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Kim: Cartography to Cultural Imperialism
Jaylaxmi M. Jadeja
Matushri Virbaima Mahila Arts College, Rajkot

Take up the White Man's burden-
Send forth the best sons to exile
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captive's need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and Wild-
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

The White Man's Burden (1899)

From the early times in which he started writing for the newspapers to the present day Kipling has invited diverse critical attention and responses throughout the world. In the preface to the Norton Critical Edition of *Kim*, Sullivan writes:

Critical responses to *Kim* have ranged from adulation to condemnation, from celebration of its “thorough knowledge” of India, its charms as an exotic adventure tale and visionary epic, or its usefulness as a parable of displacement, homelessness, and rootless modernity to condemnation of its ‘barbaric’ imperial vision.(2002: ix-x)

The present paper makes a modest attempt to expand this chain of responses on Kipling in general and *Kim* in particular. Therefore, *Kim* would be reread to examine both the implications; the imperialistic and the artistic or the humane. The objective is to find out whether the novel *Kim* possesses the potential to transcend the Socio-economic, cultural and political divides discussed so far, in the colonial discourse.

During the late 19th and the early 20th century, it is important to note the following two facts associated with the British Empire. Firstly the British Empire was at its height in the late 19th

century and secondly it was facing severe challenges of its decline and fall (due to the World Wars among other reasons) by the second decade of the 20th century.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Giffiths and Helen Tiffin in their General Introduction to the second edition of *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (2006) recites an important event in the history of European colonization and thereby post-colonial theory and literature.

When Arthurs James Balfour stood up in the House of Commons, at the height of British imperial power, on 13th June, 1910 to answer challenges to Britain's presence in Egypt, Edward said tells us (1978:32), he spoke under the mantle of two indivisible foundations of imperial of imperial authority – knowledge and Power. (Bill Ashcroft2006:1)

Quite a few European and Anglo-Indian writers of this era were genuinely interested and deliberately involved and impressed by the romantic, exotic, mystic, spiritual land of *yogis* and *fakirs*, *suttees* and *thugees*, cotton and spices. The picture of the occult and the oriental that India was to these English colonial officials, was captured and presented in different forms for the amusement and enrichment of the Western readers which underlined their very presence and dominance in the colonies.

Rudyard Kipling was one such writer whom George Orwell called, “the prophet of British imperialism.” He was born to parents who were ‘the sahibs, the ruling race, to whom Imperialism was a religion not to be questioned’. (Long 1998:573) Born in 1865, Kipling was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1907. He traveled extensively with a sharp edge of a clever craftsman, giving a unique impression to his poems and prose. He is much known for children's literature and especially *The jungle Book* (1894) but certainly not without the consciousness of an author belonging to the Sovereign British Empire, (as evident in *The white Man's Burden*) its political, cultural and economic dominance and imperialistic intentions.

First serialized in *McClure's Magazine*, *Kim* was published in the year 1901. It follows the adventures of Kimball O'Hara in the Himalayas and reflects the conflicts between Britain, Russia and Central Asia. On the surface it seems to be an extraordinary adventure story ever told, but beneath it lies a strong undercurrent of British imperialism. W. J. Long in a very subtle way writes: ‘*Kim*, reflecting the experiences of a boy who wandered over India with a holy man, was supposed to be a realistic portrayal of native life; but to read it as such is to fill one's

head with pleasant delusions.’ (Long 1998 : 576). Critics like Noel Annan, Edward Said, Ian Baucom, John A. McClure, Sara Suleri, Patrick Williams, to name a few, have read *Kim* devoid of such ‘pleasant delusions’ and in the light of postcolonial theory.

