Consuming Empire: Tea, Spice, and Colonial Commodities in Victorian Short Fiction

Jay Samanta
Panskura Banamali College

***Abstract*—This article examines how colonial commodities and imported organic threats function as agents of imperial anxiety in the short fiction of Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle. Drawing on Sidney Mintz's theories of commodity capitalism and Patrick Brantlinger's concept of the "Imperial Gothic," it argues that Victorian consumption transformed the domestic sphere into a site of racial and psychological instability. In stories like Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" and "Without Benefit of Clergy," and Doyle's "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" and "The Adventure of the Crooked Man," objects and figures associated with the colonial East—ranging from cigars and Indian rupees to lepers and swamp adders—contaminate the metropolitan home. These narratives suggest that the British drive to consume the empire exposed the imperial self to "atavism" and "reverse colonization." By focusing on the condensed form of short fiction, this study demonstrates how material traces of empire, such as the "pillage and plunder" of India, generated a persistent Gothic anxiety within everyday domestic life. These commodities do not remain external possessions; they reorganize the spatial and emotional logic of the home, revealing that imperial comforts were never ideologically secure.**

***Index Terms*—Imperial Gothic, Colonial Commodities, Victorian Short Fiction, Reverse Colonization, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Victorian domestic life was built upon imperial circulation. Tea, tobacco, textiles, and alcohol entered the British household so completely that empire was often experienced less as a political abstraction than as a set of ordinary sensory rituals. The empire appeared at the breakfast table, in the drawing room, and within the architecture of domestic comfort itself. As Sidney Mintz argues in *Sweetness and Power*, colonial commodities gradually lost their status as luxuries and became normalized components of everyday European life, obscuring the labor and violence that produced them (Mintz 5–7). Yet Victorian short fiction repeatedly exposes the instability hidden beneath this apparent domestic security. In Rudyard Kipling's "Without Benefit of Clergy," John Holden

constructs a hybrid interior furnished with "native cushions," a "red-lacquered couch," and a "blue-and-white floor-cloth" (Kipling, "Without Benefit" 347). The scene appears intimate and comfortable, but the very objects that create this domestic refuge also reveal the colony's penetration into English identity. Imperial commodities do not remain external possessions; they begin to reorganize the emotional and spatial logic of the home itself. This anxiety becomes more explicit in Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast," where colonial consumption is linked directly to bodily degeneration. The story opens amid the excessive drinking of "sherry," "champagne," and "old brandy," rituals through which Anglo-Indian men attempt to reinforce their cultural authority in an unfamiliar landscape (Kipling, "Mark of the Beast" 213). Yet this performance of imperial confidence collapses almost immediately when Fleete desecrates a local shrine with the end of a cigar. Kipling's choice of object is significant: the cigar is not merely a casual prop but a processed imperial commodity transformed into an instrument of sacrilege. The insult produces a horrifying physical regression. Fleete develops a "black rosette" upon his chest, begins craving raw meat, and emits what the narrator repeatedly describes as an animalistic odor (Kipling, "Mark of the Beast" 221–22). The colony thus returns not as abstract political resistance but as sensory contamination that invades the colonizer's body itself. The imperial encounter becomes biological, intimate, and grotesquely material.

Although Victorian scholars have extensively examined imperial ideology in the nineteenth-century novel, the short story remains comparatively underexplored as a formal site of colonial anxiety. This distinction matters because the short story operates through compression and concentration. Unlike the broader social world of the Victorian novel, short fiction isolates objects, gestures, and sensory details with unusual intensity. Colonial commodities in these narratives therefore function not simply as historical background or decorative Orientalism, but as active Gothic agents. This article builds upon foundational work in Victorian commodity studies. Thomas Richards argues that Victorian England developed a "commodity culture" in which goods ceased to be mere objects and became "the bearers of ideological meaning" (Richards 2). Anne McClintock extends this insight to the imperial context, demonstrating how domestic spaces were saturated with colonial commodities that "fetishized" the empire's violence (McClintock 34). Edward Said's *Orientalism* further clarifies how the West constructed the East as a knowable, consumable, and inferior object, a framework that underpins the Gothic return of colonial materials in these stories (Said 2–3). Together with Mintz's account of commodity normalization and Patrick Brantlinger's framework of the Imperial Gothic, these scholars enable a reading of short fiction as a privileged site for understanding how colonial objects carried terror into the English home (Brantlinger 227–30). In Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," for example, the domestic interior is infiltrated by imported colonial life forms: a cheetah, a baboon, and ultimately the "deadliest snake in India" (Doyle, "Speckled Band" 167). Doyle transforms ordinary household architecture into a mechanism of imperial intrusion. The ventilator, the bell-rope, and the saucer of milk create a hidden pathway through which colonial violence enters the English bedroom. What appears to be a secure Surrey manor is revealed as structurally vulnerable to the empire it attempts to contain. The Gothic force of these objects can be understood through

