MOWGLI: LIMINALITY AS A PATH TO POWER

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Abstract

In The Jungle Books, Mowgli cannot assimilate the difference between opposing worlds, cannot bridge them. The feral-child feels excluded from both the world of the jungle and from that of the native village and his anxiety inscribes the narration of the jungle stories in the Orientalistic vision of an archaic India that opposes the progress brought about by the colonizers. Moreover, his upbringing in both the world of the jungle and in that of the native village renders him as a hybrid imperial hero who discovers in his liminality the path to power.

Keywords: colonialism, identity, hybridity, liminality, Orientalism, ambivalences, power, control

A study of Kipling's fiction about India reveals the ambivalence of his perspective and this is what gives originality to his writing. This ambivalence arising from the confrontation between the Eastern and Western cultures was part of a historical process through which both worlds were shaping their own identities. Kipling's texts record these tensions and ambivalences, as well as the interdependence between the two worlds, their reciprocal redefinition and Kipling, like his hero in the *Jungle Books*, emerges from this confrontation as a liminal figure situated on the in-betweens of cultures and cultural identities.

As the very title, *The Jungle Books*, suggests, the written word, the 'book' the token of civilization is juxtaposed with the 'jungle'- the environs of darkness, fear and instinct-, thus two worlds are forced to get into contact giving rise to cross-cultural exchange. The main character, Mowgli is the liminal figure, placed on the threshold between these two worlds and his role is to cross the borders and frontiers, to negotiate their tensions. Being a hybrid, more a cultural hybrid, Mowgli incorporates a multiplicity of meanings, but he cannot pacify their contradictions, therefore he leaves the world of the jungle, that of the native village and finally he returns to 'humankind' to accept a steady job in the civil service as a forest ranger. His identification with the various communities he crosses -of India as a 'jungle', of India as a 'village'- is part of his maturation process, which makes him both a productive and a disruptive mediator of the imperial order because he acts both as an agent that assures the strength of the Law of empire, but at the same time he shows the vulnerability of the imperial order, given his rejection from both worlds.

Mowgli chooses to solve the contradictions by acts of violence, which associate the story with the tumultuous episode of the 1857 Indian Mutiny and its aftermath. Mowgli, the hybrid character reshapes and reinterprets the imperial history and he tries to manage the disquieting effects involved by this episode that troubled the hegemonic position of the colonizers. Being a hybrid, Mowgli overcomes resistance involved in the world of the jungle and in that of the village; as he follows his quest for identity he assimilates the multiplicity of meanings of the worlds that he crosses while also

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functioning as a purveyor of the imperial order. Mowgli's individual formation is an allegory of the history of British India, an allegory that is organized upon and also disrupted by the Mutiny, but out of which Mowgli emerges as a representative of the authority of the empire. Thus Mowgli turns to be the new imperial subject that discovers in his hybridization the path to power.

One year before the publication of *The Jungle Books* (1894), Kipling published *Many Inventions*, which contain a story about Mowgli's early manhood, entitled "In the Rukh." Mowgli's position here is significant as he is identified as an imperial hero working under Forest Officer Gisborne for the Department of Woods and Forests. This story functions like a reading key for what is to follow in *The Jungle Books*. Beyond any doubts Mowgli is here the agent of the empire and thus we learn the resolution of *The Jungle Books* before we follow the progression of the narrative. The feral child is to get a wife, confirming his stable position within human community, he finds a job in the imperial service and confirms his status as an eligible imperial subject. The position of Mowgli is self-speaking in the episode of the enchanted glade in the forest where Mowgli is represented as a hero of the imperial imaginary. This position of Mowgli is reinforced if we consider the scene with the glade from the perspective of the two modes of psychic identification that Slavoj Zizek identified as imaginary and symbolic identification. Emphasizing the important role of the gaze in this process of identification Zizek explains that imaginary identification is what we would like to be, an image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, while symbolic identification is that with the place from where we are observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves worthy of love (SZ, p.105). Also Zizek indicates that the symbolic identification is what gives us social meaning and determines our image (SZ, p.108). In the glade episode, Mowgli performs the imaginary identification through the gaze of the dancing wolves whose position shows Mowgli as their master. His symbolic identification is performed through the gaze of Gisborne who comes upon the wondrous image of Mowgli's relation to the wolves and who represents the official gaze. By returning the gaze, "Mowgli turning with his three retainers faced Gisborne as the Forrest Officer came forward" (RK, "In the Rukh"), a mutual identification is performed showing the two as worthy of esteem and thus confirming imperial authority. As symbolic identification overrules the imaginary one in relation to the social status, then we come to understand the glade episode as a consolidation of liminal boy's position as an imperial subject.

