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Race, gender and religion: A postcolonial reading of Kipling's *the light that failed* and *Kim*

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Abstract

Rudyard Kipling cut across two culture, British and Indian and represented the face of the empire. This research paper aims at a study of Rudyard Kipling from Postcolonial perspective; how various tropes like race, class and gender have been treated in Kipling's novels will be discussed in the paper. The very theme of colonialism and nationalism has been focused upon and the researcher strives to show how Kipling has treated these issues, which are perhaps two faces of the same coin. This paper would also try to investigate how the theme of India has recurred frequently in various works of Rudyard Kipling and would like to make a study on the politics of Kiplingean representation of India. Another important theme in Kipling's work is Victorian activism. The protagonists in several novels of Kipling represent this spirit. This paper would also focus on the dilemma that Kipling faced as an Anglo-Indian author, his penchant for India and his commitment towards the empire. The dilemma which has been faced by Kipling has been several times reflected in his characters. Kipling's misogyny is another issue which calls for a discussion. In *Kim*, we find Kipling created a masculine world in keeping with his obsession with the male machismo. The world of the Great Game was dominated by travel, trade and extraordinary adventures. Kipling's *The Light that Failed* also stinks of Kipling's misogyny. The researcher aims at investigating how the imperial mindset has influenced Kipling's attitude towards women and how he has negotiated the gender issue in his works. The researcher has addressed the politics of race, gender and religion as delineated in Kipling's two novels *Kim* and *The Light that Failed*.

Keywords: Empire, colonialism, race, gender, religion

Introduction

Kipling and his two fictions

To turn to a discussion of the fictions of Rudyard Kipling, it needs to be noted first that Kipling began his literary career in India, writing stories of diverse interest. However, it was only after he had gone back to England that he produced the greater bulk of his work.

The Light that Failed (1891)

The Light that Failed, Kipling's first fiction is partially autobiographical. Dick and Maisie, the central protagonists of the novel impersonate Kipling and Florence Garrad.

Yet, the fiction is a failure, for the story told in the novel is inscribed in a poorly constructed plot, long-winded and lacking in felicity of expression. It is also riddled with absurdities and tainted with Kipling's misogynistic vengeance against Florence, although she had not wronged him. The problem with Kipling was that being an egoist the rejection of his love enraged him. Thus Kipling shoddily denigrates Maisie as a wily and heartless jilt. Also, there is in this novel another woman character, Bessie, who is a whore, helped and pitied by Dick's intimate soldier comrade Torpenhow. Kipling demonizes her also, representing her as a treacherous vamp, who destroys Dick's masterpiece painting, "Melancholia".

It is the gender question that precedes all other issues in *The Light That Failed*. It stinks of Kipling's misogyny, his bafflement in the face of Florence's lesbian relationship with Mable Price. In a feeble attempt to valorize his hero Dick, he shows him to have died in a battlefield in Sudan. In fact, he casts Dick in the image of himself – as a stubborn imperialist, looking down on the Blacks as savages.

Like his creator, Dick too finds justification in the British military expedition for the conquest of Sudan. His death scene is melodramatic, and his blindness may be taken to be an allegory of sexual impotence, which Jad Adams indicates, signifies: "...his loss of creative power and the surrender of the male force to female will." (Adams 79). Adams observes too that *The Light that failed* "is now a classic text in gender studies used to examine the pathological inability of men such as Kipling to accept the new woman and to be mined for its homoerotic undercurrents." (Adams 78).

Kim (1901)

Kim (1901), the most phenomenal milestone in Kipling's long and eventful literary career, is a highly intriguing political fantasy. Kipling religiously believed that India was not really a country, but a vast terrain teeming with multifarious diversities of races and wonderfully exotic geographical and natural characteristics. The way Kipling inscribed India in *Kim* shows that Kipling intended to instil in his reader's mind the vision of a country as an integral, permanent and unchangeable part of the British Empire. It is in the light of this Kiplingean imagination of India, which could by no means be connected to reality – for India had by then politically matured under the leadership of the Indian National Congress and formulated its own political and cultural strategies to combat the empire – that we have to discuss how Kipling treated caste, race, religious and gender issues in *Kim*.

