

SHERLOCK HOLMES VISIT TO AMERICA: UNDERSTANDING THROUGH *ELEMENTARY* SERIES

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Abstract

This paper will not try to look into all of the televised revisits to detective fiction in the twenty first century. It will focus majorly on first Elementary television series featuring Sherlock Holmes and the paper will make an effort to know the reason why America needs Sherlock Holmes in this century in spite of having world's best investigating team with it. Why the states need surveillance? Why there is an effort to make figure of Sherlock more humanised? Why Miss John Watson instead of Mr. John Watson? Why Irene Adler as Moriarty? And why the working methodology of Sherlock seems to be different from Sherlock whom we know?

Sherlock Holmes, an immortal figure, had lived for more than a century and continues to live on. He was created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes first appeared to the world in 1887 in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. After that he had never died or one can say that he returned all the time whenever world needed him. His adventures might have ended with Doyle but the character lives even after that. It is very simple to understand that a character does not die with the demise of its creator but it continues to live in the reader's mind and heart. This might be the reason that character is created time and again but this cannot be the only reason.

With the rise of new forms of art, the characters like Sherlock who lived in reader's visual imagination can now be portrayed on television screens as alive, walking in your street, using modern gadgets, solving the crimes and keeping the society in order. The question is why the need to revisit. Is it because there is lack of fresh imagination or is it the intellectual ingenuity? Is this revisiting because of the new technology rather than content? I think revisiting, irrespective of whatever might be the answer to these questions, add on to the fiction. This revisiting is a characteristic of Golden age fiction. This revisit is to recover the apparent innocence associated with the older times. However, historically Golden age fiction is situated around World War II and the reasons were clearly associated with the happenings of war. Then, the question is why a revisit to a detective figure likes Sherlock in 21st century. Is the world again in turmoil? Why there is need of a detective figure to restore the order?

The first thing which one needs to understand is that irrespective of the age, the readers remain interested with detective fiction because it allows them to be a part of it and at the same time allows them to create a world where everything can be put together; a world where virtue and intelligence tries to go together. Irrespective of the time and space, detective fiction remains part of popular culture. There are three essential components of any detective fiction: detection, crime and victim. It is strangely noticed that in Golden age fiction, the victim is not much of interest. Victim does not attract much sympathy. The interest of the reader remains with the

psychological predicament of the criminal rather than the psychological predicament of the victim. So what interests the reader, or the viewer in case of the detective series is the process.

Along with this notion of interest, the question is why so much interest in Sherlock Holmes in the recent period of time. The modern world is no longer a world of equilibrium. The threat is again felt by the world. We cannot go into another world war but our world is under continuous threat. After the post war period, we have come to realization that there is nothing as absolute innocence or goodness. The postmodern world had lived and is living with this conception and due to this there is always a struggle with the identity. Further, the world is now open for everyone and so the identity has also become mobile. This has no doubt helped in building better relations between nations but at the same time, nations have got exposed to each other. Along with this the threat is from the rise of terrorism. Especially after 9/11 attack on World Trade Centre, the question has not only been raised because of the external threats but also because of the flaws in internal security. In this world, one is not even sure of the person whom one knows for the life time - whether that person is a threat or not. People tell lies on your face and walk over you. The notion of morality no longer presides and the definition of crime has also changed. The crime is no longer only because of money or jealousy or relationship problems. There are various cases of psychopaths, child predators, terrorism and other heinous crimes which even include school children shooting each other out of rage or jealousy.

This paper will not try to look into all of the televised revisits to detective fiction in the twenty first century. It will focus majorly on first *Elementary* television series featuring Sherlock Holmes and the paper will make an effort to know the reason why America needs Sherlock Holmes in this century in spite of having world's best investigating team with it. Why the states need surveillance? Why there is an effort to make figure of Sherlock more humanised? Why Miss John Watson instead of Mr. John Watson? Why Irene Adler as Moriarty? And why the working methodology of Sherlock seems to be different from Sherlock whom we know?

