

## Legitimizing the Empire: A Postcolonial Reading of the Representation of Afghanistan in Rudyard Kipling's Story, "The Man who would be King."

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### Abstract

The project of Empire building and its consolidation has carved out knowledge base, narratives and ironic tropes that have been resonated in the discourse even after the end of European colonialism. Joseph Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) was the first English man and the youngest Nobel laureate in literature in 1907. For his utterances, he was also called the Nightingale of British Empire (1). Through his fiction, poetry and journalistic works, Kipling has painted a parochial and stereotypical image of the orient generally and Afghans particularly. The themes created through his fiction have become the matrix to contextualize the East. As a poet, he not only sings about the glory of English empire but also considers it a natural duty bestowed from the heaven to accomplish the civilizing mission, to reach out to all the people who are unlike the Europeans. He created a peculiar 'Us' (West) and 'They' (Rest of the world) through perpetual journalistic, literary and political channels. "The Man who would be King", portrays a picture in totality; the short story, deals with the idea of empire building and its justification which seems highly problematic in postcolonial context. Kipling's portrayal is based on Eurocentric belief which merely conforms to the western minds. The native characters are depicted with sheer mockery; they are presented as unruly, chaotic, ignorant, uncultured, instincts driven and hence uncivilized. Kipling's portrayal of this specific sub-cultural unit as exotic and barbaric deduced a remedy to be colonized. Kipling believes that the white men must ordain and fulfill their duties to humanize the unruly Afghans through their civilization mission. The article analyzes the text of the story through qualitative research methodology and re-creates a true picture which is stemmed in objective historicism.

**Key Words: Afghan's image, Postcolonialism, Empire, Subjugation, Civilizing Mission, Rudyard Kipling.**

### Introduction

Postcolonial theory questions the colonial representations of the natives in the colonial texts. The theory finds such portrayal highly problematic. Moreover, Postcolonial theorists and critics dissect the complicated relations of colonizer and the colonized. McLeod (2000) noted that literary works produced by colonial authors who have historical stakes in the colonized lands. The term Postcolonialism is referred: "... to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.(2)

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In this process, the natives were demonized, devalued and dehumanized and as a result, are denied their freedom to live with what they have created during a historic-cultural process. The empire concealed its prime motives of economic exploitation, gain of political power and social control of the colonized subjects. The British colonial raj not only colonized the territories but also constructed visceral ontological categories of the people (3).

The reshaped identities categorized the colonial subjects through races, casts, faiths and languages. The native majority was dehumanized in several ways. The colonizers presented the Eurocentric perspectives of the colonial history and culture. Writing and literary texts were used as instruments and colonial tools to establish and consolidate the empire.

However, the development in critical thought in the latter part of 20th century not only questioned the colonial depiction but also gave an intellectual response to the perspectives of colonial representations. Marginalized and suppressed voices of the natives were listened and valued.

The story, 'The Man who would be King' was published in 1888 with Kipling's other stories in the Phantom Rickshaw. Although all his tales are aimed to create metaphors and tropes of 'Us' and 'They', but this story is much alike his 'Amir's Homily' which portrays Afghans with acute subjectivity and prejudice.

There are two main characters of British white descent in the story that are on the way to one of the regions in Afghanistan, Kafiristan (Nuristan). Two individuals start their journey and hide their weapons in luggage secretly passing the border in the caravan. When they reach Afghanistan; they are disguised as holy men. Local people started considering them as gods or some supernatural beings. Their plan is to make their empire by using religious disguise. They almost become successful in making their empire there but Dravot's desire to get married failed the plan completely. Eventually, Dravot was killed by the local people, but Peachey reached Lahore safely with the crowned head of Dravot. He had to tell the whole story.

In the story, Dravot succeeds in making a kingdom and empire in Afghan territory and planned to follow Alexander the Great. As he says, "I'll make an Empire...I am the son of Alexander by Queen Semiramis"(4). Dravot and Peachy wanted the prestigious positions. They were trying to make an empire of their own, but they were rejected. Kipling's main point here is that with weapons, knowledge of the area and military skills, one can achieve the high positions in the far-off and distant territories in the east.

Being in Kipling's chamber, two companions, Dravot and Peachy see Kafiristan in maps and charts. Showing the whole idea of colonization, he states that if a person knows how to train a nation is to engage them in mutual fighting, then it becomes easy to rule natives as a ruler. Therefore, the main thought of the two to be kings is to go and train the local people and teach them war. Following this strategy, they would be able to conquer one territory after the other. Moreover, Kipling tells us the effective role of weapons and military skills in making of an Empire.

