CRITICAL APPROACHES TO RUDYARD KIPLING'S WORK

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Abstract

Kipling was and still is a highly controversial figure among his critics. Both praised and dismissed at his time, later on re-evaluated from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, Kipling is beyond doubt a literary figure shaped by his time whose life and work offer us a re-reading of the history of British India. This paper refers to the critical perspectives of New Historicism and Postcolonial theories that offer a deeper understanding of this controversial writer whose work places him in an ambivalent area of conflicting allegiances.

Keywords: New Historicism, Postcolonial theory, colonial binary, identity, hybridity

Kipling's text is a self-speaking product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition, not an isolated work, bearing the inevitable traces of the writer's personality. The critical approach that starts from these premises and provides multiple perspectives for reading Kipling's story of British India is that of New Historicism.

New Historicism is especially associated with Stephen Greenblatt who popularised the term in 1982 in the preface to a collection of essays published in the journal *Genre*. According to New Historicists, literature and history are inseparable, as literature has an active role in reflecting and shaping social and political ideas of its time. According to John Branningan, New Historicism deals equally with "the role of historical text in interpreting literary texts and the role of literary rhetoric in mediating history" (Branningan, 2002, p. 171). In this relation, literary texts get on a special position by assuming certain "functions within a network of power relations in society" (Branningan, 2002, p. 172). Stephen Greeblatt, in his study entitled *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, extends this to the self, saying that the self regulates its own desires and repressions and when related to power, the self will reproduce hegemonic operations through a discourse that serves the authority of a certain social order. Consequently we are given another image of literature that is no longer a benevolent teacher lecturing on moral or civil behavior but rather a watchdog of its times. New Historicists agree that the study of texts can reveal their key role in mediating power within the state, that literary texts are inseparable from other texts and from their social and political contexts, that literature can include subversion against the state and that each epoch has its own mode of representing power. Thus literary texts are not only produced by social and political discourses but are also their makers.

The same reasoning is valid for Kipling and his relationship with the Empire, which is clearly revealed in the relation between his work and other texts of his time, all framed and conditioned by their social, economic and political contexts. Kipling's time

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inherently had its own mode of power and Kipling's texts, in circulation with other texts came together to form a common discourse of power relations specific to that period. Kipling's work can be best understood through its historical context, and history, in its turn, can be re-read in the author's life and works in a mutual mirroring process. Andrew Lycett, in his biography of Kipling, considers that this complex character represents "a vital figure if one wants to understand how Victorian turned into Edwardian England and came to terms with the modern age" (Lycett, 1999, p.2). He also acknowledges that when he started to consider Kipling as a subject for a biography, he "was intrigued by the prospect of his life providing a panorama of Britain's intellectual, cultural and social history" and that he particularly "appreciated Kipling's work for the historical insights into the closed society of British India" (Lycett, 1999, p.3).

New Historicist approach of texts in relation to different cultures, to other texts (literary and non-literary) accessible to the writer and characteristic for his/her epoch, gets this critical approach closer to Postmodernism as both see society made up of texts in relation to other texts. However New Historicism doesn't share postmodernism's pessimism. It is concentrated on the effects and functions of literature in history, on the role of literature in constructing a society's sense of itself. When created, the text depends on a society at a certain time in its history. This means that the text absorbs the preconceptions of its age and creates its own version of its time. The question arising here is whether literary texts have a single historical context and whether their version is the real and unique one. For instance people who wrote history in, say, 1900, projected onto the past their current views (colonialism was perceived as a good thing at that time), and the people who wrote history projected onto the same period different views (colonialism was a bad thing). So, if we try to reconstruct the past as it really was we might fall into a treacherous trap and we are also conditioned by our own place and time in history. Thus to be on the safe side we have to be highly and constantly aware of the theory of historical change. More than that, when evaluating a text it is better to have a panoramic view and to place it in the context, to show what it meant to its first readers rather than consider it an isolated creation born in a vacuum, as argued by the representatives of the New Criticism (New Historicism emerged as a reaction to this critical approach). The perspective supported by New Historicism is helpful in differentiating between Kipling's official stance as a journalist with the consequent accounts of the British India written mainly for a reading public represented by the colonizers and the 'unofficial' mode of narration in his fiction that gave him freedom to approach topics that would have offended some of the members of the ruling race.

New Historicism is also indebted to the works of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (whose theories about the power of discourses influenced Postcolonial criticism, too). He refused to see history as an evolutionary process with a single cause, but one tied into a vast web of economic, social and political factors. Like Karl Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but unlike Marx, he viewed power not as a repressive force or a tool of conspiracy but rather as a complex of forces that produces what happens.

