A JOURNALIST IN INDIA

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Abstract

In his early approaches to India and in his journalistic work Kipling combined his official view, especially rendered in the journalistic productions addressed to a reading public represented by the ruling class, with a more personal and humane consideration, which was mainly present in his work of fiction and which prompted him to transcend the colonizer's stance. This ambivalence opened him paths to explore both the world of the British exiled community and the world of the natives. Kipling internalized these two perspectives and he was able to see beyond the public version of the British enclosed community.

Keywords: fiction, communities, autobiographical writing, journalism, expatriate

The extensive work that Kipling, the journalist, produced is essential in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of Kipling's vision of India, yet a full analysis would require an exhaustive study given the great number of his journalistic productions. As Thomas Pinney shows in the introduction to *Kipling's India: Uncollected Sketches*, Kipling's Indian journalism raises two problems: inaccessibility and bulk. There are only two extensive files of the *Civil and Military Gazette*, one in the India Office Library in London and the other that belonged to the *CMG* office itself and was donated in 1982 to the National Archives in Karachi. If we add the clippings of Kipling's scrapbooks that can be found at the University of Sussex, then we realize that only a selection of these journalistic productions can help us in order to get the picture of what Kipling's journalism is like and thus we can get more perspectives regarding Kipling's vision of India. Thomas Pinney's collection also offers us material for such a selection and the reading of it should start from the premise that we don't have literary productions but rather items written in the editorial style. They are important for whatever they tell us about the writer, particularly about his vision of British India.

Reference is also made to Kipling's autobiographical writings collected in *Something of Myself and Other Autobiographical Writings* and *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling* Vol. I, both edited by Thomas Pinney, as well as to fictional work that was largely based on the experiences contained in his articles, diaries, letters and autobiographical accounts. The reason is that in the newspaper articles Kipling was somehow censored by his status as a reporter, while in his autobiographical writings, letters, diaries and partially in his fictional work he expressed his views as an individual, and this makes them necessary in getting a complete picture of what India meant to Kipling.

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It is true that Kipling's journalistic productions are not pieces of literature, yet the events that the reporter witnessed were inevitably filtered through the writer's imagination and the touch of fiction was inevitable. Still they should be read for what they are because they offer valuable accounts of Indian life. They show Kipling's avidness of saying something about everything that came under his notice. George Eliot compared the journalist's art to that of the beater of gold leaf, whose business is to make the smallest possible amount of precious metal cover the largest possible area. Kipling embarked on that job and the rigorousness and concentration thoroughly followed in his journalistic productions were the elements that shaped his literary identity and gave his distinctiveness.

The *Civil and Military Gazette* that Kipling worked for was published in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab, a predominantly Moslem city, the center of British administration for the northwestern frontier regions of India. Lahore also functioned as a platform for military expeditions meant to defend the boundaries of empire against Russian advances in Central Asia manifested by their threat of occupying Afghanistan. The number of the British living there was small as it was customary for the administrators to return Home on retirement and consequently their number grew little year after year. At the same time what is important to mention is that they viewed India not as their Home but as a temporary location and consequently they set apart from the world around them and built up a community of their own, which saw itself as living in exile from home. Therefore they were preoccupied with maintaining their living there, as temporary as it was, within safe limits, a prerequisite for being able to fulfill their duties and to carry the machinery of imperial power.

This is the community Kipling wrote for in India and it is no wonder that we find in his articles elements of nostalgia for Home, a nostalgia that was manifested in the translation of local elements with images that functioned as reminders of the lands they left behind. When describing the illuminations at Lahore for Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, Kipling compares the light shining on the exotic outlines of the city with "such a light as one sees at night playing over Brighton from far away on Lewes Downs" (Thomas Pinney, ed., *Kipling's India, Uncollected Sketches*, p.194). Thus the unfamiliarity of those alien spaces was transformed into a familiar land invested with a system of references that Kipling's audience knew very well.

This was the town that Kipling delivered to the readers, yet he was to discover that Lahore was not only the place where a relatively small community of British lived, but also a place that formed several towns, where two hundred thousand Punjabis lived among imposing Munghal monuments ranging from Emperor Akbar's sixteenth century fort to the Mosque of Wazir Khan. Kipling was deeply interested in discovering the local history and culture. He used to explore the shrines of Munghal rulers, which were situated in the gardens where people used to gather on feast days. One of these places, at present a UNESCO

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world heritage site, was the Shalimar Gardens with five hundred fountains built by the Emperor Shah Jehan in 1637. Just like in his story "False Dawn", in the evenings, Kipling used to go there on picnics with his friends. His interest in the native life was also proved by the fact that he hired a teacher to give him Urdu lessons every day and with the help of his father he started to study Persian.