Before going on to talk about *Elementary*, I would talk about another television series called *Lie to Me*. This series is based on the concept that every face says something. Facial expressions and gestures, if monitored closely, reveals the truth about the person and the actions performed by that person. There is a field of science which studies these expressions and calls them microexpressions. This study is possible with the help of technology. The usage of camera allows zooming on the suspect's expressions and the body movements. The concept is based on the fact that the unconscious expressions and the body movements are universal and true for everyone. The person who performs the function of monitoring and assisting the various other departments in solving their cases through detecting the lies is Dr. Lightman. Why there is a need of a man to detect the lie? Why not lie detecting machine is able to do that? The reason is very simple. Machines also lie because they are human creations and can be easily manipulated by humans. Also the lie detecting machine function by capturing anxiety which can be present for various other reasons as we see in one of the interrogation where the suspect is shown the picture of victim and he shows anxiety and the machine treats it as lie, where as Dr. Lightman clarify that anxiety is simply because of the sexual arousal felt by suspect for the victim.

The debate between truth and false take us back to the question of having moral justice and having the responsibility of not allowing punishment for the innocent person. This was the main thrust behind the detective fiction. The role of a detective was to assure that. So, even in the post-modern world, responsibilities remain the same. The goal remains the same. Thing which

gets changed is the process. “Postmodernism called into question existing moral values and belief systems and this is still a concern of the postmodernism of the twenty-first century” (Worthington 176).

Lie to Me was a series which simply focused on unraveling the lie out of the suspect. This is something which Sherlock Holmes knew before hand. He did not need camera to observe. In some cases, Dr. Lightman also function as Sherlock but apart from lie he cannot say anything where as Sherlock can even know the whereabouts of that person by just observing him. Deciphering the truth and the lies cannot simply help solve all the crimes. For example, the first episode of *Elementary* where Doctor murdered his wife by using the weakness of a psychopath cannot be simply solved by knowing whether Doctor is saying the truth or not because in the interrogation room Doctor says that he had not murdered his wife which is technically true and Sherlock, in spite of evidences against him, set him free. It is only after other revelation and supposed suicide of Peter Saldua, Holmes is able to conclude that Doctor had killed his wife. Furthermore, figure of Dr. Lightman is somehow treated as God who can tell who is speaking truth. Because of this, the figure of Lightman is not able to establish a strong connection with its audience. It is not that Sherlock is not treated like that but his working is more based on facts and evidences. His reliance is not completely on the notion of truth but he relies very much on finding right evidences. This is something which is common of all Holmes.

Sherlock might not be called God but he was treated no less than a superman figure that has the special power of thinking. He has a mental faculty which is far more receptive and intelligent than common people. It becomes very difficult for common people to understand what he is deciphering as that knowledge remains exclusively to him. In spite of that our focus remains on Sherlock and his deductions. “The reader of a traditional detective story presumes the enjoyment of following a scheme” (Eco 19). As Umberto Eco puts it, the idea is of iteration. With these kinds of superman figures, the plot can always begin “from a sort of virtual beginning, ignoring where the preceding event left off” (19). This is the reason why Sherlock Holmes can remain alive for infinite amount of time because no one cares about that. Eco’s statement in the context of Superman stories that “a confused notion of time is the only condition which makes the story credible” (19) is equally suitable in the case of detective stories. He also says, “it is not a matter of discovering who committed the crime, but rather, of following certain "topical" gestures of "topical" characters whose stock behavior we already love” (19). That’s why we have Sherlock Holmes in 2012 in New York working as consultant to NYPD. It is fascinating to note that the transportation of Sherlock Holmes allows the demystification of his character as superhero in ironic sense because a superhero in spite of having the potential to safeguard the entire world exercises his power “in the sphere of a small, closed community” (Eco 22).

Sherlock Holmes in *Elementary* is not a resident of New York but he had come to the place because of some problem in London. That problem we come to know later is associated with Irene Adler, the woman. Sherlock had taken the habit of having cocaine in the meantime because of the remorse he had felt at the loss of Irene. It is not that Doyle’s Sherlock did not use cocaine but it was different during that time. David F. Musto in the essay “Why did Sherlock Holmes use cocaine?” says that the use of cocaine was not prohibited during Doyle’s time. He says, “The use of cocaine to fight melancholia or boredom was not at all unusual. Cocaine as

Holmes used it was in accord with the advice of leading physicians”(79). It was later when “unqualified admiration of cocaine turned to stern condemnation” (Musto 79).

