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Whodunit, Who Am I? Feminist and Postcolonial Identity in Laurie R. King's Crime Fiction

Adiba Qonita Zahroh

adiba.q.z@ugm.ac.id
Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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Abstract

Crime fiction has long served not just to entertain but to reflect deeper cultural anxieties about identity, power, and social order. However, its potential to interrogate colonial legacies and gender inequalities remains underexplored. This paper examines how characters from different cultural backgrounds are represented in Laurie R. King's *O Jerusalem*, a novel set in British-occupied Palestine, through the combined lenses of postcolonial and feminist theory. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study analyses interactions between Western (the Self) and Eastern (the Other) characters, as well as between male and female figures. The aim is to understand how cultural and gendered identities are constructed, contested, and transformed within the context of historical crime fiction. This research contributes to current literature by combining postcolonial and feminist perspectives to address an overlooked intersection in crime fiction studies, how colonial power dynamics and gendered identities are co-constructed and contested within the genre. With the application of this dual framework, the study fills a critical gap in understanding how crime fiction not only reflects but also revises dominant narratives of identity, authority, and resistance. The method involves a careful qualitative analysis grounded in close textual analysis to investigate how identity is constructed and negotiated in *O Jerusalem*. The analysis focuses on the characterisation of Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes as Western figures, while also examining how other characters from both Western and Eastern backgrounds are represented. The study pays particular attention to themes of gender, culture, and power as framed by postcolonial and feminist theories. The findings reveal that Laurie R. King complicates cultural and gender identities through evolving relationships between Western and Eastern characters. Her portrayal of Western figures as both protagonists and antagonists challenges the assumed moral superiority of the West. Through Mary Russell, King also redefines female agency in detective fiction by offering a feminist revision of the traditionally male-centred Sherlock Holmes canon. These insights contribute to literary studies by illustrating how popular fiction can critically engage with colonial discourse and gender norms. This dual focus on postcolonial and feminist themes offers fresh insights to rethink detective fiction as a genre that challenges colonial power structures and gender norms. It demonstrates how popular literature can actively contribute to socio-political critique and reshape dominant understandings of identity, culture, and resistance. The study emphasizes the importance of re-evaluating traditional narratives in modern crime fiction.

Keywords: feminist crime fiction; gender equality; identity construction; postcolonial literary criticism; Sherlock Holmes

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literature functions not only as a site of artistic expression but also as a means of interrogating enduring structures of power and identity (Ashcroft et. al., 2002; Loomba, 2015).

Through its layered narrative, *O Jerusalem*, set in British-occupied Palestine, engages with the legacy of colonialism and the persistent inequalities rooted in gender and cultural hierarchies. The novel does more than construct a compelling historical setting; it offers a narrative framework that reflects and critiques real-world concerns such as imperial domination, the marginalisation of Eastern cultures, and the limitations placed on female agency. These thematic concerns align with ongoing debates in contemporary literature about how fiction can respond to and reshape understandings of cultural representation, colonial memory, and gendered power. This makes *O Jerusalem* a productive text for exploring the intersections of postcolonial and feminist theory in both literary and socio-political contexts. The choice of *O Jerusalem* as the focal point of this research stems from its unique setting and character dynamics. The interactions between Western characters, such as Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes, and Eastern characters, such as Mahmoud and Ali Hazr, highlight the complexities of cultural and power dynamics that make it an ideal text for examining the construction of the Self and the Other from a postcolonial perspective. Furthermore, Russell's character challenges traditional gender roles within the detective fiction genre. As a strong, intelligent, and independent female detective, she operates in a male-dominated world by offering a feminist critique of societal norms and expectations. This dual focus on postcolonial and feminist themes makes *O Jerusalem* a compelling subject for exploring how contemporary detective fiction can address and challenge historical and cultural narratives.

A key aspect of *O Jerusalem* is its dual engagement with postcolonial and feminist themes. Postcolonial studies, particularly through the works of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, have established how Western literature has historically constructed the Self in opposition to an exoticised and subjugated Other (Said, 1979; Bhabha, 1994). This binary framework is commonly seen in detective fiction, where Western protagonists embody rationality and order while Eastern figures are often portrayed as enigmatic and dangerous. However, King challenges this convention by portraying interactions between Western and Eastern characters in a more complex way. This approach provides a deeper exploration of hybridity and the shifting dynamics of power throughout the narrative. Scholars such as Loomba (2015) and Nyman (2017) have explored how contemporary fiction reflects evolving colonial relationships, yet there has been little scholarly focus on how these dynamics play out in crime fiction that revisits canonical literary figures such as Sherlock Holmes.

Feminist literary criticism, on the other hand, has highlighted how gender roles are both reinforced and subverted in literature. de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) argue that gender is a social construct shaped by cultural narratives. Within crime fiction, female protagonists have traditionally been marginalised or objectified, yet feminist scholars such as Reddy (1988) and Plain (2018) have demonstrated how modern female detectives challenge these tropes. Worthington (2011) further notes that contemporary female detectives do more than solve crimes—they engage with broader social critiques, particularly regarding gender inequality and systemic oppression. Even though scholars have extensively studied feminist crime fiction, there remains a gap in understanding how gender and postcolonial themes intersect, particularly in historical detective fiction that reconstructs established narratives.

