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A POSTCOLONIAL AND ECOCRITICAL READING OF *THE JUNGLE BOOK*: THE NOVEL AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS

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Abstract

This paper aims to trace the trajectory of inter-semiotic exchanges between Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) and its film adaptations by Disney in 1967 and 2016 and by Netflix in 2018. It attempts to understand the continuing appeal of the story despite its uninhibited portrayal of the colonial context. The depiction of anthropomorphic animal characters in an Indian jungle in the late 19th century whose lives revolve around a human baby implies a colonial heterotopia. Kipling's Mowgli- the "man-cub" adopted by wolves of the Jungle, trying to fight off a man-eating tiger Shere Khan is reincarnated in a jovial manner in Disney's 1967 production. The animated movie is far from Kipling's original text in creating an appealing cinematic experience with catchy songs sung by animals. It is removed from the plot of survival strategy of the animal kingdom as presented in the book. Targeted at a young audience, Disney's Mowgli is more human than feral and is shown with a presumed superiority over the animals. The 2016 version of live-action *Jungle Book* portraying a real boy of Indian origin running around in a CGI jungle frolicking with simulated unreal animals has problematic tones too. An ecocritical reading of the 2016 film has also been attempted to elucidate the film's depiction of environmental manipulation and destruction in the contemporary Anthropocene. Despite its many attempts at improvements, interpretations and interpolations the *Jungle Book* has remained a colonial text in all forms. The paper attempts to study the imperialist agenda which is the connecting link between Kipling and Disney productions.

Keyword: Intersemiotic, Film Adaptation, Palimpsest, Rudyard Kipling, Mowgli, Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism,

Introduction

Adaptations from the textual medium to the filmic or televisual one open up new grounds for the study of intertextuality and inter-semiotic exchanges of themes and ideas. Ever since its

publication in 1894, the man-cub Mowgli's character from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* has enthralled audiences (including children and adults) from the globe cutting across cultural and linguistic barriers. The text has gate-crashed into the domain

of popular culture through its multiple adaptations into film and television; of course, there is no denying of the fact that these adaptations have entailed numerous modifications and interpolations to the book's original texture which ultimately turns into a semiotic palimpsest. Despite multiple modifications, the text still retains evidences of Kipling's colonial and racial politics, in its glossed-over, multiple reworking of the Mowgli story, even in the cinematic format. The book's most popular film adaptations include those by Walt Disney Productions in the years 1967 and 2016, and by Warner Bros in 2018.

The maverick story of a boy being adopted by wolves, and ultimately growing up to master the wild animals and dominate the wilderness, has remained an appealing idea for the text's consumers across different media spaces, despite its immensely problematic content. The unhindered colonizing agenda is carried from Kipling's *The Jungle Book* to Wolfgang Reitherman's animated film in 1967 and from this animated version to John Favreau's 2016 live-action CGI film. In addition, the same story has also been reproduced by Andy Serkis in a Motion Capture performance format of cinematography in 2018 with an emphatic but inconsequential claim of its closet semantic proximity to Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

In this context, this paper attempts to analyse and explore the grave and detrimental, racial, colonial and imperialist undertones imbued within each text of different semiotic medium, and also to explore the ecocritical dimension of each text where Nature in the subcontinent, along with its human population, conjointly become subject to colonialist exploitation.

Rudyard Kipling, infamous for his quintessential imperialist inclinations, and hence, a fit subject of critical censure by many non-western postcolonial critics, is the creator of Mowgli, the man-cub who could be called colonial India's 'boy who lived' and lived to rule. Likened to Hitler by H.E Bates for his "love of the most extravagant form of patriotism, flamboyant stage effects and sadistic contempt for the weak" (111), Kipling nevertheless manages to make his presence felt with immaculate

