

THE PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN BACKDROP IN RUDYARD KIPLING'S KIM: A DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The diasporic literature helps us in understanding various cultures in a broader perspective. Indian Diasporic writing seems a very significant set-up linking the entire world. The Indian Diaspora has attempted to bring astonishing realities located in the Indian rural culture. The European travelers and the orientalists have revitalized the varied culture of India and enriched the English literature through their literary work. Rudyard Kipling lived in India for some years, hence was fully acquainted with the people and entire way of life in India. Kim (1901) by Rudyard Kipling, is a remarkable novel which portrays diverse religions of India, its people and culture. The novel represents a multicolored picture of India viewing its indigenous spirit. It focuses on a life of Kim, a boy of Irish descent, who is orphaned and grows up as a native Indian. Taking into consideration the various facets of the novel, it seems that Kipling generates the realistic portrayal of Indian life. He very honestly depicts the indigenous spirit of Indian backdrop through this novel. This beautiful land itself remains the theme of novel.

Keywords: *diasporic literature, Indian culture and landscape, people, indigenous spirit, beliefs, spirituality, beautiful land.*



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The diasporic literature helps us in understanding various cultures in a broader perspective. The quests for identity, nostalgia, insider and outsider condition, etc. are considered the major characteristics of diasporic writings. Indian Diasporic writing seems a very significant set-up linking the entire world. If viewed positively, diasporic literature generates good-will and makes possible a cordial relationship. It supports the value based culture. The European travelers and the orientalists have revitalized the varied culture of India and enriched the English literature through their literary works. India has remained multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-regional and multi-lingual land since centuries. The most appealing thing about India is its unity in diversity. The manifold diversity of languages, cultures, tribes, communities, and religions has neither split up, nor ruined its status as a nation for many centuries.

The task of re-creating the nation and re-writing of history took place in almost all the colonized nations, the tools and the methodology continued to change along with the rhetoric

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of discourse. While in some case the re-establishing of the nation started along with the process of colonization, some countries like South Africa (Andre Brink), Jamaica (Jamaica Kincaid) and India (V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M. G. Vassangi and others) are still involved in the process of re-inventing the nation/region. The most widely used tool in this direction was protest literature. However, major writers, political activists and freedom fighters in India also adopted the process of assimilation in their task of rebuilding the nation. In the recent years, Indian fiction writers have received worldwide readership. The Indian Diaspora has attempted to bring astonishing realities located in the Indian rural culture. The eminent personalities in this field are: Vikram Seth (*The Golden Gate* 1986, *A Suitable Boy* 1993), Shashi Tharoor (*The Great Indian Novel* 1989), Amitav Ghosh (*The Shadow Lines* 1988) and Rohinton Mistry (*Such a Long Journey* 1991). Some of them have been honored prestigious literary status or nominated for such honor. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) brought unpredicted changes. The prejudiced Western attitude towards Indian literary talent started changing when Rushdie ushered in a new writing trend by using hybrid language.

Kim (1901) is a remarkable novel by Rudyard Kipling, the Nobel Prize winner English novelist. Kipling was born in India hence the varied image of India remained an indispensable part in his creation. Kipling spent his early childhood with a Hindu bearer Meeta and a Goan Catholic *ayah*. Kipling relates this influence in his autobiography:

In the afternoon heats before we took our sleep, she [Kipling's ayah] or Meeta [Kipling's bearer] would tell us [Kipling and his sister] stories and Indian nursery songs all unforgotten, and we were sent to the dining-room after we had been dressed, with the caution "Speak English now to Papa and Mamma." So one spoke 'English,' haltingly translated out of the vernacular idiom that one thought and dreamed in. The Mother sang wonderful songs at a black piano and would go out to Big Dinners. (*Something of Myself*)

Rushdie validates Kipling's deep connection with India:

But there is the Indian actor, too; Ruddy Baba as well as Kipling Sahib. And it is on account of this fellow that Kipling remains so popular in India. This popularity looks like, and indeed is, an extraordinary piece of cultural generosity. But it is real. No other western writer has ever known India as Kipling knew it, and it is this knowledge of place, and procedure, and detail that gives his stories their undeniable authority. (*Imaginary Homelands* 75)

Eva Roa White in an essay on “In Search of Identity: Inner Diaspora and Psychic Healing in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*” observes that Kipling reconnects with Mother India through his character Kim, who like Kipling himself, carries both east and west within him. The novel portrays diverse religions of India, its people and culture. The novel represents a multicolored picture of India viewing its indigenous spirit. It focuses on a life of Kim, a boy of Irish descent, who is orphaned and grows up as a native Indian.

