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CONTEXTUALIZING POST COLONIAL IDENTITIES IN RUDYARD KIPLING'S *KIM*

Dr. Pragti Sobti, *Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner, Rajastan*

Abstract:

This paper highlights the problems of identity formation in a colonial framework as embodied in Rudyard Kipling's Kim in which he supports the presence of the Raj in British India. The paper tends to examine Kim's identity crisis; which he periodically undergoes as he moves between cultures. He is in constant process of redefining and rethinking his identity (a British, an Irish, an Indian, a Native, a Colonizer, etc.), his confusing amorphous physical characterization, his ambivalent relationship with the native and colonizer, and his Hamlet-like decision. Further the paper examine the influence of genetics on Kim's final decision and tries to explain the ramifications of the decisions and foregrounds it in Kipling's own imperials interest in India.

All culture is originally colonial (Derrida, 26)

Post-colonialism is an intellectual direction existing since the middle of the 20th century. The aspects of colonialism can be found not only in the history, literature, and politics, but also in culture and identity of both the countries i.e. colonized and colonizers. Colonial powers destroyed the native traditions and culture and they replaced them with their own. This led to the conflict after the independence of the colonized countries as they faced the challenge of developing a new nationwide identity and self-confidence. The ultimate goal of post-colonialism is combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures. It is not simply concerned with salvaging past worlds, but learning how the world can move beyond this period together, towards a place of mutual respect. Post-colonial thinkers recognize that many of the assumptions, which underlie the 'logic' of colonialism, are still active forces today.

As a literary theory post colonialism, deals with literature produced in countries that once were colonies of others countries, especially of the European colonial powers Britain, France and Spain. Theory provides framework that destabilizes dominant discourses in the West, challenges "inherent assumptions", and critiques the "material and discursive legacies of colonialism". In order to challenge these assumptions and legacies of colonialism, post-colonial studies needs to be grounded on tangible identities, connections and processes.

Furthermore, post colonialism deals with cultural identity in colonized societies; the dilemmas of developing a national identity after colonial rule; the ways in which writers articulate and celebrate that identity (often reclaiming it from and maintaining strong connections with the colonizer); the ways in which the knowledge of the colonized people has been generated and used to serve the colonizer's interests; and the ways in which the colonizer's literature has justified colonialism via images of the colonized as a perpetually inferior people society and culture. These inward struggles of identity often occur in works of many post-colonial writers. The present paper is an attempt to make a panoramic analysis of the identity problem in Kipling's novel *Kim* from post-colonial perspective

An important concern of post-colonial literature is related to locale, dislocation and relocation. Displacement or dislocation often leads to a sense of nowhereness and identity crisis. "Identity is self-

understanding of a person or an individual" (Erickson, 15). James Marcia expanded Erickson's concept of identity, where in the notion of crises VisVis confusion prevails. "Certain situations and events serve as catalysts prompting continuum of identity development, these crises create internal conflict and emotional upheaval, thereby causing individual to examine and question their values, beliefs and goals" (Marcia,12).

In the context of post colonialism much of Rudyard Kipling's writing, fiction and non fiction, focuses on India. Kipling's writing reflected largely common belief held by Britain that the Western world has a moral obligation to provide the Eastern, non-white world what they saw as their superior political and intellectual guidance. He was a great litterateur having dual cultural identities.

One of the most powerful impressions that Rudyard Kipling's works have left on the readers is his ingenuity of maintaining strict racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. Kipling's keen awareness of the fragility of the line dividing colonizer from colonized, Anglo- Indian from native, or white from black, is complicated, of course, by his political conservatism and his frequently turgid articulation of what he understood as imperial duty. His works including *Kim* tries to maintain a balance between dual standards of fragile colonial identities and an authoritarian racial paranoia. Kipling's distinction between an admirable knowledge of the contingency of racial and national identity and his conflicting authoritarian tendency is clearly visible in *Kim*. In this novel Kipling expects important facets of contemporary dialogue of identity as performance. In words of Kerr Douglas:

> Kipling imagines a form of white imperial identity that is not threatened by the constitutive rupture of colonial discourse. In doing so, he not only creatively articulates a fundamentally performative ideal of identity, but makes it the central feature of a colonial disciplinary regime (33).

For Kimball O'Hara to give the boy the name that he received from his father, a former color sergeant in "the Mavericks" (an Irish regiment) the shift from childish "games" to the "Great Game" of patriotic defense is tantamount to the discovery of his 'destiny' or 'fate' a development which affirms his identity as a living embodiment of the union between cultures, Indian and British, each of which he knows equally well within the 'two separate sides of (his) head', as the poem prefixed to the Chapter Eight of the novel puts it.

