

Rudyard Kipling's Kim: A Narrative of Imperial Rehabilitation

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Abstract: While most previous studies on Rudyard Kipling's works center either on the celebration of the British Empire or his racist doctrines, the present paper seeks to shed light on the neglected aspect of imperial defensiveness in his writings mainly in his novel Kim (1901). By anchoring the text in its context, the article tries to unveil Kipling's imperial anxieties and fears. As well, it puts forward his vision to rescue the British Empire and his discourse advocating the reconstruction of the shaken imperial confidence in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. To do so, the study is based on the New Historicist approach, chiefly Stephen Greenblatt's concepts of "wonder" and "resonance" in addition to a textual analysis of the main characters.

keywords: imperial anxiety, imperial rehabilitation, "wonder and resonance", character as a technique.

ملخص باللغة العربية: تمحورت جل الدراسات السابقة المعنية بكتابات روديارد كيبلينغ حول تمجيده للإمبراطورية البريطانية وتوجهاته العنصرية، تسعى هذه الدراسة لإلقاء الضوء على أحد الجوانب المهمة في أعماله والمتمثل في نزعه الدفاعية عن الإمبراطورية خاصة في رواية **كيم** (1901). من خلال إسناد النص لسياقه التاريخي، وسيحاول المقال الكشف عن مخاوف كيبلينغ الإمبريالية و قلقه إزاء استمرارية الإمبراطورية. كما أنه يناقش رؤيته لإنقاذها وخطابه الداعي إلى إعادة بناء الثقة الإمبريالية المتزعزعة في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر إلى أوائل القرن العشرين. تستند الدراسة إلى نظرية التاريخانية الجديدة New Historicism ، وبشكل أساسي مفاهيم ستيفن غرينبلات "العجب" و "الصدى" بالإضافة إلى التحليل النصي للشخصيات الرئيسية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** القلق الإمبريالي ، إعادة التأهيل الإمبريالي ، "العجب والصدى" ، الشخصية كأسلوب.

Introduction: Colonial literature is deeply associated with expansionist ideologies and legitimating discourses of colonialism and imperialism. Rudyard Kipling's writings, among which is *Kim*, have always been read within these limits. In his well known *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes that *Kim* is an "authorized monument of nineteenth-century European culture, and the inferiority of non-white races, the necessity that they be ruled by a superior race, and their absolute unchanging essence was a more or less unquestioned axiom of modern life"(196). In writing so, Said confirms the author's and the text's racist and supremacist ideologies that many other critics, like Richard Flynn (1991), Thomas R. Metcalf (1994), Margery Hourihan (1997) among many others, share with him.

In spite of the fact that Kipling's is an ardent imperialist who celebrates and glorifies the British Empire and British agent, he has deep anxieties about the stability of the Empire and growing fears about its servants. The difficult conditions and the doubts accompanied the power of the British Empire and its servants alleviated Rudyard Kipling's anxiety about the continuity of the empire and its vulnerability. In a letter to Dr. Leander Starr Jameson (1902), Kipling openly expresses his fears of losing the Empire. He declares: "I have great doubts on the stability of the Empire" (Pinney93) In saying so, he suspects its ability to stand in front of various challenges, and shows the British Empire's susceptibility to disintegration.

In a lecture given at the Sorbonne University, Kipling calls attention to the danger coming from the North epitomized in the barbarian Germans or according to his words "the men who are wolves" (Kipling, *A Book of Words*190). He ascertains that England risks her own integrity and leadership by underestimating the enemy and the need for fighting him, and by overestimating her sturdiness in front of that growing German monster. He denies the existence of any national as well as imperial security in a world of everlasting barbarism and menace (Ibid).

Kipling's estimation of the national/imperial situation has reached the degree he calls for a reconstruction of the nation, the empire and even the entire world (Ibid 119). He insists on the pressing need to re-establish the British imperial enterprise through using "all men, all capacities, [and] all attainments" (Ibid). Kipling's call implies the gravity of the British standing and the profundity the writer's fear. In the process of reconstruction he summons, Kipling takes the responsibility of showing the points of weakness in the British Empire and of warning against the dangers which threaten it.

