Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* as a Narrative of Empire

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to examine Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* in relation to British Empire in India. One way and another, all narrative elements revolve around and comply with the British rule in India. The paper employs textual narrative analysis to excavate how Kipling weaves the novel round the British empire in India. The adventure of the title character is central to the plot. He undertakes the adventure to search for a Red Bull on a green field, which is a regimental flag of the regiment to which Kim's father once belonged. Kipling creates and projects Kim in such a way that he is not only entrapped but also works for colonial cause. During his adventurous quest, he instrumentalizes Teshoo Lama as a shield of innocence for his colonial expedition. In the meantime, Kim keeps on working for Colonel Creighton, who is the head of British intelligence agency. The Great Game gets dominant implication in the novel.

***Keywords**:* colonial rule, *Kim,* The Great Game, narrative, empire

Introduction

The paper examines how *Kim* relates the history of British Empire in India. The novel narrates the story of a boy named Kimball O'Hara, an orphan son of an Irish colonial officer who dies in India. The adventure of the boy is central to the plot. His adventure begins from the brick platform of the gun Zam Zammah opposite the Ajaib-Gher –the Wonder House, and ends in a life-to-death struggle with the Russian agents who want to intrude into the Indian border from the north. He becomes popular with his nickname "Little Friend of all the World" in the streets of Lahore. Initially, his search for a Red Bull on a green field and the leather amulet-case containing parchment paper and birth-certificate round his neck, which his dying father has left behind, shape the direction of his quest for identity. Kipling's ingenuity as the creator of Kim's character traps him in such a way that he has no escape from the hand of colonial enterprise. During his adventurous quest for identity Teshoo Lama, a Tibetan

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Buddhist monk, with his comical quest for 'The River of the Arrow,' about which he has read somewhere, provides a shield of innocence for his colonial expedition. In the meantime, Kim keeps on working for Colonel Creighton, who is the head of British intelligence agency. The Great Game is a dominant motif in the novel. In this context, the paper excavates aspects of British Empire in the novel.

Scoops of British Colonialism in *Kim*

Colonialism is a political-economic phenomenon through which various European nations explored, conquered, settled, and exploited large areas of the world. The age of modern colonialism is supposed to have begun in the 15th century. The superior sense of the West is at the heart of their colonial mission. The West tends to look down on the people and the culture in the East as being barbaric and uncivilized. With their face of the carrying out civilizing missions, they exploit the natural resources by discarding the natives simply being irrational and strange. Saree Makdisi in the introductory note to the book *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* links the Western sense of hegemony and domineering ideology in their attempt to justify their colonial enterprise (1). According to Phillip E. Wegner, Kipling invents a narrative of empirical world by creating two worlds as described in chapter two. He writes:

> The world of Kim is then truly imperial "life as he [Kipling] would have it." However, despite his expressed desire to reform the practice of imperial rule, Kipling in no way questions the deeper ontology of empire an "authoritarian view of the world as a place structured in dyads of dominance and submission, obedience and isolation, power and pain. (132)

The whole narrative of *Kim* revolves round an adventure of an English boy who gradually changes from child to spy, or from Little Friend of all the World to a member of the governing race. The novel is shaped by the double quest of Kim and the Lama. In narrative terms, the two quests run along parallel lines; morally, however, they are antithetical. Kipling predisposes the readers by shaping these quests by providing many bits of information about them in the opening pages. Kim's quest is an attempt to make sense of the complex and ambiguous pedigree of searching "a great Red Bull on a green field, and the Colonel riding on his tall horse, yes, and' dropping into English–'nine hundred devils." (4). The omniscient narrator also tells the readers that he is English, and therefore he is in his rightful place "astride the gun Zam-Zammah" (3). He also puts an amulet with the documents that will prove him to be Kimbell O'Hara, and a Sahib. On the other hand, the Lama's quest is of spiritual kind. He has come to India in search of the Holy River "The River of the Arrow!" that springs from the arrow of the Buddha and which promises Enlightenment to its believers. The River is elusive: even the learned museum curator at Lahore knows nothing of its location.