While existing scholarship demonstrates that both postcolonial and feminist literary criticism have made significant contributions to understanding how literature negotiates identity, power, and representation, these perspectives are often treated separately, especially in crime fiction studies that revisit canonical figures like Sherlock Holmes. This gap highlights the need to explore how feminist and postcolonial themes intersect within the historical detective genre to reveal deeper tensions in cultural and gendered identities. Against this backdrop, Laurie R. King's feminist historical crime fiction, particularly through the character of Russell, offers a complex exploration of identity and gender roles within the traditionally male-dominated genre of detective fiction. King's portrayal of Russell as a potent female detective challenges the conventional narrative by presenting a female bildungsroman, where Russell's journey to establish her identity as a professional detective is central to the series (Benazir, 2023). This shift is significant in the broader context of feminist crime fiction, which has been instrumental in reconceptualising collective memory and questioning established historical narratives, as seen in the works of other authors like C. J. Sansom (Prieto-Arranz, 2023). Benazir (2023) highlights the role of the female

bildungsroman in King's work, but the analysis lacks depth in examining how these narratives specifically challenge and redefine the male-dominated detective genre. Prieto-Arranz (2023) acknowledges the significance of historical settings in feminist crime fiction but does not sufficiently address how these settings enable a critique of both historical and contemporary gender norms. My research addresses these gaps by providing a detailed analysis of how King's novels challenge traditional detective fiction conventions through their postcolonial and feminist dimensions.

This feminist dimension, however, cannot be fully understood without considering how it intersects with the postcolonial contexts in which King's stories unfold. The narrative's setting and historical background play a vital role in revealing how cultural identities are constructed, contested, and hybridised in spaces shaped by imperial power. The historical setting of King's novels, much like Sansom's, provides a rich backdrop that explores a deeper interrogation of societal norms and the subversive power of everyday life (Prieto-Arranz, 2023). This context is crucial for understanding the relationship between historical events and the personal development of characters like Russell. While Prieto-Arranz (2023) situates feminist crime fiction within historical contexts, the interaction of these settings with postcolonial themes, particularly the portrayal of Western and Eastern characters, shows how King's use of setting becomes integral to the narrative's exploration of identity, hybridity, and shifting power dynamics.

This attention to historical context and hybrid identities is further enriched by an interdisciplinary perspective that draws together insights from criminology, cultural studies, and literary criticism. An interdisciplinary approach that integrates popular criminology, crime history, and cultural studies, as advocated by Wattis (2018), highlights the importance of feminist perspectives in understanding how female characters and victims are framed within these narratives. While Wattis (2018) underscores the value of such approaches, they can also extend to the study of hybrid identities and the ways postcolonial and feminist themes intersect in crime fiction. Recognising this intersectionality provides a more comprehensive understanding of character development and narrative strategies in King's work. In a similar vein, Taber's (2024) discussion of fiction-based research highlights the methodological rigour and ethical considerations involved in crafting compelling characters and stories that provoke readers to reflect on their relationship with society. This narrative approach is evident in King's portrayal of Holmes and Russell, whose connection not only drives the plot but also deconstructs the Self and the Other, challenges conventional gender dynamics, and offers a fresh perspective on the detective genre. The historical and feminist dimensions of King's novels thus serve to enrich detective fiction, making it more inclusive and reflective of diverse identities and experiences. Taber (2024) emphasises the importance of ethical representation in fiction-based research, a principle that resonates in King's revisionist approach to the Sherlock Holmes canon, where cultural and gender identities are thoughtfully portrayed in ways that question dominant power structures.

Building on these perspectives, this study addresses the gap in existing scholarship by examining how feminist and postcolonial frameworks intersect in Laurie R. King's O Jerusalem, a historical detective novel that reimagines the canonical Sherlock Holmes. The novelty of this research lies in its combined focus on postcolonial power relations and gender identity, exploring how King's revision both honours and disrupts traditional detective fiction conventions. By analysing Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes not only as detectives but also as life partners, this study reveals how their relationship complicates established gender and power dynamics within a colonial context. Drawing on Said's concept of Orientalism (1979), it investigates how the novel frames the East through both latent and manifest cultural assumptions, while Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity guides the analysis of how Russell negotiates her identity within patriarchal and imperial structures. The study also situates O Jerusalem as archontic literature (Hellekson & Busse, 2006), demonstrating how King expands and transforms the Holmes canon to engage contemporary debates about cultural hybridity, gender, and resistance. In doing so, it responds to the lack of research that considers how historical detective fiction can serve as a site for re-evaluating dominant narratives about identity and power. Guided by this aim, the research asks: (1) How does O Jerusalem construct and complicate the Self/Other dynamic within its colonial setting? (2) In what ways does Mary Russell's character challenge traditional gender roles