creative acumen that resonates through several semiotic adaptations of his texts. Even though his flamboyant writings craftily disguise his strong imperialist predilections intended towards achieving camouflaged political ends, his clandestine imperialist political agenda manifests in the films by Disney Productions, which exude their archetypal racist propaganda evident in the films like *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*. The Warner Bros production *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle*, by dint of its conscious adherence to Kipling's dark and sinister storyline, becomes the unconscious carrier of the colonial contexts along with their inherent exploitative predilections. They convey serious racial and colonial insinuations upon closer reading that their respective author-directors consciously or subconsciously continue into the film during the process of filmmaking. While delineating the complex repetition/erasure/repetition processes involved in the act of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon notes: "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying" (7). While films produced by Disney perform the act of erasure of the brutal animality of Kipling's story and convert it into a fanciful tale where Mowgli is loved and revered by the beasts of the jungle, The Warner Bros' adaptation described as "gritty, dark" by Netflix (who own the rights to the film) is a tribute to the true essence of Kipling's text.

Postcolonial Reading of *The Jungle Book*

Reading *The Jungle Book* and its adaptations in the film medium in the 21st century in India opens up ground for postcolonial interpretation. None of these texts were produced in India despite being located in India and having Indian characters. As an established writer of the Empire, Kipling was torn between his nostalgic love for India of his childhood and loyalty to England's mission of colonizing the world. (McBratney, 291) His conflicted allegiance to both the nations manifests in the form of conflict in the story of Mowgli. The man-cub is shown to be unsuitable for the savage world of the jungle despite being raised

as a wolf by the wolves. Kipling's *The Jungle Book* reflects his belief in the geopolitical hegemony of the "white man" who took upon himself the "burden" of colonizing and civilising the savages who he calls "Half-devil and half-child" in his poem *The White Man's Burden*. (Kipling, 2013)

In the tale of man versus wild, Kipling pits the natives of the jungle against the superior human race where man wins in the end. The villain of the story is Shere Khan, a royal Bengal tiger who kills men and their cattle. The text and the film adaptations portray him as the blood thirsty beast who has his eyes set upon the 'man-cub'. The portrayal of Shere Khan with his physical description and his Persian origin name bears resemblances to the Mongol plunderers like Genghis Khan or Kublai Khan. This is a proof of the occident's colonial perspective that visualizes the oriental natives as wild, savage and in need of execution if they cannot be civilised and tamed. While the 1967 Disney movie reduces the powerful villain into a funny caricature driven away by Mowgli with a tree branch, the 2016 Disney and 2018 Warner Bros adaptations attempt to tap into the true spirit of Kipling's Shere Khan. In all these texts Mowgli takes the place of the white colonizer in the form of the protagonist who is an Indian boy. He participates in a power struggle with Shere Khan to take control over the jungle and its inhabitants. As Sujit Mukherjee emphasizes in '*Tigers in Fiction: An Aspect of the Colonial Encounter*'(1987), the tiger and the tiger-slayer are significant figures in British imperial mythologies. The tiger is

"clearly reminiscent of the fair complexioned Indo-Aryan or Caucasian tribes who are believed to have entered from the north and conquered India several thousand years before the British did... Particularly when we recall the nature and range of human qualities attributed to the tiger by Anglo-Indian writers of fact as well as of fiction — memory, cunning, vengefulness, to mention only three — we shall realize that the tiger represented some enduring spirit of India that the British felt they had failed to subjugate." (Mukherjee, 11)

