KIPLING'S *KIM*: BETWEEN THE LAW OF THE EMPIRE AND THE LOVE FOR INDIA

Nicoleta Aurelia MARCU[1]

Abstract

R.Kipling's 'Kim' is a journey of self-revelation that seems to lead to a symbolic resolution of the ambivalences of a writer split by his belief in the Law of the Empire and his sympathies with the world of the Other. Kim, the main character of the homonymous novel, is placed between the two worlds and this renders him as a hybrid-like character whose anxiety is generated by his incapacity to accommodate the English and Indian spaces at once. Moments of hybridity can be identified at the level of the text, they are even developed to a certain point, only then to be disavowed and silenced, thus revealing the limits of the writer's attempt to reconcile difference.

Keywords: hybridity, identity, law of the Empire, the Self, the Other

Kim, Kipling's final and most famous novel, published in 1901, narrates the adventures of an Irish orphan in India who becomes the disciple of a Tibetan monk while learning espionage from the British secret service. Against the intriguing background of the *Great Game*, that rivalry between Britain and Russia in Central Asia in the late 19th century, the novel embarks on a journey of self-revelation carries the promise of a symbolic resolution of the writer's ambivalences between two worlds. This ambivalence emerges from the continuous desire to engage with the Other and the constant censorship imposed by the clear-cut colonial binary of the colonial discourse. Kim is the offspring of this love for the Other, though in the end he is re-located in the Wheel of Empire.

Kim, as a hybrid, negotiates and sustains the relationship between the imperial power and the colonial subjects and becomes a valuable tool for the colonial project. However, his liminal position renders him not only as a productive but also as a disruptive figure within the representation of the British imperial project. He can continually redefine himself, being freed of any cultural or racial boundaries of the two spaces (his Irishness and orphanhood make him an outsider not only to Indians but to English imperialists, too). As an outsider he can easily alter his speech, appearance, identity so as to enter or leave an environment whenever he chooses. Yet Kipling considers this flexibility as a boyish pleasure and Kim's existence only as a game and by doing so he somehow disavows the contamination that makes Kim a misfit for the imperial project.

At the beginning of the novel Kim's identity is symbolically suspended in the amulet case that hangs around his neck. He knows that this contains his birth certificate and the name of his father. As long as his parentage is not disclosed he is a free boy without any social status and identity, thus he is not under the control of any society. However the narration intervenes with information and establishes his racial identity too clearly: Kim is

[1] Assistant Prof., PhD., University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Sciences and Technology of Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A29202 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 07:11:37 UTC)

'white', although poor, bazaar fostered and "turned black as any native"; he is 'English' although his spoken English is a "clipped uncertain sing-song."[Kipling, p.1]The narration adds more elements that ascribe Kim a superior position. The fraternity one supposes to exist between Kim and his native friends in the bazaar is clearly upset by this game of claiming possession of Zam-Zammah, the symbol of power: "Who hold Zam-Zammah, that 'fire-breathing-dragon', hold the Punjab." [Kipling, p.1] This game establishes a hierarchic classification of individuals: Abdullah is Muslim and takes precedence over Chota Lal, who, although of extremely wealthy parentage, is Hindu. As the English hold the Punjab, Kim, the 'white' and the 'English', kicks them both off the cannon and asserts himself as the 'king-of-the-castle.' On a small scale he recreates the history of India where the English replace the Muslims who had previously overcome Hindu dynasties.

As the narration progresses Kim is ascribed more elements meant to define his identity. Significantly he gets an official status when the papers held in his amulet case are discovered. This is the solution that the text gives to his in-between position: he was not black enough to be a native, nor white enough to become a Sahib. The white parentage comes to fix his position and in the end of the novel his racial origin wins. However, what seemed like a promise of an exalted destiny, the name of the father gives him only the perspective of becoming a regimented orphan at St. Xavier's at Lucknow. This is actually one of the best schools for preparing the sons of the Empire. Here Kim is going to be trained to become officially a surveyor and unofficially a spy for the Great Game. Although the school is a place of strict rules, Kim finds ways to pursue his pleasures like smoking, he flees into town, visits his lama, even disappears for a three-month holiday. This education is decisive in Kim's transformation into a Sahib, yet the writer doesn't detail it and the narrator even affirms its lack of real interest. [Kipling,p.165] On the other hand, we are given abundance of information regarding Kim's exotic education under Lurgan Sahib, the antiques and jewel dealer, a master of disguise and a hypnotist, a character based on a real person living in Simla, Alexander M. Jacob. It is ironical that, in order to become a Sahib, Kim has to master his liminality and to make a disciplined use of his earlier Self. The two worlds that engage in shaping his Self are confronting in the broken-jar scene, which establishes the relation between them. Lurgan attempts by hypnotic suggestion to make the boy see the broken jar whole again. In his hypnosis he uses Hindi, so familiar to Kim, thus Lurgan addresses the Indian part of Kim's personality. Kim's reaction is one of pleasure, his "blood tingles pleasantly"[Kipling,p.205], yet as this reaction is mastered in Kim's mind by the repetition of the multiplication table which dispels the illusion. This episode foresees the fate of Kim's Self where English logic wins over Indian imagination. At the same time the image of the broken jar is that of Kim's fragmented self that gives him the perspective of the world's multiplicity.