Therefore, Kipling's fiction engages in the discursive practices of his time, through his characters, to keep the imperial prestige integral by fostering its colonial thought. More particularly, *Kim* is among Kipling's works devoted to the defense of India against all the opponents of its integrity and centrality to the British Empire. Through his characters, the author illustrates the interaction between fiction and real facts of the imperial situation. As an illustration, he puts forward some discursive strategies as a mechanism to keep one of the British Empire's rivals, Russia away from the British territories in Central Asia to prevent any attempt of rebellion against the British rule. His method is summed up in assembling the British subjects, mainly Irish, Indian, and Afghan- under an English patronage along with the revival of the Anglo-Saxon traits as the guardians of the imperial tradition. What follows evinces how his characters attitudes embody the colonial actuality and map the larger realities of the time in asserting the need for action and hard work in order to avoid previous empires' fate of decay.

Theoretical background: New Historicism and Characterization

In order to substantiate the aforementioned claims, this analysis is grounded on the New Historicist principle of "the historicity of the text and the textually of history"(Veeser 23). According to this approach, there is a tight relationship between any literary text and its historical conditions. As Jerome McGann argues, the critic "must find

[its] *raison d'être* in [its] socio-historical ground” (Ibid). History has a critical faculty in molding texts and influencing its meanings. So, due to this influence that history has on texts, texts cannot be read in isolation from its context.

For New Historicists, texts are not only conditioned by their context, but they also have the ability to shape history and make societies. Louis Montrose confirms that to speak of “the social production of ‘literature’ or any particular text [...] signif[ies] that it is socially produced but also that it is *socially productive*—that is the product of the work and that it performs work in the process of being written, enacted, or read” (Ibid). Text and history, accordingly, have a reciprocal relationship and equal importance. Thus, New Historicists’ task is to figure out this mutual constitutiveness through the interpretation of textual representations and the text’s historical and cultural resonance.

According to Stephen Greenblatt, contextualization is a prime instrument for a deep understanding of any text since it enables the reader to see the connection between the influencing factors in the text and in which way the text reflects them. He calls this “resonance”, and he defines as,

the power of the displayed object [text] to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer [reader] the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer [a reader] to stand. (42).

Then he affirms that “resonance” “can be achieved by awakening in the viewer a sense of the cultural and historically contingent construction of an art object, the negotiations, exchanges, swerves, exclusions” (45). By means of history, they seek to find out and interpret the discourses by which the text is influenced and how it influences these discourses and its *milieu*.

Greenblatt believes that “resonance” works hand in hand with “wonder” which is the ability of the text to stop the reader “in his [his]

track, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (42). In capturing the attention of the reader, the text invites different memories, emotions, and empathies and, thus, arouses his awareness to the resonant in it. In Kipling's novel, the element of "wonder" that arrests the reader resides in its characters' make up which resonate many historical situations and ideologies. Therefore, it can be said that in *Kim*, Kipling uses characters as a technique to communicate different messages and to call attention for many imperial issues.

In the introduction of *Why Do We Care about Literary Character?*, Blakey Vermeule claims that "for all their historical complexity, fictional characters are the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented" (xii). They have various faculties; they are tools that allow experiencing new emotions, delving into hidden and profound meanings, and influencing the reader's behavior, knowledge and convictions. Vermeule confirms that the importance of literary characters stems from people's susceptibility to them and its ability to attract their attention (ibid) or what Greenblatt calls "wonder". Characters are historical agents used by Kipling to reverberate his imperial anxieties and his visions to cope with them.

Kipling's Imperial Anxiety and Rehabilitating Plans

Since its early presence in India, the British government faced many obstacles and rebellious movements which represented no real threat and were easily crushed. Yet, the Indian Mutiny in 1857 was a crucial event that many considered as the first Indian war for independence. In *English Historical Writings on the Indian Mutiny 1857-1859*, Sahi Bhusan Chaudhuri insists that the 1857 Mutiny represented a real jeopardy for the British Empire such that the English fought in it as if they fought for their homeland (07). The Mutiny, though contained, was a real threat for the British, which convinced them that their hegemony over India was not as solid as they thought and that Indians could at any time rise against their colonial rule. It shattered what Francis G. Hutchins calls "the illusion

of permanence” in his book entitled in the same expression. In 1885, it was the creation of the Indian National Congress as the aftermath of different conflicts and hard situations for both the British and Indian parts. With the creation of the Congress, things worsened mainly for Kipling who was against the idea of granting the Indians any access to the rule of India since such an access could be the first step towards claims on autonomous Indian rule and, therefore, the loss of what has been considered as the most precious colony.