To begin with an appraisal of Kipling's treatment of the gender question, it should be pointed out first of all that Kipling, in keeping with his obsession with the male machismo, created in *Kim* a masculine world, virtually in exclusion to the significance of women. The Centre stage of this world is occupied by Kim, a bi-cultural boy of Irish origin, precociously grown into an early manhood, and an old ascetic Lama who has come to India in the naïve quest for a mythical river. They are encircled by other men, some mere companions, some others colleagues and friends, namely Mahbub Ali, Lurgen Sahib, Huree Babu, an old Indian soldier, Colonel Creighton, missionaries *et al.* Women characters, few and far between, are in the novel in some way or other subjected to trivialities – depicted as prostitutes, elderly widows or promiscuous women like the widow of Shamleigh. Kim's annoyance with women's presence in the male world is indeed an echo of Kipling's strange belief that the male world was a noble world of efficacious actions, and that women's intervention in this world was absolutely unsolicited. The world of the Great Game was dominated by travel, trade and by extraordinary adventures. As for the role of women in men's life, let me indicate Kipling's viewpoint with the help of Said's ironic observation: "at best, women help things alone: they buy you a ticket, they tend the ill, and ...they molest men." (Said 165).

Yet, notwithstanding being a male chauvinist, Kipling is not so much a misogynist in *Kim* as he is in *The Light That Failed*. The Kulu widow in this novel is a very interesting character full of superstition and compassion. But for her motherly nursing, Kim could not have overcome his illness. When Kim called the woman "mother" after a bit of hesitation, he meant to acknowledge her sincere affection for him. To speak of the woman of Shamleigh, let me quote what Kim said: "It may be that I have acquired merit

also...at least she did not treat me like a child." (Kipling 331).

Religion, which forms a trope in these novel calls for its evaluation in the dialectics of the Lama's contemplation and Kim's action. Kipling formulated these dialectics on the premises of the Lama-Kim relationship. The Lama, whom Kipling represented as an exponent of India's religious philosophy, frequently harped on the "Excellent law" (Kipling 19) contemplating which, he believed, he could emancipate himself from "the wheel of life". Kim had always been in quest of novelty and variety, and so he primarily played a role as a sidekick to the Lama's pilgrimage for the discovery of the mythical river, not because he wanted to acquire merit, but because of his thirst for refreshingly new experiences in life. The Lama surely would have found it too difficult to cope with the "great and terrible world" (Kipling 66) without the ingenuity of his highly resourceful 'chela'. When the Lama told the parable of the young elephant (The Lord Himself) feeding the old elephant (Ananda), shackled in a leg-iron, he acknowledged Kim as his saviour. After a terrifying experience with the Franco-Russian agents, who conspired against the empire, the Lama, in appreciation of Kim's heroic role in helping him out of the danger, said gratefully: "Child, I have lived on thy strength as an old tree life on a new wall." (Kipling 338).

The Lama also becomes Kim's benefactor, for after the incidental discovery of Kim's white parentage, when Kim indispensably needed to go in for British imperial acculturation through a formal academic process in Xavier's school, The Lama financed him.

The claptrap of the Buddhist mysticism and spirituality narrated by the Lama was of the least consequence as far as Kim's lukewarm response to it was concerned. This is because Kim found all this neither intelligible, nor interesting. He needed something more, that is, the Great Imperial Game in which Kim had to play an instrumental role. It was for this purpose that Colonel Creighton had devised his grooming. In fact, Kim acted in the spirit of the Law as Kipling understood it. This law enjoined on him the task of the imperial service on a strictly disciplined line with an apparent air of sportiveness.