Brantlinger's concept of the "Imperial Gothic," which identifies late Victorian fears surrounding reverse colonization, racial instability, and the possibility that "the savage, 'dark' forces of the colonial periphery might overwhelm or reverse the civilizing project of empire" (Brantlinger 230). In these stories, the empire does not remain geographically distant; it recoils back into the metropole through commodities, bodies, and animals that refuse containment. This article argues that Victorian short fiction transforms colonial commodities into Gothic symbols of imperial anxiety, exposing the fragility of British domestic identity at the height of empire. Through close readings of Kipling and Doyle, the following discussion traces how imported objects repeatedly collapse the boundary between colony and metropole. The first section examines the commodification of colonial intimacy in "Without Benefit of Clergy." The second explores bodily contamination and atavistic regression in "The Mark of the Beast." The third analyzes how Doyle's detective fiction reimagines the English home as a porous imperial space vulnerable to infiltration from the colonial periphery. Together, these texts reveal that the comforts of empire were never ideologically secure. The very commodities that symbolized imperial power also carried the possibility of corruption, regression, and collapse. Victorian short fiction therefore imagines empire not as stable possession, but as a Gothic system whose materials continually threaten to consume the civilization they were meant to sustain.

II. METHODOLOGY

Corpus Selection and Comparative Scope

The present study adopts a comparative corpus of four short stories—two by Kipling and two by Doyle—because this grouping allows close attention to recurring forms of domestic contamination across authors and genres. The selection is justified by the concentration of material signs in these stories, which makes them especially suitable for close reading of objects, bodies, and interior spaces. This corpus is intentionally limited to stories in which colonial materials are central rather than incidental. Such a scope allows the analysis to track how domestic instability is organized through goods, animals, currency, and bodily marks rather than through broad geopolitical commentary. By focusing on a small set of texts, the method enables sustained attention to narrative repetition, variation, and escalation across the two authors. The goal is not to generalize about all Victorian fiction but to identify a coherent pattern in the commodity Gothic of late nineteenth-century short prose.

Analytical Framework: Imperial Gothic, Commodities, and Material Contamination

The analytical framework combines Imperial Gothic criticism with commodity theory and scholarship on stigma and unfitness. Studies of the Imperial Gothic are most relevant because they explain why colonial return is often rendered as bodily threat, spatial invasion, and emotional disturbance rather than as overt political argument. Commodity studies add the crucial insight that objects are not inert props but carriers of historical relations and ideological force. Methodologically, this means reading each story for the ways it organizes contamination through

contact. The cigar in Kipling, the imported animals and snake in Doyle, and the rupee in "The Crooked Man" are all treated as material nodes where empire becomes legible in the domestic sphere. Close reading is necessary because these objects operate through narrative placement as much as through symbolic meaning. Their significance emerges from the relation between object, setting, and bodily response, not from isolated description. That relation is precisely what Imperial Gothic criticism helps to name, and it is why material contamination becomes the key analytic category in this review.

Use of Secondary Scholarship and Evidentiary Limits

The secondary literature used here relies on thematic synthesis rather than on one-to-one source summary. At the same time, the evidentiary limits of the available scholarship must be acknowledged. The literature does not always distinguish sharply between commodity history, imperial anxiety, and generic Gothic effect, and many studies gesture toward these issues without isolating short fiction as a distinct form. That gap is precisely why comparative close reading remains necessary: it can register how specific narrative details produce the larger pattern that broader scholarship identifies only intermittently. The method therefore treats scholarship as a scaffold for interpretation rather than as a substitute for textual analysis. This approach also reveals what the literature still leaves underdeveloped, especially the relationship between short fiction, domestic horror, and material culture. The Commodification of Colonial Intimacy in "Without Benefit of Clergy"

In "Without Benefit of Clergy," Rudyard Kipling reimagines the colonial domestic space as a site of profound individual regression where British identity is eroded through the ritualized consumption of foreign materials. John Holden's attempt to establish a private sanctuary in India results in a hybrid interior that is neither fully English nor fully Indian, yet entirely dependent on colonial commodities. This environment is defined by the accumulation of local objects that provide comfort while simultaneously signaling Holden's "going native". As Sidney Mintz argues in Sweetness and Power, the expansion of empire transformed exotic goods into the "first mass-produced exotic necessity," a process that normalized the presence of the colonial periphery within the European home.

