



A BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF RUDYARD KIPLING'S WORKS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KIM

POORVA TRIKHA

Associate Professor, MCM DAV College, Chandigarh, India



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ABSTRACT

Works by Rudyard Kipling, one of the most famous British writers of the twentieth century, remain as current and fresh in the present times as they were a century ago. Kipling's power as writer can be estimated from the highly prestigious reputation that his works still enjoy in the present academia and the present generation of readers. Kipling tired his hand at almost all forms of English literature including poems, short stories, novels and children's books. His fame chiefly rests upon works of fiction like *The Jungle Book* , *Kim* , *Just so Stories*, *The Man who Would be King* and poems, including *Mandalay* , *The White Man's Burden* and *If*. Going back to the formula given by Taine that literature is determined by "le race, le milieu, et le moment" ; the present paper undertakes a historical biographical study of Kipling's works with a special emphasis on the novel *Kim* which is considered by many to be his masterpiece. The complete understanding of a writer's work cannot be obtained unless the writer himself and his psychology are properly understood. I have attempted to analyse Kipling's works with reference to his personal experiences to establish that most of his successful works emerged out of his intuitions and circumstances that he faced in his life.

Keywords: Rudyard Kipling, Nobel Laureates, *Kim* (novel), Biographical criticism

Joseph Rudyard Kipling was an English writer chiefly known for his works on the British rule in India. He was born in Bombay, presently called Mumbai to a British Family on 30 December, 1865 to Alice Kipling and John Lockwood Kipling. His mother was a lively woman and his father was a sculptor and pottery designer who went on become the Principal of Architectural sculpture at Sir Jamestjee Jeejebhoy School of Art in Bombay. Kipling was named after the Rudyard Lake in Staffordshire, England which his parents loved as a place of beauty. Kipling's parents considered themselves Anglo-Indians and the complex issue of identity and nationality was a prominent feature in his works as the writer himself wrote in his autobiography. Kipling later wrote a poem on Bombay which exhibited his feelings towards the city, a few lines of which read,

Mother of cities to me

For I was born in her gate
Between the palms and the sea
Where the world-end steamers wait.

He was taken to England along with his sisters at the age five. He was sent with his sisters to England to live with the Holloway couple at Southsea. He later recorded the neglect he suffered in his autobiography. The cruelty that he suffered in his childhood was reflected in "baa, baa, black sheep". After living with the couple for some time he then went to United Service College at Devon. It was the school which provided him with the material for his schoolboy stories entitled *Stalky & Co.*

It was at this school the he met a girl named Florence Garrard who was his sister Trix's friend. Like most of his works picked up characters and situations which he had faced in real life, the

character of Maisie in his first novel *The Light That Failed* was modelled on Florence.

When it was realised that Kipling lacked the academic ability to pursue his higher studies at Oxford along with the fact that his father lacked the financial requirements of his education, it was decided that he would go back to India. His father called him to India and procured for him a Job in Lahore where he worked as a Principal of Mayo College of Art and also as the Curator of Lahore Museum.

At Lahore, Kipling worked as an assistant editor of a newspaper – the *Civil and Military Gazette*. It was this newspaper which he called “mistress and most true love.” Kipling also published his first verse collection called *Departmental Ditties* during this time i.e. in 1886. Kipling’s family used to visit the Indian hill station called Simla, every year for a month and it were his experiences of the place that is seen often mentioned in many of his works. Kipling’s very next work to get published was a collection of short stories entitled *Plain tales from the hills*, which was published in Calcutta in 1888. Later, Kipling went on to work for a bigger newspaper called *The Pioneer* in Allahabad.

His literary output was at a tremendous increase in 1888 when six collections of short stories by him appeared. Kipling decided to go to London early in 1889 and sailed towards his destination in March. His journey to London via countries like Rangoon, Hong Kong, Japan and United states and his experiences of these places appeared in his book *From Sea to Sea and Other Sketches, Letters of Travel*. W. L. Renwick points out that:

Kipling came to London as ignorant of the literary and artistic circles, their ways, their manners, their intellectual habits and intentions, as they were of his. . . . You will find among the verses in *The Seven Seas* many traces of early conflicts and some of the reasons for them and in the story called *My Son’s Wife* and *A Diversity of Creatures*, a later and much less happy attitude to his fellow artists .(5)

Kipling also wrote some horror stories when he was young. The horror of things is seen in mysterious *Bubbling Well Road*, *Bertran* and *Bimi* where there is the half - human ape who out of jealousy hideously kills the owner’s young wife. The

impact of his own psychology is seen in most of his works and can be related to his age and living conditions.