In my opinion, what is most interesting is the Lama's and Kim's dependence upon each other. This weaves a fabric of a symbiotic relationship, the formation of which was not motivated by Religion / Spirituality. Kim simply guided and aided the credulous Lama in his search for the mythical river and provided for his material requirements, but Kim had no spiritual attachment to his contemplation. Their contribution to each other was therefore essentially materialistic, though their reciprocity was certainly based on love and devotion. The Lama would have found himself helplessly vulnerable without Kim, and Kim could not have been promoted to a recognizable status in the social hierarchy but for the Lama's patronage. An effort to strike a harmony between the spirituality of the East and the activism of the West in their reciprocity is simply superfluous. An analysis of the chemistry of their relationship shows that it was not the Lama's "excellent law" instructing him to contemplate spiritual emancipation from the worldly delusions, but Kipling's law, sternly motivating its followers to the service of the empire with loyalty and orderliness, that was the destiny of Kim. Not only this, the Lama's financing of Kim's education to raise him to a social station where he

would be regarded as a “Sahib” indicates that this old ascetic too was drawn into the domain of the empire. Edward Said rightly says in his *Culture and Imperialism*: “...Kipling...firmly places him [the lama] within the protective orbit of British rule in India. This is symbolized in Chapter 1, when the elderly British museum curator gives the Abbot his spectacles, thus adding to the man’s spiritual prestige and authority, consolidating the justness and legitimacy of Britain’s benevolent sway.” (Said 167-168). There is yet another point that suggests the Lama’s affiliation with the empire. In a highly dramatic moment when the Russian agent defiled the Lama’s talisman-like paper, the Lama hit him with his iron pen case, even though it was the same recluse who had forbidden Kim to kill a serpent and to let it live his own life. The Lama’s momentary deviation from his own avowed creed of peace and non-violence, metaphorically signifies his entry into the domain of violence in which imperialist design is always clinched.

Let us begin with Kim’s position as an individual in our critique on Kipling’s treatment of the class, race question in the novel. Kim, born to Irish parents was a half-caste from the class standpoint. Critics like Ashis Nandy have indeed defined Kim as a “half-savage”. But Kim’s character, had a striking singularity in that as Kipling puts it, “He did nothing with an immense success.” (Kipling 7). We are further informed by the writer that Kim “lived a life as wild as that of *The Arabian Nights*, but missionaries and secretaries of charitable societies could not see the beauty of it.” (Kipling 7). Kim was known as “the little friend of the world”, primarily because of his unique faculty for befriending people irrespective of their caste, creed and race. The novel begins with a picture of Kim in the company of a Hindu and a Muslim friend. He had a lively and a dynamic mind, observing and absorbing novelty and diversity.

If we carefully read through Kipling’s stories, and *Jungle Book* 1 and 2, we can discover the reason why Kipling did not let Kim move about alone, but bound him together with quite a number of figures – Creighton, Huree Babu, Mehub Ali, Lurgen Sahib *et al.* – all assigned to the “great game” of imperial service. Kipling loathed individualism out of the peculiar apprehension that if let alone to act of their own accord, individuals might precipitate anarchy. Edward Said says in *Culture and Imperialism* that “in a celebrated essay, “Kipling’s Place in the History of Ideas”, Noel Annan presents the notion that Kipling’s vision of society was similar to that of the new sociologists – Durkheim, Weber and Pareto, who saw society as a nexus of groups; and the pattern of behaviour which these groups unwittingly established, rather than men’s wills or anything as vague as a class, cultural or national tradition, primarily determined men’s actions...” (Said 186). This is what we see in the Mowgli stories, where Mowgli’s singularity is diluted into “herd and pack”. In *Kim* too, Kim’s individuality is described as a sort of desolation – “...his soul was out of gear with its surroundings – a cog-wheel unconnected with any machinery...squabbles, orders and reproofs on deaf ears.” (Kipling 351).

