

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

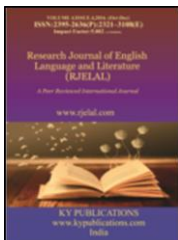
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

**The Re-Inventions of Sherlock Holmes: A Study of the Fiction by Vithal Rajan,  
Jamyang Norbu and Neelum Saran Gour**

**SANANDA ROY**

PhD Scholar

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi



**ABSTRACT**

'Sherlock Holmes is the greatest detective who never lived and who will never die' is the unanimous stand that readers take. Such was the power of this character that he continues to fire the imagination of myriad authors all over the world to result in countless pastiches and parodies. Indian writers in English have re-written Sherlock Holmes, sometimes reworking history and placing him in new situations that re-emphasize the trend of re-writing established literary texts. It is also interesting to note how several incarnations of the great detective have flourished in Indian Bhasha fiction. Time and again Indian writers have tried to re-create the Holmes magic. Be it the bespectacled, astute Byomkesh Bakshi created by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay or Satyajit Ray's suave, witty sleuth Feluda, all seem to be inspired by Holmes, with a devoted sidekick at their behest.

This paper proposes to analyse Indian writers in English who have almost recreated Sherlock Holmes. The realm is undoubtedly that of the popular, hence the approach has been from the angle of popular fiction. The lines between the popular and canonical have got increasingly blurred for quite some time now, and it continues to be, with popular and high literature now finding equal importance. Several Indian English writers, in this case, Vithal Rajan and Neelum Saran Gour, and Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu have reworked Sherlock Holmes. The texts *Holmes of the Raj* and *The Year of High Treason* by Vithal Rajan, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* by Jamyang Norbu and *Messres Dickens, Doyle and Wodehouse Pvt. Ltd.* by Neelum Saran Gour, attempt to reinvent the literary figure of Holmes. Though the common objective is to offer an Indian perspective, the three have very different motives behind it. While Rajan attempts to rewrite history, Norbu focuses on Tibet with the purpose of recreating history, and Neelum Saran Gour simply delivers a light-hearted, self-reflexive comedy that parodies not only the great detective but also the English language.

. There can be found numerous popular culture references to Sherlock Holmes in Western academic study. New Sherlock Holmes stories; stories in which Holmes appears in a character part; stories about imagined descendants of Sherlock Holmes; and stories inspired by Sherlock Holmes but which do not feature Holmes himself. Though this aspect is also prevalent in Indian English writing, it has perhaps not been adequately examined.

This is an era of increasing study of Western popular texts in Indian academics, and it brings us to the fact that English in India maybe viewed today as a mode of formulating a shifting space, linking cultures, spaces and genres that are in constant flux themselves, and offer us with fresh perspectives. Therefore a study would reveal how these texts have been systematically deconstructed only to be reconstructed with an Indian viewpoint.

The title of the initiator of Detective Fiction should perhaps be bestowed on Edgar Allan Poe, who introduced Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin in the short story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* that set in stone the basis of countless detective fiction to come. However, little was to change until the appearance of 'The World's Greatest Detective.'

'Sherlock Holmes is the greatest detective who never lived and who will never die' is the unanimous stand that readers take. The tremendously popular Holmes has always created history and occupied a position of prime importance in Western academics; the stupendous power of this literary character continues to fire the imagination of myriad authors all over the world resulting in countless pastiches and parodies. New Sherlock Holmes stories; stories in which Holmes appears in a character part; stories about imagined descendants of Sherlock Holmes; and stories inspired by Sherlock Holmes but which do not feature Holmes himself. Though this aspect does feature in Indian English writing, perhaps it has not been adequately examined in this field. Indian writers in English too took the cue to reinvent the literary figure of Holmes. Several incarnations of the great detective have flourished in Indian Bhasha fiction as well. Time and again Indian writers have tried to re-create the Holmes magic. Be it the bespectacled, astute Byomkesh Bakshi created by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay or Satyajit Ray's suave, witty sleuth Feluda, all seem to be inspired by Holmes, with a devoted sidekick at their behest. Indian writers in English have re-written Sherlock Holmes, sometimes reworking history and placing him in new situations that re-emphasize the trend of re-writing established literary texts.