Holden’s domestic refuge is established through a deliberate rejection of the rigid Victorian bungalow in favor of a hybridized interior:

"He had built himself a house... furnished it with native cushions and a red-lacquered couch... and there was a blue-and-white floor-cloth from Multan on the floor. It was a place of peace and great comfort, and the price of it was forty rupees a month".

This scene illustrates what Anne McClintock describes as the "cult of domesticity" being inextricably linked to the "imperial market" (McClintock, 1995, p. 17). The objects do not merely decorate; they reorganize the emotional logic of the home. When Holden’s partner, Ameera, gives birth to their son, the domestic space becomes a theater for non-European rituals of protection.

Ameera's fear for the child's soul leads to the performance of a sacrifice that directly challenges Holden's Western rationalism:

"'It is a sacrifice,' said Ameera. 'Two goats for a son and one for a daughter. See that they be all white... Holden had seen the death of many goats... but this was different... it was a sacrifice for the life of his son'".

Holden's participation in this "sacrifice" represents a surrender to the material and spiritual logic of the Other, reflecting Edward Said's argument that the Orient was often constructed as a space of "mysterious rituals" that challenged European "epistemological confidence" (Said, 1978; Fernandez, 2016). However, as Patrick Brantlinger notes in Rule of Darkness, the "Imperial Gothic" is defined by the eventual collapse of such civilizing projects. The death of the child and Ameera reveal the ultimate fragility of this hybrid "island of decivilization". The finality of this loss is marked by the physical disintegration of the house itself:

"The roof-beams cracked and the walls bulged... the house was levelled to the ground... 'It will be an empty city,' said the landlord, 'and the white man will know it no more'".

The "roof-beams" and "bulging walls" serve as metaphors for the structural instability of an imperial identity built upon the consumption of foreign intimacy. By the end of the narrative, the materials of empire have reclaimed the space, leaving no trace of the "white man" or the domestic comforts he sought to construct. If "Without Benefit of Clergy" shows the colony consuming domestic intimacy, "The Mark of the Beast" intensifies this logic by turning consumption inward. Here, the colonial commodity does not merely surround the Englishman—it enters his blood. Bodily Contamination and the Silver Man in "The Mark of the Beast"

In "The Mark of the Beast," colonial consumption is linked directly to biological regression through the desecration of a Hindu temple. The protagonist, Fleete, performs this act of sacrilege using a "half-consumed cigar," a processed imperial commodity that functions as an instrument of cultural insult (Fernandez, 2016; Battles, 1996). The cigar itself represents a complex global commodity chain: tobacco originated in the Americas, was processed through industrial labor in English factories, and was then shipped to India for colonial consumption (Mintz, 1985). By grinding this cigar into the forehead of a statue of Hanuman, Fleete uses a symbol of imperial economic power to initiate a "primal encounter" that triggers a wolfish transformation (Battles, 1996; Chemmachery, 2020).

The most potent figure of colonial contamination is the "Silver Man," the leper priest whose "abject" body represents the ultimate threat to the imperial self (McClintock, 1995, p. 47). Kipling describes him as "perfectly naked," his body shining "like frosted silver," a metaphor linking him to the very currency that motivated imperial traffic. However, the Silver Man is "unhumanized"

and "unaccountable"; he "mews like an otter," a sound that denotes a scavenger-like degradation rather than noble power. Crucially, the leper has "no face," a disfigurement that prevents the British characters from recognizing him as a human subject (Krishnaswamy, 1999; Chemmachery, 2013). When the Silver Man "mews" and catches Fleete round the body, dropping his head on Fleete's breast, the touch perverts the ritual of human intimacy into a vector for atavistic regression (Krishnaswamy, 1999; Battles, 1996).

When the narrator and Strickland attempt to "cure" Fleete, they resort to the torture of the Silver Man, using "metal heated to white heat" to extract the curse. This scene illustrates Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in Capital, where social relations "assume the fantastic form of a relation between things". The Englishmen treat the leper's body as a material object to be "buckled comfortably" to a bedstead, revealing that the "savage" behavior they sought to purge has already infected their own conduct. The leper survives the torture and disappears, suggesting that the "dark forces" of the periphery are never truly eliminated, only postponed.