In *The Jungle Books* Mowgli will follow the process of his maturation and his status places him between opposing elements: the world of the animal and the world of the human, the world of nature and the world of culture; the confrontation in *The Jungle Books* is not so much about the conflict between Britain and India as between the feral and the human worlds which create the background for Kipling's allegory of the history of British India followed in the destiny of Mowgli.

In "Mowgli's Brothers", the newcomer gradually enters the world of the jungle and establishes his position. Here the female figure, the Mother Wolf, intervenes as she

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adopts and nurses the man-cub, defends him from Shere Khan then she is removed from the discourse and, as the empire is men's business, Mowgli gets under the care of Bagheera and Baloo. The introduction of the female figure followed by her obliteration indicates a tendency of Kipling's fictions of adolescence to separate the feminine from the making of empire. Mowgli's initiation in the Law of the Jungle delivered by Baloo in "Kaa's Hunting", teaches him the "Master Words of the jungle" (R.K., *The Jungle Books*, p.32) which protect and allow him to move freely in the spaces of the jungle controlled by potential hostile jungle creatures. In "Tiger-Tiger!" Mowgli reorganizes the jungle world and turns into its master. His position is more consolidated when he establishes relations with the Indian world of the village: by means of the village bullocks he destroys his arch-enemy Shere Khan and his surveillance and infiltration techniques learnt in the jungle assure his success when he turns against the village in "Letting in the Jungle." A liminal boy, Mowgli makes use of the teachings of both worlds and he uses them to his advantage, thus he emerges as superior to both worlds, that of the jungle and that of the village. He is the ideal imperial subject that has deep knowledge of the world of the natives and knows how to use it for the imperial demands of control.

Mowgli's formation in the space of the jungle is one that foreshadows his place in the official scheme of the imperial order. Primitive values of order, division and exclusion are evoked in metaphors of 'blood', 'hunting', 'herds' and 'packs' that are part of a caste-like system, which, as Baloo shows Mowgli, regulates the social conduct of the Jungle. Mowgli challenges this system and makes the animals rethink their values and customs. The background against which Mowgli's education unfolds is that of the jungle. Actually, if we are to consider Ronal Inden's statement that "the most widely used metaphor" in Indological accounts of Hinduism "is that of Hinduism as a jungle" (R.I., p. 86), then we come to realize that the image of the jungle is that of India and the Jungle Law is India's rigid caste system that Mowgli, as a true representative of the colonizers, challenges in order to confirm the jungle's colonization, a role that has already been anticipated in "In the Rukh."

Kipling's choice of the jungle as the background for Mowgli's maturation process is also explained by the sources that inspired Kipling to write this story. One of them is the Orientalist work of W.H. Sleeman, "An Account of Wolves Nurturing Children in Their Dens" (A.H., p.109) published in 1852, a period when British power became insecure due to the uprisings in southern India. In Sleeman's accounts a boy is reunited with his mother after a sojourn among the wolves; another boy returns to human society but is regularly visited by his jungle acquaintances. Sleeman suggests that Indians' backwardness makes them close kin to the jungle and that they are in constant danger- just like Kipling's Monkey People- to be absorbed into pre-Aryan darkness. Of course that the British mission is to enlighten them and to rescue them from their decay into the jungle state. Another source of inspiration casts light upon the social structure of the Jungle where the Monkey People, outcaste, are despised by the other animals. William Wilson Hunter in *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1872) indicates that in Sanskrit literature, the