This paper proposes to analyse Indian writers in English, in this case, Vithal Rajan and Neelum Saran Gour, and Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu who have almost recreated Sherlock Holmes. The texts that will be discussed in the course of the paper are Vithal Rajan's *Holmes of the Raj* and *The Year of High Treason*, with greater focus on the former, Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* and Neelum Saran Gour's *Messres Dickens, Doyle and Wodehouse Pvt. Ltd.*

The realm is undoubtedly that of the popular, the approach therefore is from the perspective of popular fiction. The lines between the popular and canonical have got increasingly blurred for quite some time now, and it continues to be, with popular and high literature now finding equal importance.

All three authors have varying motives in mind, yet the common objective is to offer an Indian perspective. While Rajan attempts to rewrite history, Norbu focuses on Tibet with the purpose of recreating history, and Neelum Saran Gour simply delivers a light-hearted, self-reflexive comedy that parodies not only the great detective but the English language itself. The selected Indian English writers have chosen to create sequels to/rewrite/parody Holmes and since the prime function of parody is to rework, revise, revive, adapt, quote, recast and replay. This is exactly what these authors have done. What one needs to examine is how differently they have done it from one another.

*Holmes of the Raj* is a collection of six short stories, told by Watson, describing the visit of Sherlock Holmes to India at the time of the British Raj. With an interesting preface it describes how Vithal Rajan chances upon the "lost" stories. Rajan's lively stories are situated in different parts of colonial and princely India ---Jhansi, Nainital, Pondicherry, Shimla, Hyderabad, the forests of Central India in addition to the four metropolitan cities. Neelum Saran Gour, on the other hand, locates her episodes in England, makes a more ambitious attempt and displays her fetish for literary games. Her book is a literary work of genius to be enjoyed by those who are generally familiar with the works of Conan Doyle, Dickens and Wodehouse. There are uncountable implanted intertextual references. Norbu's reincarnation of the great detective is ingenuous indeed because he bases his novel upon a single sentence from Doyle. In 1891 Doyle killed Sherlock Holmes' in a struggle with his arch rival, Professor Moriarty. There was unprecedented public outrage and two years later popular demand made Sir Arthur Conan Doyle resurrect the great detective. On his return Holmes informed Dr. Watson, "I travelled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting

Lhasa, and spending some days with the head lama" (*The Complete Short Stories of Sherlock Holmes: The Adventure of the Empty House*, pg 328). Norbu's novel pounces on the opportunity and recreates events describing Holmes' hiatus of two years. He charts the adventures of Holmes while in not only India but also Tibet. In *The Year of High Treason* Rajan recreates history, commingling it with fiction, which brings together all the famous literary heroes and villains of the 20th century under one roof, in the most unexpected of settings – Delhi, 1911, for the epoch-making Coronation Durbar of King George the Fifth. This racy, humorous novel on the secret history of the Coronation Durbar takes readers on an unforgettable walk back in time.

The notion of intertextuality forms a crucial part of rewriting and is deeply relevant to all the novels. People from history, fictional characters from other texts feature in the novels occasionally – Saran Gour's book is that of adventure and humour and the reader shall recognize many familiar characters: David Copperfield, Agnes, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Estella, Holmes, Watson and Jeeves. Mr. Copperfield and Mr. Nickleby are clients of Sherlock Holmes. It also mentions Jeeves being recently employed as a butler in Holmes' household. Similarly Rajan's novel *Holmes of the Raj*, has almost all the public figures living in India during this period – Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Ramanujan, Annie Besant, Jinnah, Ronald Ross – appear in a cameo role. Watson gets a peek into the life of Balu Palwankar, watching him and his brothers play cricket in Bombay and even gets a glimpse of Dhyanchand as a schoolboy playing hockey in Jhansi. In the story "Kim and Kim Again" we learn that Kipling's character Kim was actually a girl in a boy's disguise. There journeys into the future reveal a rickshaw puller named Balraj and his son Parikshit, who live on the streets of Calcutta after losing their Do Bigha Zameen in the village. In Norbu's story Watson cannot possibly be the narrator therefore he intelligently makes use of a fictional character – Babu Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, the Bengali babu and scholar-spy from Rudyard Kipling's masterpiece *Kim*. The Dalai Lama is also a character in this story. In *The Year of High Treason* the characters along with the detective duo

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, who are sent by Winston Churchill to protect the king; include, two popular gentlemen thieves, Arsène Lupin and Raffles, who have crossed swords with Holmes before; the mysterious Dr Fu Manchu, dreaded by the British; Mikhail Strogoff, the Tsar's special messenger and Tarzan and Karzan, the viceroy of apes.