Thus, the killing of Shere Khan by Mowgli marks an act of conquest quite similar to the overthrow of the Mughal rule in India by the British only to take over the nation and rule it themselves. Kipling borrows the fearful yet reverential image of the tiger from William Blake's poem "*The Tyger*" (as can be seen in the name of the chapter's title "*Tiger! Tiger!*") and creates the hateful image of a man-eating monster. Kipling takes the inspiration for his villain from the sport of tiger hunting by Anglo-Indians and this colonial antagonism gets invisibly transferred via the visual means of film adaptations. In the 1967 Disney adaptation, the conflict begins with the wolf pack discussing the arrival of Shere Khan in the jungle which endangers the life of Mowgli. The tiger is shown in a villainous light because he hunts for prey and has been straying into the man village whose borders were continuously infringing into the jungle. This could explain the reason behind Shere Khan's changing hunting grounds. Moreover, the agony that Khan undergoes at the hands of man is taken for granted. A contrapuntal reading of Shere Khan's behaviour would reveal that he was the acting protector of the jungle situated at the top of the food chain and man's interference in the jungle ecology is the sole reason why animals began to be endangered.

The series of movies that have been made on Kipling's *The Jungle Book* shows the fascination of the first world audience for the exotic. This trend could be termed 'Raj revivalism' in Salman Rushdie's words that goes on to re-create the adventurous imperial childhood that Mowgli has in the Indian jungle. Yet, the racism behind the process of filmmaking goes undetected. The colonial memory that is preserved in texts like Kipling's is revived again and again through adaptations carried out by producers and directors located in first world countries like the United States of America who are unaware of the reverberations of colonialism that still exist in the commonwealth nations. The first Disney adaptation (1967) used an all-white voice cast for its characters while the director of the second movie John Favreau cast Neel Sethi, an American boy of Indian origin who ran around in a CGI jungle frolicking with non-existent VFX animals. The Netflix owned movie directed by Andrew Serkis

also cast Indian-American boy Rohan Chand who acted along with actors none of whom were Indian or of Indian-origin despite playing characters of Indian animals. In the politics of recreation of a text that belongs to the Empire, these filmmakers are doing what Kipling did- creating a hybrid. Kipling's hybrid identity owing to his pastoral childhood in India and his extreme faith in the British Empire gets transferred onto Mowgli who was a man as well as wolf. The movies that are reworkings of the Mowgli stories cast Indian-American actors. The hyphenated existence of Mowgli's character and the actors who play them places them in the realm of hybridity. A colonial anxiety is produced in the character of Mowgli who is split between his need to dominate and his desire to be accepted by the natives, who in this case are the animals of the jungle. Similarly, when Neel Sethi or Rohan Chand play the characters, despite their much-admired acting skills, interstices open up to reveal their hybridity in their American accent and gestures. They mimic a white person's interpretation of what Indian behaviour would be. Except the young boys playing Mowgli, there has been barely any Indian presence in the cast or in the people involved in the process of filmmaking. Despite the efforts to make the 2016 Disney film inclusive of people of all races and colours by casting Idris Elba as the voice artist for Shere Khan and Lupita Nyong'o for Raksha- the mother wolf, the film still remains a product of white cultural supremacy. Disney did not cast any Indian actors in the English version, thus lacking in the authentic feel of Indianness. Bollywood actors like Priyanka Chopra, Irrfan Khan and Om Puri were cast for the Hindi language version somewhat reducing their roles to secondary voice artists. Even the 2018 adaptation has Indian actors simply giving their voice to animal characters whose physical appearance was designed in VFX inspired from the facial and physical features of English actors like Benedict Cumberbatch and Christian Bale who played the roles of Shere Khan and Bagheera respectively.

Exchange of Racist Propaganda

Postcolonial analysis of this text sheds light on the prevailing and transmitted racist hegemony across its various mediums of adaptation. In the book, racism is evident in the clear division of

different species – man, jungle people, monkey people - and the distinctive spaces they inhabit. The racial division is first realized between man and animal and then between superior animals like Shere Khan, Kaa, Bagheera, Baloo, the wolf pack and inferior marginalised animals like the *bandar-log*. Amongst all these racial divisions, the human race with their weapons and fire-power qualify as the most superior by Kipling and the filmmakers. In all the texts of *Jungle Book*, the most horrifying representation of racism is in the portrayal of the *bandar-log* or the monkey people. They are shown to be the subject of utter disgust of all animals and are topographically placed away from rest of the 'jungle people'. The ape is misunderstood for being an ape. The *bandar-log* or the monkey people are shown to crave man's power of the 'red-flower' i.e. fire power. The segregation in the forest among the *bandar-log* and rest of the animals is seen when Baloo, the mentor and teacher of Laws of the Jungle to the Sionee pack of wolves forbids Mowgli to associate with them. He says that,