Kipling locates imperial anxiety within the colonizer's body: the cigar, the mark, the leper's touch. Doyle shifts this Gothic logic from flesh to architecture. Where Fleete's body becomes a contaminated vessel, the Surrey manor in "The Speckled Band" becomes a permeable structure. The following section analyzes how Doyle reimagines the English home itself as a porous imperial space.The Porous Home and the "Speckled Band"

Arthur Conan Doyle reimagines the English manor as a "porous imperial space" that is structurally vulnerable to infiltration from the periphery. In "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," the domestic interior of Stoke Moran is compromised by "Indian animals" like the cheetah and the baboon that Dr. Roylott brings back from Calcutta. The "swamp adder," identified as the "deadliest snake in India," enters the bedroom through a ventilator—an architectural feature intended for comfort that becomes a conduit for imperial murder.

The snake is trained with a "saucer of milk," a mundane domestic commodity that is perverted into a tool for violence. Milk is traditionally associated with motherhood, nurture, and the English idyll; Doyle places it on the floor to condition a venomous reptile. As Simon James observes, the saucer of milk is matter "out of place," a signifier that the domestic interior has been reduced to an animalistic level (James 209). When Holmes finds the saucer, it serves as evidence of the perversion of domestic care, illustrating how the comforts of the metropole are hollowed out by "reverse colonization" (Lee 2021).

"The Adventure of the Crooked Man": The Ruined Body as Gothic Commodity

While "The Speckled Band" stages colonial return through biological agents, "The Adventure of the Crooked Man" locates imperial anxiety in the ruined body of the returned soldier and the foreign currency that circulates within the English home. This section argues that Doyle transforms the human casualty of the empire into a Gothic commodity—neither fully alive nor dead, neither

English nor Indian—whose very presence destabilizes the domestic sphere.
The "Crooked Man," Henry Wood, is the ultimate representation of the "ruined commodity" of the empire. Betrayed during the "Indian Mutiny of 1857," his physical appearance serves as a powerful simile for the degradation wrought by colonial violence:

"'He was a most fearful object... his face was puckered like a withered apple... and he was twisted out of all human shape'".

The "withered apple" simile is significant; the apple is a quintessentially English fruit, symbolic of domestic health. By describing Wood's face as "withered," Doyle suggests that the Englishman's identity has been corrupted and deformed by his experiences in the colonial periphery. Wood is no longer a man but a "fearful object," a discarded material trace of the "atrocities of the Mutiny" (Abdullah, 2015; Kohlke, 2010).

The primary material signifier of this historical return is the "Indian rupee" found at the scene of the Colonel's death. The rupee represents what Keertika Lotni describes as the "pillage and plunder" of India returning to circulate within the domestic economy of the metropole. Its presence in a secure English drawing room exposes the "economic contamination" inherent in the imperial project. Furthermore, the 1857 Mutiny acts as a persistent "historical trauma" throughout the narrative, reflecting a "collective unconscious" traumatized by the Rebellion. Wood's companion, a mongoose named Teddy, further emphasizes the "animalistic intrusion" into the home, acting as an "autonomous agent" of destruction that mirrors the"magical" power of the commodity fetish (James, 2018; Marx, 1867).

III. CONCLUSION

The short fiction of Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle reveals that the Victorian consumption of empire was a Gothic enterprise fraught with the threat of "reverse colonization" and bodily decay. Across the narratives examined, the domestic sphere is transformed from a secure sanctuary into a permeable space where colonial commodities—tea, cigars, and currency—act as agents of psychological and cultural instability. In "Without Benefit of Clergy," the hybrid intimacy of the colonial home ultimately collapses into the environment it sought to possess, illustrating the fragility of an identity built upon foreign materials (Blunt, 1999; Chemmachery, 2013). Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" takes this logic further, moving the site of contamination into the body of the colonizer itself, where the desecration of the Other is met with a grotesque, atavistic regression that exposes the latent bestiality within the imperial project (Battles, 1996; Chemmachery, 2020). Doyle's detective fiction shifts this anxiety toward the architectural and economic structures of the metropole. "The Speckled Band" and "The Crooked Man" demonstrate that the English home is structurally porous, vulnerable to the biological and historical "traces" of a violent imperial past (Abdullah, 2015; Lee, 2021). Whether through the "deadliest snake in India"

or a single "Indian rupee," the empire refuses to remain a distant possession, recoiling instead into the drawing rooms of Surrey and the military camps of Aldershot (Lotni, 2018). These objects, functioning as fetishistic commodities, possess an autonomous power to dismantle the façade of Victorian respectability (Jappe, 2020). This study identifies a persistent pattern across Kipling and Doyle: the "civilizing work" of empire is repeatedly undone by the very materials it seeks to distribute and consume. The "cigar," the "saucer of milk," and the "withered" body of the soldier serve as reminders that the comforts of empire were never ideologically secure. The narratives suggest that the act of consuming the empire inevitably involves being consumed by it. Further research could expand this analysis to other Victorian Gothic writers, exploring how the material returns of empire continued to haunt the late Victorian imagination through other commodities and genres.