We are informed by Kipling’s biographers like Jad Adams that Kipling identified himself with the British soldiers. We find in *Kim* a veteran soldier who represents the traditional loyalists, who religiously believed in an allegiance to the empire. Therefore, it was only natural for such a soldier to

have condemned all those men in arm who revolted in 1857 against the empire. We hear him say to the Lama and Kim: “a madness ate into all the Army and they turned against their officers. That was the first evil, but not past remedy if they had then held their hands, but they chose to kill the Sahib’s wives and children...” (Kipling 138). In saying this, the veteran soldier actually vents Kipling’s own perception of the revolt. In fact, the soldier not only demeans the great revolt of 1857 as a mere act of madness, but also approved of the terribly repressive measures applied by the white colonial masters. Thus Kipling, through this old soldier’s loyalist version of the revolt, forwarded a purely imperialist logic which always projected the natives as rebellious and devious in contrast to the White man of strict moral judgment.

Like the loyalist soldier, the Kulu widow in *Kim* also spoke in praise of the British rule. At the sight of a District Superintendent of Police, riding by, Kipling shows her as thinking “these be the sort to oversee justice. They know the land and the customs of the land.” (Kipling 140). These characters have been cited in order to show how Kipling in his novel tactfully sidelines a subversive discourse on the justification of the British colonization of India and reconstructs the colonized minds within a corpus of the imperialist design. All the Asiatic characters in this novel are depicted as seeing nothing unjust in the imperial rule just as Kipling did not despite his familiarity with India.

The character of Hurree Babu, an M.A. from Calcutta University and an Anthropologist, is an amusing one in the novel. In the eyes of the Russo-French plotters against the British Empire in India, the Babu apparently represented a “monstrous hybridism of the East and the West.” (Kipling 296). He worked efficiently in the interest of the British Empire, having an ambition for being raised to such an enviable status as that of Creighton’s by belonging to the Royal Society. But the Babu was not a white Sahib, even though he tried to put on a British accent and tried to quote Shakespeare in his own words. There can be no doubt that Hurree Babu was a typical product as fashioned by Macaulay’s educational project: “A class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste and opinion, in morals and in intellect.” (Loomba, 146).

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Caliban threatens Prospero: “You gave me language and my profit don’t / is I know how to curse you. The red-plague rid you / For learning me your language.” (Shakespeare 976). Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture*, argues that there are instances where the colonized Nationalists drew upon the western language and culture and used them as retaliatory measures against their white masters. In *Kim*, the Babu, in his drunkenness, “spoke in terms of sweeping indecency of a government which had forced upon him a white man’s education and neglected to supply him with a white man’s salary.” (Kipling 294). He also groaned over colonial oppression and the plight of his land. At the same time, the Babu is credited in the novel with having safely taken the important documents from Kim to reach them to the proper place. He thus contributed immensely to the success of Kim’s exploits. No less importantly, the Babu rescued the Lama from being drowned into the river. He may be taken for a hybridized caricature, a comical figure. In his book *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, Angus Wilson argues that *Kim* does not show Kipling’s typical gestures – “stiff upper lip” and the “assertion of superiority”. This assessment is

partly correct, but Kipling cannot be given a clean chit as in *Kim* too, the orientalist in him sneers at the Orientals. In fact, Kipling missed no scope of belittling the natives. After Kim had paid for the train tickets with the Lama's money, he "returned the money keeping only one Anna in each rupee of the price of the Umballa ticket as his commission... the immemorial commission of Asia." (Kipling 37). Kipling thus sought to misrepresent the people of the East as being scheming and often dishonest and immoral.

Nevertheless, it should be admitted that, in *Kim* Kipling's outlook on the natives of India is not that of a complete racist. Kipling constructed in this novel the character of a high British official, the Kingpin of the great imperial game, who discreetly understood that injuring the cattiest sentiments of the natives would be harmful to the empire's stability in India. This man rightly realized the necessity for the empire's men to win the confidence of the natives and to manipulate them into subordination. Therefore, he told Kim: "...do not at any time be led to condemn the Black men. I have known boys newly entered into the service of the government who feigned not to understand the talk or the customs of Black men..." (Kipling 151).

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