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Treatment of race, caste, religion and gender in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*: A literary scan through the postcolonial lens

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Abstract
Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* depicts a masculine world. The women characters are seen to play meagre roles. Kiplingean India depicts the colonized India from colonizer's point of view. Kim, the protagonist of the fiction is conditioned to be in the great game, "The Game of Empire." This paper seeks to depict the portrayal of race, caste, gender and religion in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* through postcolonial perspective.

Keywords: Masculine, colonized, race, caste, gender, religion

Introduction

Of all the writers who have ever treated India as the sanctum of their literary contemplation, Rudyard Kipling occupies a very significant place. Kipling, who was born in India and had living ties with this country over a long period of time, glimpsed her geographical and politico- cultural scenario very intimately, thereby acquiring profoundly rich material from this land for his amazingly diverse literary work. Kipling's greatest literary achievement *Kim* (1901) is based on India. This friction is a wonderfully intriguing political fantasy in which, inter alia, Kipling reveals his lifelong belief that India was not really a country, but a vast terrain inhabited by multifarious diversities of races. Kipling held that India was a land of wonderfully exotic geographical and natural traits.

The way Kipling depicted India in *Kim* highlights the fact that he intended to register in his reader's mind the vision of a country, forming an inseparable, permanent and irrevocable part of the British empire. It is in the light of this Kiplingean imagination of India, which could by no means be associated with reality- for India had by then politically matured under the leadership of "The Indian National Congress" and had formulated her own political and cultural strategies to resist the thrust from the empire----that we have to discuss how Kipling treated caste, race, religion and gender issues in *Kim*.

As we get into a discussion on Kipling's treatment of the gender issue in this novel, we should not fail to point out at first that Kipling in keeping with his obsession with the male machismo, created in *Kim* a masculine world, virtually excluded from the warmth of woman. The epicenter of this world is occupied by Kim, a bi –cultural boy of Irish origin, precociously grown into an early manhood, and an old recluse, Lama who came to India in the naïve quest for a mythical river. They were encompassed 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 some way or other subjected to trivialities – depicted as prostitutes, elderly widows or promiscuous women like The Widow of Shamleigh.

Kipling's male world is vibrant with the "Great Game" and is marked by extensive travels, hectic trade and extra- ordinary adventures. Women have but little room in vigorous world; as for women's role in men's life, Kipling's view point may be presented with the help of Said's ironic observation: "at best, women help things alone: they buy a ticket, they tend the ill, and …they molest men." (Said, 165)

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, an interesting character in *Kim*, treated kim with motherly care and compassion, and thereby helped him recover from his illness. Again, as a result of his interaction with the women of Shamleigh, Kim went through for the first time the fire of his juvenescence.

Religion, which forms an important role in this novel calls for its evaluation in the dialectic of the Lama's contemplation and Kim's action. The lama, presented by Kipling as a mouth piece of India's religious philosophy, frequently harped on the "Excellent Law" (Kipling 1901, 19), contemplating which, he believed, he could unchain himself from the "wheel of life". Kim had always been in search of novelty, and so he primarily played as a sidekick to the Lama's pilgrimage for the discovery of the mythical river simply in the hope of enriching himself with refreshingly new experiences of life. The Lama surely would have found it too difficult to cope with "the great and terrible world" (Kipling 1901, 66) without the ingenuity of Kim's 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 encounter with the Franco- Russian agents, who conspired against the Empire, the Lama, extolling Kim's heroic role in extricating him from the grip of danger, said gratefully: "child, I have lived on thy strength as an old tree lives on a new wall." (Kipling 1901, 338).