While in London he published a novel *The Light That Failed* and also the novel *The Naulakha*, which he wrote in collaboration with the American writer Wolcott Balestier. In 1892 Kipling married Balestier’s sister Carrie in London. The couple went to Unites states for their honeymoon and settled at a house named *Bliss Cottage*. It was at *Bliss Cottage* that Kipling wrote *The Jungle Books*. The setting and the kind of environment required for writing the *Jungle Books* was provided by the house and thus could be seen as emerging our of those specific situations which the writer faced.

The family then shifted to another house of named *Naulakha* in honour of Wolcott. Kipling lived happily there till the disturbance between United Kingdom and Venezuela over British Guiana arose. The dispute went on to become a major Anglo-American crisis and Kipling felt uncomfortable as a British citizen in America as that time. Hence he decided to move out and go to England. By 1896, Kipling was back in England and settled at Devon, in the south England. It was here that Kipling wrote his most famous poems like *Recessional* and *The White Man’s Burden*. From there he went on to visit South Africa and Sussex.

Kipling was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907. He also remains the youngest recipient of the award to this date. The prize citation said: "In consideration of the power of observation, originality of imagination, virility of ideas and remarkable talent for narration which characterize the creations of this world-famous author." Nobel prizes had been established in 1901 and Kipling was the first English-language recipient. The honour of being the British Poet Laureate and Knighthood were also proposed to him whom he reportedly declined or refused to accept.

In 1910 Kipling’s story collection *Reward and Fairies* was published which contained his most famous poem titled *If*. Kipling mentioned in his autobiography that the poem was inspired by Dr Leander Starr, who was the leader of the movement the Jameson Raid by British Forces against the Boers in South Africa. Jameson’s life and the connection to the poem are thoroughly covered in the book *The If*

Man: Dr Leander Starr Jameson, the Inspiration for Kipling's Masterpiece by Chris Ash. A prominent Indian writer Khushwant Singh wrote in 2001 that Kipling's *If* has "the essence of the message of The Gita in English."

World War I broke out in 1914 and it saw Kipling supporting the United Kingdom's war aims. Kipling scorned irresponsible men who lacked action and sincerity towards their duty in the First World War. He wrote *The New Army in Training* in 1915, in the same context. Kipling's own son John died at the Battle of Loos in 1915 at the age of eighteen. John's death seems to be manifested in the poem *My Boy Jack* written in 1916 and also in the play *My Boy Jack*. Partly due to the grief caused by his son's death and partly otherwise, Kipling joined Sir Fabian Ware's Imperial War Graves Commission. He also wrote the history of his son's regiment the Irish Guard in two volumes in 1923. His frequent visits to the war cemeteries gave birth to the short story *The Gardener* and the poem *The King's Pilgrimage* in 1922. The autobiographical elements in his works become evident when one goes back to trace the origins Kipling's works. The inspiration for the most part comes from his own life's events and happenings.

Kipling died of a perforated duodenal ulcer on 18 January, 1936, aged seventy. Kipling's reputation has never mellowed down since. T.S.Eliot, a Nobel Prize Laureate himself edited – *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* in 1943 and commented that "Kipling could write great poetry on occasions – even if only by accident", thereby resurrecting the long gone writer and also reinforcing the idea that Kipling's best works emerged from specific occasions in his life.

Kipling's popularity has seen several phases. By 1892 some critics spoke of him as "written out" ; by 1909 he was probably at his zenith; in the nineteen-twenties and thirties he was, if not forgotten, one whom to approve was to confess oneself outside the pale of serious students of literature. T. S. Eliot could write of him as a "neglected celebrity". Five years after Kipling's death, H.E. Bates drew parallels between him and Hitler in his 'love of the most extravagant form of patriotism, flamboyant stage effects and sadistic contempt for the meek'. As for his style it was all

termed as 'tinsel and brass' by Bates. But the fact remains that even the critics who condemn his work cannot escape the sheer weight of his excellence. An example in the present case is Amit Chaudhuri, who had attacked Kipling roundly in his work 'but later acknowledged that 'Kipling is a very great writer.' Another great writer of the twentieth century, Henry James said that "Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius (as distinct from fine intelligence) that I have ever known."