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According to Foucault all human actions are reduced to the idea of power. The power is not linked to a certain class- as Marxism states- but to the entire society.

New Historicism is looking for instances of power as manifested in the text and identifies two groups: those with power and those marginalized; the conflicts arising in the text are for identifying the group with the most power. Power is also a means of controlling the marginalized, and the thing that the latter seek to gain. This relates to the idea that literature is written by those who have the most power and therefore it must include details that indicate the presence and the attitudes of the common people. Foucault relates the idea of power to the image of the panopticon, a theoretical prison system developed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, where prisoners never know for sure if they are watched. Yet, the light that shines from the center in all the cells leaves them no choice but police themselves and be submitted. Foucault included the panopticon in his discussion of power to illustrate the idea of self-policing that occurs in the text when those who lack power are made to believe that they are being watched by those who have it. Kipling applies to the India of *Kim* a political machinery similar to that of the Panopticon where the social order of the empire is maintained and controlled not by the public and direct operation of the Law as it is the case in *The Jungle Books*, but through the Great Game's discreet surveillance, gathering and circulation of political information. Kim's liminal position becomes an invaluable tool for the Secret Service, yet his status as a mediator his commitment to a bicultural group challenges the exclusive position of the purveyors of power and control. In *The Jungle Books*, however, Mowgli's capacity to stare down even the most powerful animal in the jungle, places him on the exclusive position of the Master whose gaze commands the submission of those upon whom it falls.

It is evident that, as New Historicists state, literary texts can function as mediators of power and political control. The text consequently can get a political position, literature can get complicit in the operations of power and literary texts can have the capacity of political acts or even historical events. New Historicism gives us means for exploring how literature participates in forming dominant ideologies of a particular time. The critic is given the possibility to reconstruct the ways in which any text interacted with, was shaped by and shaped the society, the culture and the politics of the past. The instrument he/she is given is the creation of that dialogue between texts that eventually prove to share the same assumptions and values. The scope would finally be to identify the ways in which literature acts as a vehicle for power relations and the conclusion – valid for the case of Kipling, too- is that texts cannot escape history, they are products of social and political forces and include ideologies of their time.

Another critical perspective that Kipling's colonial discourse requires for interpretation, which is actually related to that of New Historicism especially in its treatment of the idea of power, is that of Postcolonial criticism. Postcolonial theory deals with literature produced in countries that were once colonies of other countries or with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies and their

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people as its subject matter. Such "acts of cultural articulation" (Suleri, 1995, p.111) are part of the legacy of imperialism, which includes narratives with their specific discourses of colonialism, race and otherness.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is considered the founding book of postcolonial literary theory and criticism. It is a study of race, empire and representation, a critical study of the ways the Occident has tried to objectify the Orient through discourses. Said argues that the invention of the Orient as the object of study was subordinated to imperial hegemonic interests and its perception involved two perspectives, one of knowledge and one of fantasy: Orientalism is meant "to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically as a topic of learning, discovery and practice" (Said, 2003, p.73) At the same time Orientalism is defined as "the collection of dreams, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line"(Ibid). Both perspectives created the discourse of Orientalism, which contributed to the formation of power structures within the text. Said refers to the way the Western colonizing world has created such structures by inventing false images and myths of the Eastern colonized world - stereotypical images and myths that have so conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination of Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures and peoples.

Said's *Orientalism* also refers to the ways colonial literature was used to justify colonialism by promoting the image of the locals as inferior. According to Edward Said, *Orientalism* is an institution for dominating the Orient by means of its discourse within which the eastern "Other" is a silent object, incapable of representing itself. Only the Westerner is allowed to mediate our knowledge of the Orient. Only the knowing colonizer has the power to represent the natives because they cannot represent themselves. In the colonial binary the Oriental is represented as being emotional, decadent while the Westerner is principled and progressive. This "dichotomizing system of representations" (Moore, 1997, p.14) resorted to stereotypes, which viewed the East as voiceless, sensual, female, despotic, irrational, backward while the West was masculine, democratic, rational, moral, dynamic and progressive. This relation between the two opposing cultures was used to justify the civilizing mission of the 'white man' whose destiny was to rule over subordinate people. To take the classical example of Robinson Crusoe, we can easily guess that in his making a servant of Friday, he represents the Other as in need to be civilized and therefore justifies the dispossession of the natives.