The education at Lucknow, the training under Lurgan, all these have a common purpose: to prepare Kim as a mediator subject between the imperial culture and the colonized one. He is the new type of the Sahib, or as Sullivan called him "a new colonialist with a split sense of the constitution of self"[Sullivan, p.177], who, despite being engaged

BDD-A29202 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 07:11:37 UTC)

in the play of power to consolidate the hegemonic position of the colonizer, becomes a problematized identity. His shifting positions between the two worlds question the truthfulness of his final integration into the structures exercising control over the natives. According to Don Randall, the use of mediator subjects such as Kim, an indigenized white boy, Mahbub Ali, the Pathan working for the Great Game (although his people were in a state of restless insurrection against the British in the 19th century and he outspokenly adheres to the religion and culture of the Pathans), or Hurree Babu, the Western educated Bengali, all these actually reflected a historical situation.[Randall, p.132] Kim's diving into "the happy Asiatic disorder"[Kipling,p.89] is meant to create an image of India that is happy under the Raj especially in the subsequent decades to the 1857 rebellion. India was to carry the message of Victoria's Jubilee celebrations as one big happy imperial family where everyone could coexist peacefully. The policy was meant to produce and maintain peace through an elaborated system of dominating the subject people. This system needed mediators like Kim whose cultural hybridization gave imperial culture access to the colonized one.

As different sites of the text indicate, Indians are stereotypically represented. Thus the narrator states that Orientals lie, "Kim could lie like an Oriental"[Kipling,p.36], while of course "the English do eternally tell the truth"[Kipling,p.188], yet in the book the English are engaged in a massive lie in the shape of the Secret Service. The Orientals are necessarily presented as deficient and inferior to the British. This comparison is always inferring a referent element that is represented by the British standard. The Indians have a different notion of time, motion, sound, sound, order, correct speech, yet all these shouldn't be rated as inferior, as the narration infers, but as different so as the anglicized Afghan of "East and West" suggests: "You come and judge us by your own standard of morality- that morality which is the outcome of your climate and your education and your traditions."[Pinney, p.205] Thus according to the narrator "All hours of the twenty-four are alike to Orientals"[Kipling, p.35], their moves are "swiftly-as Orientals understand speed"[Kipling,p.191], Mahbub "had all the Oriental indifference to mere noise"[Kipling, p. 188], Kim is diving in "the happy Asiatic disorder"[Kipling,p.89] and natives are indulging in "the usual aimless babble that every low-caste native must raise on every occasion."[Kipling,p.184] To offer the counter example and to make the trick of superiority work for sure the narrator describes the efficient use of time of the Maverick regiment setting up the camp. For them it is only "a routine of a seasoned regiment pitching camp in thirty minutes"[Kipling,p.82] but for the Lama it is sorcery. The spell is already made. The illusion of superiority is maintained by the narrator's claim to a special capacity of the Westerners to apprehend time 'objectively.'

The ultimate means by which the colonial project trusts that it can become successful is the culturally hybridized figure of Kim. So far we have learnt what it means (for the British) to be an Indian. Now, together with Kim we learn what it means to be a Sahib. Kim's initial independent status, under no law, allowed him to play freely with the boundaries of race. Although the disclosure of his parentage fixes his position, he continues

BDD-A29202 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 07:11:37 UTC)

to assume a racial indefiniteness when he says to Mahbub Ali,"What am I?Mussulan, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist?"[Kipling,p.193], a question that is counter-pointed by the statement that functions like a recurrent motif, "Once a Sahib, always a Sahib." Kim's liminality is actually what makes him valuable for the imperial project and he is in the gramiscian sense the perfect instrument by which the hegemonic class can exercise power.Kim can cross freely Indian social spaces, he can exchange castes and creeds; he is the Englishman who masters Oriental culture. As he has access from within, India is doubly controlled- by imperial authority through its ordering system and through India's own codes for which Kim is a valuable insider. The knowledge that the Sahibs managed to contain in documents and maps is now completed by Kim's perspective from within the world of India. Kim's election as a provider of such knowledge from within is not accidental. He is a boy, so he represents the perfect alibi for the truthfulness and disinterestedness of the imperial project. However, as the broken jar episode presented him he doesn't have a stable identity, which makes him susceptible to turning into an indigene. At times he is identified and identifies both with the colonizer and with the colonized. Yet, what makes him even more valuable is that he does not suffer from his experiences of going native like the characters in Kipling's earlier stories. The secret is that he is just a boy and he hasn't reached the maturity of his Selfhood so he doesn't have anything to lose. He is just like the wolfish Mowgli who hasn't acknowledged his human side. However the stigma is placed on him from the first page of the book: he is English and he is white and this cannot be erased. Although his fate is sealed at the end of the book, before he gets there his identity is shaped by the experiences he lives at the crossroads of the two cultures. His liminality offers him the chance of occupying the two spaces at once.