and negotiate female agency within a male-dominated and colonial world? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to broader debates in literary, gender, and postcolonial studies, highlighting the importance of revisiting canonical texts to create more inclusive and reflective literary landscapes.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research approach to analyse Laurie R. King's O Jerusalem through combined postcolonial and feminist perspectives. The primary data for this research is the full text of O Jerusalem (King, 1999, Bantam Books edition, 436 pages), selected for its complex portrayal of British-occupied Palestine and its nuanced character dynamics that reflect cultural and gendered power structures. The entire novel was read closely, with key chapters and passages identified that show how Western and Eastern characters interact, how cultural identities are constructed and contested, and how Mary Russell negotiates her position as a female detective within patriarchal and colonial systems. These passages were then categorised and coded to identify recurring themes of identity, hybridity, gender roles, and power relations, with particular attention to dialogue, narrative strategies, and character development that illustrate tensions between the Self and the Other. Secondary data, including scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays on postcolonial theory, feminist literary criticism, and crime fiction, were sourced from reputable academic databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. Previous studies on Sherlock Holmes adaptations and the concept of archontic literature were also consulted to situate King's work within a broader literary and historical framework. The coded themes and patterns were then interpreted using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine how O Jerusalem engages with wider debates on identity, power, and genre revision.

ANALYSIS

The Self and the Other in The Mary Russell Series: Postcolonial Perspective

This section addresses the first core aim of this research, which is to examine how *O Jerusalem* constructs and negotiates cultural identity through a postcolonial framework. The analysis focuses on the positioning of Western and Eastern characters within colonial settings and explores the ways Laurie R. King engages with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. The discussion pays particular attention to how the novel interrogates colonial hierarchies through character dynamics, narrative structure, and thematic contrasts. The representation of the Self (the West) and the Other (the East) does not remain fixed throughout the story. Instead, the narrative presents a continuous process of negotiation, shaped through both latent and manifest expressions of Orientalist thought.

The arrival of Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes as Westerners in the colonised countries, Palestine, India, and Morocco, amplifies the exploration of the Self and the Other in the novels. In all selected novels, Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock Holmes's elder brother, solicits the assistance of Holmes and Russell in addressing international affairs on behalf of the British government. The affairs represented in all primary texts are related to the resistance of the natives (the Rest) towards the domination of the British government and other European countries (the West) during the colonial period. In each novel, King portrays the East as being perceived as barbaric and unrest, particularly in the context of their resistance to Western domination. This portrayal aligns with Said's discussions in his book *Orientalism* (1979) which critiques how Western discourse has historically depicted the East as irrational, violent, and inferior, justifying colonial intervention. The narratives thus unfold against the backdrop of colonial tensions and power dynamics by offering a complex exploration of the interactions between the colonisers and the colonised.

To commence the analysis, *O Jerusalem* unfolds in the context of British-occupied Palestine, where Russell and Holmes collaborate with two Bedouin Arab spies named Mahmoud and Ali Hazr. Despite being relatives, Mahmoud and Ali exhibit distinct characteristics. Ali Hazr, the younger of the two, displays noticeable resentment towards both Russell and Holmes from their initial encounter. In contrast, the elder, while not overtly expressive of acceptance, maintains a respectful demeanour. Holmes attributes their reserved manner to a habit of exercising caution with

everyone they encounter, particularly newcomers from the external world, such as Russell and Holmes. This initial dynamic sets the stage for the complex relationships that unfold throughout the narrative.

The novel introduces the Hazrs as Bedouin operatives whose relationships with the British complicate their positions within colonial power structures. Despite being Arabs, The Hazrs's choice to stand by His Majesty's side makes them seem to be traitors towards their own Eastern land. This first impression of the Hazrs shapes the image that Arabs are treacherous to their own country. Other than that, the beginning of the novel itself starts with Russell's prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. Her poor judgement towards the two is vividly declared through her remarks on the Hazrs as Arab cutthroats with their weapons like knives and guns (the long-barrelled Colt revolver). She adds how both of them seem unfriendly and how their appearances are scary and unsightly, 'his face [Mahmoud Hazr's face] was bisected by a scar that tugged at his left eye and continued down into his beard; the younger man [Ali Hazr] was missing two of his front teeth, which when he spoke revealed a slight and oddly sinister lisp' (King, 2012, p. 22). Her prejudice does not stop there, she even shows her disdain towards the Hazrs for a religious reason.

> "I had lost a cousin two years before in the town north of here, cut down along with one of his children when the Arab inhabitants has risen against their Jewish neighbours, massacred a number of them, and driven the remainder from their homes. I did not want to be in the same room with these menacing individuals, much less dependent on them for food, drink, and instruction for the next six weeks." (King, 2012, p. 22)

All of these preconceived notions are not based on any real interaction with the Hazrs but stem from the broader, unconscious stereotypes that have been perpetuated by Western culture, an embodiment of latent Orientalism as Said (1979) argues as deeply embedded cultural assumptions about the East.