I have taught thee [Mowgli] all the Law of the Jungle for all the peoples of the jungle—except the Monkey-Folk who live in the trees. They have no law. They are outcasts. 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. We of the jungle have no dealings with them. We do not drink where the monkeys drink; we do not go where the monkeys go; we do not hunt where they hunt; we do not die where they die.

This racism is transferred into the movie adaptations when Disney introduces the character of King Louie, the leader of the monkey people who sings "I wanna be like You" to Mowgli. He sings:

I wanna be like you

I wanna walk like you, talk like you, too

You'll see it's true someone like me

Can learn to be like someone like you.

His song represents the discrimination and inferiority of the *bandar-log*. This racism is carried forward from Kipling to Reitherman and Favreau, the directors of the Disney films. The popular earworm song sung by King Louie is a representation of how coloured people are perceived to crave civilization and white man's power of industrialisation which in this case is the fire power. The first casting choice for Disney's King Louie – a Gigantopithecus, a species of orangutan not native to India – was Louis Armstrong who was an influential American jazz artist. Even the song writers Robert B. and Richard M. Sherman wrote the song "*I wanna be like You*" with Armstrong in mind. Later in order to avoid controversy of casting a black jazz singer in the role of a singing ape, Louis Prima was chosen. The following lines that he sings,

Now I'm the king of the swingers/Oh, the jungle VIP

I've reached the top and had to stop/ And that's what botherin' me

I wanna be a man, mancub/ And stroll right into town

And be just like the other men/ I'm tired of monkeyin' around!

Oh, oobee doo/ I wanna be like you

I wanna walk like you/ Talk like you, too

You'll see it's true/ An ape like me/ Can learn to be human too

are reminiscent of the African swinger style of singing. Yet, this style of singing by a white person turns into a parody of the original Swing music that was popular in the African-American traditions of slave songs, ragtime and blues. Thus, the portrayal of the *bandar-log* singing about how they want to be like men by a first world production house like Disney situates the African-American jazz singers in the place of monkeys. The racism transfers from Kipling's implication of Indian natives as monkeys to the slandering of African population by Disney. In

the reproduction of a colonial text, target of racism shifts from Indians to Africans who have both had a long, painful history of slavery and bondage at the hands of the white colonialists. Such a colonial text despite its several adaptations across media and across the time period of over a century is bound to have racial bigotry since their point of origin are one and the same.

The question that now arises is of the intended reader and receiver of the intersemiotic exchanges between the text in print and film media. According to Harish Trivedi, in his essay *Reading Kipling in India*, Kipling could not have addressed a large part of the Indian population because "one-third of the population is still illiterate" and "no more than one percent of the total population can, or is likely to, read a book in English for pleasure." (189) The readers that can read *The Jungle Book* would be students with access to English medium education or English as a second language. Hence, in 1896 the targeted readers of Kipling's texts were the Anglo-Indians and their kids who were to grow up to live and lead in the colonies. The various Laws of the Jungle became an aid to control and shape the future citizens of the Empire. Thus, the colonizing mission gets carried over in the form of children's literature that has now been adapted into films.