Along with risks of internal rebellions, British India was a target for Russian expansionist plans in its attempts to control Central Asia, which became a site of rivalry between the greatest European powers. In *England, Russia, and Central Asia: A Study in Diplomacy*, Anwar Khan describes the situation saying,

In order to find its way, the Czars of Russia relied on diplomatic missions to the adjoining small and big powers. Between the years 1857 and 1859, three Russian missions were dispatched to four Oriental courts. [...] This alarmed the British in India whose fear of encirclement or the eventual invasion of India from the North, further deepened. (30)

More, conflicts between the European powers gave birth to the Franco-Russian alliance against Britain. This coalition increased the British fears of losing their control of India. It is worth to point out that the European expansionist greed forced these competitive countries to gain Afghanistan's alliance. Russians, for instance, saw it as the best passage to get into India. Simultaneously, for the British, it was also one of the best ways to prevent the Russians from expanding their control over India.

Throughout this analysis, we shall explore how for Kipling as well as for Anglo-Indians, India was indistinguishable an integral part of their mother country and in the making of their identity. Such a vision appears clearly in Kipling's poem entitled “The Native-Born” (1894) where one can read:

We learned from our wistful mothers/ To call old England
"home"; [...]

But we by the right of birth/ Our heart's where they rocked our
cradle,

Our love where we spent our toil /And our faith and our hope and
our honour.

We pledge to our native soil! (Kipling c, 2016).

It can be understood from the above verses that the author plainly expresses his strong attachment to India, which is for him, a "hope", and "honour" for the sustenance of British Empire. His feelings and attachment to India is what Steven Patterson calls "the Cult of Imperial Honor in British India", an idea, which he explains clearly in this passage:

Much of the psychological sense of well-being for British identity was rooted in the control of India, making it a wellspring of national identity as well. As is often the case, Kipling expressed it most succinctly: "what can they know of England, who only England know?" If Kipling referred to the empire here, India was his spiritual home, and the British could be most proud of their achievements there- of all the children of empire, India shone brightest and was the most jealously guarded, its honor retained against all external and internal threats. (24)

Patterson shows that the British Empire's greatness closely related to its control over India. The reason of Kipling's interest in the invigoration of the empire's power and reinforcing the British authoritarianism in this precious colony is displayed in his writings through characters. It is important to point out that Kipling over time grew more and more suspicious of the power and efficiency of "Great Britain":

It would appear that his personal contacts with empire builders like Rhodes (who gave the Kipling family the use of a house for their

lifetime) and Lord Roberts (with whom Kipling later collaborated in schemes for national defense) gave Kipling a vivid sense of how fragile the empire truly was, and these experiences turned him from a theoretical critic of English decadence into an activist whose mission was to employ his literature both to warn of lurking dangers from outside powers and to support movements or schemes which attempted to reinvigorate the effete body or languid will of the nation (Quoted in Eby160)

According to the critic, Kipling was in awe of the decline of the British Empire, which would have a negative impact by hurting the English national pride. For this reason, he oriented his writing to the revitalization of this enfeebled empire and its weakened citizens.

In Kipling's view, the reason behind the recession of the British military power and the decadence in which the empire started to sink in rests on the megalomaniac sense that got hold of the British politicians, soldiers, as well as citizens. They became arrogantly complacent with their previous great achievements, forgetting the need to guard what they had gained. In his 1897 poem entitled, "Recessional", Kipling alerts to such perils on the persistence of the empire. "Recessional," writes Rashna B. Singh, "celebrates the sacrosanct nature of the civilizing mission and chastises those who cheapen it through 'tumult' and 'shouting'." The reviewer adds that "It serves as a reminder of the fate of empires that forget divine providence and indulge in displays of pride and pomp" (101). In that way, he calls for a reform in the way the colonies were perceived and calls for letting arrogance to hard work. Kipling's idea of the assembly of the empire subjects does not aim at effacing the differences between them; it rather seeks to make them integrate with the empire and work for its benefit. As Kumar observes, "The English set about constructing a British identity that, while not necessary substituting for other identities, provided a capacious umbrella under which all groups could find shelter" (07).