In contrast, manifest Orientalism, which is the active expression of assumptions in political and literary discourse (Said, 1979), is evident in the way Russell's and Holmes's mission is framed as a civilising effort. Their presence in Palestine, initiated by Mycroft Holmes on behalf of the British government, is portrayed as a necessary intervention to manage the 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised' East. The British government's approach, which includes using local Arabs like the Hazrs to serve British interests, while simultaneously holding them in contempt, reflects the duality of manifest Orientalism. The Hazrs, despite being instrumental to the mission, are still seen through a lens of suspicion and inferiority, Russell's disdain towards them is rooted in the manifest belief that Arabs are untrustworthy and inherently violent. Yet, this setting might only serve as a literary device strategically employed by King to offer readers an insider's perspective. By involving characters like Ali and Mahmoud Hazr, who are natives of the region, King enhances the authenticity and naturalness of the narrative. Without this insider guidance, if Holmes and Russell were portrayed as British outsiders tasked with resolving issues in Palestine without local insights, the story might lose its verisimilitude. The inclusion of characters intimately familiar with the cultural and political nuances of the setting enriches the storytelling, making it more immersive and believable for the audience.

Russell's portrayal of the massacre perpetrated by a group of Arabs against their 'Jewish neighbours' underscores her view of the Arabs as barbaric. Russell's choice of the term 'Jewish neighbours' conveys a sense of friendliness and harmlessness associated with the Jews that creates a sharp contrast with her description of the Arabs as brutal. It is essential to acknowledge that Russellss perspective on the Hazrs and Arabs, in general, is likely influenced by her challenging personal experiences as a Jew in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it remains imperative to refrain from making sweeping judgments or generalisations about an entire group based on the actions of specific individuals. Prejudice should be avoided, and a complex understanding of diverse perspectives is crucial in evaluating complex situations.

Russell's abrupt reaction towards Muslim Arabs mirrors contemporary societal attitudes towards Muslims. In today's world, many individuals harbour prejudice and animosity towards Muslims, often unfairly associating Islam with terrorism without seeking well-founded sources.

This unfounded fear has given rise to the term 'Islamophobia,' which, to some extent, tarnishes the image of Muslims and Islam on a global scale. The irony lies in the fact that some individuals form biased opinions about a particular religion without engaging personally with its followers, relying solely on media portrayals that can be rife with conspiracies and often lack accuracy. Such prejudices oversimplify the intricate realities at play, akin to absurd generalizations like labelling the Holocaust, KKK, colonialism, or slavery as representative of Christianity.

Holmes exhibits a distinct approach, being more absorbed in his surroundings and maintaining a professional focus on the primary purpose of their arrival. Unlike Russell and the Hazrs, Holmes is carefree and easy-going. His amiable demeanour is devoid of personal resentments related to Muslim Arabs, and his logical working style allows him to control his emotions professionally. Having dealt with numerous cases tied to international affairs, Holmes is well-trained and open-minded, demonstrating a laid-back attitude that stems from his natural self-assurance as a white, Western male elite. In contrast, Russell's unease is rooted in her gender, contributing to her quest to establish a sense of self by relying on white Western supremacy. Holmes's prior visit to Palestine enhances his understanding of the culture and customs and it makes him more adaptable. In *O Jerusalem*, Russell encounters her first case involving international affairs and diverse individuals which leads to challenges arising from her relative lack of experience in such matters.

Another sensitive topic continues as shown in the story's initial problem which is triggered by a religious-based fight between Jews and Muslims. Again, a group of Arab Muslims is depicted as murdering a Jew, as spoken by Holmes '[h]is [body] position shouts out "murder most foul" of Jew by Arab. The shocking effect was deliberate' (King, 2012, p. 40). This incident further emphasises the portrayal of Easterners, particularly Arabs, as barbaric and uncivilised due to their intolerant actions toward individuals of different religious beliefs. Within this narrative, Russell and Holmes, perceived as 'civilised' Westerners, are called upon to 'civilise' the 'barbaric' Arabs and resolve their issues. Positioning themselves as 'problem solvers', Britain, representing Western nations, assumes it is the qualified and capable entity to manage the unrest in the East. Such representation of the East, specifically the portrayal of Muslim Arabs in this literary work, aligns with the concept of manifest Orientalism.

The manifest Orientalism on Muslim and Arab's portrayal as villains and Westerners as a hero in literary works – especially in the form of a spy story – have long existed since '…thirty years before 9/11 and at a time when direct attacks on [Western countries] were still a part of futuristic fantasy…' (Simon, 2010, p. 14). It is perfectly depicted in Richard Grave's Cobalt60 which was published in 1975.

Graves integrated these events into his novel to present a vicarious apocalyptic plot by Muslims against the United States and Western civilisation. The hero is decidedly Western, but here, rather than Communists or Nazis, the villain is Arab and Muslim and the plot is Islamic fanaticism expressed as jihad or holy war against the West (Simon, 2010).