‘Knowledge’ and ‘Power’ as mentioned earlier were the most important contours of colonization. Knowledge of the places around the globe was extremely necessary to establish power over them. Hence knowledge of Cartography was considered to be very crucial factor for the colonizers to carry out their hegemonic intentions. Map became the mirror of the world and mapping an act of authentication and expansion of empires, borders and boundaries. The three things; map making, discovering new routes and lands and writing histories, travelogues, narratives etc. on and about these new found lands contributed largely to the implementation of the Western imperialistic attitude and design. This is forcefully endorsed by Mercator’s Atlas:

...I have principally endeavored to describe before every Mapp the order and nature of the most remarkable places in every Province, the better to profit, the studious, and careful of Politick matters and State affairs. (Bill Ashcroft 2006: 321)

Thus, this European endeavor as a whole to map the Subcontinent was officially known as the ‘Survey of India’ and colloquially as the ‘Great Game’ which in turn is manifest on every page of Kipling’s *Kim*. Colonel Creighton, the director of the survey and the chief on Indian intelligence, understands that the security of the colonial state depends on his ability to render visible and to map the territory England purports to possess’. (Sullivan 2002: 352) To chart the ‘cross border territory of Tibet’ and to fix India not only as a governed territory in space but as a permanent possession in time, Creighton takes help of natives and nomads with a full risk of subverting his system. One wonders at ambiguity and complexity the novelist creates around the identity of Kim who is the son of an Irish soldier having black skin, able to safeguard Mahbub Ali his protector and provider, win lama’s trust and confidence make Father Victor and Colonel Creighton recognize his inborn dexterity and cultural affluence with which he easily slips into the unmapped spaces of Tibet as a ‘chela’ of a lama. Kim’s art of disguising himself and others as a necessary part of the ‘Great Game’ is a telling comment which arouses an unresolved parallel of the British imperial design on one hand and the identity problem faced

by Kim in the novel and colonizers at certain point of time in the history of colonization. In one of the conversations between Mahbub Ali and Kim, (conversation becomes an important tool to acquire knowledge to exercise power) the reader comes across this confusion:

...He paused with a puzzled smile. 'What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain or Buddhist? That is a hard knot'. (2012:154)

In the face of this, the fact remains that Kim is a Sahib known as 'Little Friend of all the world' who is more comfortable in Indian Garbs than English who is sponsored to be educated in the English Education System (referred as madrissah) by a Tibetan lama, which is counter challenged by Kim through his eternal wish to be on Road. The hustle and bustle on the road and rail, life on the plains and hills and beyond, journey, movement and displacement, along with the perennial search and quest for acquisition of knowledge and wisdom of the natives are the integral part of the novel but a powerful testimony of the imperial oppression. The lama's journey from the monastery at Such-zen to the museum more known as the Wonder House amongst natives at Lahore and Kim's journey from Lahore that is in plains to the monastery on the hills was undertaken in the search for a River of Healing and a Red Bull.

Both these places i.e. the museum and monastery are centres of knowledge through which the historical, geographical, cultural and spiritual manifestations of the British imperialism can smoothly function. For instance, lama who stands for Buddhist spiritual knowledge is sarcastically shown bowing down to the English curator and asking him as to ; 'where is the River of the Arrow ?' (2012:11) And in spite of the great show the English curator whom lama calls the 'Fountain of Wisdom.' by showing him the 'mighty map'; we find him ironically answering; 'I do not know. I do not know.' (2012:11)

Parallel to this British interest of showcasing their authority over knowledge, Kipling evokes vividly the exuberant landscape of India and its rural people who are devotedly committed to their British masters but cannot have a position above '*Rasaledar*'. A live picture of the remote rural India either on planes or on hills is described perhaps out of his love for India but with a stain of imperialism. For example, talking about Indians' use of train which in the Hindustani is written/spoken as 'te-rain' the novelist writes; 'All hours of the twenty four are alike to

Oriental...; (2012:28) At other place while commenting on Kim's personality, the novelist writes :

Kim was the one soul in the world who had never told him a lie. That would have been fatal blot on Kim's character if Mahbub had known that to others, for his own ends or Mahbub's business, Kim could lie like an Oriental. (2012:25)