Ecocritical Reading of *The Jungle Book*

The human act of pillaging the earth for its resources is a form of colonisation of Nature. It is essential to study the consequences of human actions on the planet in the ongoing Anthropocene and its representations in literature. Studying the invisible exchanges in *The Jungle Book* and its film adaptations involves focusing on the 'jungle' of *The Jungle Book* because it is where the natives i.e. the animals are located. Since human and non-human interaction forms the crux of the text and its adaptations, an ecocritical reading will elucidate the repercussions of environment manipulation by Mowgli. Greg Garrard says in the first chapter of his book *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* that ecocriticism:

[h]as turned towards a more general cultural ecocriticism, with studies of popular scientific writing, film, TV, art,

architecture and other cultural artefacts such as theme parks, zoos, and shopping malls. As ecocritics seek to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture takes place. (4)

The term Ecology coined by Ernest Haeckel literally means the study of household as its Greek root *oikos* (which translates to “household”) suggests. In *The Jungle Book*, the arrival of Mowgli disrupts the balance of the jungle ecology which is the home of the natives. It begins the process for rupture of the entire jungle system since Mowgli is more man than a wolf. The jungle is governed by the ‘Law of the Jungle’ in a manner that restrains animals from hunting humans. A strict adherence to the Law by all animals renders Shere Khan an anomaly. He preserves his true animality by hunting whoever, wherever he pleases. The Darwinian law that works in nature is the survival of the fittest. Yet, the Law of the Jungle “forbids every beast to eat Man” because “man-killing means, sooner or later, the arrival of white men on elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gongs and rockets and torches. Then everybody in the jungle suffers.” (Kipling) The Law situates man above the animals and their jungle and out of the jungle food chain. This creates a tension among the animals who are bound by the Law when they encounter Mowgli – a man-cub with “man” being a distinctive part of his identity. The book and films present nature in a manner that accommodates to man’s need, in this case Mowgli’s needs. Since ecocriticism examines the exploitative attitude that humans have always had towards nature that “nature exists to serve the human race” (Nayar, 249), such a reading of the text reveals how jungle people readily stood by Mowgli whenever he needed their assistance. Raksha adopted Mowgli as one of her own cubs when Shere Khan wanted to kill him and Bagheera and Baloo choose to help him remain in the wolf pack by voting for him in the Council meeting. In the book Baloo takes the responsibility to mentor Mowgli and teach him the

Law of the Jungle. When Mowgli was abducted by the *bandar-log* Kaa saves him. The whole jungle world revolves around Mowgli and is engaged in keeping him alive. The one creature who is not awed by the only human in the jungle is Shere Khan and hence becomes the villain of the story. Shere Khan, the royal Bengal tiger, is aware of the consequences of human intervention in nature. The 2016 version of Disney adaptation presents a side to Shere Khan that looks out for the preservation of the jungle. Khan who has been previously burnt by man’s fire says, “Does my face not remind you what a grown man can do? ... Well let me remind you- a man cub becomes a man and a man is forbidden!” Man is forbidden in the jungle because of his ability to endanger all non-human species. In the same movie Mowgli uses “tricks” to get things done. These “tricks” are Mowgli’s natural human instincts that allow him to manipulate the natural environment for his ease. In a scene where Baloo asks Mowgli to climb a high hill and get him honeycombs so that he can feed before he hibernates for the winter, Mowgli cuts vines and tree branches and fashions a harness. He removes all the honeycombs and stacks them in a cave. This is an exhibition of a typical human characteristic of gathering food and storing them for later consumption at the cost of environmental destruction. The filmmakers in order to show the human side of Mowgli create a scenario for the destruction of ecosystem by making him remove almost all the honeycombs. This destructive act endangers the bees of the forest.

Man’s ability to make fire and control it places him apart and above the animals. The use of fire in all the texts of *The Jungle Book* distances Mowgli from his animal identity since it endangers the entire forest. In Kipling’s text, in the chapter “Mowgli’s Brothers”, upon being turned away from the wolf pack Mowgli threatens both the wolfs and the tiger with fire and asserts his human nature. He says,

“There is no need for this dog’s jabber. Ye have told me so often tonight that I am a man (and indeed I would have been a wolf with you to my life’s end) that I feel your words are true. So I do not call ye my brothers any more, but sag [dogs], as a man

should. What ye will do, and what ye will not do, is not yours to say. That matter is with me; and that we may see the matter more plainly, I, the man, have brought here a little of the Red Flower which ye, dogs, fear.”

