and sinister business”, Sherlock and Watson seem to be the harbingers of ‘light’ and enlightenment (201). Especially, Sherlock whose methods of deduction and sharp insight meant that he missed nothing about the case; not even the details that were omitted in Stoner’s narration (like her stepfather’s violence against her) or those that she never even had the faculties to notice (for example, the “dummy” bell-rope in the dead Stoner sister’s room). All Helen Stoner had to do to survive this threat (which one may conclude at this point in the story, is some devious plot concocted by her stepfather) is “do what I (Sherlock Holmes) have told you (Miss Stoner)” so that Holmes and Watson “shall soon drive away the dangers that threaten you" (211). The savior rhetoric by our superhero duo is hard to miss here. And the subject of their saving becomes a nervous, frail woman and the ghost of her equally hysteric sister. Gayatri Spivak (referring to Sarah Kofman) in her contention of Freud’s theoretical framing of women and womanhood, notes that “the deep ambiguity of Freud’s use of women as a scapegoat may be read as a reaction-formation to an initial and continuing desire to give the hysteric a voice, to transform her into the subject of hysteria” (2008). The “masculine-imperialist ideological formation” that constructs the monolithic third-world woman is also responsible, it seems, for the formation of the archetypal ‘Eternal Feminine’ (2009). Helen Stoker, as the aforementioned ‘hysteric woman’, hence must look entirely to the good Samaritans (She has no money to offer to Holmes!) to rescue her— as her life, according to Sherlock, “depends upon (her) compliance” (210).

Having weaved out the presence of the ‘darkness’ that surrounds Stoke Manor, one may ask, where does this ‘heart of darkness’ (sic: Joseph Conrad) really emerge from? The character of Dr. Grimesby Roylott is elemental to the presence of the horror that perpetuates through the story. His “absolutely uncontrollable anger” has resulting in him “becoming the terror of the village (and the folks would fly at his approach)” (194). This means that the Stoner sisters were not the only two people afraid of his presence, rather it seems that everyone in that particular English society who crossed his path became frightened of him (except, of course, Sherlock Holmes who found Dr. Roylott’s encounter with him amusing). However, I noticed that there is something more concrete to the fear that exudes from Dr. Roylott’s mysteriously threatening presence: it seems to be built around certain artifacts that act as hooks to ground this fear in the hearts of the characters of the story (and resultantly, the readers as well). To list a few of these: a passion for “Indian animals”—namely a cheetah and a baboon, his custom to smoke “strong Indian cigars”, a “band of gypsies” that inhabit his estate’s grounds and finally, the “low, clear whistle” and the “speckled band”—which turns out to be “the deadliest snake in India” (194/ 196/ 197/ 216). Dr. Roylott’s particular flavor of villainy seems to be reminiscent of, it can be argued, an Indian snake charmer.

It’s hard to miss the pattern establishing itself here: Dr. Roylott moved to Calcutta after his family’s Aristocratic legacy collapses, he becomes a doctor able to establish a “large practice” in the colonies, after an assault and murder perpetuated by Dr. Roylott’s “violence of temper approaching to mania (that) has been hereditary in the men of the family”, he returns to England with the same temperament he left with, but seemingly “intensified by his long residence in the tropics” (194). There is something equally mysterious and unexplainable about Calcutta and the colonies that seem to have infected Dr. Roylott, like a disease. This does, however, beg the question: how is Dr. Roylott’s disposition simultaneously a product of the East and that of his hereditary family patterns in the West? The horror eclipsing the man then seems to be both a product of the myth of the “Orient” and what it does to a man and the place of a displaced European sensibility, lost probably when the Roylott’s of Stoke Manor squandered away their wealth. Hence, Dr. Roylott’s first crime, long before he killed his stepdaughter for her money or killed the ‘native’ butler for (alleged) theft, is that of poverty. He is a man fallen from privilege in the polite English society; his father “living a horrible life of an aristocratic pauper” (193). This fall from aristocracy has also resulted in Roylott turning to a middle-class profession (“…took a medical degree and went out to Calcutta” (193)). He ruins his chances of betterment at the hands of this profession by the murder of an unnamed and unassuming ‘native’ and now must kill off his daughters to ensure they never marry and inherit part of the wealth his dead wife has left them. Interestingly, this becomes one of the first clear binary oppositions between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Roylott. Holmes does what he does “for the love of his art than for the acquirement of wealth” (189). In fact, when Helen Stoner confesses to not have money to reward him for his services, Holmes notes, “as to reward, my profession is its own reward...” (192). Holmes passion for his work, his art and his resolve to help is put in contrast to Dr. Roylott’s greed, incapability to retain an honest living or kind demeanor, and general bitterness for the world.