Along with these antithetical quests, Kim's friendship with Mahbub Ali, a chainman working for Colonel Creighton spy network, makes the narrative even more complex as this narrative fabric frequently intrudes the smooth progression of these two quests. When Kim unknowingly works as a messenger for the network to keep his friendship with Ali, he gradually gets acquainted with other network members whose aim is to prevent Russian invasion in British India from the northern border. With the help of these diverse fabrics of narrative working simultaneously, Kipling puts Kim in such a situation that he has to work for the British Raj in India. As the narrative line moves forward, it leads Kim and the Lama to the Climax, i.e., the Great Game in which the situation persuades the Holy figure to act in the interest of the network unknowingly though. This discloses Kipling's real intention of bringing two antithetical quests together. Here, the Lama becomes a tool in the hand of spy network.

Kim's formal education at Xavier has colonial implications. His search for a Red Bull on a green field finally leads him to his schooling and training as a spy. His late father's prophesy comes true when he comes across his father's former regiment whose flag bears the design of "a great Red Bull on a green field" (4). Immediately after the Sahibs open the amulet round his neck, they recognize the boy as the son of their former officer. They plan Kim to send to the Protestant Sanawar Military Orphanage according to "the order of the Commander-in-Chief" (89) and keep the boy with themselves in charge of a drummer boy and the regimental schoolmaster until the school opens. In the meantime, Colonel Creighton, the English colonel whom Kim first secretly encountered in Umballa, shows up. After conversing with Ali about Kim's peculiar history, he shows an interest in Kim's welfare and schooling thinking that "he mustn't be wasted if he is as advertised" (102). Finally, they arrange for his schooling at St. Xavier, the Catholic school at Nucklao. He spends three years in the Western Catholic School, where he masters the culture, academic knowledge, and language of the British rulers. Most important of all, as he remembers later, they have taught him not to "forget that one is a Sahib, and that someday, when examinations are passed, one will command natives. Kim made a note of this, for he began to understand where examinations led" (115). This is what the then Anglo-Indian rulers want him to be.

Kipling's colonial interest also manifests in the way natives are depicted in the novel. *Kim's* India is a world crowded with the stereotypes of magic-ridden, superstitious and religious-minded people, i.e., the world made up inferior and primitive population. Phillip E. Wegner hints at such imperialistic portrait when he talks how Kipling creates two different realities that he fails to unify. He quotes Edmund Wilson who claims that Kipling's account of Kim's travels throughout the subcontinent provides the writer an opportunity to describe the many peoples and cultures that made up India; the significant portion of the novel is devoted to

magical and visionary kind of descriptions that presents natives and their way of life in stereotypical and imperialistic mode. Wegner claims: "Kipling succeeds in Kim when he establishes for the reader "the contrast between the East, with its mysticism and its sensuality, its extremes of saintliness and roguery, and the English, with their superior organization, their confidence in modern method, their instinct to brush away like cobwebs the native myths and beliefs" (130). Wegner's ideas in the passage get verified in many observations on Indian life presented in *Kim.* In fact, Kipling observes Indian mores in a derogatory, stereotypical mode. Sihks are characterized as having a special love of money: "Mahbub's eyes lighted with almost a Sikh's love of money" (161). Similarly, Hurree Babu as a Bengali has been presented as a timid person, when he hides the packet taken from the foreign agents: the Babu "stowed the entire trove about his body, as only Orientals can" (255). The action stowing the documents about the body implies that Orientals in general lack skills to put things in a civilized manner; therefore, they are uncivilized. Another example of derogatory stereotype is evident in Kipling's characterization of Hurree Babu Mookerjee. Indeed, Kipling portrays Mookerjee as highly educated and extremely competent in his work as a spy. This manifests in The Great Game in which Mookerjee, with the help of Kim, tricks the Russian spies out of their goods and leads them astray. Despite being "polished, polite, attentive – a sober, learned son of experience and adversity" (207), Kipling treats him not as an equal to the British whom he loves to imitate, but rather as a caricature. This is especially evident in the way that Kipling has rendered his English speech patterns. Mookerjee's English speech is full of highly British expressions, such as in a conversation with Kim: "By Jove . . . why the dooce do you not issue demi-offeecial orders to some brave man to poison them . . . That is all tommy-rott" (204). Despite Mookerjee's use of such a highly concentrated idiomatic expressions, Kipling transcribes Mookerjee's English in an eccentric spelling—such as "dooce" for "deuce"—to highlight the Bengali's non-British accent. This is done to give the impression that Mookerjee's English is not "true" English, but a dialect. The dialect-type spelling, together with the almost laughable, exaggerated use of British figures of speech, has the effect of making Mookerjee's speech a caricature of the English language—the opposite of authentic English language. Edward Said writes of Kipling's cartooning of Mookerjee: "Lovable and admirable though he may be, there remains in Kipling's portrait of him the grimacing stereotype of the ontologically funny native, hopelessly trying to be like 'us'" (33). With regard to such portrayal of natives and their way of life, Mehmet Ali ***Çelikel*** observes:

> Kim can 'lie like an Oriental' or Kim can sleep as the train roars because the Oriental is indifferent to 'mere noise' (Randall 79). By making such generalisations, Kipling remains faithful to the established, conventional Western understanding of the Eastern image in *Kim*. Negative characteristics

> like "lying" and uncivilised, nomadic behaviours like sleeping "indifferently" to noise are all attributed to the Orient. (287)

By following the conventional ideology in looking at the East as stated by ***Çelikel***, Kipling puts the White race and their cultural practices in a very higher place. This implicates the hidden politics of colonial outlook.

The derogatory ethnic stereotypes discussed above are in sharp contrast with Kipling's portrayals of the British and their way of life, which are depicted in a very positive light. For example: when Lurgan Sahib attempts to train Kim's power of quick observation by hypnotizing him, he takes refuge at the multiplication tables he learned at St. Xavier to resist: "'Look! It is coming into shape,' said Lurgan Sahib. So far Kim had been thinking in Hindi, but a tremor came on him, and with an effort like that of a swimmer before sharks, who hurls himself half out of the water, his mind leaped up from a darkness that was swallowing it and took refuge in–the multiplication-table in English!" (141). The passage embodies Kipling's belief that British way of life, which is guided by reason, is superior and advanced than that of the Asians, which is crude and emotive. Such contrasts throughout *Kim* serve to support and justify the rule of the more capable British over the Indian people. To borrow the words from Edward Said, the novel is all about "the glamour and the romance of the British overseas" (7) enterprise for British readers. Another striking example is evident in Kim's response to the Lama when Kim changes E-23 into a sadhu. After seeing Kim's skill in changing, bewildered Lama, who misreads the deed for magic, warns Kim to abstain from "Doing" such actions except for acquiring merit towards Enlightenment. Kim responds that "to abstain from action is unbefitting a Sahib". Being a holy man, the Lama answers back, "There is neither black nor white…. We be all souls seeking to escape. No matter what thy wisdom learned among Sahibs, when we come to my River thou wilt be freed from all illusion–at my side" (194). The discussion creates the dichotomy of activity/ passivity, of which the realm of passiveness is for natives and that of activeness for sahibs. The discussion above shows that the Whites and their mores are superior in comparison to the natives.

The Great Game

The Great Game is the political conflict between Britain and Russia in central Asia. In this backdrop, Kipling links the Game to the British government's Survey of India from 1767 to the year of Indian independence in 1947 in the novel. The government used to train surveyors who had to work undercover for the British government. In addition to mapmaking, they used to collect information about the possible Russian invasion from the north. The British government wanted to keep Afghanistan, Tibet, and Nepal from allying with Russia in order to protect the security of their Empire. The Surveyors, who worked in the northern parts of the region, were

sent in disguise due to security reason. It was this type of espionage work for which Colonel Creighton was training Kim. The climax of *Kim*, in which Kim, the Lama, and Huree Babu Mookerjee effectively disarm and rob two Russian spies, is a direct reference to the threat that the British felt from the Russian presence.