Taking a different angle, King's texts display a sense of ambivalence. They navigate through an Orientalist perspective while attempting to portray a more tolerant stance for both the Rest and the West. Upon initial examination, as seen in *O Jerusalem*, King seemingly posits a hypothesis for readers that the culprits might be the Turks, symbolising the Rest, aiming to reclaim Jerusalem from British rule. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the real mastermind behind the crimes is not an outsider but a British insider—someone close to General Edmund Allenby, who oversees the British occupation in Palestine. Disguising himself as a Christian monk, he seeks refuge in a monastery to evade suspicion. This resolution strategically preserves the image of the Rest, particularly the Muslim Arabs, without undermining the heroic portrayal of the West, with Russell and Holmes emerging as the protagonists. Russell and Holmes's mission in Palestine, while ostensibly aimed at resolving conflicts, implicitly endorses the idea that Western intervention is necessary to maintain order and progress. However, the narrative complicates this dynamic by revealing that the true antagonist is not an Eastern figure but a British insider—a twist that challenges the assumption that the West is always the heroic force.

This ambivalence in the narrative can be interpreted as King's attempt to critique the very Orientalist structures that her characters initially seem to uphold. By positioning a British figure as

the villain, King destabilises the binary opposition between the civilised West and the barbaric East; it suggests that corruption and brutality are not exclusive to any one culture. Yet, this subversion is partial, as the story ultimately reinforces the superiority of the Western characters, with Russell and Holmes emerging as the protagonists who restore order.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Mahmoud and Ali Hazr undergoes dynamic changes throughout the novel. Despite Russell's initial strong aversion towards the Hazrs, she gradually succeeds in forging a close, albeit complex, relationship with Mahmoud, and they become very close, though not in the most amicable manner. Establishing this friendship with the Hazrs proves to be a challenging endeavour. In their initial encounter, Russell faces difficulties in gaining the trust of both Hazrs for the mission. The frustration escalates when Holmes suggests that the Hazrs might not have complete confidence in both him and Russell to carry out the mission.

> "I [Holmes] don't think they wanted us [originally emphasised] here, no. Two young soldiers trained in desert warfare they might have tolerated, although even that I doubt."
> "Lovely, I [Russell] though morosely. I was on the verge of my twentieth year, I has worked with Holmes for four of those, and I had just on the last few weeks succeeded in convincing him of my competence and my right to be treated as a responsible adult. Now I would have to start all over again with these two proud and no doubt misogynist males. I did not look forward to the task." (King, 2012, p. 47)

In this scenario, Mahmoud and Ali, emblematic of the Rest, transcend their initial portrayal as barbaric figures, emerging as characters who are neither feeble nor powerless. Throughout the investigation aimed at apprehending the culprit, the Hazrs assume pivotal roles. Notably, in their representation of the Rest, there is a tendency to underestimate the capabilities of both Holmes and Russell, symbolic of the West. Among the Hazrs, Ali distinctly articulates his animosity towards Holmes and Russell.

> "'So we are to be your nursemaids?' Ali said with incredulity."
> "'Absolutely not,' Holmes snapped, his voice suddenly cold."
> "'You are an old man and she is a girl.' Ali retorted." (King, 2012, p. 28)

Ali's remarks imply that irrespective of Russell being a girl and Holmes being an elderly man, both are perceived as vulnerable and reliant on the assistance of stronger individuals. Despite Holmes's established reputation as a detective and Russell being acknowledged as Holmes's trusted apprentice, Ali appears unconcerned by these credentials.

Russell's evolution in her relationship with Mahmoud and Ali throughout the novel further emphasises the dynamic between latent and manifest Orientalism. Initially, her latent prejudices influence her interactions with the Hazrs that later leads to overt expressions of manifest Orientalism in her treatment of the Hazrs. However, as she spends more time with them, Russell begins to recognise the complexity and humanity of Mahmoud and Ali, which challenges her initial assumptions. This shift demonstrates how deeply ingrained latent Orientalism can manifest in behaviour, but also how it can be confronted and deconstructed through direct, humanising experiences.

Thus, in *O Jerusalem*, King not only portrays the entrenched nature of Orientalist thought but also suggests the possibility of overcoming these biases through genuine engagement and understanding. However, it is important to note that despite these moments of understanding, the narrative still largely upholds the superiority of the Western characters, with Russell and Holmes emerging as the rational problem-solvers, a conclusion that reflects the enduring power of both latent and manifest Orientalism in Western literature.

The Self and the Other in The Mary Russell Series: Feminist Perspective

This section addresses the second focus of the research, which is to investigate how gendered identity is shaped, challenged, and revised within the context of King's crime fiction. Through a feminist lens, the analysis examines how Mary Russell navigates a patriarchal and colonial world by

challenging gender roles and expectations. Drawing on Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990), the discussion focuses on Russell's cross-dressing, her strategic rejection of domestic roles, and her embodiment of feminist resistance. The narrative constructs Russell as the Other in relation to male figures but also situates her as a uniquely empowered Self within a constrained system. This section also reflects on the limitations of King's feminist vision, particularly in her portrayal of Russell as the sole empowered woman, which raises questions about the depth and breadth of collective feminist representation in *O Jerusalem*.