Another glaring instance of this opposition is also in the way Sherlock’s murder of Dr. Roylott and Dr. Roylott’s criminal and immoral activities are treated differently in the story. The story concludes with the death of Dr. Roylott after Holmes successfully intercepts his scheme to murder Helen Stoner and makes his snake or ‘speckled band’ attack its master instead. The official inquiry on the case comes to a conclusion that “the doctor met his fate while indiscreetly playing with a dangerous pet” (217). Holmes even confesses to Watson that he is in no doubt “indirectly responsible for Dr. Grimesby Roylott’s death” but “cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon (his) conscience” (219). Much like Dr. Roylotts absconding capital punishment in the colonies for killing a ‘native’, most likely for his European status—Sherlock too absconds responsibility in the West for killing a nearly-native: a dispossessed Dr. Roylott. Rather, it is treated as a victory by the superhero duo. The “clever and ruthless man who had an Eastern Training” (Dr. Roylott) stands as the Other, evidently inferior counterpart to the clever and honest man with “rapid deductions and quick intuitions” (218/ 190). It is significant to note, however, that the only thing that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Roylott are equals in, is strength which is demonstrated when Roylott pays Holmes and Watson a visit to tell them how ‘dangerous he is and seizes a poker to bent into a curve “with his huge *brown* hands” (there is no explanation given as to why a white man’s hands are brown but I assume the ‘tropics’ are to blame for that as well). Sherlock Holmes, unfazed by this display of power acknowledges that he may not be as bulky, but he is just as strong, before proceeding to “straightening it out again” (208). There are many characteristics that Roylott holds, through the vilification and admonishing of which, the character and values of Sherlock Holmes are also established in the story. The differences are solidified to ensure Grimesby Roylott remains the villain and the similarities are particularly cherry-picked to elevate Holmes position in this dichotomy.

At this point, I feel a necessary discussion needs to be formulated around the theoretical frameworks through which Edward Said delineates the place of Western knowledge production about the East in *Orientalism* and its connection to ‘The Adventures of the Speckled Band’.Said notes that the Orient is almost a “European invention” and had been since the ancient past “a place of romance, of exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1784). This invention lends to the particular way in which the European visitor writes and describes the European representation of the Orient (or in the case of Dr. Roylott, comes to embody this invented ‘Orient’). The Orient holds a special place in the European, Western imagining and experiences: it is not only “adjacent to Europe” but is also the place of its greatest colonial exploits, the source of its “civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant” and also the source of its most “recurring images of the Other” (1784). These images of the Other are also relevant to the images, artefacts, and narratives through which the character of Grimesby Roylott is constructed in the story. As Said notes, the practice of Orientalism springs from a point of difference—through an acknowledgment of the distinction between East and West and hence giving rise to “elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on” (1785). The Orient is overexplained yet overtly shrouded in the mystique of the difference of this ‘Other’ from the Occident. It is simultaneously known (perhaps, entirely imprecisely) and unknown.  
 Roylott’s place as the Other or the outsider is exemplified through many key occurrences that this paper has already fleshed out but a significant one is also the recurring reference to the gypsies. Helen Stoner notes that since his return to England, Grimesby Roylott has “had no friends at all save the wandering gypsies, and he would give these vagabonds leave to encamp upon the few acres of bramble-covered land which represent the family estate and would accept in return the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end” (194). There are also swift allegations made by Sherlock on how the whistles at night and the “presence of a band of gypsies who are on intimate terms with this old doctor” could mean something sinister is brewing (201). The gypsies are continually looked at as nuisances (“It must be those wretched gypsies in the plantation” (196)) and their presence as the sure signal for some variation of crime being committed. It does, of course, come as no surprise that the pejorative term ‘Gypsies’ is used for the Romani people who are nomadic tribes of people originating from the Indian subcontinent. The presence of this particular Ethnic group in the middle of an English estate is already uncanny, mysterious and unsettling. There is no one kind of ‘gypsy’ community that stands as a homogeneous identifier for the whole; but the general consensus on their origins takes us to the Punjab region in Northern India: a place where Dr. Roylott was also residing for a good portion of his life. The presence of the Romani people also relates to ideas of illegal encroachment on land because there is no one place the community belongs to and must travel and settle at different places sporadically. Hence, the idea of displacement is inherent to their existence—which also lends to a grander understanding of Dr. Roylott’s character and its representations. His alignment with the band of gypsies also offers an understanding of both the gypsy tribe and Grimseby Roylott as outsiders and outliers on the English estate and equally, in English society. It staunchly reiterates the point that Roylott has departed from English polite society, fallen from privilege, lost his wealth and literally embodies this displacement. He has surrendered his right to be called a European or an Englishman, even if he lives on an English estate and claims undue right over his wife’s and stepdaughter’s money. It is significant, then, that the “ruthless man with Eastern Training” is portrayed as the quintessential idea of the Orient which, as Edward Said would call is the, “contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” through which Europe (or the West) defines itself (1784).  
 Returning to Said, it is important to note that the place of the Orient is not an entirely and “merely imaginative” exercise, rather, Said notes, it is an “integral part of European material civilization and culture” (1784). The Other (Orient), hence, stands as an imperative counterpart to the creation and perpetuation of the Original (Occident)— much like Sherlock Holmes becomes a fully fleshed out superhero-esque character in the presence and in contrast to Dr. Roylott. Quoting Said, an argument can be made, that European culture continues to “gain in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (1785). Therefore, he notes, “the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (1796). Additionally, since starting from roughly the late eighteenth century, much of the writing done by the West on the ‘Orient’, can be seen as an institution that tries to deal with the existence of its counterpart— “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1785). This ‘dominating’ and ‘holding authority’ over it also starts from place where the discourse around the East is built on a structure “of lies and of myths” which, if dissipated and confronted with the truth, would “simply blow away” (1787).