On the other hand, the world for which he was supposed to offer his services was that of an expatriate community. It was flowing every day on the typical broad main road called The Mall from where it filled the offices of municipal and other important buildings, or indulged within the leisure facilities offered by gardens or assembly rooms. The safety of this community was assured by the permanent presence of an infantry battalion and artillery battery in the military cantonment of Mian Mir, which Kipling couldn't have missed. The company of the soldiers was a great pleasure for the young writer given his admiration for the army, but at the same time it gave him the occasion to get inside the life of their barracks which was not as dazzling as those from outside probably imagined. His account of the vagaries of the soldiers' life in the barracks indicates Kipling's deep interest in exploring the world around him to the tiniest detail just like the beater of gold leaf. His inquisitive mind made him observe the life of the soldiers beyond the official reports and thus he became acquainted with the sources of their problems, which were after all matters of imperial safety.

Kipling's routine as a journalist was very demanding and left him little time for his wonderings in the world of imagination. Kipling's duty was to give official news to a readership of officials: reports, speeches of the Viceroy, proceedings of the Government, news around the world, especially from England, local news which concentrated almost exclusively on the English community. Anything happening in the native quarter, the lives of the Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs in Lahore went almost unnoticed by the newspaper. This was the regular way of doing things and Kipling had to follow the rules that had been established long before his arrival. Moreover he was only seventeen, at the beginning of his career when he functioned like a sponge absorbing all the influences coming from outside. It was also a period of experiments for young Kipling, a period that started with editorial notes called 'scraps', only a few paragraphs long, posted on the *CMG*'s front page. They were based on current news and combined the editorial style with descriptions and were not very adventurous.

Adventure was yet to come as Kipling was assigned to a native state called Patiala (April 1884), to cover the state visit of the Viceroy, Lord Ripon, for the opening of Mohindar College. Patiala was one of the Sikh states under the British protection and it was lying on the plains of the Eastern Punjab, some two hundred miles from Lahore. The opening of a school was part of the British authorities plan to promote education in a state

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considered backward from this point of view. The court of the Maharajah, apart from the native luxuries that left Kipling in awe and made him think of Aladdin's Cave, also had objects of Western origin such as the gold-mounted swords given to the Maharajah by the Prince of Wales and Lord Lytton or an album with portraits of Princess Beatrice or the Prince of Wales, as well as all the heroes of the Mutiny and the capture of Delhi.The picture was an awkward juxtaposition of elements of two different worlds; the fact that they were all covered with dust suggests the backwardness of this state and comes to justify the intrusion of the British who assumed the role of promoters of civilization. When Kipling was introduced to this world he had the feeling that he "had suddenly stepped out of the life of to-day and had gone back a quarter of a century at least." (Ibid, p.30) His reaction can be interpreted both as fascination with the exoticism of these Maharajahs, as well as discontentment with the lack of education in the native state that so much contrasted with the lavishness of the court. It is interesting to note the way he reacted to this world in a letter he wrote to his aunt, Edith: "You may say what you like about the decadence of India, but in a purely native state you see what a blaze of jewels and color India must have been." (Ibid) This letter shows a Kipling who departed the official stance he was meant to assume when writing for public consumption and who adopted a more personal attitude, which allowed him to be himself, impressed by what he saw.

The next special assignment took Kipling to the mouth of the Khyber Pass, in Peshawar, to cover the meeting of the Amir of Afganistan with the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin. The encounter was a necessary act of diplomacy. Given the constant threat of the Russians, the British needed a confirmation of pro-British 'neutrality' from the Amir Abdurrahman of Afghanistan, who had returned from the exile to take control of the country. The way the British organized the meeting rose at the level of a durbar where the magnificent imperial pomp and ceremony were fully exposed so as to impress the Amir and thus to secure his allegiance. Nearly a decade later Kipling used it as the backdrop for a story in *The Jungle Books* in "Servants of the Queen" where an old Central Asian chieftain is impressed by the order of the animals march and a native officer informs him that this is due to the effective chain of command, and that the Amir should learn something from this and he should better obey the Viceroy.