Orientalism followed the same regime by subjecting the knowledge of the Orient to the Western dominating style. It seems obvious that the nucleus around which the elements of Orientalist discourse gravitate is power. Following Foucault, Said indicates that the (Western) will to knowledge and to produce its truth is a will to power. After all you master something when you know it. Accordingly, knowledge of the colonized (of the language, customs and religions) had to be mastered and this was not a disinterested

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process. It was subjected to the paradigms of Orientalist discourse and was put at the service of the colonial administration.

One inherent question is to what extent this Western knowledge of the Orient corresponded to reality. Said speaks about a certain estrangement of Orientalist discourse from material circumstance indicating that it is made up of representations "as representations", transmitted from text to text producing an unchanging stereotype of an unchanging Orient. What we get then, is the representation of a Western writer who draws upon previous representations made by other Western writers. Consequently Orientalism is inscribed in what Said calls a tradition of representation, which he also amends because of its misrepresentation of the real in a hegemonic power/knowledge structure. Said argues that Kipling follows the same pattern and in his essay "*Kim*, the Pleasures of Imperialism" he presents Kipling's contribution to what he calls "the invention of traditions" and the "Orientalized India of imperialist imagination" through significant moments in the novel. For Said, *Kim* articulates the hegemonic relations between the colonizer and the colonized during the period of the Raj and follows the absolute division between the white and non-white races (Said, 1987, p.37). In the colonial binary the colonizer is by definition the white European and the colonized the non-white Other. According to E. Said "a young Englishman sent to India would belong to a class whose national dominance over each and every Indian was absolute." This clear-cut distinction is complicated by the case of Kim who belongs to the class of Anglo-Indians but is not on the singular position of the colonist, of the agent of imperialism. E. Said makes no distinction of class among Anglo-Indians, a category that can include anybody from high-level civil servants to the lowest army recruit. Kim's first image in the novel is that of "a poor white-one of the poorest" and we come to wonder if he really belongs to a privileged position. In this case, for Said, race takes precedent over class thus creating an artificial fixity of the binary system. Kim is a perfect example of a problematized identity as he is by blood British but by culture Indian. When Said defines Kim's identity he bases his argument only on the origin of this character (which is also altered as he is Irish by origin) and doesn't consider his actions. Kim's cultural hybridity is, according to Said, a superficial costume imposed on Kim's identity. Kim remains for Said an Anglo-Indian Sahib, not an Indian.

Orientalism did a great service to literary studies by creating new ways of studying imperialism, thereby increasing critical interest in Kipling. However many of its theories are rather controversial. In *Orientalism,* Said attempts to explain that close reading "does not entail what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text's surface" (Said, 2003, p. 20). He indicates surface racism is real and should not be ignored. But a complete exteriority in reading the text is hardly just and a complete analysis should take us beyond the surface meaning.

Robert Young speaks about objections to colonial discourse and he classifies them into several categories. The first objection refers to the restricted number of literary texts used to exemplify and the large historical generalizations based on them. Secondly is

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historicity: colonial discourse analysis dehistoricizes, treats all texts as synchronic; we should not overlook the fact that even if it participates in a discourse, an individual text is still part of a (non) textual history. Another objection refers to the "textual nature of history". Young points out that the analysis of colonial discourse means that analysts consider texts as texts rather as historical documents. On the other hand how can we be sure that the history we read and which is referred to in these texts is the real one and is not biased. Critics such as Benita Parry or Aijaz Ahmad criticized the textualism and idealism of the colonial discourse analysis which overlooks its relation to history.

Another objection regarding the colonial discourse refers to its homogenous totality that overrides the particularity of historical and geographical difference. Said's generalizations tend to be more concentrated on the texts and neglect to a certain extent the great diversity of colonialism with its specific historical and political context. Contextualization is necessary for grasping the peculiarities of each colonial space. Thus we come to realize that this specificity is creating multiple discourses that cannot be equated with the homogenous colonial discourse proposed by Said. For this homogenous character Said's theory was sanctioned as it was applied over different historical periods, on different national cultures (e.g. France and the U.S.), across disciplines and between different writers.

Finally, objections were formulated with respect to the theory of discourse. Generally colonial discourse analysis is defined as the examination of the ways in which this discourse was developed in order to describe, represent and administer the colonial rule. One of the critics of Said's univocal notion of discourse was Homi Bhabha who developed his own theory of colonial discourse by insisting more on the discourse's ambivalence rather than on its fixed homogeneity. In the case of Said it is ironical that although he insists on the uniformity of Orientalism he challenges himself by analyzing the complex and different positions taken by various writers (including Kipling).

