

# Rudyard Kipling's Kim: A Text of Literary Tourism

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## **Abstract**

*Nobel Laureate Kipling's novel Kim was published in 1901. It is the most controversial propagandist fictional text written on India. Some regard it as pro-Indian while others regard it as anti-Indian. Kim is written in a lighter mode to deliberately avoid and cover the colonial atrocities done by Britishers and tries to legitimize colonization. While reading the text, Kipling makes it very clear that Britishers are required to maintain stability, order and peace. He believed that it is the moral responsibility of Britishers to govern the uncivilized world. The novel tries to analyse Kim's relationship with the natives. He is shown as a tourist who is out to explore India with a western eye. His relationship with the natives is largely characterised by contempt except Lama, as he believes in colonial superiority. In fact, Kipling uses many minor characters to endorse British rule on India. To Kipling, British rule is necessary for moral enlightenment. Kim's journey starts from Lahore via Umbala (now called Ambala), Simla (now called Shimla) to various parts of northern India, depicts his limited tour and gives an imperial message. To show British superiority in pre-eminence, train is used as a symbol of development which the colonial masters have gifted to the colonised.*

*The monograph will focus on various illustrations in the novel through which Kipling tries to justify western attitude, colonial hierarchy and justification to colonialism and imperialism.*

## **Keywords:**

Colonisation, Identity Crisis, Orientalism, Western gaze

## **Introduction**

Kim is a controversial text which generated criticism as well as appreciation. Many critics regarded it as anti-Indian and the novel is written by a Western mindset keeping Western readers in mind. To Mc Clure, "Kim not only repudiates racist modes of characterisation but also dramatizes the repudiation, that is a Utopian portrayal of future racial harmony. And that is perhaps a more effective antidote to racial antipathies than any of his works" (p.480). The novel clearly shows Kipling's outsider attitude where it clearly separates the colonisers and colonised. To the novelist, India is an 'Oriental' place.

## **Analysis/ Arguments**

The novel starts with Kim's relationship with the natives. Kipling is describing and sharing his own experiences with the natives. His Indian friends are playing under the Zam-Zammah canon. Kipling, in the novel, uses ethnic words throughout the novel to give ethnic taste to its western audience. There are many instances in the novel where

Kipling has portrayed this. At the same time he also tries to depict racial superiority. The description of canon reflects this very superiority. “[T]he English held the Punjab” (p.1), Kim tries to get on the top of the canon and compels the Muslim boy Abdullah to get off the canon. Kim explains

“[a]ll Mussalmans fell off Zam-Zammah long ago!”. He also remarks that “the Hindus fell off Zam-Zammah too. The Mussalmans pushed them off” (p.5).

The description of canon in the very beginning shows Kipling’s idea about India. To foreigners, India is a land where supernatural element and dependence on God is absolute. In the novel too, Kim is described as a child of young colour sergeant of the Mavericks, an Irish regiment. Kim’s birth is described as “Between first and second cockcrow of the first night in May, and his first cry causes “the great earthquake in Srinagar” (p.56). The dependence on supernatural elements in Indian subcontinent is further shown when Kim is referred as Shaitan or evil. Kim’s case becomes unique as he is culturally Indian but his European birth causes identity crisis as he is neither fully accepted by Indians nor British. Infact he is tired to be used as a tool to spy on Indians. He has to accept this role as he has no choice. Sometimes the novel becomes confusing as Kim himself does not know which side he has to be. For example, he targets Mahbub Ali of “selling” him “back to English”. “What will they give thee for blood money” (p.136). The lines illustrate that Kim has no trust on the British. “But Kim is Kim. He was in the seventh heaven of joy to see all India as he was walking on the Great Road” (p.89). This very well shows that Kim wants to be called an Indian but his Western identity is confusing him as on many instances he wants to maintain racial/ western superiority.

Kim wants to be in the Sahib category but his idea of Sahib badly shatters in St.Xavier where he is treated badly. St. Xavier “looks down on boys who go native altogether” (p.177). The school was a training place to be a racist and the Sahibs are prepared to treat the natives with iron fist. Kim is not recognised as sahib, he is counted as a native and he has to learn a hard lesson. The drummer boy beats him and misbehaves with him. Kim, in the eyes of drummer boy, was “an ignorant little beggar brought up in the gutter” (p.145). But his inclination towards the British was still there as he believed that he will return to Europe if colonisers leave the country. Kim chooses to work for the British as in his mind he was more of a tourist and his homeland is Europe despite being badly treated by the drummer boy, he still feels close proximity towards the white.