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

In my opinion, the most interesting aspect of the Lama – Kim episode is their dependence upon each other. Kim simply guided and aided the Lama in his credulous search for the mythical river and provided for his material requirements without ever affiliating himself to his spirituality. Lama materially helped Kim in his upward social climbing. The Lama would have found himself a victim of different predicaments without Kim's aid whereas Kim could not have raised himself to a recognizable social station without the Lama's patronage. An analysis of the dynamics of their relationship shows that it was not the Lama's "Excellent Law" instructing him to contemplate spiritual liberation from the Worldly delusion, but Kipling's law, motivating its followers to the service of the empire with loyalty and orderliness that was a destiny of Kim. Not only this, the Lama's funding for Kim's education to raise him to social honour where he would be regarded as Sahib, indicated this old ascetic too was drawn into the huge web of the empire. Edward Said rightly observes in his work "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 1993, 167-168). There is yet another point that suggest the Lama's affiliation with the British 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, in a momentary deviation from his own avowed creed of peace and non-violence. This metaphorically signifies the ascetic's entry into the domain of violence in which imperialist design is always clinched.

Setting about attempting a critique on Kipling's treatment of class and race question in the novel, let us mention that Kim, born to Irish parents, was a half- caste from the class standpoint. Critiques like Ashis Nandi have 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 1901, 7). We are further inform 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 1901, 7).

Kim was known as "the little friend of the world", primarily because of his unique knack 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.

Kipling did not let kim move about alone, but bound him together with a galaxy of characters--- Creighton, Huree Babu, Mehebub Ali, Lurgen Sahib *et al.* – all assigned to the "great game" of imperial services.

Kipling heated individualism out of a peculiar fear that if let alone to act of their own accord, individuals might precipitate anarchy. Edwards 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 sociologist – Durkheim, Weber and Pareto, who looked upon society as a nexus of groups; and the pattern of behavior which those groups unwittingly established, rather than men's wills or anything as vague as a class, cultural or national tradition, primarily determined men's action…"(Said 1993, 186). This is what is seen in Mowgli's stories, where Mowgli's individuality is diluted into "herd" and "pack". Kim's individuality is describe as a sort of aloofness – " … his soul was out of gear with its surroundings – a cog- wheel unconnected with any machinery … squabbles, orders and reproofs on dead years." (Kipling 1901, 351).

We are informed by Kipling's biographers like Jad Adams that Kipling identifies himself with the British Armies. We find in Kim a veteran soldier representing the traditional loyalists. Speaking in contempt for the Revolt of 1857, his said to the Lama and Kim; "a madness ate into all the army and a turned against the officers. This was the first evil, but not past remedy if they had then held their hands, but they chose to kill the Sahibs' wives and children…" (Kipling 1901, 138).

Kipling, through this old soldier's loyalist version of the Revolt, offered a purely imperialist logic which always projected the natives as insurgent wrongdoers in contrast to the white men of strict moral judgment. In fact all the characters in this novel are depicted as seeing nothing unfair in the imperial rule jut as Kipling did not despite his familiarity with India.

The character of Huree Babu, an MA from Calcutta University and an anthropologist, is an amusing one in the novel in the eyes of the Russow- French conspirators against the British empire in India, the babu represented a "monstrous hybridism of East and the West" (Kipling 1901, 296). Huree 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 on't / is I know how to curse you. The red- plague rid you/ for learning your language."(Shakespeare, 976). Homi Bhabha in his book "The location Of Culture" argues that there are intances 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 1901, 294). He also groaned over the colonial exploitation; at the same time the babu served the cause of the empire by taking the important documents from Kim and reach them to the proper place, thereby contributing much to the success of Kim's exploits. Babu rescued the Lama from being drowned into the river. He may be taken for a hybridized caricature, a comic figure.

Kipling missed no opportunity of trivializing 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 1901, 37) Kipling thus misrepresents the people of the East as being scheming, immoral and avaricious.

Never the less, there is no denying the fact that, in "Kim", kiplings outlook regarding the natives of India is not all together racist. Kipling constructed in his novel the character of a high British official, the Kingpin of the great imperial game, who wisely understood that injuring the casteist sentiments of the natives would be detrimental 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 persuade them into subordination. Therefore, he told Kim: "… do not at anytime 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 the Black men…." (Kipling 151).

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