Kipling had been accused of one thing again and again which is the imperialistic strain in his works. One of the major writers George Orwell went to the extent of calling him a "prophet of British imperialism". Along with Imperialism Kipling has been accused of sadism. Dr Henn, who understood the accusations on Kipling in detail and analysed his works, concluded that "his writing is at its best when he employs the medium of a persona who speaks in Urdu, Pushtu, and even medieval latin." i.e. his oriental connection. With this perception Dr Henn regards *Kim* as the summit of Kipling's achievement.

Kim has indeed been considered Kipling's Masterpiece by many critics. It happened to be the first Indian President Jawahar Lal Nehru's favourite book. It was specifically in *Kim* that "Kipling has established the contrast between the East, with its mysticism and its sensuality, its extremes of saintliness and roguery, and the English, with their superior organization, their confidence in modern method, their instinct to brush away like cobwebs the native myths and beliefs... we have watched the oscillations of *Kim*, as he passes to and fro between them (Wilson 30)."

In the fall of 1899, having finished with *Salky & Co.*, Kipling turned again to *Kim*. As regards to the origin of the novel and the biographical aspects involved in it, Kipling wrote:

It grew like the Djinn released from the brass bottle, and the more we explored its possibilities the more opulence of detail did we discover. I do not know what proportion of an iceberg is below water-line, but *Kim* as it finally appeared was about one-tenth of what the first lavish specimen called for . . . The Himalayas I painted all I, as the children say. So also the picture of the Lahore Museum of which I had once been

Deputy Curator for six weeks- unpaid but immensely important. (Kipling 139)

The novel was initially published serially in McClure's Magazine from December 1900 to October 1901 as well as in Cassell's Magazine in 1901. Kim was first published in book form by Macmillan & Co. Ltd in October 1901. The backdrop of the novel is formed by the political conflict between Russia and Britain, also known as The Great Game. With the political situation in the background the novel traces the journey of an approximately thirteen years old boy Kim, who is a chela or disciple to a Tibetan Teshoo Lama. It is a picaresque novel where both the preceptor and the disciple set out on a journey across India: The lama in search for his river of Arrow and Kim on his quest for a Red Bull in the Green fields. There is a detailed portrait of people and places in India. "The eye is caught by a whole kaleidoscope of race, caste, custom, and creed, all seen with a warm affection that is almost unique in Kipling."

Kim has many occult elements like the one manifested in the character Huneefa who is a sorceress who performs a devil invocation ritual to protect Kim. The reason for inclusion of such mystic elements in the novel can be found in Charles Carrington's statement that "The desire to penetrate the occult exercised a strong fascination over Rudyard throughout life, an attraction which he resisted, not altogether successfully (362)."

It is the India of the beginning of twentieth century that finds its adequate picture in the novel. The views of the writer about India can be grasped from a line from the book, "Kim dived into the happy Asiatic disorder which, if only you allow time, will bring you everything that a simple man needs." Partick Brantlinger points towards the autobiographical element in the novel in the comment that, "In his most successful novel, he wrote about a boy whose enjoyment of 'happy Asiatic disorder' matched his own." Further he points out that "Among all of Kipling's writings, Kim best expresses the ethnographically curious, tolerant and even admiring side of Kipling – that is, Kipling at his best. Though he (Kipling) called his masterpiece 'nakedly picaresque and plot less'. . . (138)"

The autobiographical elements in the novel Kim are clearly seen in the character of the curator of the Lahore Museum which is based on Kim's father John Lockwood Kipling who was a curator himself in Lahore. The very opening lines of the novel which run as:

He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammah on her brick platform opposite the old Ajaib-Gher – the Wonder House, as the natives call the Lahore Museum. Who hold Zam-Zammah, that 'fire-breathing dragon', hold the Punjab, for the great green-bronze piece is always first of the conqueror's loot. (1)

The gun which is described in these lines is an existing piece called Zamzama which is situated in front of the Lahore Museum and is also sometimes referred to as Kim's Gun.