On this ground, Kipling makes use of the Russian threats to India as a unifying element of the various characters and preserves for each of them his peculiar identity (for a specific purpose that will be explained through the analysis). He allots to each character a role to play in the defense of India within the frame of the 'Great Game' in order to stimulate a sense of importance for and belonging to the empire. This sense is a crucial factor to the maintenance of imperial control over its subordinate peoples (Ibid 06).

Kim is the story of Kim, an Irish orphaned boy, whose chameleon-like character, curiosity, and knowledge nominates him to be a part of the Great Game by gaining his place in the British regiment secret service. His adventure starts with attaching himself to the Lama in his journey throughout the Indian lands and accepting to deliver a message from Mahboub Ali (an agent in the secret service) to Colonel Creighton. Kim's success in his mission and his Irish origin contributed to his enrollment in the service. He starts a new mission to save the Indian lands from the Franco-Russian plots with the help of Mahboub Ali and Huree Babu. The task is successfully accomplished due to Kim's capacities.

Reading Kipling's *Kim* closely reveals that the main characters are shaped as historical agents and they stand for the author's metropolitan culture. The novelist sets out to tell the story of these characters in an attempt to restore the glory of the British Empire. In doing so, he brings into focus the idea that India existed to be ruled by the British, and creates a link between the representation of imperial culture and the issue of identity construction. The character's attitudes illustrate the author's interest in that specific moment of historical and cultural transitions combined with the ways other characters have been caught up in these changes. Kipling establishes the links between individuals, history, and interaction between personal and British national cause of "Without the English, Indians will disappear".

Kipling's choice of Irish is built on his awareness of the role played by these people in the British Empire building and maintaining it in its

hard times (Parrinder 324). The importance of the Irishman, at the turn of the twentieth century, manifests itself in various aspects throughout the narrative. The first is the importance of the Irish traits of fearlessness and impulsiveness that are essential in imperial control. Edmund Wilson states that “so long as the Irish is loyal to England; Kipling shows the liveliest appreciation of Irish recklessness and the Irish mischief” (Wilson142). Kipling invests all those characteristics in Kim to consolidate the British rule in India. He relies on Kim’s cleverness, love of adventure, disguise skills, courage, energy, and initiative to thwart the Russian plans in India. Without Kim’s skills, neither Mahboub Ali’s message reaches Colonel Creighton, nor his life is saved, nor is the Russian agents’ plans hindered. Though Kim’s aptitude for observation and action is not the only factor that leads to preventing the Russians from achieving their aims, it plays a pivotal role in doing it.

It is important to point out that by making Kim knowledgeable of the Indian society and granting him with the aforementioned faculties, Kipling does not intend only to bring into light the importance of the Irish in protecting India. He also stresses that the English lack the required elements to keep their over-seas colonies under the rule of the British Empire. Because of their pomp he speaks of in his “Recessional” in addition to their ignorance of India, and their misunderstanding of its people, the English agents cannot persist in India. Kipling tries to call their attention to efficient action which falls under his “Myth of indefatigable colonial administrator on whose shoulders the empire rested” (Arata159).

Instead of making his main protagonist English who is actually the “Empire-bearer,” to borrow Kumar’s words, Kipling makes him Irish. In doing so, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the Anglo-Indian settlers conduct in India that needs to be changed. Again, in order to show the importance of being knowledgeable, active, and alert, Kipling resorts to an implied comparison between Kim and the Lama along their journey. The Lama’s extreme spirituality and his idealistic

thoughts about life do not serve his quest of the River of Arrow. The author tries to make it clear that great ideas without hard work and efforts are useless. Such ideas cannot provide him neither with food and shelter nor protect him in case of danger. This is obvious in the Lama's continuous need for a servant, which explains the reason behind his attachment to Kim. Without Kim's Knowledge of India and its people's casts, his ability of manipulation and persuasion, added to his power of observation, the Lama can never reach the river.