At this juncture, I find it important to point out that the place of women (Helen Stoner and her sister) and the place of the Orient (Dr. Roylott) hold similar (but not the same because the stoner sisters are, despite everything, members of English society) places of inferiority in the networks of relationships in the story: these characters are all built around elements of myth and mystery and they all continue to be located as counterparts of the ’Other’ to the emblematic honorable and intelligent white men. This also lends to the idea, which I will be reiterating at this point, that the “European collective notion of the ‘us’ stands against all ‘those’ non-Europeans’ which leads to the production of a cultural hegemony (1787). In a later part of the story, Sherlock and Dr. Watson are walking back to the Stoke Manor after having devised a plan to save Helen Stoner when something what looks like a “hideous and distorted child” crosses their path (214). After being startled and realizing it’s Dr. Roylott’s baboon, Sherlock quickly regains composure and retorts, “It is a nice household— That is the baboon” (214). Sherlock’s comment is particularly important not just for the disdain through which he views Dr. Roylott’s ‘Indian’ pets but also because he reestablishes the contrast between the rest of English society and the rules and expectations around which it operates versus the Stoke Manor, where the rules seem to be of the jungle, or rather, just the imagined East. Edward Said notes that the cultural hegemony through which European or Western society established dominance both in and outside of Europe is through the idea “of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.” In addition to this is also the idea that “the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more sceptical thinker might have had different views on the matter” (1787). Hence, repeatedly throughout the story the contrast between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Roylott is established: while Sherlock is intelligent, Roylott is sly and clever, while Sherlock is rational, Roylott flies into fits of unchecked rage, while Sherlock belongs to the sophisticated metropolis, Roylott to the unkempt Stoke Manor which is plagued by “recurring images of the Orient” (1784).

Finally, I also wanted to point to the incident of the assault and murder of the ‘native butler’ that Dr. Roylott committed in his time in Calcutta working as a doctor. Very little is said about the incident outside of it being illustrated as the moment where a fissure takes place between the ‘European’ version of Dr. Roylott who had “professional skill and force of character” versus the ‘Oriental’ version the readers meet who returns to England “a morose and disappointed man” (193). The incident also marks the only mention to anything local or ‘native’ to Calcutta and the reference, of course, is a fleeting one: “In a fit of anger, however, caused by some robberies which had been perpetrated in the house, he (Dr. Roylott) beat his native butler to death and narrowly escaped a capital sentence” (193). Edward Said contends that the first problem with the discipline of Orientalism or the discourse around it is that it somewhat concludes “that the Orient was essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality (1787). He notes that, “There were— and are— cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West” (1787). Hence, the “phenomenon” of Orientalism, according to Said, “deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a “real” Orient” (1787). Any mention of the “real” Orient, my argument continues, is the smallest reference made to the local butler by Arthur Conan Doyle which encapsules the half-baked essence of the colonies: a thieving butler, the triggering of a wild rage and a long-term imprisonment. It may even be implied that this one-dimensional dread of Calcutta (like a disease) seems to be responsible for Dr. Roylott’s ruination and undoing.