Russell occupies the most challenging position among the trio of characters, being the lone female in a male-dominated colonial milieu during an era when a woman's pursuit of freedom was deemed unconventional. In an era where women typically confined themselves to domestic roles, Russell's presence amid an all-male cast faces vehement opposition from the Hazrs. Ali, in particular, exhibits disdain through his mistreatment of Russell, exemplified by the callous act of tossing a twine-bound parcel to rouse her, containing a woman's garment. This gesture not only highlights gender dynamics but also explores the intricate intersection of gender and religion.

Initially, Russell assumes that the Hazrs comprehend her need to adopt the attire of an Arab man. However, cultural disparities emerge in the Rest, notably in Palestine, a region profoundly influenced by Islam. Within Muslim culture, the act of women dressing as men is deemed haram—or prohibited. This situation compels Holmes to step in and insist that the Hazrs dress Russell in male clothing and treat her as they would a man. His actions further highlight the intricate relationship between gender and cultural expectations.

"She [Russell] will not wear those clothes, or anything like them. No burkah, no bangles, no veil. She will not walk behind us, she will not cook our food, she will not carry water on her head. […] However, she will simply not do that, so we must either live with it or separate. The choice, gentlemen, is yours." (King, 2012, p. 31)

Holmes makes it clear to the Hazrs that they should not assign traditional domestic roles to Russell. His stance reflects his rejection of the gender norms that were widely accepted during that period. He advocates for Ali and Mahmoud to recognise Russell as a capable adult deserving of equal treatment to their male counterparts. Holmes explains that Russell must dress as a man because societal attitudes in Eastern countries during the early 19th century would not permit her to move freely otherwise. He contends that women, during this period, were perceived as unequal to men, subject to stringent limitations on their freedom and mobility. To avert drawing attention from potential adversaries, Holmes proposes the adoption of male attire for Russell. The act of cross-dressing, in this context, emerges as a pivotal consideration crucial to the efficacy of the investigative endeavour itself.

The discussions surrounding Russell's treatment and her adoption of cross-dressing illuminate the stark contrasts that set her apart from other characters. Drawing on King's insights (2005), the concepts of the Self and the Other, pervasive not only within postcolonial studies but also extending into feminist discourse, come to the forefront. Russell, in her interactions with male characters, assumes the role of the Other. A feminist perspective highlights how women, especially in the early 20th century, were regarded as subaltern and vulnerable, a concept that aligns with Said's analysis in *Orientalism*. An analysis of Russell's character through this lens reveals deeper socio-cultural complexities and provides insight into the broader implications of her experiences and interactions.

Russell's adoption of male attire, initially perceived as a necessity for survival and acceptance within the hostile environment, serves as a symbolic act of resistance against the rigid gender roles prescribed by both Western and Eastern societies. By donning male garments, Russell challenges the traditional expectations of femininity and challenges the notion that women are inherently dependent and less capable than men (Butler, 1990). This act of cross-dressing can be interpreted through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that gender is a constructed identity, maintained through repeated performances (Butler, 1990). Russell's transformation blurs the lines between the Self and the Other, as she navigates and negotiates her identity within the colonial framework. However, while Russell's cross-dressing challenges

traditional gender roles, it also emphasises the limitations imposed on her as a woman in a colonial context. Her need to adopt male attire to gain respect and authority highlights the systemic barriers women face in asserting their agency. This duality reflects the complexities of feminist resistance within oppressive structures, where acts of empowerment are often co-opted by the very systems they seek to challenge (Hooks, 1984).

Moreover, Russell's relationship with the Hazrs exemplifies the intersectionality of her identity as a Jewish woman in a colonial setting. Her prejudice against the Hazrs can be seen not only as a manifestation of Orientalist stereotypes but also as a response to her own marginalisation and insecurity. This complexity aligns with Chandra Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse, which often fails to account for the complex identities of women in different cultural and historical contexts (Mohanty, 1984). Russell's distrust of the Hazrs is thus a reflection of her struggle to reconcile her Western identity with her position within the colonial hierarchy, where she is simultaneously part of the dominant force and yet marginalised by anti-Semitic sentiments.

Within the narratives, two instances necessitate Russell's adherence to complete bed rest; one unfolds in *O Jerusalem*, and the other in Garment of Shadows. Although the conditions are not ideal for investigative work, Russell remains determined to carry out her responsibilities. She chooses to disregard the doctor's recommendation for rest and instead returns to her detective work. This steadfast resolve challenges the prevailing notion that a woman embodies the Other – inherently weak, incapable, and subaltern – juxtaposed against the perception of a man as the Self – inherently strong, capable, and superior (Hooks, 1984). Russell's actions go against conventional gender expectations, which highlights her sense of agency. These choices also challenge the established norms within the narrative and the broader socio-cultural context.