"Two Sided Man"
"Something I owe to the soil that grew
More to the life that fed
But most to the Allah who gave me two
Separate sides to my head.
I would go without shirts or shoes
Friends, tobacco or bread
Sooner than for an instant lose
Either side of my head".
- Kim Chap. VIII

Kim, an Irish orphan, grows up in the streets of the Indian city of Lahore and adapts to the culture and languages of India so well, in fact, that he can pass himself off as a member of almost any religious or cultural group of India. He is at once a Sahib and, by virtue of his upbringing, a part of the colonized society.

Kim, who is known as "Friend of All the World" and includes "this great and beautiful land" as all his people, begins to undergo a crisis of identity when he is first made to go to school to become a Sahib. This question of identity and belonging plagues Kim throughout the novel, leaving him with a feeling of loneliness. Sarup considers identity as "fragmented full of contradictions and ambiguities". He differentiates between "public" identity, "the outside of our concept of self and "private" identity, "the inside of our identity (44). And throughout the novel Kim is trying to negotiate between his "public" and "private identities".

Kim's dual identity and his ambivalent feelings towards England and India are depicted in the beginning of the novel, where Kim is presented as a white child who "was burned black as any native..... Spoke the vernacular by preference, and..... consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small (non-white) boys of the bazaar" (Kipling 49).

In the first part of the novel, Kim sets out on a quest to establish his real identity, led on by a package of papers left him by his father. His identity is without any fixed outlines. The color of his skin, a race marker is undecided. He is 'burned black" (1) but not very "black" (21), at the same time he is a "white boy" (124) and has "white blood" (255). Yet he is "bonze" (356) Irish by birth, Asiatic by culture and yet treated as an Englishman. The color of skin as a form of identity is 'erased' thus makes him anonymous.

Strolling about the streets in India and getting well along with people from different kinds of classes, he is called "A Friend of the World". But, at the same time, he is not able to forget his belongingness to his motherland and desires to return to England. This insight is crucial in understanding Kim, for Kipling creates an ideal of British colonial identity that does not so easily crumble before ruptures of meaning. By creating Kim's character Kipling tries to create such a form of imperial identity that is not threatened by its own discordant notes. Kipling carefully constructs a paradigm of a specifically white racial identity that embraces the displacement through which the self is constituted as a form of freedom. In *Kim,* we witness something very different from a panicked and defensive anxiety over epistemological contradictions, and this inconsistency of white identity forms the basis of intense pleasures that are directed back into the service of empire.

Kim's identity is a "hard nut" (204) to crack. Culturally he belongs to Asia, but 'genetically' he is European. This blending of Asian and European features affects him culturally. He faces identity crisis because of his connectivity and feeling of 'being related' to his native culture. Therefore, he accuses Mahbub Ali of "selling him" back to the English. For Kim, Mahbub Ali is a 'traitor' who betrayed him into the hands of the British. This reveals his closeness to the Indians, though he maintains his superiority over them. To be white within Kim is not to realize an Aryan purity; nor is it to cling to a notion of European cultural superiority based on a sense of rigid or permanent cultural boundaries. Some Englishmen in the novel such as the Anglican Chaplain, Bennett, or some of Kim's antagonist at St. Xavier's embrace ideals of national or racial identity that fit one, or both categories. Such characters are without exception portrayed as pedantic and narrow minded, and often as comically prejudiced. The prohibition required to maintained racial decorum according to their traditional notions of identity isolate than from their surroundings, and renders them helpless when thrown upon real India. These characters are, of course, white in a traditional sense, which requires only that they be of European descent, and be recognized as such. They also enjoy the privileges, both symbolic and real, that come from belonging to this exceptional racial category. In Kipling's sense of the term, however, they occupy their white identities uncomfortably and ineffectively. Because they cling to rigid essentialist notions of whiteness, these characters not only do not comprehend, but often actively thwart, the performative work that must be done to sustain their privileged racial status.

Kim's identity crisis is also revealed in functioning of his mind. He is used to speak Hindi, but when Lurgan tries to dazzle him into believing that a broken far is moving, he shifts from Hindi to English. "His mind leaped up from a darkness that was swallowing it and took refuge in the English" (218) Indian superstitions, illusions and cultural influences hardly effect Kim as the white culture, language and blood rank superior in his mind. When Kim is angry or relaxed he thinks like an Oriental in Hindi, but when he is confused and needs to rationalize things, he in English. Kim also searches for a stable religious or social identity. He inquires "am I a Hindu?" (27). He also asks Mahbub Ali, "What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain or Buddhist? That is a hard nut" (204). Ali is unable to resolve the question either by choosing one of these identities or repeating that Kim is white. But, entitling Kim as white apparently cannot foreclose his identity against the possibility that he is also Muslim, Jain, Hindu or Buddhist. The statement that "thou art a Sahib" would appear to open the possibility that Kim could inhabit one or more additional identities, but

it cannot settle the question of which one. Rather than fixing Kim's identity within ethnic boundaries, the statement "thou art a Sahib" apparently opens up endless possibilities. To be a Sahib is to be irreducible to any ethnic identity or even any list of ethnic identities.