Elementary series provides a new Sherlock. Sherlock who is more humanised, a Sherlock who can fall in love. He still does not have friends but he is now more respectable to the team working with him. In spite of the first episode where we see him belittling the police detective, we notice him working with Inspector Bell as he works with Watson. It is very significant to note that the arrogance of Sherlock decreases with the episodes and he is more humble. The contrast can be clearly seen between British Sherlock and Sherlock in America. In fact BBC version of Sherlock which is more close to Doyle’s text has the same Sherlock as the text who is devoid of human emotions as such (it is only in third season, which came in 2014 after *Elementary* series, we experience emotional side of Sherlock). The crime is seen as an event which makes him happy and more energetic. This is not seen in *Elementary*. He is not shown to be worried about why the crime is not taking place. One reason might be that the city itself has become a place where crime takes place on day to day basis. Further, he is no longer despised by police because he is now considered to be a good help. The reason might be behind democratic framework of America which allows everyone to be a participant and the safety of the society is not only a concern of government but equally of all the citizens. Thus, the helping hand of Sherlock is not seen in the light that his actions are anyhow damaging the image of police. This might be a force behind making Sherlock more communicable and more humanised. It is appealing to notice that the word used to praise earlier Sherlock was ‘brilliant’ where as in *Elementary* his actions are said to be ‘very good’. Besides, Sherlock is no longer someone who will not make mistakes. In fact, in most of the cases, he first gets the wrong person and then finally towards the end he is able to solve the crime. Most importantly, Watson is no longer a helping figure but also someone who investigate crime on her own. In fact, in the end Watson is able to plan the plot to catch Moriarty and not Sherlock.

The major change seen in American version is the gender change of Watson and Moriarty. Traditionally male figures are now female. We do not have Mr. Watson but Miss John Watson and the woman, Irene Adler comes out as Moriarty. The question is why this change. It seems that it is an effort to provide equal space to everyone, even in the case of gender. It is also breaking the stereotypical image of woman as someone who is passive and can only be a companion. The passivity of woman is used to hide the real motive. It is postmodern world where there is a consciousness of gender as a performance, as formulated by Judith Butler. Irene Adler who is the love interest of Sherlock, when introduced in the series, turn out to be in the end, Moriarty. In the garb of being conventional woman who has been traumatized by Moriarty, she performs her role. In the short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia”, her intelligence is shown to be equal to Sherlock and thus, she is someone among women to be partner of Sherlock and even had the possibility of becoming his beloved but that possibility is not exercised. Sherlock is not provided that opportunity by the text. *Elementary* provides that opportunity or we can say that the constructed past of Sherlock before coming to New York lead to that possibility. Sherlock needs the rehab because of this past. With the knowledge of Irene as dead, Sherlock goes on to become a drug addict. Miss John Watson is his sober companion appointed by his father. Watson is a figure on whom Sherlock will be forced to depend on.

The important point is that in this postmodern world identities cannot be fixed as they keep relocating and readjusting themselves. Every identity is a performance. Sherlock is

Sherlock because of the fact that he repeatedly perform as Sherlock. Any character especially in the case of detective fictions is treated with significance because of the repeated performance of that character as that character. This repeated performance is also important with respect to the recipient of that performance, reader/viewer. Umberto Eco rightly says, “when our favorite author writes a story in which the usual character does not appear and we are not even aware that the fundamental scheme of the book is still like the others: we read the book with a certain detachment and are immediately prone to judge it a "minor" work, a momentary phenomenon, or an interlocutory remark” (20). So, the change of gender for Watson comes as a surprise in the first episode. It become difficult for the reader to accept Watson as female but slowly and gradually with two or three episodes, one gets comfortable with that. It comes to our understanding that any character is simply a performance and can be done by anyone irrespective of gender. This understanding is because of the fact that in postmodern world the viewer or the reader is aware of the identity politics and know that the identity is not something which can be fixed. This understanding is because of their day to day experience of the world. So in the context of crime fiction, the facets of postmodernism also play a significant role. Heather Worthington says, “crime fiction draws on aspects of postmodernism such as the fluidity and fragmentation of identity, intertextuality, instability, deconstruction of grand narratives, and uses them in the interests of, for example, gender politics” (178-179). It would have been very intriguing to have a series where Sherlock is performed by a woman.