Furthermore, with regard to the fact that this novel was written during the second Boer War in which the Irish took part on both fighting parts, it can be read as an encouragement to the Irish to join the English armies, and a celebration of those who do. Richard J. Kelly comments on the Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland during the Second Boer War stating that The Irish contribution to the British Boer War effort, at a time when Britain was increasingly unpopular internationally, led the English to have a more positive view of the Irish. This newly acquired good will was also reiterated by Queen Victoria; in fact, she deliberately embarked on a campaign of dynamism in order to boost her army's moral and resolve, which culminated in her final visit to Ireland (4–26 April 1900); she wanted to show in person her sincere indebtedness to the Irish military contribution (Kelly03-04)

Similarly, Kipling's Irish hero can be construed as the Queen's visit mainly because of his support for the war and his visit to the British troops in February 1900. Kipling shows that to work for the benefit of the Empire is both beneficial for the English (it has been previously discussed) as it is for the Irish. Kim says that through joining the Mavericks he can be "rais[ed] [...] to honour," (*Kim*111) the honor of belonging to the English masters, as he can gain money. Tim Watson claims Kim's hybridity (colonizer and colonized) serves two main aims; the first is its role in defending the empire he belongs to, and the second is the containment of the Irish unrests (110). The representation of the Irish as a loyal agent of the English army is a

negation of any disorder or any perturbation. The author attempts to create an imaginative portrait of the Anglo-Irish relations that contributes through what Edward Said calls "Textual Authority" to generate a belief among the Irish that serving the British Empire worldwide is part of the order of things. Philip Wegner calls this situation of stability of the empire's subject formulated in Kim "The utopian reconstruction of increasingly restive Irish populace" (115).

In addition to the Irish, Kipling uses Huree Babu, the educated native, and the old men who fought in the Mutiny as agents working for the British. These characters' conformity to colonial presence shows the necessity of the Indians' assistance in the entrenchment of the British in India. By stressing Babu's hard efforts in gathering information for the British Indian Government and the old soldier's opposition to the uprising which he describes as "plague" and "madness", the writer emphasizes that interpellation, to borrow Althusser's terms, of the Indians as loyal subjects makes them defenders of the empire. This interpellation is accomplished by showing the benevolence of the empire and the advantages of supporting it. Owing to fighting with the British, the old man made a fortune and gained a high social position in his village.

More significantly, Huree Babu is Kipling's tool to show the inaptness of the local populations to rule and to defend their lands against outsiders without the help of the English. He utilizes him to criticize the Indian National Congress and its educated members to which he is vehemently against. In his book *From Sea to Sea*, Kipling insists that

It seems not only a wrong but a criminal thing to allow natives to have any voice in the control of such a city [or the whole land]—adorned, docked, wharfed, fronted, and reclaimed by Englishmen, existing only because England lives, and dependent on its life on England. (06)

Kipling illustrates this vision through trivializing Huree Babu and presenting him as a fearful and an awkward agent who cannot fulfill his mission without “European” help. He reinforces the image of “the European master of the game” by the “clinging dependence of the native on the Anglo Indian” (Pandit209-210). Therefore, he asks for Kim’s support in foiling the Russians plans. It is due to Kim’s assistance that they succeed to achieve their plans.

Mahboub Ali is another key character in Kipling’s imperial nationalist ideology and the Anglo-Russian conflict because Afghanistan is the way through which the Russians can get a foothold in India. By getting the alliance of Afghan people as Mahboub Ali, who works for the British Indian Secret Agent Service, Russia is kept away from India. Kipling wants to diffuse the idea that British India is safe while the Russians do not represent a real threat. He reiterates that the disturbances faced by the British were nothing more than continuation the previous troubles such as the Mutiny and which can be easily overcome.

Conclusion

It derives from the foregoing analysis that Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* epitomizes its author’s ideology and imperial nationalist orientations within its discourse of “Require domination”; “Subordinate authority” among many other imperial attitudes. The novel depicts both the problems that the British Empire encountered and foregrounds Kipling’s imperial discursive strategies, with suggestions to solve them. Therefore, it can be deduced that the idea to “Keep the cultural integrity of the British Empire” is central to the narrative, which illustrates the way Kipling blames the conditions the British Empire, mainly how it deviates from its mission of civilizing the peripheries of the world; how its ambitions and enthusiasm faded, and how its dazed arrogance collapses. The novel also presents the various threatening aspects of the British India which are the local populations’ rebellions and the Russian rivalry. Kipling sees that the way out of British India’s problems is to gain the confidence of the

empire's subjects, to employ them for its benefits, and mainly to re-energize the English imperial tradition. All these features can be understood through the attitudes of Kim, who embodies "the Western mind" as well as the literary project of Kipling's imperial culture, which is developed in the novel.

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