It is very clear from the above examples that Kipling appreciates Kim at the cost of bitter sarcasm on the character of the Orientals. An ambivalent tone is further created when Hurree Babu, a character from Calcutta, in a state of intoxication derails the British Colonizers:

He became thickly treasonous and 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. He babbled tails of oppression and wrong till the tears ran down his cheeks for the miseries of his land... Never was so unfortunate a product of English rule in India more unhappily thrust upon aliens. (2012:256)

The same person in a wakeful state, free from the effects of the drink starts praising the British Government; 'He loved the British Government it was the source of all prosperity and honour, and his master at Rampur held the very same opinion'. (2012:257)

Kipling stretches this ambiguity of tone further to Kamboh a *Jat* farmer from Punjab who has all adulations for the British established means of transportations. He says:

The Government has brought on us many taxes, but it gives us one good thing – the 'te-rain' that joins friends and unites the anxious. A wonderful matter is the 'te-rain' (2012:214)

The same person when he says that he does not know 'their Gods' at Benares, the reader is left aghast. To add to this feeling of bewilderment kamboh who is readily convinced by the charms of the lama and Kim makes a harsh comment on the superficial religious rituals practiced by the Indians.

'The priests tell us that Benares is holy - which none doubt - and desirable to die in. But I do not know their Gods, and they ask for money, and when one has done one worship Wash here! Wash there! Pour, drink, lave and scatter flowers but always pay the priests. ' (2012:213)

Yet, on moving towards the end of the novel the reaches to a bright world of newer nuances, where the 'Great Game', seems to be coming to a close with Kim becoming desperate to get rid of the goods (documents, books, reports, maps etc.) that he has captured from the Russians at the risk of their (lama, HurreeBabu, Kim) lives. The Game he had joined with immense enthusiasm doesn't hold him on having accomplished it. It is like saying 'I am no more a part of it and not playing anymore.' The unusual relationship and ties of mutual devotion, dependence and love that develops between the lama and kim, give a sudden turn to the course of the novel. Lama and Kim forego their respective dreams, of attaining salvation (*niravan*) and solving the problem of identity. Both lama and Kim are shown engrossed in deep introspection enabling them to attain freedom from the bondage of a colonized spirit. This becomes very much evident in the last two chapters of the novels, wherein lama and kim shatter their aspirations of external colonial territories, borders and boundaries and attain the knowledge of vast internal recesses, leading them perhaps to a newer kind of search. Thereby Kim oscillates between the colonial machinery and his individual self which is endlessly yearning for a fatherly and a motherly figure and a family. His torn personality and his feeling of loneliness are clearly expressed thus: 'In all India is no one so alone as I! If I die today who shall bring the news-and to whom?' (2012:200)

The transactional relationship between the lama and Kim get converged to mutual give and take rather than merely hegemonic. Sara Suleri observes:

His (the lama's) need for Kim-and Kim's for him - suggests an alternative colonial cartography upon which classification cannot occur, for the Road and the River can no longer determine those proper distinctions that separate their aims. Instead, land and water meld into a new geography both more troubling and surprising in their ability to mirror one another.' (Suleri, 1992:125)

To conclude it may be mentioned that *Kim* begins a pleasure treasure hunt of its characters especially the lama and Kimball O'Hara in the public domain engulfed in the colonial-imperial divides, in the end rises to the emancipation of the self and the soul in the private personal domain which transcends all the historical, cultural, political, religious and spiritual divides. Thus the rereading of *Kim* in the light of postcolonial discourse discussed so far from Said to Sullivan, it gives a fresh insight into cartography of neo-imperialism which should take a stance of forward looking economic factors rather than backward looking cultural ones. And finally, whatsoever be the approach to understand the text, the fact still remains true that Kipling does not cease to be an artist ever in love with India with whom his umbilical cord can never be broken.

Reference:

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