Kim also manifests resistance to his newly ascribed position as a subject under the law and order promoted by the imperial policy and this makes him an ambivalent figure. In his initiation to the Great Game he shows signs of resistance and this happens even from the first mission. After carrying Mahbub Ali's secret message to Creighton, Kim eavesdrops upon the confidential discussion between Colonel Creighton and the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Armed Forces, only then to relate the news of war he has heard to a group of Indian listeners. While at St.Xavier's Kim frequently slips out, enjoys the pleasures of the town or visits his lama. These actions actually indicate that Kim is developing his own individuality, as he wants to act also according to his own terms. The ambivalent position of Kim is also followed by the stances that the narrator assumes in relation to the actions he records and particularly, as Don Randall points out, in the relation with Kim. The narrator's ambivalence is betrayed even at the level of the language, by his choice of 'alien' terms that he doesn't mention only once but prefers to repeat them. R. Young calls this the hybridization of a code that actually undermines the authoritative colonial discourse, which after all is supposed to make use only of the language of the ruling class. According to R. Young, the authoritative discourse … must be singular because it cannot speak through the 'double-voiced' effects of 'linguistic hybridization.'[Young, pp.20-22] The narrator resorts to puns such as the word play "yagi" (bad-tempered) with "yogy" (a holy man), which

BDD-A29202 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 07:11:37 UTC)

supports the Bakhtinian theory according to which one voice can have the capacity to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance. The instances of hybridized English such as "tikkut" and "te-rain"[Randall,p.150] can be interpreted according to R. Young both as a fusion that brings together the two elements, but also as maintenance of separation as the two points of view are set against each other dialogically. Yet this is the point where the authoritative discourse is undermined.

Throughout the novel, Kim experiences different roles in search of the one that feels right to him, yet his question, "Who is Kim?" voices the crisis of an identity that cannot identify exclusively to any position. The question "Who is Kim?" becomes "What is Kim?" and this 'what' marks the transfer from Kim's crisis of identity to that of a new India emerging from its confrontation with the Western culture. This question voices the indeterminacies that are inherent to any cultural hybridization in the contact zones of the empire. This question that is left unanswered suggests that Kim hasn't resolved his crisis of identity and thus he is not ready to assume maturity. According to Erik Erikson the onset of the identity crisis is in the teenage years, and only individuals who succeed in resolving the crisis will be ready to face future challenges in life. Kim continues to be under the care of his incompatible 'fathers', Mahbub Ali and Teshoo Lama and he seems condemned to an eternal childhood. As Robert Moss points out, Kim hasn't decided for his loyalties and he leaves conflicts un-reconciled.[Moss, p.141] Instead of solving the tensions Kim is actually re-inscribed in their perpetuation. His unimaginable maturity, his uncoming of age can find an answer in Sara Suleri's assertion that Kim "becomes the image of the colonizer, but one that is elegiacally mourned in the passing of its prematurity."[Suleri, 129] Kim's unsolved identity is that of the empire that cannot accommodate the British and Indian cultures at once. It cannot become aware of such an existence, it cannot assume its coming of age because the time has not come. Thus Kim's identity is left suspended for the moment when history can accept his hybrid nature.

Kim's quest for identity has passed the mundane differences between the two cultures and has revealed the infinite possibilities of otherness which definitely stir the anxiety of belonging in each of us. The lack of an answer and the open end of the novel containing Lama's words and not Kim's, as we may have expected, suggest that Kim is the symbol of a new world that cannot yet get a name. This can be interpreted as a crisis of modernity making Kipling a visionary in his anticipation of the products and responses to the postcolonial condition.

Bibliography:

Don Randall, *Kipling's Imperial Boy*: *Adolescence and Cultural Hybridity*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2001

Kipling, R., *Kim*, Penguin Books, London, 1994

Robert F. Moss, *Rudyard Kipling and the Fiction of Adolescence*, Macmillan, London, 1982

Robert J.C.Young, *Colonial Desire, Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London&New York, 1995

BDD-A29202 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 07:11:37 UTC)

Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993
Thomas Pinney, ed., *Kipling's India, Uncollected Sketches*, "East and West", Papermac, London, 1987
Zoreh Sullivan, *Narratives of Empire, Cambridge* University Press, Cambridge, 1993

BDD-A29202 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 07:11:37 UTC)