## Literature Review

Colonialism is a territorial settlement and exploitation of natural resources. It attempts to rule the native inhabitants of occupied lands (5). Colonial authors depicted the natives with an implicit bias and prejudice. The study of Kipling and his contemporary white writers paint a gloomy and dark picture of the 'others' (non-Europeans). As Kipling (1914) presented

the Afro-Americans with racial hatred and bias in his 'American notes', he was very indifferent and subjectively judgmental while portraying the Negroes. He condemned being a Negro in the free land of the brave people. This confirms his utter dislike for the Afro-Americans. In these notes, Kipling attached dehumanizing and inferior status to the black Americans (6).

Furthermore, Kipling (2014) in the short story 'A Sahibs' War' compared the shadows of Hubshis (Black people) with pollution and called them animals (7). Attaching animalistic qualities to human beings were very common in the colonial texts.

Rudyard Kipling's famous poem 'The White Man's Burden' envisions the projection and extension of the British colonial raj's hegemony as 'civilization project'. The first stanza of this poem reads as under:

Take up the White Man's burden -  
Send forth the best ye breed -  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need;  
To wait in heavy harness  
On fluttered folk and wild -  
Your new-caught sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child (8).

These lines justify the hegemony of the white men and subjugation of the native people. The last line of this stanza got a metaphorical significance in the colonial and postcolonial discourse in which Kipling negated the native people's social and cultural evolution and concludes that they are 'Half devil and half child'.

Even the title of the poem suggests racial hatred towards the non-white races of the world. Moreover, the poet asked the white man to enlighten the people in the east with western culture and manners of living.

Social and ideological construction of the colonized subjects lay at the core of the colonial texts. Superiority of the white race and colonizer is asserted through the texts in multiple ways. Colonizer and the colonized interactions are based on domination and submission respectively. In the novel 'Kim', the native character like Mehubub is depicted in stark contrast to the white colonizer. He is shown some unruly and an uncultured being (9).

Similarly, 'The Ballad of East and West' by Kipling had the same idea of dividing the world into two binaries. Kipling attributed superior status to the West and white race whereas the East was presented with negative images of savages. The relation between the strong and the weak is noted as the key theme of the text. English, as 'self' was praised and held in high esteem. For example, the native character in the poem could become civilized by becoming the part of empire (10).

Scott (2014) studied Kipling's Novel 'Kim' and noted many images depicting and showing negative stereotypes and notions about the Orientals (the Indians). Such depiction of the natives reinforces the idea of western superiority and dominance (11). Therefore, considering colonized inhabitants as devoid of civilized attitude who needed the help and support of the white colonizer.

Sharma (2019) took the same position on Kipling; especially Kipling's praise and love to General Reginald Dyer who is known as 'the Butcher of the Ameristar'. The columnist has quoted the story of the newspaper 'Morning Post' which launched 'General

Dyer Fund' on July 8th, 1920. The raised fund of about 26000 pounds was presented to Dyer on his return to Britain in the same year. According to Kim Wagner, a senior lecturer in British Imperial history at Queen Mary University of London, Rudyard Kipling donated ten pounds to the fund on 17th July 1920. The news item further said that those who contributed to the fund have approved the inhuman and cruel action of General Dyer. The columnist further wrote, when Dyer was buried in 1927, Rudyard Kipling 'The Poet of Empire' sent a wreath with the inscription: "He did his duty as he saw it"(12). Wagner noted that it is evident and clear that Kipling was supportive of General Dyer and his inhuman act. Therefore, writer like Kipling if approves such acts, suggests that for the interests of the British Empire everything is justified even killing the peaceful and unarmed native protesters. Their lives had no value and worth and have no right to raise their voice even peacefully.

### Analysis and Discussion

A thorough study of the story concludes Rudyard Kipling's staunch belief in the upper hand of the white race over the rest of the races in the world. He created an orient which is needy, poor, ignorant, cultureless and colorless and through the white's men civilization project; he presumes that this emptiness is needed to be filled. But behind the civilization project, there is his innate desire of the extension and justification of the British colonial raj. The terror, violence and ruthlessness caused by the colonialism is legitimate because the native people must unlearn their ways and they have to learn the ways of the white men.

As civilizations and cultures nurture in certain period of history and evolve as a result of interaction with other cultures, the people learn, re-learn and unlearn in a due course of historical and cultural processes, but the colonial masters had ordained a self-given responsibility to themselves to teach others, those who don't seek their lessons were naturally to be punished and controlled. In a nutshell, civilization project was aimed to manipulate the cultural ecology for their political and economic gains.

Imperialism was all about control and hegemony; they wanted more natural resources, cheap labor and markets to sell their goods and services. The most effective way to subjugate the people is to alienate them from their history, culture, language, oral tradition and overall way of thinking. Kipling's civilization project finds the way to attack the native's world views and then replace it with the contents of the white's man civilization project. It creates a peculiar alienation and culture of silence in the native population, as Brazilian educationist Paulo Friere wrote that in such circumstances the oppressed starts thinking with a naïve consciousness (13).