The people inhabiting Peshawar were forming according to Kipling a "vast human menagerie": "faces of dogs, swine, weasels and goats, all the more hideous for being set on human bodies, and lighted with human intelligence." (Ibid) This picture of Peshawar was not published in the CMG; it was a personal response to the experiences lived in this city that Kipling called "The City of Evil Countenance". Likewise the following account of the way an Englishman was treated if he fancied to enter that world was not included in the official reports sent to Lahore: "As an Englishman passes, they will turn to scowl upon him, and in many cases to spit fluently on the ground after he has passed." (Ibid, p.83) Such patronizing

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descriptions bear overtones of colonialism and they may suggest Kipling's anxiety of being alone in an alien world surrounded by a crowd of savages whose language he cannot speak and who, despite their temporary acceptance of the benefits of civilization –"security to life and goods, law, order, discipline"- can never be reconciled "to the white stranger within their gates." (Ibid, p.85) *The Civil and Military Gazette* readers had already felt the bitter taste of such opposition from the natives, as the memories of 1857 were still fresh. Therefore Kipling kept for himself his experiences in "The City of the Evil Countenances." The things that he may have reported were the hard work of the police - the symbol of the Government – to prevent these frontier savages from cutting one another's throats and the construction of "the magnificent drain and water main, which run through the main streets" (Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling*, p.144) that also prevented them from contracting more diseases. The machine of the Empire had to show its functionality even at its furthest ends in order to justify its presence.

Another newspaper assignment got Kipling to Simla for the summer season in order to send reports about the British community life to the *CMG*. Simla occupied a very important position, on the political scene as it concentrated the headquarters of the most important official agencies and since 1879 it had been the center of the Army's influential Intelligence Department. Kipling's mission was therefore very important for the *CMG* given the potential that Simla had for news regarding the workings of the machinery of government. Kipling first visited Simla for one month in 1883 and noticed the unlikeness of this world: "Simla was another new world. There the Hierarchy lived, and one saw and heard the machinery of administration stripped bare" (R. Kipling, *Something of Myself*, chapter III).

Simla was also a special place as there the British had created an enclosed, self-sustaining community, which was trying to create a replica of the community left at Home, with parties, dinners, amateur theatricals that were repeated ritually to support the existence of this community. Kipling came back in Simla in 1885 and an affinity with the world of the hill station was soon established as his reports and writings of fiction were to prove. He used the events in Simla as background for many stories in *Plain Tales from the Hills* and some of his characters are also based on actual persons.

Meanwhile, Kipling continued to write and in mid June 1886 he published his *Departmental Ditties* (it included some of the 'Bungalow Ballads' which had been published the previous year and referred to some unfortunate civil servants or army officers living in Simla). These poems were inspired from aspects of Anglo-Indian life and Kipling made this clear from the very beginning as on the envelope he addressed it to 'All Heads of Departments and all Anglo-Indians.' As the British probably liked to read about themselves the book was very successful and made Kipling famous.

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The change of the editor of the *Civil and Military Gazette* was also a very important step in Kipling's evolution. The new editor, Kay Robinson, asked Kipling to write the so-called 'turnovers' (stories of 1500 to 2000 words that began on the first page and continued overleaf). These stories made up the material for *Plain Tales from the Hills*, which offer a sophisticated synthesis of Kipling's attitude to India.

From November 1887 to March 1889 when he left India, Kipling worked for the *Pioneer*. His assignment to the native states of Rajputana in November and December gave him the chance of seeing another India, the more mysterious one of the rajahs, elephants, and palaces. These places had never been absorbed into British India. While they could manage their internal affairs as they wished, the Indian Government controlled their external affairs by means of treaties. Kipling was sent there to write his impressions in a series of formal essays, which were later collected under the name of "The Letters of Marque" in *From Sea to Sea*, Volume I.

When approaching these travel impressions we have to bear in mind the hegemonic relationship that Britain established with these states (even if it was only at the level of external affairs). Kipling was the representative of the dominant party and his accounts should be read also from the perspective of his status in British India. He was to acquire knowledge of the world of India and the way he chose to render it is suggestive of his conflicting tendencies towards the two cultures that got into contact.

The world that Kipling encountered was a strange combination between ancient and modern. The land he stepped on infused him with a sense of history, which he reinterpreted, and gave it new meanings. However the process was mutual: Kipling interpreted the land and the land gave him a thorough knowledge of himself.

Kipling's experience of India was a self-defining process, which made him aware of his divided self between the two worlds. He was the colonizer on a land that he called Home. He didn't fit anywhere completely but this gave him access to both worlds. The people he met, the experiences he had, and the socio-economic-historical situation deepened more his ambivalence but multiplied his perspectives. His early approaches to India in the world of fiction, his much-dedicated activity as a journalist got him closer to this world with whom he developed a deep and personal relationship.

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