It seems Watson being woman is a preparation for the viewer to bear the shock of Irene as Moriarty. This is a shock which is shared by audience with Sherlock. I think it is for the first time in any work of Sherlock, audience and Sherlock gets emotionally attached to each other. He is as defeated as we were in all the other cases. The defeat of Sherlock because of his emotional attachment with Irene is the moment which allows others to participate in solving the case for him. Sherlock is now performed by Watson to catch Moriarty/Irene.

By the performance of Sherlock, it is not meant that Watson imitates Sherlock’s actions, because his actions are not the product of physical prowess but a constituent of his mental faculty which cannot be imitated but can be learn with due course of time. Miss John Watson is different from Mr. Watson. There are different kind of politics goes in her making. She cannot be belittled by Sherlock as she is a woman and gender politics came into role and also as explained earlier, democratic justice is a requirement in American. This also explains the reason why Inspector Bell is given due respect by Sherlock as racial politics does not allow him to ridicule a black person.

The function of Miss John Watson as a feminine figure is to disrupt the conventional performance of woman as someone who has no identity on her own. The concern of identity is not only in terms of profession but also in terms of domestic space. It is ironical to see that in the domestic space of Holmes, Watson performs the role of Miss Hudson as housekeeper but at the same time, she is part of his investigation and also in the domestic space, there is some kind of sharing (no doubt it is an impartial one). Apart from all this, the fascinating thing is she makes Sherlock do things which he never does – for example, she makes him watch sports game. Also, if she makes coffee, she makes Sherlock move his feet and get it from the table.

Furthermore, structurally Watson role as woman becomes important because Irene is Moriarty and Holmes because of his love relation with her is not able to act towards the end. It is through the brain of Watson, NYPD is able to catch Irene/Moriarty. The complete inaction and

putting down all the guns down by Sherlock towards the end show that in this postmodern world even Sherlock is not perfect. He is simply a human being. In fact he is a performance which can be performed by someone else. Before being able to catch Irene Sherlock has continuously taken effort to train Watson. The training is not simply to handle the physical attack but also it is a training of mind by forcing her to think on cases. Slowly and gradually it becomes a habit with Watson and she begins to act on her own as a detective.

Undoubtedly, the reader has always remained connected with Watson as in Doyle's or previous versions of Sherlock because Watson function as a figure whose mental faculty correspond to all other than Sherlock. Watson was someone who was well above average but never equal to Sherlock and so the readers or viewers. In that case, there was always a distance maintain between Sherlock and the reader/viewer. In *Elementary*, that distance ceases to exist to some extent. We are allowed to enter into psyche of Sherlock as Watson start functioning as Sherlock to some extent. I do not suggest that there is no distance but there is a possibility that everyone if able to perform like Sherlock can become a Sherlock. Sherlock is no longer a single person but he begins to symbolize a performance which can be performed irrespective of time, place, gender, etc.

This has undoubtedly positive connotations but simultaneously there is the possibility of everyone being Moriarty. The difficulty of Holmes to identify Irene as Moriarty is in parallel with the viewer as both are familiar with a different kind of relation shared between the two. Moriarty is equally a performance like Sherlock irrespective of time, place, gender, etc. In this context, there is a need to keep a check on that performance. Thus, the idea of surveillance gets the prominence again and as a consequence the den of Sherlock Holmes is also under threat and so, he had planted hidden cameras in case there is an invasion of his house. Thus, in the present scenario, one being Holmes is not enough. Other means of protection is also needed. There is no doubt that with this continuous surveillance of the state, the freedom of human being is under threat and one feel uncomfortable to realise that he/she is constantly observed (reaction of Miss John Watson after knowing about hidden camera in the house explains that). Nevertheless, this surveillance has become, ironically, an essential measure for the freedom.

In conclusion, along these lines, this paper made an attempt to disentangle the figure of Sherlock Holmes along with other characters in *Elementary* television series situated in New York, America. The paper through the detective figures also tried to comprehend the need of surveillance in this contemporary world.

Besides, this paper should not be envisaged as final discernment of Holmes in the existing world. This paper welcomes all the agreements and disagreements with respect to the arguments proposed, because this paper had clearly perceived how even "the Sherlock Holmes" cannot be defined in absolute terms as in this world his performance also has to comply in accordance with the other people and the surroundings.

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