The Great Game gets dominant implication in the novel. Of the two narrative spaces, according to Phillip E. Wegner, the Great Game occupies more significant place than the phenomenological space that occupies the "exotic landscape" of India. He writes:

> Kipling refers to this latter frame as "The Great Game"-a figure that we can now read as the sign manifest in the local Indian political context of the absent presence of the global empire's massive structure. The logics of the Game necessitate that the place of "India" be transformed into a playing field upon which the various European powers, represented by their secret service forces, battle for control. (136)

This narrative frame is significant as almost all narrative fabrics even seemingly insignificant actions –from Kim's "chance" meeting with the army of the Red Bull, to his tenure at St. Xavier's School, to his apparently aimless wanderings with the Tibetan Lama, Kim's delivery of the small note –ultimately occur within the determining context of the Game. Not only that, Kipling continually reminds the Game through different characters at many points of the novel. For example: Lurgan Sahib reflects, "the Great Game ... never ceases day and night, throughout India" (161). For Huree Babu, the Game remains till "when everyone is dead . . . . Not before" (202). Wegner further writes, "every event in imperial India takes place within the context of the Great Game" (136). Even after the Game is over, Kipling indicates the pervasive hegemonic force of the Empire in the days to come, maybe through another version of the Great Game. After the conclusion of the adventure, Hurree Babu declares, "By Gad, sar! The British Government will change the succession in Hilas and Bunar, and nominate new heirs to the throne" (255). These indications point at Kipling's attempt to show British power as the real truth in British India.

Kim's Initial Posture

The novel opens with the hero sitting "in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam Zammah - - -. Who hold Zam-Zammah, that 'fire-breathing dragon', hold the Punjab, for the great green-bronze piece is always first of the conqueror's loot," and he gets this posture by kicking a native boy off "the trunnions–since the English held the Punjab and Kim was English" (3). Through this kind of cast of the hero's posture and gesture, Kipling is foregrounding the fact that his hero, who has the pride of being British even in children play, will do something special for its

protection and continuation. Then Kipling relates his biography that he is a son of an Irish soldier who is brought up as an Indian on the streets of Lahore and who speaks Urdu rather than English as his mother tongue. By providing these bits of information in the opening paragraphs of the novel, Kipling predisposes readers to read the novel in a certain way. His pride of being English further justifies his participation as an important actor in the Great Game because he is English, and therefore it is his duty to protect India from Russian invasion.

Kim's Amulet and a Red Bull on a Green Field

When older Kimball O'Hara dies, the only inheritance he leaves behind are some documents. The Opium Den Keeper who looks after Kim from the age of three to thirteen sews them into a leather amulet-case, and hangs it around Kim's neck. She does this because she remembers O'Hara's prophecy that one day these documents will do "wonders for his son" (79) and that "Nine hundred pukka devils and the Colonel riding on a horse will look after" his son when he finds "the Red Bull!" (81). When Father Victor and Arthur Bennett open the amulet, they find "Kimball O'Hara's 'ne varietur' parchment, his clearance-certificate, and Kim's baptismal certificate" with his pleading scrawl: "Look after the boy. Please look after the boy'–signing his name and regimental number in full" (79). The contents of the amulet are no more than the proofs for Kim to be Kimball O'Hara and a sahib with the father's concern for the future of his orphan son. Without knowing the nature of the contents, Kim runs after the red bull, by means of which he thinks he would "be made great" (39). From the very beginning of the novel, Kipling shapes Kim journey to the service of Empire by weaving this thin narrative fabric. Wegner writes: "Every event in the narrative works toward the continued maintenance of this pervasive hegemonic force: a hegemony which, like the horizons of the Game itself, cannot be understood (and consequently, challenged) by any individual" (138). Similarly, the Umballa priest predicts "the sign of War and armed Men" (39) after learning Kim's birth hour and his father's prophesy. The village priest's horoscope comes true when he trespasses into the barrack with excitement.