Indians are defined by their essential characteristics, while Kim is not. Mookerjee's failure in the game of ethnic exchange affirms the fact that, unlike Kim, he is bounded by his ethnic traits, imprisoned within the limitations prescribed by his essential Bengali being. From the beginning of the novel to the end, India appears before us as a collection of ethnic and cultural essences, as when the narrator very typically observes that " India is full of holy men stammering gospels in strange tongues…as it has been from the beginning and will continue to the end" (Kipling,80). The timelessness of India, its definitive static's sameness from the beginning until the end of time, is omnipresent as page after page the distinctive characteristics of India, "the East," "Pathans," "Orientals," "Hindus," and "Babus" are named. In contrast, every attempt to define Kim through essential qualities decisively fails. His subject position can only be figured negatively within the text. This failure is most obvious in Kim's constant questioning of his identity. While Kim is frequently proclaimed to be white, both by the narrator-"where a native would have lain down, Kim's white blood set him upon the feet" (94) and by various characters, most authoritatively Colonel Creighton-"thou art a Sahib and the son of Sahib" (167) such statements invariably fail to fix Kim's identity. Instead, they tend to lead to a process of open ended questioning regarding who Kim is. These queries characteristically begin with the statement that Kim is white but end with a question. Thus, "I am a sahib….. No, I am Kim. This is the great world, and I am only Kim. Who is Kim?" (166).Pondering this question eventually leads Kim to "throw" himself "into amazement," letting his "mind go free upon speculation as to what is called personal identity" through the repetition of his own name, mantra-like, in the form of a question. "Who is Kim..Kim..Kim?"(233). As the question yields to the mere repetition of Kim's name, we realize that the name absorbs the question. "Kim" becomes synonymous with "Who is Kim?" and we discover only a question mark in the place of racial essence.

Huree's remark "That is the question" (314), on hearing Kim's question "who is Kim" (167) encapsulates Kim's identity crisis. Kim is fighting with himself to find a fix identity. He is unable to decide whether he wants 'to be' a 'sahib' with all the dignity of grace of Sahibs or not to be a "Sahib" and become a colonized native. He finds the solution to his problem and finally achieves a fixed identity when he decides to be a colonizer. His decision is reflected when he tells the Lama, "I Love thee... and it is all too late. (388). The Lama already had noticed the shift in Kim from native to Sahib, Kim tries to assure him that, "I am not a Sahib, I am thy Chela" (386). This depicts the moral identity crisis faced by Kim. But Kim always had the 'genetic' tendency to become a colonizer and therefore he decides to become a one with the privileges of power and authority.

Kim's focus on the Great Game of espionage and his role as an informant survived different strains of Kipling's identities as both an Englishman and an Indian. The boy's shifts from Westerner to Easterner and back, physically in the 'Great Game' are in fact the expression of his own inner character, comprising of opposing cultural influences in it. When Mahbub Ali entitle him as "Thou art a Sahib and son of a Sahib" (195) Kim alternately declares "I am a Sahib (150), I am not a Sahib (183). Though, he never denies his European heritage, but he never defines himself completely as Sahib. Equally an Indian and a Westerner, he instead slips in and out of various appearances and identities, seeming naturally at home in each. And it is this cultural flexibility that makes Kim fit for the world of spying. The juggling of multiple costumes and characters, which him has performed his whole life simply by nature, allows the boy great success in his acts of espionage. In the final chapter, Kim's identity is discovered in such a way, "I am Kim. I am Kim and what is Kim? His soul repeated it again? Again….. Tears trickled down his nose and with an almost audible click he felt the wheels of his being look up a new on the world without." (289)

Though, there is no direct answer to the question that which identity Kim forged for himself? But by the end of the novel, it appears as if he had achieved a sense of self which he was searching and

struggling although, and which he has been defining cumulatively through his experience.

He achieved a role (i.e. adult role) in which he will be "what he really is", true to himself neither a pure Indian nor British, a role which will help him to maintain a detachment from everyday life and commitments, a role which will lead his union with Lama. As a secret agent his being the combination of Indian and British will be an advantage, and he can devote his life to helping to preserve the stability of the British Indian world which fostered him.

Kim at the end accepts the European component of his character but to a certain limit, he never wants to cut his emotional and spiritual roots (which are native) and become a white colonizer. He wishes to serve the Sahibs discreetly, tangentially using his native instincts and experiences, but not as a soldier exerting 'white' powers. Though he claims his identity is "a hard knot" to solve, it is easily explained as one spanning multiple cultures.

Kipling longed for freedom from the imperial constraints characteristics of his role. Finding freedom in British India, he made his own way in a new world. *Kim* therefore represents Kipling's need for merging his Indian selfhood and that of its counterpart. Much like Kim, we are never completely at home. As secret agents, we survive the entanglement of our identities whilst probing our agency through *Kim.*

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