Echano (2005, p. 191), in her essay, points out about feminist consciousness in detective fiction that '[p]opular novels by woman writers with female sleuths as a protagonist became a phenomenon in the late 70s and particularly in the early 80s…' and this occurrence marks the social debate caused by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This phenomenon was highly influenced by the expansion of feminism itself: 'as the women's movement grew, so did the demand for female protagonist. Carol Brener, former proprietor of the Manhattan bookstore, Murder Ink, remembers customers so desperate "they didn't even care if the killer was a woman, as long as it was a strong character"' (Ames & Sawhill, 1990, p. 67). From this statement, it is clearly shown that the readership of detective fiction has been widening throughout time, considering that crime fiction was initially addressed to male readers since crime fiction, especially spy stories, engages with active and dangerous actions. Spy stories as narratives of action, adventure, and intrigue are 'populated by masculine heroes have been most attractive to men' (Burton, 2016, p. 257); the things in which women will not put their interest or simply those things perceived as unmatched with women's stereotypes in the past. Accordingly, King who began to write her crime novels in the late 90s also wants to conserve the legacy of her predecessor to reshape women's past stereotypes and present a new worldview that women are strong and capable, just like men.

Building on Bulbeck's assertion regarding male writers in the colonial era attributing ruin and loss of empire to white women, casting them as subordinate and dependent entities, King, as a modern female writer, seeks to dismantle this myth embedded in old colonial discourse (1991). Through characters like Russell, a white woman portrayed as a significant contributor in colonial settings, King challenges the prevailing narratives. She illustrates how women play pivotal roles and, in Russell's case, can even be saviours of the empire. Moreover, King explicitly expresses that her engagement with crime fiction, encompassing spy stories, serves not only her feminist agenda but also aims to address various contemporary social issues.

> "I appreciate the forms of crime fiction, because it gives me an entertaining story to tell, while at the same time unrolling threads of meaning throughout the plot lines. Mysticism, feminist identity, scriptural interpretation, the struggle for equality between the sexes, control and submission, friendship and love: all the colors on the painter's palette, brought together in service of an entertainment." (King, 2010)

In a form of historical fiction, King's texts mean to deconstruct old social discourse – which shapes contemporary social issues – and reconstruct history in order to give new alternative insights towards contemporary readers by means of the representations depicted. Throughout the selected texts, King notably refrains from presenting other female characters who rise to the same level as Russell in terms of significant actions and impact. This deliberate choice underscores the exceptional position of Russell within the narrative by emphasizing her as a distinct and ground-breaking character. By focusing on Russell's agency and contributions, King accentuates her as a singular figure challenging traditional gender roles and expectations within the genre.

In two of the Mary Russell series, namely *A Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1995) and *A Letter of Mary* (1997), King introduces numerous female characters. However, these women do not play significant roles in terms of concrete actions comparable to Russell's investigative prowess. In *O Jerusalem*, only one female character is explicitly mentioned, Dorothy Ruskin. An additional unnamed woman is briefly referenced, with no significant role or explanation, except for some woman described as being attracted to Russell while in disguise as a young man. The narrative provides no further details or development for this incidental female character. Both novels feature female victims and allegedly female culprits, yet they lack a clear resolution regarding the identity of the culprits. In *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*, the resolution remains ambiguous. Russell and Holmes have two suspects, Margery Childe, and her husband, Claude Franklin. However, Franklin is killed, and the story concludes with Margery Childe being acquitted and exiling herself from England. Similarly, *A Letter of Mary* presents several suspects: Erica Rogers, her grandson Jason Rogers, and another accomplice, a woman with male associates. The resolution involves Erica suffering a stroke, Jason committing suicide, and their accomplice being brought to justice. Holmes speculates that Erica Rogers is the mastermind, but the novel does not explicitly confirm this.

These narratives portray women primarily as victims, portrayed as powerless and weak. King avoids explicitly presenting women as culprits with agency and significant roles. The allegedly female culprits are often paired with male counterparts, and their status as culprits remains ambiguous. In contrast, Russell stands out as the singular powerful heroine. Although King labels Russell as a feminist character (In the 'Editor's Preface' of *Beekeeper's Apprentice* – the first novel of the series – Russell is described as 'a smart-mouthed, half American, fifteen-year-old feminist sidekick'), the series misses opportunities to showcase other women characters in empowering roles. The novels peculiarly limit Russell to the spotlight, relegating other female characters to secondary roles without significant contributions. This choice raises questions about the depth of the feminist representation within the series.

King's decision to focus predominantly on Russell, while marginalising other female characters, raises critical questions about the representation of women in her narratives. Although Russell's character serves as a powerful symbol of feminist agency, the absence of other strong female figures may inadvertently reinforce the notion of the exceptional woman, rather than presenting a collective representation of women's experiences and struggles. This narrative choice could be interpreted as a reflection of the limitations within feminist literature, where the focus on a single empowered female character sometimes overshadows the need for a broader representation of diverse female voices and experiences.

Nonetheless, Russell's singular presence as the standout woman throughout the series proves sufficient to address the representation of women as a collective gender. This representation should not be taken for granted, especially when compared to men. Russell's unwavering determination to be accepted within the male colonial world yields positive outcomes. She competently keeps pace with her male colleagues, takes a leadership role during investigations, and notably befriends Mahmoud Hazr.