The narrative of *Kim* is set within the background of Indian scenes. It offers a vivid portrayal of India under the British Empire. Kipling introduces here the landscape of India demonstrating all its diversity. The novelist describes the flat levels of the green plains observed from the train as well as the green fields seen in all directions to exhibit the beauty of Indian Landscape. The place named Umballa has a prosperous land which gives three and even four - through patches of sugar-cane, tobacco, long white radishes, and nol-kol (*Kim* 36). The people introduced in the novel are hard-working and seem to enjoy the honest life. The beautiful scenario of roads along with the trees like mango-groves has been visualized while Lama and his disciple Kim pass through several places. Sometimes they go through the hilly ways from where a wonderful background of Himalayas covered with snow can be observed. Lama and Kim also like the pleasing sounds of the well wheels. Kim, when reaches to Simla, also gets an opportunity to see the distant snows pink at the sunrise as well as the green plains spread far below him. While describing the various scenes, the novelist keeps in mind the live portrayal of foot hills, the path that passes through the forest and the pasture. Lama receives a generous hospitality by the villagers residing in the huts. They have a high regard for Lama hence offer him all the facilities. Kipling’s sense of minute observation is evident in description of tiny birds and animals like squirrels, parrots, and doves. The entire scenario of Indian life is described by the novelist in such a wonderful manner that validates its realistic impression:

The diamond-bright dawn woke men and crows and bullocks together. Kim sat up and yawned, shook himself, and thrilled with delight. This was seeing the world in real truth; this was life as he would have it- bustling and shouting, the buckling of belts, and beating of bullocks and creaking of wheels, lighting of fires and cooking of food and new sights at every turn of the approving eye.

The morning mist swept off in a whorl of silver, the parrots shot away to some distant river in shrieking green hosts: all the well wheels within earshot went to work. India was awake, and Kim was in the middle of it, more awake and more excited than any one, chewing on a twig that he would presently use as a toothbrush; for he borrowed right- and left-handedly from all the customs of the country he knew and loved (*Kim* 70)

Cities and Villages:

We find people here residing either in cities or villages. Kipling himself stayed in Lahore for some time hence was familiar with entire culture very well. Lahore, now a city in northeastern Pakistan, was a part of British India when Kipling wrote this novel. The museum of Lahore symbolizes the prosperity and cultural facets of Indian culture. Kipling's personal memories are symbolically woven together in the novel since the story takes place at Lahore in the beginning. In the beginning of the novel, Kim is found playing near the gun which stood outside the Lahore Museum where Lockwood Kipling was curator:

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 (*Kim* 2).

Likewise, there is also the description of Kashmir Serai and other places well-known to Kipling. The narrative describes the attractive landscape of Kashmir Serai when Lama arrives there with his disciple Kim:

Half pushed, half towed, he arrived at the high gate of the Kashmir Serai: that huge open square over against the railway station, surrounded with arched cloisters where the camel and horse caravans put up on their return from Central Asia. Here were all manner of Northern folk, tending tethered ponies and kneeling camels; loading and unloading bales and bundles; drawing water for the evening meal at the creaking well windlasses; piling grass before the shrieking, wild-eyed stallions; cuffing the surly caravan dogs; paying off camel-drivers; taking on new grooms; swearing, shouting, arguing, and chaffering in the packed square. The cloisters, reached by three or four masonry steps, made a haven of refuge around this turbulent sea. Most of

them were rented to traders, as we rent the arches of a viaduct; the space between pillar and pillar being bricked or boarded off into rooms, which were guarded by heavy wooden doors. (*Kim* 17).

The depiction of the colonel Creighton's bungalow located at Umballa offers the distinct features of residence and life-style of English people in India. Lucknow is the place from where Kim receives his education, is portrayed as a city of extraordinary buildings in the novel. Kim takes visit of many places of this historical city prior to his joining the school. The people of Lucknow and Delhi speak pure Urdu language.

There is no city- except Bombay, the queen of all- more beautiful in her garish style than Lucknow, whether you see her from the bridge over the river, or from the top of the Imambara looking down on the gilt umbrellas of the Chutter Munzil, and the trees in which the town is bedded. Kings have adorned her with fantastic buildings, endowed her with charities, crammed her with pensioners, and drenched her with blood. She is the centre of all idleness, intrigue, and luxury, and shares with Delhi the claim to talk the only pure Urdu. "A fair city- a beautiful city." The driver, as a Lucknow man, was pleased with the compliment, and told Kim many astounding things where an English guide would have talked of the Mutiny (*Kim* 113)

The novelist also mentions the wonderful place Simla along with its people and the lifestyle of the people living there: "A fair land a most beautiful land is this of Hind- and the land of the Five Rivers is fairer than all,"... Look, Hajji, is yonder the city of Simla? Allah, what a city!"... Lurgan Sahib has a shop among the European shops. All Simla knows it. Ask there... and, Friend of all the World, he is one to be obeyed to the last wink of his eyelashes. Men say he does magic, but that should not touch thee. Go up the hill and ask. Here begins the Great Game." (*Kim* 136-137). His shop is such a place from where people get collection of a variety of things. The tourists find there the oriental treasures.