He then threatens Shere Khan by saying,

“This cattle-killer said he would kill me in the Council because he had not killed me when I was a cub. Thus, and thus, then, do we beat dogs when we are men. Stir a whisker, Lungri, and I ram the Red Flower down thy gullet!”

and beats him with the burning branch. Mowgli also attacks the wolves burning their fur in the process. This vicious picture of Mowgli- the man-cub, more man than a wolf, represents his destructive side that endangers not only the animals but the Sionee jungle too. John Slater from the Kipling society notes that the chapter “Mowgli’s Brothers” was originally set in the Aravulli (now Aravalli) hills area of Rajputana which is a dry tropical region. Careless use of fire by Mowgli in such a region threatens to burn the forest destroying its flora and fauna. In the 1967 animated film, Mowgli drives Shere Khan away by tying a burning branch to his tail who runs away into the visibly dry forest. This act puts the forest at the risk of fire. While in the second Disney adaptation, Mowgli sets the entire jungle on fire in his pursuit of Shere Khan. The whole jungle is engulfed in fire while Mowgli and his friends battle with Shere Khan who ultimately falls from a tree branch into the raging flames below. With passing time each adaptation shows the precarious situation that the environment is in due to destructive human activities. In the 2018 Netflix adaptation *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle* Bagheera and Akela are shown to realise the effects of man’s colonisation of the jungle. The men start to encroach more and more into the jungle with each passing day which predicts the animals losing their own habitat. In Kipling’s text, the village and jungle are described as, “At one end stood a little village, and at the other the thick jungle came down in a sweep to the grazing-grounds, and stopped there as though it had been cut off with a hoe.” The jungle ending abruptly and human village

beginning right at its edge that seemed cut with a hoe shows the process of deforestation that has already begun.

Unlike the Disney movies that strays away from the gruesome reality of human beings, Netflix’s dark adaptation portrays a British hunter and taxidermist John Lockwood who has a penchant for killing Shere Khan. He has a studio filled with preserved and mounted animals which fills Mowgli with disgust. Lockwood’s character is inspired from Kipling’s text that had an Indian hunter Buldeo who wanted the hide of the tiger. This adaptation is close to Kipling’s text and shows Mowgli as the protector of the jungle both from the men and the tiger. The wolves are “afraid of what man might do to us” and are also afraid of Shere Khan who has disrupted the wolf pack. The jungle people asking for help from Mowgli to save themselves from the infringing actions of humans and from Shere Khan, who is vengeful because he is aware of the destructive potential of Mowgli-a man, has problematic undertones. Here the colonizing agenda gets forwarded when the natives seek the help of the coloniser to save themselves from the actions of other colonisers and also to save themselves from a tyrant of their own kind.

Conclusion

Along with destruction of environment, Kipling’s text and its film adaptations by Disney and Netflix present the effects of colonisation. Each film adaptation in its own way has tried to make the text politically correct. Yet, the story’s imperial flaws resurrect themselves in one way or other. The story of Mowgli still delights because it is a story that lies in the intersection of the coloniser and the colonised. The boundaries between the two are ambiguous and awkward. These texts are written and filmed more for a first world audience than the third world post-colonial audience. The mimicry of the first-world ex-coloniser can still be seen in the stereotypes created in the all films. The choice of actors or the representation of animals constituting the monkey people and the jungle people only contributes to the complication initiated by Kipling. Masked under excellent story-telling and modern cinematography, lies the objective of imperialism

that aims to control the Other and its environment. Mowgli is situated in the grey area of the Other and the Self. This paper was an attempt to track the course of colonial complications of Kipling's story that turns into postcolonial tension with each film adaptation.

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