Throughout the novel Lama is in search from his River of Arrow and Kim goes out in quest of a "Red bull in a green field" which is later seen as a military formation sign of a bull on a green background. That formation sign is still used by a military formation in Ambala Cantonment in India just like the way it belongs to an establishment in Ambala in the book.

J.M.S Tompkins points out that in the art of Kim was one of the books the Daemon was concerned in, that is, it was a work of inspiration as distinguished from one of keen interest and craftsmanship. It was 'a thing imposed from without', but no claim is made for it as a 'built book', and it is described as 'nakedly picaresque and plot less' (2). A very similar view is held by Brander Matthews who wrote that wherever "his intuition was whole, as in Kim, in which the artist conquers the moralist and buries him deep underground, he is nothing short of superb: his symbols clothe his intuition so that we take it for flesh and blood."

Since multiple religions are shown in the novel, many have tried to analyse which religion Kipling himself believed in. As regards the religion of Kipling Bonamy Dobree points out "But the most cursory reading of Kim shows how much he respected the faith of the Lama; and in that book he speaks scornfully of the Protestant parson, Bennett, who looked at the Lama" and calls him 'Heathen'."

He ends with a gently satirical touch at the unimaginativeness of the European visitor, and his materialistic preoccupations.

Many comparisons have been made between Kim and E.M. Forster's passage to India due to the fact that both the novels are based in India and both the writers exhibited deep understanding of the Indian culture. However, in the opinion of Francis E Krishna, "there is no doubt in my mind that Kim is a greater work about India than Passage to India and my contention is borne out by Nirad Chaudhuri and K.R.S. Iyenger as well as a number of other Indian critics." While some consider Forster's understanding to be superior and others vice versa, Thomas Humphrey Ward states that "He (Kipling) has given evidence of knowledge of Indian life which and its phenomenal in one so young." Kim shows Kipling's sensitivity towards India. Critics have also tried to find out the reason for wider popularity of A Passage to India amongst Indian readers or why is Kim or Kipling's works in general remain unread.

In the similar context George Orwell has expressed the dilemma stating while talking about Barrack Room Ballads that "How complete or truthful a picture has Kipling left us of the long service, mercenary army of the late nineteenth century? One must say of this, as of what Kipling wrote about the nineteenth Century Anglo-Indian, that it is not only the best but almost the only literary picture we have." Thereby highlighting the importance of a writer as Kipling who is considered as a faithful chronicler of that age.

Another critic has pointed out that part of what gives Kim's delight in India is its author's confidence in the rightness and permanence of British Rule i.e. his faith that shows in the text. Edward Said writes in Culture and Imperialism that Kim inhabits 'parallel universes' in order to draw the analogy between Kipling's world and Kim's. The novel has been taken up for discussion and study by various writers and critics and many of them have pointed out towards the imperial strain in the present as well as the other works of Rudyard Kipling; especially after the advent of the new literature.

Kipling remains a favourite of many readers of English literature and many of his contemporaries

too. James Joyce once stated that three writers of the nineteenth century who had the greatest natural talent were Leo Tolstoy, D'Annunzio and Rudyard Kipling. He further stated that all three of the, has semi-fanatic ideas about religion and patriotism.

CONCLUSION

Kipling was indeed a fantastic writer whose works continue to be read and researched on. His own personality has been considered very complex and enigmatic. According to my study of his works and his biography, I have strongly felt the element of autobiography prevailing in his works. Though Kipling's works consist of fiction and contain many unreal elements but the personal element lies not in the narrative but behind the narrative i.e. the origin of it or the inspiration that lay behind the writing of a piece of work. Kipling's works have had to face mixed reactions but the overarching fact remains that his popularity has not diminished. His works have been better understood in light of his own experiences. A writer cannot be isolated from the era he lived and produced in and such a phenomenon is impossible to be separated from the works and life of Kipling. Kim stands out from his works for the sheer beauty of the metaphysical aspect in the novel and the outstanding description of India and its people. His works have been adapted and continue to hold mesmerizing power over its readers. They are the chroniclers of history of nineteenth and early twentieth century and therefore the historical context becomes a very prominent part of any study carried out on Kipling's works.

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