It also introduces another contention (that I have) with this cursory reference to the ‘native’. The reason for the assault and murder, as narrated by Helen Stoner, “is caused by some robberies which had been perpetrated in the house” (193). The irony is rich here: A white man, who has settled in, exploited, and stolen from the colonies as a last-ditch effort to save his wealth and career, has murdered a native butler for theft. I feel this can be read as another allegorical retelling of the British Imperial Empire’s imaginative exercise in inventing the Orient and in that endeavor, divorcing itself from the narrative of theft and exploitation. The local man steals (allegedly) while in service to a white doctor and dies a brutal death for it, while the British Imperialist Empire plunders, exploits and usurps this local man’s home to no consequence.  
 Before I conclude this paper, I also want to reiterate a point I have been making in varied ways throughout this essay: the position of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson as the charming, intelligent, and sophisticated henchmen for the British Imperialist Empire. Arthur Conan Doyle purposely divorces them from the weight of the political position they carry; there is no overt reference made to their opinion on the colonies or the East, despite the glaring undertones of the racist and prejudiced way in which they view the Indian colonies. But on the surface, they remain unsullied in their passion for their work and their good-hearted help for those who seek Holmes out, with no splattering of the imperialist implications of the work they do and the things they say. Edward Said notes in *Orientalism*, that, “It is very easy to argue that knowledge about Shakespeare or Wordsworth is not political whereas knowledge about contemporary China or the Soviet Union is” (1790). I find that to be a useful way to think about the way Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are written by Arthur Conan Doyle: as depoliticized saviors who will come to the aid of anyone who is in trouble regardless of gender, class, ra ce, and ethnicity. It is easier to think of them that way and to tell stories about their adventures that way. It is similarly easier for the readers to receive this superhero-esque duo as honorable, dignified, and reliable (“…Miss Stoner, you see that we have been as good as our word” (205)). But to say that they are not involved in anything political or that their ideological believes do not color the cases they take, the crimes they solve and the ‘villains’ they rid English society off is a convenient erasure of the (behind-the-scenes) work of imperial ideology. The casebook Sherlock Holmes keeps of all the work he has previously done and the people he has helped by “devoting the same care to (their) case” as he does to others, is just another depoliticized version of the *real* work he is doing. That is, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson as exterminators of the vermin plaguing polite English Society, the defenders of the honor of certain individuals (mostly white, mostly European, and mostly women) and stooges for the Imperialist Empire.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to prove that “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle can be read as an allegory for the invention, production, and perpetuation of myths about the Orient/ the East/ the Indian Subcontinent by the Occident/ the West/ Europe. It delineates the processes through which ‘The Speckled Band’ acts as an imperialist narrative that constructs its characters and settings in ways that are reminiscent of the European knowledge production of the “recurring images of the Orient” (1784). These occurrences and images are symptomatic of a larger ideology of hegemonic control that holds European culture, thought and practices as superior to any other non-European ones. They also perform another significant task: through the manufacturing of a certain image of the East (or of the non-Europe), the West is also able to construct itself, in a process indicative of, quoting Gayatri Spivak, a “collective fantasy… of a collective imperialist empire” (2009). In the negative spaces of all that is not European, the imagined Other resides. The values (of mostly, dignity, honor, truthfulness, loyalty and the like) that are quintessentially European, also then offset the values of the other side of the world and these other people, who are always placed in contrast to Europe.

In the story, if Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are read as symbolic of the values, performances, and ideologies inherent to a European way of life and thinking, then all the other characters of the story are set into relational networks with the protagonists that reassert the protagonists’ position as superior and their own positionality as inferior. Among these characters are Helen Stoner (as well as some references made to the dead Stoner sister) and Dr. Grimesby Roylott. These characters function as ways to reiterate the binary oppositions through which the construction of the character of Sherlock Holmes happens in the story. Helen Stoner is a woman who repeatedly performances her own victimhood—and that of her dead sister (“…there is no great pleasure in our lives” (194)) and insists on mostly Sherlock Holmes and in extension, Dr. Watson’s heroism (“I assure you I am in your hands” (210)). Similarly, Dr. Grimesby Roylott is an antagonist who performs his own villainy through repeated “disgraceful brawls”, throwing people into streams and parroting the sentiments everyone else has for him: “I am a dangerous man to fall foul of!” (208). It may be argued that through these actions and dialogues, Holmes and Dr. Watson’s actions are justified: even if they are the ‘indirect’ murder of Dr. Roylott. At the point in the story that this happens, a reader is already rooting ang hoping for the ‘brute’ doctor’s annihilation.

In the final sequence of suspense and the culmination of it, Roylott’s evil scheme is successfully intercepted by Holmes and the “schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another” (217). Sherlock carefully withdraws the swamp adder snake from Roylott’s dead body and “carrying it at arm’s length, throws it into the iron safe, which he closes upon it” (217). Once again, superhero Sherlock Holmes and his sidekick Dr. Watson remove a deadly, foreign pest from English society and lock it in an iron cage where it belongs. Order is restored, all is well.

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