

Imperialism in Rudyard Kipling's Kim Essay Sample

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Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* easily falls into the category of colonial texts, which tried to portary an Orientalized Orient during the colonial age. When *Kim* was published in 1901, the British Empire was still the most powerful empire in the world. The Indian subcontinent was one of the most important parts of the empire, which thousands of "Anglo-Indians," like Kipling himself, called home. As we go through *Kim*, we find that Kipling, consciously or inconsciously acts as an imperialist agent.

Imperialism was not just the practice of the British Empire's acts of colonization of other lands and people; imperialism was a philosophy that assumed the superiority of British civilization and therefore the moral responsibility to bring their enlightened ways to the "uncivilized" people of the world. This attitude was taken especially towards nonwhite, non-Christian cultures in India, Asia, Australia, and Africa. In his "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 orientalists' beliefs. For example, Edward Said writes in his introduction to *Kim*: Sikhs are characterized as having a special 'love of money'; Hurree Babu equates being a Bengali with being fearful; when he hides the packet taken from the foreign agents. These derogatory ethnic stereotypes are sharply contrasted with Kipling's portrayals of the British and British culture as more advanced.

For example, when Lurgan Sahib attempts to hypnotize Kim, Kim recites the multiplication tables he learned at English school to resist—sharply symbolizing Kipling's belief in the advancement of British law over the superstitious ways of the Asians. Such contrasts throughout Kim serve to support and justify the rule of the “ more capable” British over the Indian people. Moreover, according to Edward Said the portrayal of Kim as an orphaned quite a jungali boy, sensitive and friendly is basically an image of Indian people.

Culturally he was making them inferior. In his view Indians were good natured, sensitive, friendly but were jungali and uncultured. He conceives Indian society devoid of elements hostile to the perpetuation of British rule, for it was on the basis of this presumptive India that orientalist sought to build a permanent rule. The Kim (the protagonist of his picturesque novel KIM) is a major contribution to this Orientalized India of the Imagination.

For example, “ Kim would lie like oriental” or, bit later, “ all hours of the twenty-four are alike to orientals”, or, when Kim pays for train ticket with lama's money he keeps one anna per ruppe for himself, which, Kipling says, is “ the immemorial commission of India” later still Kipling refers to “ the huckster instinct of the east” Kim's ability to sleep as the trains roar is an instance of “ the oriental's indifference to mere noise”.

Kipling also develops between “ native” and “ Sahib” conflicts with the unavoidable fact that the British are the governing class, and the Indians are the governed. Kipling, however, presents the imperialist presence in India as unquestionably positive. This is done most effectively through the main plot

of the novel — the endeavors of Indian and British spies to protect the northern border of British India from the encroachment of Russia, thus protecting the imperial interests of the British Empire. It is especially significant that Indian spies are shown protecting British interests.

In this way, Kipling constructs an India in which the native population supports the British Empire and thus presents Britain's imperialist presence as a positive good. The way Kipling assigns Kim the protagonist and Babu Hurree Chander oppositional positions, for example, is also crucial to the power relations within which the narrative operates. The relationship between the colonizers and the natives was indeed a complex one, because there was no tidy transfer of power between the two parties.

There are connections between the ortrayal of Kim and the Babu but it becomes Kipling's challenge to assign these two characters distinct roles in his political narrative. Kipling's portrayal of Babu Hurree Chander Mookerjee, a native employee in the British administration, is a literary device used by Kipling to depict imperial authority. Indeed for Kipling, who believed that it was India's own destiny to be ruled by England, it was imperative to stress the superiority of the white man, whose colonial mission was to rule the dark and 'inferior' races.

He does this by locating the educated Hurree Babu in a position that is subordinate to Kim. In terms of the social hierarchy enforced by colonial order, therefore, Kim occupies the privileged position by belonging to the 'rulers' whilst the Babu is his insignificant 'other'. Despite this notable fact, both characters are, undeniably, products of a colonial upbringing in a

colonized society. Thus, Kim develops as a superior in his role of authority, whilst Babu Hurree Chander is his excluded opposite.

In other words, the Babu is Kim's anti-self, to whom Rudyard Kipling assigns a negative value in relation to Kim. In fact the relationship between the coloniser and the colonized is a tense one, because of the intensity of the British colonial period. This is Kipling's major dilemma in the novel and a problem that he attempts to overcome. The characters are merely there to highlight how the British Empire affected those at grassroots level, the people most affected by colonial authority.

This is also why we see so many male relationships forged throughout the novel. Colonies were essentially run by men and imperialism was driven from a predominantly male perspective. It is with this social and political context in mind that exposes Kipling's imperialist ideology as being nothing more than a narrative strategy, to represent Kim's authority over the native inhabitants of the colony. However, Kipling was arguably an imperialist, and Kim embodies attitudes towards British rule in India, which these days are wholly unacceptable and unpalatable.

Kipling believed it was right and proper for Britain to 'own' India and rule its people, and so the possibility that this position might indeed be questionable never seems to have crossed Kipling's mind. However, at the time that Kipling was writing, there was considerable ferment of revolt amongst Indians against British rule but Kipling appears to dismiss this at points in the novel when he could have acknowledged it. This is particularly apparent in

Chapter Three when he has an old soldier comment on the Great Mutiny of 1857, dismissing it as mere “madness”:

In terms of explaining colonization and imperialism, therefore, Kim is the ideal embodiment of the conflicting Indian and English worlds. Interestingly, it appears that all of the events of the Great Victorian Empire are inbred in Kim's own character. As the British Empire sought to discover and entrench its imperial authority in India, so too does Kim seek to find a place in the country in which he was born.

Thus, Kim faces an ongoing struggle to create a new identity for himself. Who is Kim? “What is Kim?” are two questions that Kim asks himself as the novel progresses. For example on page 331 of Chapter 15, Kim poses exactly these questions from “his soul”: ‘I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?’ His soul repeated it again and again. ‘As in the words of Edward Said, “we have been shown two entirely different worlds existing side by side, with neither really understanding the other, and we have watched the oscillation of Kim, as he passes to and fro between them.

As such, Kipling renders a vision of India where intellectual, moral and political boundaries are less than equal. Indeed, if Kipling believed, as he well argued, that East and West can never really meet in the Indian colony, then in Kim he makes sure they do not. Kipling's imperialism becomes more evident if we compare him with another Victorian novelist Conrad. Unlike Conrad, Kipling did not offer any negative assessment of the imperial project. On the contrary, for him it represented high adventure. It was Europe's moral duty to ‘enlighten’ the non-white world.

Kipling believed in racial difference, that is, in European superiority and for him British rule in India was a solid fact, beyond any challenge. Thus, the Great Empire had a profound effect on Rudyard Kipling's literary creativity, especially in the creation of his characters and the distinctive lives that they lead. As Said points out Kipling's Kim embodies the absolute divisions between white and non white that existed in India and elsewhere at a time when the dominantly white Christian countries of Europe controlled approximately 85 percent of the world's surface.