THE DEMISE OF THE IMPERIAL FANTASY

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Abstract

It is said that all stories come to an end. The story of the British in India was not a common one. Kipling was part of this story and, like his countrymen, he really believed in this fantasy. This fantasy had very practical grounds and hid economic and political interests. However, this fantasy was soon to be confronted with a mirroring process involving the two cultures, the British and the Indian, whose proximity generated instances of hybridity and alterity that challenged the privileged position of the colonizers and eventually brought about the downfall of the imperial fantasy. It is true that Kipling believed in this fantasy, yet the real reason Kipling believed in and promoted was a humanitarian one.

Keywords: imperial, colonizers, colonized, liminality, hybridity

The characters that were also the authors of the Imperial fantasy left the scene of that far away realm long ago and others took their place. The former really believed in their fantasy and projected their dreams on those realms. Some of these dreams took shape and have endured until present; others have been inevitably diluted by history.

The Englishmen, the main characters of this fantasy, were to build up in the mountains pinnacles of power from where they felt morally entitled to rule, administer and uplift the inferior races whether they wanted it or not. For assuring the success of this project the British had to assure that their presence was permanent. Permanency involved perpetuation and this meant the creation of a self-sustained society for the rulers.

Consequently, apart from the men faithfully serving the Empire, the pinnacles soon hosted their women and children. Preservation and perpetuation of their identity necessitated landmarks to remind them who they were and what their role was. Official institutions were erected and for the education of the ruling offspring, schools were founded. After all, they were to carry on the duties of their parents and they were trained accordingly.

The burden of this project was heavy and in order to lighten its weight they relied heavily on the support of the subject races. The natives supported the British existence in the hill stations as they were doing all the menial work; they built roads, offices and schools. Yet their proximity to the British compounds was troublesome as any mixing with the Other would have spoilt the pure blood of the ruling race and wouldn't have justified their superior position. The reaction of the dwellers of the pinnacles of power was either to project their own dreams on them by envisaging them as noble savages that were guarding their gardens of Eden, or to distance from them by resorting to racial tropes by which natives were seen as subversive elements.

This distancing of the pinnacles of power made them even more appealing to the British community and at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th

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century they reached the highest reputation as social and political centers of the British in India. The fantasy thus became reality.

Kipling approved it, as he believed in its civilizing mission. In his poem "A Tale of Two Cities" he shows his conviction that "Still, for rule, administration, and the rest, / Simla's best" (Kipling, 2002, pp.62-63). But he also observed and criticized fissures of this fantasy: corrupted officials who were supposed to be strong pillars of the pinnacles, like the 'Strong Man' of the Government in "Consequences" who didn't reject an appointment to the Foreign Office, although he knew it had been by black favor. Corruption existed although Churton, the Assistant Commissioner in "The Bisara of Pooree", "was not brought up to believe that men on the Government House List steal - at least little things" (Kipling, 1994, p.266). Threats were coming not only from the inside of the British community but also from the outside.

If the native laborers could be confined in spaces that didn't threat the security of the British areas, this was no longer the case of upper and middle class Indians who, by their social status could have claimed a position within the closed and exclusivist hierarchy of the British society. Moreover, the much more entitled princes and professionals who were coming to the hill stations were adding further concerns to the British regarding the preservation of their community.

Seeing that they no longer enjoyed exclusivity in those spaces, which were their own creation after all, the characters that began the story of the hill stations felt betrayed and gradually left the realm of their imaginations, parting with their dreams, too. They couldn't stand any other position but that of rulers because they hadn't been taught otherwise.

The Indianization of what once were landmarks of empire was an irreversible and inevitable process. The British made hill stations so attractive that they didn't realize what the other side of the coin would be like. Hill stations became attractive for the Indians, too. Lawyers, doctors, civil servants, merchants and other Westernized Indians were attracted to the hill stations in great number. Kipling's snide remark in his poem "A Tale of Two Cities", "the Babu…stealing to Darjeeling" evidenced the hill stations' popularity among the educated natives, and not only. Although efforts were made to prevent the access of Indians to the British residential areas, Indian visitors continued to come, they bought properties and the situation changed so much that as an irony "by 1920s several hotels catered exclusively to orthodox Hindus and Muslims." (Kennedy, 1996, p.211). Servants turned into masters and there was no coming back.