Coupled with the notion of intertextuality is the use of quotation which is also essential to the concept of rewriting. Norbu in his book uses it effectively. 'You have been in Afghanistan I perceive' (*The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, pg 6) remarks Holmes, when he first meets Bengali babu Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, at Bombay's Sassoon docks. This reminds one of Doyle's original, which first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet* published in the *Beeton's Christmas Annual* in 1887. Holmes and Dr. Watson were introduced during Watson's search for lodgings, 'You have been to Afghanistan I perceive' remarked Holmes on their first meeting. Therefore this became Holmes' stock in trade not just in Conan Doyle's original stories but also the countless adaptations, parodies and films. Norbu introduces Holmes disguised as a Norwegian called Sigerson. Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, who is investigating on Holmes for his department is delighted at the revelation of Holmes' true identity.

Not long after Holmes' arrival at the Taj Mahal Hotel, there is a bloody murder in his room, an attack originally intended for him. Woven with fascinating cryptic and *tantrik* trivia, the reader is led, on the trail of the assailant, whom Holmes suspects is second in command to the late professor Moriarty, Sebastian Moran. The trip leads him to Simla en route to Lhasa, where he is invariably sucked into adventure and mystery and learns of the conspiracy to kill the Dalai Lama by Chinese imperials. It is now Holmes' duty to protect the 14-year-old god-king and wipe out the resentful Moriarty, who returns, with strange occult powers. Norbu's motives are inclined towards his concern over Tibet. Being a prominent scholar and spokesman for a free Tibet his book doubles up as a strong spiritual and political statement. It also explains the cults and botany of India, the hidden secrets of the mandala (a sacred circle in Sanskrit),

Tibetan archaeology, and slavery and by its closing chapters becomes a supernatural thriller of sorts. It also could be passed off as a brilliant travelogue of the peninsula.

In *Holmes of the Raj*, Rajan however, makes the detective appear to be a racist; a missionary and a crusader for the Raj, since he is presented as the agent of the Raj. This is time and again drawn out clearly in the book but the very first instance when we come across it is, in the first story, "The Case of the Murdering Sanit." Here Holmes expresses his resentment over a certain Mr. Ayer's (a government servant) allegiance to his Ranees of Kanchee as his sovereign, when he comes to seek Holmes help to solve the case of the priest Shankaracharya, who has been arrested by the police and who he feels has been most diabolically framed. After the visitor had left, in the presence of Watson, Holmes delves deep into thought and puffing on his pipe, legs stretched under the table, remarks:

Our new acquaintance has been very frank and yet he has been secretive also. Did you mark his open regard for his Ranees, Watson?

I thought it was very proper, Holmes, I said. It does credit to him, and to her.

Twice he called her his 'sovereign', Watson, did that not strike you as strange?..... He should have but one sovereign, and that is Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria. (*Holmes of the Raj*, pg 8.)

Rajan's intent is primarily to parody and he manages to create situations that hold the readers' attention. Whenever there is a slight chronological variance, Rajan offers exploratory explanations in lighthearted academic endnotes. Norbu has, as an activist for the Tibetan cause, an additional agenda — drawing the world's attention to Tibet where the last part of the plot unfolds and which metaphorically describes the country's present condition and draws the reader's attention towards Chinese atrocities in Tibet. Gour's book targets a niche audience with a taste for literary games. In her novel, subversion reigns supreme. For instance she makes Sherlock Holmes unable to unravel the mystery until Jeeves comes to his rescue. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her review

states that a showdown between Holmes and Jeeves is described by the author with captivated gravity:

It was an instant that chroniclers of history may well have drawn the attention of the centuries to ... .. When two men of credit and conviction, two sagacious souls well matched, study one another acutely across the carpet, shrewdly evaluating each other's strengths and frailties, it does not behove lesser mortals present to hazard an interruption

The book is a candid pastiche, recreating familiar voices from the past.