Referring to the process of identity formation Homi Bhabha considers that "identity is only ever possible in the negation of any sense of originality or plenitude, through the discipline of displacement and differentiation … that always renders it a liminal reality" (Bhabha, 1986, pp.xvii-xviii). Therefore the Westerner has to descend from his metropolis, from his assumed superior position, he has to descend among the Others, the same way Conrad's Kurtz did, or Kipling himself, in order to get the real dimension of his identity. Identity is after all acquired through a process of similarities as well as dissimilarities. In order to define ourselves we need the Others and difference is what gives us originality and defines our identity. Through this very process of displacement and differentiation we get liminal figures and Kipling is no exception to this. For the case of Kipling relevant is the author himself with his divided self between duty towards the empire and love for the country of his birth, between desire for the Other and fear of the Other, desire to know the mysteries of Indian and fear of going too deep into the world of the Other. The writer's ambivalences result not from a discourse that follows the rigid structure of the colonial binary but from a cross-cultural identification

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that aims at comprising all perspectives. Such identities with their ambivalent character come to undermine the colonial discourse proposed by Said and indicate that colonial power was liable to destabilization.

Apart from problems arising from issues of identity formation, the colonial power was threatened by destabilization given the resistance coming from within. Homi Bhabha identifies three destabilizing reasons. Firstly, following Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Homi Bhabha points out that colonial authority like any other form of power incites "refusal, blockage, and invalidation" (Foucault, 1981, p. 11) in its attempts at surveillance. The result is the instability of the colonial enterprise. Secondly, drawing upon Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973), Homi Bhabha refers to the concept of gaze, which stands for the colonial authority. This authority is troubled by the fact that, to be defined, colonial identity depends on the presence of the colonized Other who is potentially hostile as indicated above. Consequently this brings about instability to the colonial discourse. Finally, following Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1967), Homi Bhabha indicates that the language of power is liable to vicissitudes because it largely depends on the repetition of its fix elements (even there where they are no longer applicable) and on the structure of difference. Yet placed in a different context this language loses some parts of it and acquires new elements from the culture it gets into contact. As Robert Young indicates, the English culture, for example, translated into the alien context of the Indian scene "retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence; it is now a partial presence, a device in a specific colonial engagement, an appurtenance of authority" (Young, 2001, p,114). The same happens with Kim's imposed British identity that betrays its artificiality by the reiteration of the statement "I am a Sahib" meant to assert his superiority. Kim is the colonizer only when he is affirmed this way. When he is with the Lama he is the devoted chela until somebody else reminds him that he is a sahib. Kim uses the vernacular when he speaks to Indians and he also wears the native garb. His identity is apparently Indian until an explicit affirmation is made to the contrary. For example when speaking to Hurree Babu about his plans to play the Great Game, Kim once again reminds him: "I am a Sahib". Thus the stability of the colonial binary is apparent as it is based on the anxious repetition of affirmations such as "I am a Sahib", "never forget thou art a sahib." If not repeated, the colonial construction would lose its meaning given the contradictory and diverse sites that Kim crosses in the process of his identity formation.

Apart from the repetition of fix elements, the language of power shows its artificial construction also by resorting to stereotypes. Bhabha in his essay "The Other Question" (1983) interrogates racism and racial stereotyping indicating that this gives access to an "identity" as much based on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense. The stereotype is characterized as that desire for an originality, which is "threatened by differences of race, color and culture" (Bhabha, 1994, p.75). Therefore the stability of the colonial binary, based on stable oppositions, is complicated by the use of stereotypes which are artificially and continuously reiterated only to better reveal the precarious

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position of the Self when defining in relation to the Other. Homi Bhabha challenges Said's univocal notion of discourse by insisting on the discourse's ambivalence generated by this use of stereotypes that betray the instability of the colonial pattern and undermine its fixity.

Homi Bhabh's theory of mimicry relies on psychoanalytic theories of identity formation such as the device of the mirror for creating the self-image. The result is a kind of narcissistic identification in the image of the colonized as a "reformed, recognizable Other" (Bhabha, 1994, p.86). Such figures can be found in the image of anglicized natives defined by Thomas Macauly as "Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, web source). This "reformed" image insists on difference- not quite white, not English but anglicized- a difference that comes to justify colonial rule. They are poor imitations of the Self, because these "mimic men" cannot ever arrive at the threshold of humanity identified with the colonizer. The result is an ambivalent and self-contradictory discourse, which paradoxically must continuously assert differences in order to consolidate power.