The introduction of the character of Lama from Tibet in the novel is also very interesting. The character of Lama is shown with full sympathy and emotions. The character of Lama was introduced by Kipling, as the western readers/ audience are interested in Buddhism and spiritualism and whenever they visit India or Nepal they want to visit such places where desires, emotions and bondages are dealt through enlightenment and Buddhism. Lama is helping Kim to explore India. Kim as his

disciple travels to various places and Banaras holds a very special place as Kipling not only tries to depict India as the land of “others” and India is a place to visit for a very a brief period and then leave that place. This might be the reason that Kim chose to work for the British as he knew that if he is able to appease the colonial masters as he may go back to England as to Kim Western Europe is his final destination. Therefore, when Mahbub Ali asks “who are thy people, Friend of all the World?” to which Kim replies “[t]his great and beautiful land” (p.193). Kim bears close affinity with the whites. Kipling tries to show India is the land of snake charmers and it is shown in the novel that Kim is afraid of snakes, “[n]o native training can quench the white man’s horror of the Serpent” (p.61). But no matter Kim thinks he is white and will return back to England but he is unable to discard the native culture. He thinks in Hindi. “[H]is mind leaped up from a darkness that was swallowing it and took refuge in – the multiplication-table in English”(p.218). This very well shows his identity crisis too. Many times Kim forces himself reluctantly towards white culture and language. His very confusion makes him think in English. On many occasions he forgets that he is from Sahib class. “Eastern smells of Lurgan’s room make him forget he was to be a Sahib” (p.211). “All forgetful he was a Sahib” (p.174). Kim cannot overcome the conflicting forces within him. The clash of culture and identity makes Kim’s life vulnerable. Kim confesses to Shamlegh women “I have wrestled with my soul till I am strengthless”<sup>10</sup> (p.377). Kim’s identity cannot be accurately fixed. He is “burned black like any native” (p.1), but “not very black” (p.121). Simultaneously, he is a “white boy” (p.124), has “white blood” (p.255), and is “certainly white” (p.122). Yet, he is a “bonze” (p.356) and a “scarlet figure” (p.150). He is Irish by birth, Asiatic by culture and yet he is treated as Englishman. Kipling through the novel tries to show various religious and cast structures and hierarchy of India. This may be the reason that Kim is not shown with a fixed identity he does not have a unified and clearly defined religious or social identity. Kim asks, “am I a Hindu?” (p.27). He also asks Mahbub Ali, “What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist? That is a hard nut” (p.204). Even Mahbub Ali, who is like a father to him, cannot understand who/what Kim is. Hence, he asks the lama about Kim’s “country – his race – his village? Mussalman – Sikh – Hindu – Jain – low caste or high?” (p.28). He is ready to spy for the British atleast he may have a fixed identity if he is with the colonisers.

Kipling has portrayed him as an outsider which is revealed when Kim says “Will thou someday sell my head for a few years sweetmeats if the fit takes thee” (p.179). This is the reason that Kim has a good and deep relationship with Lama, who is also an outsider and a Tibetan. He is fascinated by this wandering stranger. Infact Kim becomes his guide of Indian life. As a matter of fact Kipling’s novel is also guide to his western audience. The novel in form of imperialistic travelogue starts from Lahore, now in Pakistan, from Muslim dominated area to Banaras, a Hindu dominated area to the Himalayas to show whole of India. The journey takes four years, taking Kim from age of thirteen to seventeen. Kim and his companion Lama are unique as they do not have any family ties. Kim was an orphan and Lama do not have any immediate family.

The novel also shows the distrust of Kipling on Indians. Religion played a very important role for the colonisers. The novel is no exception. Here too, the religious background is dealt in detail and religious identity plays a pivotal role. The character of Mahbub Ali when described by Kipling he is shown as a Muslim and Lama as a Buddhist. Infact sometimes the novel can be seen as a study of religion in which Europeans and colonisers are more interested. Infact Indian subcontinent is a land of Orientals for the colonisers. Kim has to study Muslim colonisers to consider them as a martial race, his conscious and unconscious remarks very well depict this attitude. Kim's hybrid situation is problematic and unique. The novel contains colonial discourse and clearly shows Kipling trying to legitimise the colonial rule. Kipling's novel clearly promotes colonial Sahibs and negative attitude towards natives. To Said

“The pleasure of Imperialism” Edward Said says that Kim is “a master work of imperialism...a rich and absolutely fascinating, but nevertheless profoundly embarrassing novel.” He re-reads Kim from the post-colonial perspective and says that many of the observations of Indian life presented in Kim as fact are derogatory stereotypes, derived from orientalist's beliefs.” (p.117)

The novel reveals Kipling's negative attitude towards Indians and natives of India. Here, deliberately, Indians are shown as inferiors so that colonial dominance can be justified. The novel promotes white race and to be successful one has to be a white and it is necessary to be a white to achieve high social status. The novel is more of an imperialistic tourism rather than plain description of a country. No doubt Kim does not have a fixed identity and a defined religion. Kim asks “Am I a Hindu” He even asks Mahbub Ali “Who am I”. Even Mahbub Ali asks Lama about Kim's “country-his race-his village?” (p.64) Kim cannot come to terms with his confused identity. This can be seen when Kim returns as a scribe and in Jain temple with Lama. Kim choice of language depends on whether he is stressed or relaxed. The presence of Kim's ‘native’ self means an ‘absence’ from English. Though whenever he is with Lama he does not like to be called a Sahib. Lama can very well understand Kim's sadness. Kim though working for coloniser but coloniser do not want to acknowledge him as their own. This makes Kim remark that “I wish I do not come here to find the Red Bull and all that sort of thing. He says I do not want to be a Sahib. I am not a Sahib” (p.185). But despite the indifferent attitude of the colonisers Kim want to be a Sahib despite his efforts are unrecognised. For example, Kim says “I am a Sahib and my heart is heavy too” (p.149). Maybe at the back of Kim's mind is his fear that he is an orphan and he feels protected due to British rule in India and once British rule ends he will be of nowhere” (p.15).