As in Rajan's novel, all famous literary and historical characters recreate familiar voices from the past, his firm grasp of history and geography lends a rich texture and credibility to the stories. In her artful pastiche Neelum Saran Gour explores a peculiar possibility. If Charles Dickens solicited the support of Arthur Conan Doyle and P. G. Wodehouse and they sat down to write a book together, what would such a book turn out to be like? The central character of this novel is the English language itself as originally imparted by the colonizers to the colonized. *Messres Dickens, Doyle and Wodehouse Private Limited* is delightful for its many playful shades of covert meaning. Having learnt to play with the English language over the last two centuries, the Indian English author can ghost - write in the old voices, making Dickens, Doyle and Wodehouse members of a new company with Private Limited, an Indian commercial suffix, tagged on and 'messires' grafted onto 'messres' turning Brit Sahibs into Indian *Sahibaan*. Gour's narration is in a hilarious mock-Victorian style, where she plays this persistent joke on the English language and on three icons of British culture. Norbu's language is marked by a period flavour and his Holmes is prone to quote Horace a bit too frequently, but the book is carried forward by a lively charge nonetheless. The most fascinating aspect of the book is the dialogue and the effortless authenticity with which Norbu switches between Hurree's Hindustani and "babu-tommy" English, a characteristic of the British Raj in India, and Holmes' mannerisms from Doyle. As in the books by Neelum Saran Gour and Vithal Rajan, the major attraction of Norbu's novel is also its deadpan humour which is

remarkable. For Gour too, it is comedy that is her strength all throughout. Her vision of life is essentially comic, and humour plays a major role in her writing even when the intent is patently serious.

All three authors have turned out artful parodies of Holmes and have subverted dominant discourses. Rajan's style clearly reflects his engagement with history. He imparts political undertones to his stories. Offering a heady concoction of past and present, of literary figures and politicians, he takes the reader through the corridors of history, fabricating at will to deliver the most unusual read. The humour is very pronounced whereas in Norbu's it is deadpan to suit the narrative. Norbu of course has a dual purpose in mind, completely innovating from where Doyle left off, and to speak of Tibet. Therefore while Rajan rewrites history fictionally, Norbu recreates it. Gour entirely steers clear of all this and plays with the English language.

This is an era of increasing study of Western popular texts in Indian academics, and it brings us to the fact that English in India maybe viewed today as a mode of formulating a shifting space, linking cultures, spaces and genres that are in constant flux themselves. There can be found numerous popular culture references to Sherlock Holmes as mentioned earlier in Western study; he appears most persistently in novels, beginning with Mark Twain's *A Double-Barreled Detective Story* (1902) in which Holmes comes to America with his nephew to Nicholas Meyer's pastiches *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1974 novel and 1976 film), *The West End Horror* (1976), and *The Canary Trainer* (1993) to the recent Whitbread Award-winning *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon (2004) whose title is a quotation from a Holmes remark in a Conan Doyle story "Silver Blaze."

However in Indian writing in English, these chosen novels explore possibilities that not only make them subversive, but most importantly they also offer us with fresh perspectives. The readers therefore realise how these authors make the astounding literary figure of Holmes available to the Indian reading public, creating that very popularity yet in a completely unique way. They systematically

deconstruct Holmes only to reconstruct him and his adventures with an Indian viewpoint, and that is how they reinvent him for a reading public who are geographically and culturally very distant and different from the original.

#### Works Cited

##### Primary Sources

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *The Complete Short Stories of Sherlock Holmes*.

Gour, Neelum Saran. *Messres Dickens, Doyle and Wodehouse Pvt. Ltd.* Allahabad: Halycon Books, 2005.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*. 1985. Routledge, 1991. Print. Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*.

Norbu, Jamyang. *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*. India: Harper Collins, 1999.

Rajan, Vithal. *Holmes Of The Raj*. India: Random House Group, 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Year of High Treason*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2011.

##### Secondary Sources

[neelumsarangour.org/](http://neelumsarangour.org/)

[www.classiccrimefiction.com/history](http://www.classiccrimefiction.com/history)

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Afterlife of Sherlock Holmes." Rev. of *Holmes Of The Raj*, by Vithal Rajan, and. *Messres Dickens, Doyle and Wodehouse Pvt. Ltd.* by Neelum Saran Gour. *Hindu* 1<sup>st</sup> Oct, 2006.