The city of Benares, considered for the temple of Tirthankers, seems a dirty place to Kim. Lama receives a shelter here while his journey in search of Holy River. There one finds a little clean cell for Lama where he sits cross-legged. The copper-gilt image of the seated Lord Buddha is also placed in the corner in front of which certain things like the lamp, incense holder and a pair of copper flower pots are also found (*Kim* 177).

Kipling was a journalist by profession hence had to visit different places in order to collect a variety of information. The novel reflects his acquaintance with the village culture. When Lama and his dear disciple Kim leave the place Umballa, they take rest under a village tree on their first evening. The small huts of these village people are made of mud-walls. We find here the beautiful scene of cattle coming back after grazing at evening. The women seem busy in preparing evening meals at this time. The novel describes their nature and routine life in its sensible form as:

The women were always kind, and the little children as children are the world over, alternately shy and venturesome. Evening found them at rest under the village tree of a mud-walled, mud-roofed hamlet, talking to the headman as the cattle came in from the grazing-grounds and the women prepared the day's last meal (*Kim 43*).

The people:

As stated earlier, Rudyard Kipling lived in India for some years, hence was fully acquainted with the people and entire way of life in India. Besides the character sketches of Lama and Kim, the novel also describes the number of people on the Grand Trunk Road. The Grand Trunk Road seems a broad, smiling river of life to Kim. The people like Sanyasis, Akali and native people going to enjoy fair are found on such road whereas crowds of people can be seen in trains, markets and at certain resting places. They use to wear colourful dress of different style. The village people cook their food on fireplaces made of dung. Kim also has relationship with the horse dealer named Mahbub Ali, who loves him sincerely. While going to Benaras, Kim and Lama meet the old woman of Kula on the road. She treats them lovingly and makes all arrangements for Kim and Lama when they are very much tired after visiting the hills. She prepares a variety of drinks and nutritious food for Kim as a result Kim recovers from weakness.

Kipling vividly describes the custom and manners of people of about hundred years ago. Their habit of cleaning the teeth with a freshly picked twig is mentioned. Some of these people are fond of smoking the hookah after their meals. They seem superstitious and have their own beliefs. There seem caste and class disputes among them occasionally. The references regarding the injustice and suffering in the society is also incorporated in the novel. The people living in the mountains have their own way of living. For example, when

Lama is struck by a foreigner, the coolies believe that a disaster will follow. Kim treats the farmer's son with quinine pills.

The novel focuses on the presence of the British officers in India during that time and also shows how the changes take place in the Indian Society. It also reflects the encounter between two civilizations. To native people English language spoken by British seem awkward, though some of them attempt to understand the meaning of certain words. For example, the man like Huree Babu could not master the English language however; he has an understanding of the importance of words. Likewise, Mahbub Ali, the horse dealer can also exchange his views with the British people.

Teshoo Lama, a representative of Buddhism represents the true spirituality of the east. Lama remains an important figure in shaping the career of an orphaned boy called Kim. Lama prefers Kim as his true disciple. He is in search of the river of arrow. Lama follows the Middle way and wants to attain a state of complete detachment from this world like Lord Buddha. To him, the world seems illusory. He wishes Kim to be freed from all illusions and bondages of this materialistic world. He agrees to undergo expenditure for Kim's education as he loves him heartily. Finally, Lama finds the river at his feet hence finishes his search of river in plains. He experiences that his soul becomes free of sin after the meditation and fast for two days.

The old woman of Kulu, the widow of the Rajah from Kulu also remains an interesting character from traditional Indian point of view. She seems talkative by nature. The novelist has presented her incessant flow of words effectively. When Lama finds her talking too much, he escapes gently. Though, she respects Lama and makes the necessary arrangement for him. Kipling indirectly mentions the generosity of the people of India. Kulu woman is such a character who keeps the atmosphere lively. She as a grandmother thinks for the welfare of her grandchildren and plans out many things for their bright future. She seeks blessing of Lama for the benefit and security of her entire family.

Taking into consideration the various facets the novel, it seems that Kipling generates the realistic portrayal of Indian life. He very honestly depicts the indigenous spirit of Indian backdrop through this novel. This beautiful land itself remains the theme of novel.

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