That makes Kim comment “would be a Sahib again” (p.182). He says to a Hindu boy, “Is this way to lie to a Sahib”(p.183). That he belongs to a ruling class is further demonstrated when he says “I will beat thee in the morning. I do not love Hindus” (p.213). Kim had studied where training was given that Indians should be treated with violence and contempt.

The novel was written in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when the relation between the coloniser and the colonised were very strained. There were voices from many corners of self governance which the British rejected. Though Kipling tried hard to show Kim as a boy who is not a traitor but due to his white background, he is unable to do so. To Kipling, Kim is not an agent infact he is exploited by Colonel Creighton, Father Victor and Reverend Bennett who all tried to exploit Kim's adolescent for their own purpose.

The novel 'Kim' comprises of colonial discourse. Many critics feel that Kipling through Kim tries to legitimise British rule in India but in reality the novel shows that the colonisers were to lose India. Kipling was of the opinion that it is the Sahibs, i.e. the colonisers and their representatives can manage Indian population. The novel shows stereotypical characteristics of the natives and is compared with the characteristics and features of the British/Europeans. The novel tries to justify colonialism. The characterisation of Kim is such where he is shown as a superior to natives and there are numerous examples where he is shown as a superior. The aim of the colonisers is to show that without them colonised cannot even survive and through there colonial institution India as a country can succeed. Religion is an important tool to rule and this can be seen in the novel too. Religion is dealt in detail as religion helps in categorization. Colonisers made sure that hybridity should not be promoted. To them hybridity cannot achieve status of a white man. Though Kim to become a Sahib, he adopts Christianity just like Shamlegh woman did. Hence Kim remarks

"I am to pray to Bibi Miriam, and I am a Sahib. No I am Kim. This is a great world, and I am only Kim. Who is Kim? He considered his own identity, a thing he has never done before, till his head swam. He was one insignificant person in all this roaring whirl of India, going southward to he knew not what fate" (p.145).

The lines spoken by him very well shows that it is mandatory to be a Christian or follow Christianity otherwise he will not be a part of them but at the same time he does not want to loose his identity. He likes to be recognised as an individual but he knows that without adopting colonisers' religion he is an insignificant person as all the resources are with colonisers not with the colonised. One may say, he wants to be a Christian to be successful as there are many instances when he forgets that he wants to a Sahib. For instance, "stopped Mohammedan fashion" at Jain temple. He unconsciously says "Allah be merciful" or "Allah alone knoweth what I seek"(p.229). The character of Kim though sketched to show composite culture of India through vivid description but unknowingly the novel reduces to the debate of the colonisers and colonised. The name of the protagonist Kim is deliberately chosen as it means noble and brave and in Korean it means gold. No doubt Kim's journey is full of adventure and he nobly and bravely survives.

## **Conclusion**

Kipling wanted his novel should have multicultural appeal. He did not want to make it an Indian oriented story. This is the very reason he has introduced Lama from Tibet and

making Buddhism an outside religion. Kipling tries to show the local colours of India during British rule. The novel has many autobiographical elements which helped Kipling highlight the conflict between the East and the West through natives and Europeans. Kim though has identity crisis because he is the mix of East and West which makes his task more difficult which religion he should follow. Sometimes to Kim it is the religion which plays a pivotal role in establishing the identity as what is happening in today's India. According to the religion the formation of character and opinion is formed to treat an individual. Kipling wanted to prove that he has covered whole of India by describing Lahore followed by Banaras to the Himalayas. But there are serious shortcomings as Kipling covered those areas where he lived or travelled or foreign tourists prefer to go and live for a brief period of time. South India is totally untouched or North East India is not explored. Moreover, the freedom movement started from Northern India that may be the reason that Kipling restricted himself to northern India only. No doubt, Kipling was able to interpret the basic characteristics in a perfect manner. For example, Sikhs are characterised by their love for money. No doubt the novel is a result of Kipling's tremendous understanding and knowledge of North India and maybe he has not touched the South as center of action is in the northern India and it is the north India which dominates the South till today. All the major and prominent freedom fighters are from the North. The novel spreads in 15 chapters. Kipling's describes India as

“And truly the Grand Trunk Road is a wonderful spectacle. It runs straight bearing without crowding India's traffic for fifteen hundred miles – such a river of life as nowhere else exist in the world. They looked at the green-arched, shade -flecked length of it, the white breadth speckled with slow -pacing folk...” (p.74)

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