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aboriginal Indians, the pre-Aryan castes of India, appear as 'Monkey Tribes', or the 'Raw Eaters' and are despised by the Aryan settlers. In the Jungle Books, the Monkey people are "eaters of everything" (R.K., p.34) who leave their dead to the vultures. Baloo, the high caste bear, warns Mowgli about their shallow nature and his comment echoes the Aryans contempt for the 'aboriginal' Indians, men of 'inarticulate utterance' and 'uncouth talk'(A.H., p.110): "They have no speech of their own, but use the stolen words which they overhear when they listen, and peep, and wait up above in the branches. Their way is not our way. They are without leaders. They have no remembrance. They boast and chatter and pretend that they are a great people about to do great affairs in the jungle, but the falling of a nut turns their minds to laughter and all is forgotten."(R.K., p.35)

However, the presence of Mowgli comes to challenge the Jungle Law and its caste system; his kidnapping inevitably makes the Jungle approach the despised Monkey people. Mowgli thus breaks the circle of the caste system and makes Bagheera and Baloo realize their errors and their limits in employing the Jungle Law and their ignorance regarding the possibility of any upheavals such as those generated by the Monkey people. To overcome the crisis Baloo is forced to resort to Kaa, the rock python, feared by the Jungle and legendary among the *Bandar-log*. Kaa is not a mild negotiator and his mystical, hypnotic powers that are feared even by Bagheera and Baloo, present him as an authoritarian power suggesting that the *Bandar-log*'s claims to be accepted by the Jungle must be recognized but they are not allowed to undermine the Jungle Law.

The other world of Mowgli's identity formation is that of the native village. The Indian village is on a subordinate position to the jungle, as it is a lawless space, with childish Indian villagers, superstitious and easily transformed into a vindictive mob by the hunter Buldeo. Mowgli associates them with the Monkey people showing his annoyance with their laziness and chatter: "Chatter-chatter! Talk, talk! Men are blood brothers of the *Bandar-log*." (R.K., p.198) Mowgli is not allowed to get a secured place in the world of the villagers who think that instances with wolves obeying a man are "magic of the worst kind" and consequently reject Mowgli as a "sorcerer (and)…jungle-demon." (R.K., p. 69) The representation of the village as a place of superstitions and its resistance to the Law brought by Mowgli is an Orientalist representation of an old, archaic India that resists the progress brought about by the British. However the villagers' resistance brings about their destruction and Kipling chooses to solve the conflict between the two worlds by an act of violence. If nature is subdued by the killing of Shere Khan, the irresistible force of modern imperial power, which stampedes the village, destroys the archaic world of India. Although no villager is killed, they are forced to leave their homes and as the title of this story suggests, "Letting in the Jungle", the jungle grows over the ruins of the village. This 'letting in' of the jungle upon the village suggests the position of the village within the jungle world, in a subordinate position, similar to the representation of Indian society by the Raj as one subordinated to the British colonial administration.

Mowgli's process of maturation meant to assert him as the holder of power also has to be challenged by trials that he has to overcome in order to consolidate his