As Kipling states in the story "...Indian isn't big enough for such as us."(14) Further, he puts forth all the important accessories of an empire to be built and extended beyond the conquered lands to the other places like Afghanistan and its far-off areas.

In this respect, Said (2006) argued that Europeans always make proper planning and develop systematic knowledge about any territory or race to be colonized and conquered (15). Therefore, Rudyard Kipling being a typical orientalist follows the footprint of this ideology; that is to study the unknown and unexplored areas, their cultures and customs through certain means like books, maps and charts as Kipling states here:

*and require to see Books and Atlases, and we have decided  
that there is only one place now in the world that two strong*

*men can Sar-a-whack. They call it Kafiristan. By my reckoning it's the top right-hand corner of Afghanistan(16).*

Furthermore, the two characters in the story intend to know the social and political order of the native people. They see and note the tribal rifts and clashes in their society as fault lines. Mutual wars and conflicts are considered opportunities for them to be availed and utilized for their imperial designs. By helping one chief against the other provides them another opportunity to penetrate more into their social and political order. Hence, they adopt divide and rule policy (famous imperial strategy) which makes the natives internally weak and fragile “The more tribes the more they’ll fight, and the better for us”.(17) Such policy is used by the colonizer in all the colonized lands because it provides the colonizer a great opportunity to snatch their political authority and power from all the native and local chiefs. In this way, they themselves become kings easily as Kipling writes in the story, “Then we will subvert that King and seize his Throne and establish a Dy-nasty”(18). Kipling’s works always carry the idea to train and teach the non-white races and to inculcate into their minds that peace and stability is only possible by adopting the English (the white colonizer) political, social and cultural structures. Otherwise, the native cultures and social order teach nothing but barbarism and backwardness.

Kipling develops the dichotomy of Master and slave here. He is not ready to give the local people equal status in the scheme of things because the white English men are born superior and the “others”, the natives are Inferior.

*...Dravot gives out that him and me were Gods and sons of Alexander, and Past Grand Masters in the Craft, and was come to make Kafiristan a country where every man should eat in peace and drink in quiet, and especially obey us (19).*

Last words in the passage are noteworthy which carry the idea of superiority of the white race that if the native wants peace and progress; that is only possible to become obedient to us. Progress and development could only be achieved through English empire. Kipling’s “Us” refers to the developed and rational West (English race) and rest of the races come in the category of “them” which are lesser humans and who are in dire need of the white colonizer. If anyone stands against the empire, he is to be tagged uncivilized and uncultured and hence deserved to be physically terminated or tamed to follow.

Kipling’s most popular works were figured out during the heydays of Great Game which was to stop the Russian colonizers beyond the Indian borders adjacent to Afghanistan. He remarks that the defense of the colonial borders is an unparalleled sacred duty to the soldiers of British Raj:

“Two hundred and fifty thousand men, ready to cut in on Russia’s right flank when she tries for India!” (20).

Kipling’s so-called civilizing mission does not end at a certain point. His expansionist passion transcends the physicality, and he creates a mythicized ontology for the Raj’s superiority.

As in the story, Dravot establishes his kingdom in one of the far-off territories in Afghanistan. He proudly wishes to hand over the crown to Queen Victoria, who was the Empress of India.

*When everything was ship-shape, I’d hand over the crown—this crown that I’m wearing now—to Queen Victoria on my knees, and she’d say: ‘Rise up,*

*Sir Daniel Dravot. ' Oh, it's big! It's big, I tell you! But there's so much to be done in every place—Bashkai, Khawak, Shu, and everywhere else. (20)*

But for Queen this is not enough rather she wants the Empire to be extended to all over-all the unexplored territories on the surface of the earth. More importantly, the two phrases in the quote “*every place, everywhere else*” are noteworthy here. These phrases carry the long-cherished dreams of Rudyard Kipling and of every white colonizer. They believed to extend the empire to all the corners of the earth. This was their biblical mission to teach, train the rest of human races who were suffering in the fire of backwardness and ignorance. Kipling was staunch supporter of this belief; though the covered agenda was to search the gold and riches “...the gold lies in the rock like suet in mutton.”(21)

Though the setting of the story is far-off Afghan territory, the native characters are not given due voices rather they are shown as pawns, as silent followers, shadow and listeners of the white characters. They are shown unable to manage their affairs smoothly and plainly and that they need the support of the white colonizer to manage the affairs as well as to restore peace among different tribes. Without the colonizers' help, they would keep on fighting over petty things. The native people are shown illiterate and unaware about all the aspects of life. Even they don't know how to cultivate the land that was also to be taught by the white master to them.