Metropolitan Patriarchy

Kim is a novel motivated by masculinity. All of the main characters are male, and females show up largely as plot devices. The female characters are remarkably few in number. Said finds the novel "overwhelmingly male" where "a set of men with Kim and the Lama at its center "make up the novel's major, defining reality." On the other hand, few female characters – the old woman of Kulu, the Woman of Shamlegh, Huneefa, the Opium Den Keeper – perform peripheral roles like cooking, child rearing, or tending the ill which are stereotypically feminine roles. For example, the

old woman of Kulu provides a place for Kim and the Lama to rest, as does the Woman of Shamlegh. Not only that, Kipling depicts these female characters in the negative light. Said observes: "all" female characters "are somehow debased or unsuitable for male attention: prostitutes, elderly widows, or importunate and lusty women like the Woman of Shamlegh; to be always pestered by women, Kim believes, is to be hindered in playing the Great Game" (12). They hinder men from achieving their goals, whether in their spiritual pursuits or in their political games. Being tired of the old woman of Kulu, the Lama says to Kim: "Take note, my *chela*, that even those who would follow the Way are thrust aside by idle women!" (197). Likewise, Mahbub Ali warns Kim of the potential intrigues of women during his training as a spy: "Mahbub was exact to point out how Huneefa [a prostitute] and her likes had destroyed kings" (162). Furthermore, the world of the novel, Said observes, is "a masculine world dominated by travel, trade, adventure and intrigue in which the common romance of fiction and the enduring institution of marriage have been circumvented, avoided, all but ignored" (12). These patriarchal overtones replicate the colonialist ideology in the sense that both colonialism and patriarchy are just two sides of the same coin. Both speak of domination, and also are the byproduct of the most fundamental dichotomy of imperialism which is superiority and inferiority. Therefore, male domination is one important trait in colonialist writing. Çelikel sees the influence of imperial and metropolitan ideologies in Kipling's privileging a native character with an Irish descent as:

> From the point of view of metropolitan ideologies, imaging of India as female and Britain as male was not unusual in the colonialist writing as Hubel suggests. Hubel also finds a similarity between the relations of colonised/colonial and wife/husband (4). Indian incompetence is frequently declared in Kipling's texts, which complies with the fact that the English masculinity is important in the imperial adventure fiction. (288)

The passage maintains that there exists a close relationship between patriarchal ideology and colonialist writing because both of them originate from the same source, i.e., metropolitan ideology. Therefore, the imperial overtones of the novel, as Teresa Hubel says, comply with the male gaze that reduces women to peripheral roles, the destiny that the colonized people have been undergoing

Conclusion

In *Kim,* Kipling articulates his conviction that the English has right and duty to rule India. This colonial outlook manifests in the way he weaves all the narrative fabrics even seemingly insignificant ones into a grand narrative of empire. The climax of which is The Great Game in which the Indian and the British spies succeed in halting the Russians' attempt to encroach into the British Empire from the northern

border. He designs and shapes his boy hero's three year's journey from the streets of Lahore to a top-class spy who performs the first man's role in the final battle as if it occurs at a normal course. He brings other characters including the Lama and other natives who voluntarily submit themselves for Kim's colonial cause. He puts some important clues to affect and shape Kim's entire development important in the opening pages of the novel. First, he hints at his hero's forthcoming contribution for colonial cause in the posture and gesture of cast astride the symbolic gun. A few paragraphs afterward, he foregrounds his whiteness and hangs an amulet case round his neck containing the documents as proofs for his identity. Kipling also fills his mind with his late father's prophesy and make him run in search of the red bull. Together with these details, Kipling follows the footsteps of colonialist writing by bringing patriarchal overtones in the novel. Following the dichotomy of metropolitan ideology, he makes up the narrative out of male dominated defining reality reducing female characters and feminine roles to periphery.

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