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overruling position. Even though he is a hybrid and he is supposed to mediate cultural differences, the discourse of *The Jungle Books* cannot accommodate an India that resists the changes brought by the British domination. Thus the relation between Mowgli and Shere Khan attains a symbolic value as it represents the confrontation between the archaic India and the modern imperial hero. Not by coincidence the name of the tiger, Shere Khan is also the name of a 17th century Afghan chieftain who invaded the subcontinent and who is considered the founder of the Mughal Empire. (P.S., p.28) The name of the tiger also recalls the name of the Emir of Afghanistan, Shir Al Khan, who in 1878 refused to receive a British mission in Kabul and when the British attacked from India he fled to Russia for help where he died. Unlike the Afghan chieftain, Kipling's Shere Khan is lame and old, yet very dangerous and subversive like the Emir. Being lawless, he is an outsider of the wolf pack, of the jungle and of the village. He assumes an ancient right of killing the Man who, according to the story told by Hathi (the old elephant) in "How Fear Came" set in motion a series of events that produced Fear then subsequently the Law. The Man is the purveyor of the Law and Shere Khan is the subversive element that attacks it. By killing the tiger Mowgli performs his colonial duty and consolidates the power of the Law. Moreover if we interpret the confrontation between Mowgli and Shere Khan through the myth of the 'white tiger' we can see how colonial discourse found justification for the colonial rule by drawing upon and inscribing new meanings to the history of the colonized. According to Sujit Mukherjee, tigers and tiger slayers are key figures in the British imperial mythologies. The myth of the 'white tiger' coming from the North is associated with the Aryan tribes that are believed to have entered from the North and conquered India thousands of years before the British did. (S. M., p.78) By killing the tiger, Mowgli re-enacts an episode in the history of the colonized, repeating a 'white' conquest. The confrontation with Shere Khan initiates the conquest between conquerors: the modern British Empire and the ancient Aryan invasion. By killing Shere Khan, Mowgli rightfully becomes the tiger's successor and the position of the imperial power is consolidated.

The confrontations for leadership in the jungle with the young wolves rallying with Shere Khan against Mowgli are in fact allusion to the 1857 Mutiny when all Indians, Hindu and Muslim alike, most rebelling Indian kings and the Indian regiments of the Sepoys looked to a figure that could unite them. This was Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last of the Munghal emperors in India who after the Mutiny was exiled and died in Burma. The same way the British put an end to Bahadur Shah symbolic kinship and concluded the Munghal rule in India after three centuries, Mowgli puts an end to the tiger's pretensions to power. Mowgli uses the skin of the tiger to show his position as master of both the world of the jungle and of the native village. However, as Mukherjee warns the myth-tiger never dies. It is that continuous fear of the colonizer that he cannot comprehend the spirit of India that he cannot dominate it; so the myth-tiger in the British imagination continued to show its subversive presence and it had to be shot again and again. Not surprisingly Mowgli is faced with new sites of resistance even in the native village where

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the fangs of the archaic tiger take the shape of the villagers' superstitions that make them cast Mowgli out of their community.

Thus, if "In the Rukh" Mowgli, as a liminal figure, can experience a pacified union with the world of the Other represented as a tamed world under his control in the image of the dancing wolves, in *The Jungle Books,* Mowgli cannot assimilate the difference between opposing worlds, cannot bridge them; to attain control he resorts to acts of violence the same way his predecessors did to crush the Indian mutineers. Unlike Kim who manages to cross the opposing worlds and pacify them, necessarily under the prevailing and beneficial British rule, Mowgli questions this vision as he feels excluded from both worlds: although most animals in the jungle are loyal to him, he cannot change them and he has to leave; the same way the superstitious and backward native village cannot accommodate him. Although Mowgli's actions confirm the validity and viability of the British rule, the anxiety regarding the unchanging character of the Indians is permanent. It is like the myth tiger that never dies and the tale of the rebel has to be told again and again and the tiger has to be killed every time the narration re-enacts the treachery. The colonial discourse has to perpetuate the power structures and any resistant elements have to be silenced even if this is to be done by acts of violence. According to Robert Young "Colonization begins and perpetuates itself through acts of violence which become the necessary, indispensable events of imperialism's agonistic narrative of desire." (R.Y., p.173) Thus the acts of violence in "The Jungle Books" present an India that resists change and emphasize again the gap between the two worlds. It is only in the idyllic narrative of "In the Rukh", which significantly is not part of the jungle stories, that a utopian union between the two worlds can be contained in the figure of Mowgli.

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