Sander Gilman speaks of the issue of the stereotype as a form of disavowal, as means of projecting the subject's anxiety over the loss of control over the self which results from its splitting into the "good" and the "bad" self (Gilman, 1985, p. 17). Thus the use of stereotype is a means of disavowing the 'bad' self and projecting it on to the Other. Kim, for instance, affirms his superiority over the stereotyped Hurree Babu, the Western educated Indian, who functions as Kim's anti-self. Yet the colonizer ridicules Hurree Babu's stereotyped image and this indicates that the latter is not the exact copy of the intended pattern, but a partial representation, which renders him as an inappropriate colonial subject. This identity clearly complicates the monolithic colonial discourse and moreover it complicates Kim's identity. Kim defines his Self in relation to a stereotyped Other who is neither quite Indian, nor quite English. In the mirroring process, described by Homi Bhabha, the reformed Other can threaten the Self just because it is its reflection and resembles it. So colonial mimicry is both resemblance and menace: the reformed Other is 'not quite white': resemblance is equated to 'white', menace to 'not quite.' In the mirroring process the colonizer emerges as an unstable identity split between desire and anxiety produced by the image of the stereotyped Other. Thus colonial mimicry, as a desire for a reformed Other that is almost the same but not quite, instead of consolidating colonial power, splits the colonial discourse so that, according to Homi Bhabha, two attitudes towards external reality persist: one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates 'reality' as mimicry.

In "Of Mimicry and Man", Bhabha relates stereotyping, imitation and mimicry to ambivalence and hybridity in the colonial discourse. Hybridity is considered a destabilizing factor, a paradigm of colonial anxiety as it undermines the authority of power. Although Kipling signals moments of hybridization that are inevitable in the contact zone between the Western and the Eastern culture, he cannot acknowledge a

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hybrid identity given its subversive effect to the hegemonic discourse. As it is the case of Kim the moments of hybridization shape the identity of character and are developed up to the moment when this hybrid identity is to be acknowledged, yet the writer silences the moment of its recognition and gives no answer to Kim's question 'Who is Kim?' This brings us back to Bhabha's notion of hybridity by means of which the voice of colonial authority is interrogated and reversed and consequently challenges the dominant culture. This is because in the instances of hybridity the single voice of colonial authority inscribes elements of the Other, and consequently reveals itself as double-voiced. Bhabha speaks about a 'hybrid displacing space' that incorporates both the indigenous and the colonized cultures, which, as he suggests, challenges the authority and the authenticity of the imposed imperial culture (Bhabha, 1992, pp.57-58). In another essay, Homi Bhabha even speaks about a 'Third Space', "…*neither the One*…*not the Other*…*but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both" (Bhabha, 1988, p.13). As Robert Young argues, this third term, hybridity, "can never *be* third because as a monstrous inversion, a mis-created perversion of its progenitors, it exhausts the differences between them" (Young, 1995, p.23) and thus Kipling's silence regarding Kim's identify finds its justification.

Kipling's discourse engages in this process of questioning the colonial binary and departs Said's *Orientalism*. Said misinterprets the way Kipling addressed the issues of race and class when defining identities, as well as their relevance in the relation to the problem of hybridity. A close reading of the texts gets us into the writer's playing consciously or, let's assume unconsciously, with signs of identity. Kim is the example of a problematized identity as he is by blood British but by culture Indian (he was born in India and was raised by an adoptive Indian mother, speaking the language and wearing the clothes of the natives). The construction of Kim's identity should be followed in the contradictory and diverse sites of the text itself. The evident signs of his mixedness, foreignness and impurity break down the simple binary of the colonizer and the colonized and disrupt the reading under the singular ideology of Orientalism. Also the presence of Hurree Babu (to whom Said's detailed essay "*Kim*, the Pleasures of Imperialism," devotes only a paragraph, considering the babu's presence a "small practical device" used by Kipling to represent imperial authority) foresees the objection of postcolonial authors to the depiction of the colonized as hollow "mimics" of Europeans or passive recipients of power. Following Foucauldian argument, resistance of the marginalized who thus signal their presence accompanies all manifestations of power. This is also the case of the educated babu whose not quite Englishness provides sites of resistance to the hegemonic pattern of the colonial discourse.

The pattern of the colonial discourse as introduced by Said, latter challenged by several amendments advanced by Homi Bhabha, Spivak, JanMohamend, or Young, has continued – yet in new forms - to be perpetuated by the West in the social, political, economic structures (and in ideological forms of Othering). We hear everyday that we are witnesses to a process of globalization that accommodates cultural differences. We are

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again on a mined field as a certain leveling is attempted which definitely involves interference and change. How much of diversity is sacrificed for the sake of unity? And what gives the reference point for that unity? History has taught us the lesson of colonialism yet some of its misdeeds are perpetuated. Homi Bhabha proposes a concept of cultural difference, which does not aspire to "equality" with the dominant but respects and preserves the peculiar and multiple histories and identities of the historically marginalized.

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