Kipling paints the border area in very negative words and calls the Pashtun tribes robbers, looters and dacoits. Border area is portrayed where to rob, kill and plunder. “Would they could have foretold that my caravan would have been cut up by the Shinwaris almost within shadow of the Pass!’ ... (22).

The native people are shown less humans rather animals like who were needed to be trained on the patterns of white men's Eurocentric manners as Kipling writes:

*Then all the people come down and shouts like the devil and all, and Dravot says— “Go and dig the land, and be fruitful and multiply,” which they did, though they didn't understand. Then we asks the names of things in their lingo—bread and water and fire and idols and such, and Dravot leads the priest of each village up to the idol, and says he must sit there and judge the people, and if anything goes wrong he is to be shot (23).*

In this story, the native chiefs are portrayed like children who were to be guided and directed by the Dravot. Kipling uses the same dehumanizing language for the native people time and again. Their voices are compared with wild animals and devils. He refers to the local priests as blasted priests. In the subsequent part of the story, Kipling compares these priests with animals. He says that they were howling like wild creatures. Sometimes, they are called swines and beggars. Such portrayal and depiction are done to justify and legitimize the idea of empire building and to extend the civilizing mission to the far-off areas.

Moreover, Muslims of the area are named Muhammadans on the orientalist patterns. They are shown quite inferior to the white Europeans who are always trustworthy and faithful. “that you won't cheat me, because you're white people— sons of Alexander—and not like common, black Mohammedans”.(24).

The above quoted words imply that Kipling's white race is always trustworthy and faithful while the rest of the races are common and black Muhammadans who always cheat and deceive.

Even the mountains are shown mysterious, tall and wild and full of threats and dangers which are governed by devils. The whole landscape is not only shown in physical darkness but also metaphorical darkness which seem to imply a sort of backward society attached to that landscape. On the other hand, India is proper for Kipling because there is established English government.

Kipling has romanticized the white English race beyond the level of literary exaggeration. When it comes to the comparison of the native and English man, he uses peculiar tropes for both the entities. He used charming and attractive adjectives for his white fellows like gentlemen, sober and grand master, emperors, Sir Daniel Dravot, commander – in-Chief, and strong men which are in stark binary opposition to the vocabulary drawn for the native characters. For Kipling, they are robbers, beggars, people in rags and swans, and irrational “Others”.

While going for colonial plan which the two white characters consider as a sacred and biblical duty, therefore, the text of the contract begins with the name of God. The European whites always considered it a biblical mission to colonize the non-white races and their territories. Kipling calls the two colonialist figures harmless and allows them to take ammunition and arms secretly through religious disguise. He seems to justify using religion as a tool for the imperial cause.

In this story, Kipling prays for two disguised protagonists. As a storyteller and poet, he does not show empathy for the natives being tortured and killed by his protagonist, Dravot, because there is a flat agreement that native men either subdue, follow or be killed like rats and cockroaches. When natives do not comply with the orders, it is justified to kill and shoot them. Only the gospel is shown true while the other religious followers are entitled as black Muhammadans who are untrustworthy, violent and barbaric.

Hence, the white characters are depicted morally sound and perfect. They are always faithful and trustworthy because they belonged to the superior race. Even the local and native names are unacceptable to Rudyard Kipling. They are changed like Billy Fish, Holly Dilworth, Pikky Kergan. Finally, when Dravot intends to divide the kingdom, the half of the kingdom will go to the white master, Peachey and local chiefs are to be given sub-ordinate places in the kingdom (25).

## Conclusion

A thorough analysis of the story concludes that Kipling creates an imaginative portrait through the canvas of this story, stemmed in his prejudiced and racial connotation. ‘The Man who would be King’ is still believed a masterpiece in the erstwhile colonial world. The story has been filmed in 1975 by John Houston and still referred as one of the land marking works of the Kipling. This literary work constructs an ugly, unruly, illiterate, and ignorant image of the orient. Kipling borrows such tropes mainly from Afghanistan.

Kipling concludes the story with a tragic end and propels that if the British Raj does not crush the native tribes, they cannot be taught the lessons of civilization. This story possesses several archetypal colonial tropes, which ranges from the ugliness, darkness and colorlessness of the native people and their land and its brightness could be fulfilled with the advent of a civilization mission. He concludes that all the power and right to rule the people belongs to the British crown and the white men has to kill or be dead for this national project of white’s men supremacy and rule.

On the contrary, this story is an archetype of the contradictions within the narratives of the colonial writers. The nexus of civilization with the love for gold, glory and control has no rational footings, therefore, this work of all times one of the best sellers needs to be revisited and it is the responsibility of the sane voices of the occident to rethink the 'others' and correct the course of history through their human agency, knowledge base and institutional infrastructure.

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