



# IDENTITY CRISIS IN RUDYARD KIPLING'S KIM

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## Abstract:

Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, comes out as a subtle provocative text that generated a lot of contradictory criticism. Some critics opine it as pro-Indian whereas others considered it anti-Indian. *Kim*'s identity crisis and his chameleon-like nature is explored by observing Kim's relationships with the natives. The novel explores the world of reality and that of imagination. The present paper analyses the characters as an identity crisis. The paper sheds significant light on identity crisis as a part of postcolonial discourse.

**Keywords:** anti-Indian, black, heathen, savage, absolute, *bazaar*, *sahib*, *shaitan* etc.

Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* is a subtle provocative text that generated a lot of contradictory criticism. Some critics opine it as pro-Indian whereas others considered it anti-Indian. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, for example, states that the novel is "the answer to nine-tenths of the charges leveled against Kipling and the refutation of most of the generalizations about him." He adds that "a whole kaleidoscope of race, caste, custom, and creed, all seen with a warm affection that is almost unique in Kipling." (Williams et al. 1994:480). To McClure, Kim "not only repudiates racist modes of characterization, but also dramatizes the repudiation, that is a Utopian portrayal of future racial harmony, and that it is perhaps a more effective antidote to racial antipathies than any of Conrad's works" (Williams, p.480).

The novel explores the world of reality and that of imagination. Williams warns that the text creates what Barthes calls a "reality effect through its accumulation of detail, particularly of Indian life (and almost in the spirit of an ethnologist)" (Williams et al. 1994:488). Kipling creates a 'sham' of truth and authenticity by using his knowledge of some Indian ways of life to 'market' the Oriental stereotypes and colonial discourse. Although *Kim* is sometimes regarded as a work aimed at young boys rather than adults, I still

believe it is academic tract intent upon glorifying empire since it promotes such stereotypes that are fed into the minds of such young boys.

Kim also juxtaposes the cultural differences between the 'white' 'Christian' and 'civilized' British colonisers and the 'black' 'heathen' and 'savage' native Indians. Said notes : the presence of an 'absolute' "division between white and non-white, in India and elsewhere". He claims that "Kipling could no more have questioned that difference and the right of the white European to rule, than he would have argued with the Himalayas" (Said 1989:10). Kipling could not "rid himself of that obsession, driven into the minds of all Englishmen who went East before the War, that a denial of racial superiority was the one deadly sin" (Rubin 1986:14).

The novel promotes the colonial assumption that cultural differences between races are genetic. Kipling uses his knowledge of the natives and their ways of life to prove that colonisers who are born in India and live with its people are more capable of understanding natives than 'imported' ones. Hence, Williams remarks that "the book [Kim] is a plea on behalf of the country-born Englishman (who is, born and bred in India), as the rightful ruler, rather than the 'genuine imported Sahib from England'" (Williams et al. 1994:495). This 'plea' is an attempt by the colonizer Kipling to legitimize the British colonial presence in India. It is also an exclusive discourse by which all other colonizers are excluded from sharing the spoils of colonization.

Kim is the child of a "young colour-sergeant of the Mavericks, an Irish Regiment" (p.2). Kim is born "Between first and second cockcrow of the first night in May", and his first cry causes "the great earthquake in Srinagar" (p.56). This supernatural birth had/has a drastic destructive effect on India. He is a mysterious 'creature' with 'evil' supernatural powers, an idea that is emphasized by the many references to him as being a "*Shaitan*" or a "devil." Kim's identity is a 'hard nut' (p.204) to crack. He is 'culturally' Asian and 'genetically' European. He "borrowed right-and left-handedly from all the customs of the country he knew and loved" (p.104). The combination of the Asian and the European affects Kim culturally. His identity crisis is caused by the native culture to which Kim feels so 'related'. Hence, he accuses Mahbub Ali of "selling" him "back to the English. What will they give thee for blood-money?" (p.156). To him, Mahbub Ali is a 'traitor' who betrayed him into the hands of the British. Hence, Lurgan "treated Kim as an equal on the Asiatic side" (p.215). Further, "Kim was in the seventh heaven of joy to see all India as he was walking on the Great Road" (p.89). These references demonstrate how close he feels to the Indians, though he maintains his superiority over them.

It is ironic that Kim is called "Friend of all the World" (p.6). His relationships with the natives are largely characterized by contempt. He treats his "friends" and every other character with contempt except for the lama whom he loves, a love that does not prevent him from exploiting him. Kim's contempt of the natives is revealed in many cases. He "consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small boys of the bazaar" (p.1). Yet, he kicked the Indian boy off the cannon and took his place, because he is English and "the English held the Punjab" (p.1). The narrator explains that "India is the only democratic land in the world" (p.5). To him, democracy is achieved since the Indian boy, whose father is a rich man, cannot remove Kim, the poor boy, off the cannon. Williams, however, warns that this is "simply one more restatement of the

(democratic) right of the white man to kick the native, however rich he may be” (Williams et al. 1994:483). Kim is like Mowgli or Tarzan among the Indians. Mowgli and Tarzan establish their superiority over both the natives and the animals. Kim does the same, and his superiority remains unquestioned.

Although Kim considers himself a Sahib, he is discriminated against and treated badly and with contempt at St. Xavier which “looks down on boys who ‘go native altogether.’ One must never forget that one is a Sahib, and that someday,... one will command natives”<sup>8</sup> (p.177, my italics). Clearly, at St. Xavier school racism is fed into the children who are being prepared to rule the natives. Consequently, the drummer-boy styles all natives as “niggers” (p.141). Kim nearly “goes native altogether”, and has, therefore, to be taught a hard lesson. The drummer-boy beats him and treats him badly because Kim can “talk the same as a nigger”. He also describes him as “an ignorant little beggar” who was “brought up in the gutter” (p.145). Further, Kim was subjected to two-thirds of the “white man’s abuse’ at St. Xavier” (p.150). He learns to maintain his superiority over the natives the hard way.

Kim is another Titus Andronicus. He believes he is better than everybody, even his own Irish or Indian people. He switches sides to work for the colonizing enemy manifested in the British Secret Service. Hence, Edmund Wilson states that “Kim returns to the British Secret Service as, in effect, an enforcement officer for British imperialism against the Indians among whom he has lived and worked” (Childs 1999:23). To the same effect, Mohanty claims that Kim, like Mowgli, becomes an “accomplished insider without having given up any of his privileges as an outsider” (Childs, p.243). He explains that Kim and Mowgli are taught “to inhabit perfectly without being tied down to the place of their habitation.... A strange allegory of colonial rule, as possession without implication, penetration without involvement” (Childs, pp.244-247). Kim chooses to join the British Secret Service and to work against the Indians just like Titus Andronicus in Shakespeare’s play *Titus Andronicus* fights with the enemy against his own people. His “white blood” (p.255) prevails in the end, and this enforces Kipling’s belief in the genetic differences between races.

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