By forming a friendship and earning the trust of Mahmoud Hazr, who initially underestimated her as a woman, Russell secures approval within this male-dominated world. From a feminist perspective, Russell achieves recognition as the Self. Her journey signifies a departure from the traditional perception of women as subordinate, weak, and incapable. Russell's character challenges these stereotypes through the illustration of the potential for women to excel and be acknowledged within traditionally male spheres.

Surprisingly, in *Justice Hall*, a Mary Russell series instalment, it is revealed that Mahmoud and Ali Hazr are, in fact, aristocratic British gentlemen with no traces of Arab descent. Mahmoud is none other than Lord Maurice 'Marsh' Hughenfort, the Seventh Duke of Beauville, and Ali is revealed to be his cousin Alistair John Hughenfort. This revelation comes as a shock, catching Russell off guard, as she did not anticipate this twist. Interestingly, Holmes had noticed some suspicious characteristics in the Hazrs from their first encounter in *O Jerusalem*, but he did not explore deeply into his suspicions.

The revelation in Justice Hall that the Hazrs are actually British aristocrats masquerading as Arabs adds another layer to the analysis of the Self and the Other. This plot development challenges the clear division between the civilised West and the barbaric East. It exposes the way these categories are socially constructed rather than inherent truths. It also emphasises the performative aspects of identity and the fluidity of the Self/Other dichotomy by suggesting that these roles are not fixed but can be manipulated and challenged (Said, 1979). This revelation also critiques the essentialist notions of Eastern otherness through the exposure the arbitrary and performative boundaries that define and confine identities within colonial narratives.

Reflecting on *O Jerusalem*, the conclusion arises that the heroes of the story are actually British individuals. The Western characters serve as representations of the Self, depicted as capable problem-solvers aiding the Rest. Conversely, there is a notable absence of significant contributions from the Eastern Muslim Arabs or Palestinians during the events in *O Jerusalem*. This absence implies that, to some extent, King reinforces the perception of the passivity, laziness, and even incapability of the Rest in handling their own issues. This narrative choice potentially perpetuates stereotypes about the agency and efficacy of Eastern characters in the face of challenges. This imbalance risks perpetuating enduring stereotypes about the limited agency of Eastern characters. However, the revelation in *Justice Hall*—that Mahmoud and Ali Hazr are British aristocrats disguised as Arabs—adds a significant layer to the analysis. This narrative twist blurs the boundaries between the Self and the Other and reveals the performative nature of identity itself. What sets this study apart from previous research is its integrated focus on both postcolonial and feminist concerns within a single framework, using historical detective fiction to examine how gender and colonial hierarchies operate in tandem. This approach not only expands the critical conversation around Laurie R. King's work but also contributes to the broader field of literary studies by demonstrating how genre fiction can expose, complicate, and reframe dominant cultural narratives.

CONCLUSION

As a contemporary author, Laurie R. King plays eloquent political correctness in responding to the social issues depicted in her stories and 'like much contemporary writing within the genre, [her works] also show a marked social unconsciousness' (Echano, 2005, p. 190). In line with Said's profound insights into manifest Orientalism, literature serves as a powerful medium that moulds global perspectives on various critical issues. Remarkably, King adeptly introduces and navigates sensitive themes such as race, religion, gender, and the intricate dynamics between the West and the Rest within tumultuous historical periods. Her body of work effectively challenges two pervasive myths deeply ingrained in both postcolonial and feminist discourse. Firstly, she interrogates the entrenched notion of the West as the Self and the Rest as the Other. Secondly, she dismantles the stereotype of men as the Self and women as the Other.

From a postcolonial lens, King endeavours to strike a delicate balance in portraying the images of the Rest and the West. Even though she underscores the perceived significance of the West over the Rest, she refrains from vilifying the latter. The West takes centre stage with characters like Russell, Holmes, and, notably, Mahmoud and Ali following the revelation in Justice Hall. However, King ingeniously challenges the narrative by also representing the West as the antagonist. This strategic move challenges the preconception that the Western Self is inherently righteous or should be unquestionably followed, as she exposes Western characters as masterminds behind the intricate sequences of crimes in her stories.

From a feminist standpoint, King actively dismantles the enduring myths surrounding women. She leverages her feminist agenda through characters like Russell, a paradigm of strength,

talent, and independence. Within a world dominated by men, Russell refuses to conform to the traditional image of women as powerless, weak, or dependent. King deliberately creates a strong and self-reliant female protagonist to challenge conventional ideas about women's roles and abilities by reshaping expectations within the story.

To extend this line of inquiry, future research could explore comparative analyses between King's work and that of other feminist crime writers such as Sara Paretsky or Tana French, who also negotiate gendered authority in male-dominated genres. Scholars may also consider examining representations of non-Western female detectives in postcolonial contexts, which could highlight different cultural dimensions of feminist resistance. Additionally, further studies might investigate how historical fiction as a genre continues to engage with and critique colonial legacies and gender ideologies, particularly through cross-cultural or intersectional frameworks. These directions would build on the findings of this study and contribute to a broader understanding of how genre fiction participates in the reimagining of identity, power, and justice.

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