The far-away land of the British fantasy was probably what lured the ruling people there. The aloofness of the highland area inspired them feelings of purity, power and endless bliss. They came to associate these characteristics with their status in the subcontinent and therefore they saw these places as ideal locations to build up their fantasies.

The same appealing character lured the Indians, who, like the British, were searching for places of relaxation in order to escape the routine of their work and to enjoy

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the fresh and cool air of the hills. The guidebooks before the independence present Darjeeling as a heavenly region where "the voice of the silence from afar will whisper into your years and your fancy will lift you up on its wings and carry you to a region of heavenly ecstasy conjuring up an unspeakable sense of the Infinite glory of the Great Unseen Hand behind." (Kennedy, Dane, 1996, p. 213).

If we compare this description with a commercial from the Internet we can see that the same scenic 'points', which once the British admired, which were then magnets for the Indians, bear the same appealing function at present no matter the type of public they address: "Darjeeling conjures visions of serenity, of vibrant green hills steeped in splendor, a land of breathtaking beauty crowned by the majestic Himalayas. Darjeeling is one of the most magnificent hill resorts in the world. This heavenly retreat is bathed in hues of every shade. The flaming red rhododendrons, the sparkling white magnolias, the miles of undulating hillsides covered with emerald green tea bushes, the exotic forests of silver fir - all under the blanket of a brilliant azure sky dappled with specks of clouds, compellingly confounds Darjeeling as the 'Queen of Hill Stations'" (All India Travel Guide).

The British lived with the illusion that those places were impenetrable. That was their mistake. Kipling approved the separation that the British were determined to maintain, but his writings give several accounts of blurring the dividing line between the world of the colonizer and that of the colonized. Apart from their function as simple accounts of facts, they were also intended to warn about the interference of the Other into the space of the colonizing Self. The British perceived this as threatening and soon they were packing their bags and were leaving for Home.

As the British were emptying their spaces, the Indians were soon filling them. They bought properties from the British and send their children to the British schools. The British, on the other hand, because of the lower costs of traveling to Britain, preferred to educate their children in England. The transfer of the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi (1911) was a strong blow especially to Simla because the officials had to transfer their seasonal headquarters to the new quarters in Delhi. During the WWI Simla seemed to revive by sheltering a large number of women and children, yet this was just temporary because after the war they went back Home.

The fantasy seemed to come to an end: the director that staged the whole fantasy was leaving and the main characters were following him, yet the setting remained. Although the setting seemed to have lost its magic for the British, its appealing character endured and the end of the British rule didn't mean the end of the hill stations.

Renewing forces were coming from the world beyond the pale. Independence dawns finally arose; the Indians took over and filled the cast of the story of the hills. They were lured just like the British and are still being lured to these sites. The spirit that gave life to the 'once upon a time' fantasy of the British is probably what attracts them there. Their spirit made Kipling call them "the only existence in this desolate land worth the living" (Kipling, 1947, p.27).

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They represent a different world, set apart from the plains, a world where generally accepted conventions simply cannot apply. As Kipling himself observed, "Simla is a strange place and its customs are peculiar…There is no law reducible to print which regulates these affairs" (Kipling, 1947, p.37). This unlikeness is what made hill stations so appealing to Kipling's contemporaries, a legacy they passed on to their followers.

If one wants to set up on a journey to the hills, he/she will find there millions of summer visitors squeezing into the stations' malls and shops and hotels, seeking relaxation, communion with nature, or adventure. They stroll on the malls of a once exclusive community, row on the lakes or go on short excursions. The hills are the same sites of escape, ideal for honeymoons, places of romance. The spirit of the hill stations has endured. Now they are places where landmarks of former Western authority coexist with the humming mazes of the bazaars.

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