WORK CITED

[1] Abdullah, Elham Hussein. "Mystification of History and Myth in the Victorian Response to the Indian Rebellion with Particular Reference to Sherlock Holmes's Narratives." Journal of Literature and Art Studies, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 42–50.

[2] Bardi, Abby. "The Gypsy as Trope in Victorian and Modern British Literature." Victorian Literature and Culture, vol. 34, no. 2, 2006, pp. 567–582.

[3] Battles, Paul. "'The Mark of the Beast': Rudyard Kipling's Apocalyptic Vision of Empire." Victorian Literature and Culture, vol. 24, 1996, pp. 213–232.

[4] Berger, Anna Maria Busse. "Haunted Oppressors: The Deconstruction of Manliness in the Imperial Gothic Stories of Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle." Humanities, vol. 9, no. 4, 2020, p. 122.

[5] Blunt, Alison. "Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925." Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, vol. 24, no. 4, 1999, pp. 421–440.

[6] Brantlinger, Patrick. Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914. Cornell University Press, 1988.

[7] Chatterjee, Arup K. "The Science of the Andamans and The Sign of the Four: The Distorted Racial Hierarchy of British Imperial Anthropology." Victorian Review, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 45–62.

[8] Chemmachery, Jaine. Modernity and Colonisation: The Short Stories on Empire by Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham. PhD Dissertation, Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013.

[9] Chemmachery, Jaine. "'The Mark of the Beast' as Trace of History: Animalistic Tattoos in Michel Faber's The Crimson Petal and the White and Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows." Commonwealth Essays and Studies, vol. 42, no. 2, 2020, pp. 89–102.

[10] Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Adventure of the Crooked Man." The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes, Penguin Classics, 2008, pp. 227–248.

[11] Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Adventure of the Speckled Band." The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, Penguin Classics, 2008, pp. 159–182.

[12] Fernandez, Jean. "Recognizing the Leper: Hindu Myth, British Medicine, and the Crisis of Realism in Rudyard Kipling's 'The Mark of the Beast'." Victorian Literature and Culture, vol. 44, no. 4, 2016, pp. 845–863.
[13] Glazzard, Andrew. "The Guardians of Securities: Wealth, Crime, and Empire in Sherlock Holmes." Journal of Victorian Culture, vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 345–360.
[14] Heinz, Sarah. "'That Passing Glimpse': Home as Precarious Idyll and the Frictions of Late Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Subjectivity in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Stories." Journal for the Study of British Cultures, vol. 31, no. 1, 2024, pp. 55–72.
[15] James, Simon J. "Daily Bread: Food and Drink in the Holmes Canon." Critical Quarterly, vol. 60, no. 3, 2018, pp. 5–13. Wiley, https://doi.org/10.1111/criq.12427.
[16] Jappe, Anselm. "Fetishism and Narcissism - The Base of Capitalism?" A Critique of Political Economy, edited by Frank Engster, Springer, 2020, pp. 121–138.
[17] Kipling, Rudyard. "The Mark of the Beast." The Man Who Would Be King and Other Stories, Oxford World's Classics, 2009, pp. 257–278.
[18] Kipling, Rudyard. "Without Benefit of Clergy." Life's Handicap, Oxford World's Classics, 2008, pp. 331–360.
[19] Krishnaswamy, Revathi. Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire. University of Michigan Press, 1999.
[20] Lee, Ji Eun. "Undisciplining Englishness: Narratives of Colonial Encounter in Conan Doyle's The Sign of Four." English Studies, vol. 102, no. 5, 2021, pp. 567–585.
[21] Lotni, Keertika. "Wealth and Entitlement in Detective Fiction: Britain's History of Pillage in India." Nineteenth-Century Literature, vol. 73, no. 2, 2018, pp. 210–235.
[22] Marx, Karl. Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books, 1976.
[23] McClintock, Anne. Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest. Routledge, 1995.
[24] Mintz, Sidney W. Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History. Viking, 1985. Said, Edward W. Orientalism. Pantheon Books, 1978.
[25] Warwick, Alexandra. "Imperial Gothic." The Encyclopedia of the Gothic, edited by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, Blackwell, 2012, pp. 345–348.