Kim: Pedagogy In The Empire From A Post-colonial Perspective

Rudyard Kipling's 'Kim' is an intercultural mosaic with a homogenous blend of culturally diverse characters, each with their own ideologies and perspectives on education. Kipling's characters namely, Creighton, Lurgan, Mahbub Ali, Hurree Babu, and the lama are of paramount importance in helping us understand the contrasting views on education during the imperial era. They embody different models of education and serve as a guide in helping us analyze Kipling's role as an educator to the reading public and explore his ideas on the education of a white boy in India. It is interesting to observe, especially from a post-colonial perspective, how each of the aforementioned characters and their relationships with Kim had various implications on his educational path as this could facilitate our understanding of the larger, overarching concept of pedagogy in the Empire. Even though Kipling is an imperialist, and supports Western education as an important aspect of the Empire, he believes that in itself, it is not enough; the westerners also need a native education in both a spiritual and a practical register.

We must first understand the concept of post-colonialism. Post-colonialism is a complex theory since it encompasses the study of various intertwined categories including acknowledging the cultural interactions amongst people in certain, geographical regions or territories that were previously occupied by the Europeans, dealing with the history behind a present-day system such as education in a country that was previously a colony and finally, exploring literature that has been authored by people originating from colonized countries and which draws on their experiences. Even though there still exists a prevailing debate on the exact meaning of the term post-colonialism, we shall regard the term to mean the aftermath, both temporal and ideological, of colonies. In other words, it refers to the effects of European colonialism through the course of the 1800s up until the present day neo-colonialism. This book serves as an interesting read from a post-colonial perspective since it helps us to compare the current system and beliefs on education with those held by officers and servants of Raj during the nineteenth century.

It is quite clear that Kipling did not entirely resonate with perspective on education. As a result of the colonization of India, a large number of children faced cataclysmic losses, causing them to be separated from their families and admitted into orphanages where they were brought up. It had become quite evident to officers that these children were devoid of proper education and they saw this as an opportunity to steer these children in a direction such that they would best serve the Empire. Metcalf has suggested that this served as a means to prevent the white boys from becoming 'native' and serving as an additional hindrance to the Empire.[footnoteRef:1] They wanted to protect their race and thus enforced 'European-ness' in the colonial state since they knew that this would help them protect their race and sustain the Empire which they built on the concept of their assumed racial superiority. The children were thus made imperial assets and it became their primary objective to serve the Empire and assist Officers. However, Kipling believed that detaching the westerners from the natives and their customs would not be effective to the sustenance of the Empire and he uses Colonel Creighton as a mouthpiece in 'Kim' to reflect his views on education. According to him, it is easier to stay civil and maintain everlasting peace if we are able to understand and moreover, respect our cultural differences with one another. [1: Thomas Metcalf, A Concise History of India, Cambridge University Press,

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The novel ‘Kim’ represents Kimball O’Hara, a white orphan boy, as he assumes and transgresses cultural boundaries whilst being educated at St. Xavier’s amongst other ‘products of imperialism’ or while working in the colonial intelligence wing of the Ethnological Survey. On the outset, one would believe that Kim’s identity as a Sahib generates a contradiction: he cannot be a Sahib and a friend and son to Indians simultaneously. However, through the story, Kipling has presented the benefits and the necessity of both a Western and native education for Kim as a result of which he is able to identify with both cultures. He is able to interact with others just like him at St. Xavier’s where he is not only reminded of his identity – that of a Sahib – but also made to learn concepts like mapping which would serve him well when preparing for the Great Game and entering the real world where he must fend for himself. Moreover, Kim’s questions pertaining to existentialism are primarily answered in the text by Eastern, non-European figures- revealing, perhaps the privileging of non-European modes of text. Thus, Kipling justifies the importance of both forms of education for a young, white orphan in India.

Colonel Creighton represents the imperial perspective as he works for the Ethnological Survey. He radiates authority and is a personification of the views held when it came to educating their kind in the nineteenth century.

However, more importantly, Creighton is representative of Kipling’s view on pedagogy in Raj. Colonel Creighton is the embodiment of the opinion that one must understand how India operates as a country in order to govern it.[footnoteRef:2] Creighton’s relationship with Kim had a paternal aspect to it for he sent Hurree Babu to look after the young boy when he went off on a spiritual quest with the lama, but Creighton also considered Kim to be a valuable asset to the Empire. He believed in education through institutions like St. Xavier’s and even encouraged Kim to ‘work as an assistant chain-man in the Canal Department’[footnoteRef:3] which emphasizes India’s promise to make Kim into a Sahib. At St. Xavier’s, Kim is told that he would be encouraged to imbibe both racial and moral values but as one might see, these do not necessarily cohere with one another. In fact, it is evident, that the institution focused on maintaining one’s racial dignity more than one’s sense of moral judgment. Kipling uses his mouthpiece to emphasize the vitality of Western Education while also maintaining one’s own ethics. [2: Edward Said, Kim as an imperial Novel, in Kim, pp 337-350] [3: Kipling, Kim, 103]

There is a good spirit in thee. Do not let it be blunted at St. Xavier’s. There are many boys there who despise black men.[footnoteRef:4] [4: Rudyard Kipling, Kim, Edited by Zohreh T. Sullivan, Norton Critical editions, 102]

Thus, Creighton supposedly embodies the educational perspectives of Kipling, who himself, thought that India was an integral part of Raj and the customs of natives should be embraced but was also of the opinion that Western education of Whites born and bred in the country was essential for maintaining the foundation of the Empire which was built on the idea of European supremacy. Creighton thought of ignorance as the greatest sin and knew that at St. Xavier’s, Kim might be forced to despise those different from him, but sent him off anyway, for he knew that mapping, movement, and imperial power are inextricably bound together and Kim, needed to be educated in these various techniques to be able to become a successful participant in the Great Game.

When tales were told of hot nights, Kim did not sweep the board with his reminiscences; for St.

Xavier's looks down on boys who 'go native all-together.' One must never forget that one is a Sahib, and that someday, when the examinations Are passed, one will command natives. Kim made a note of this for he began to understand where examinations led.[footnoteRef:5] [5: Rudyard Kipling, Kim, Edited by Zohreh T. Sullivan, Norton Critical editions, 107]

Clearly, Kim found his initial days at St. Xavier's quite overwhelming and unpleasant. He was among other students that were quite similar to him in the sense of being white boys in-India but he still found the atmosphere quite claustrophobic and restrictive. He was against the institutionalized system of education and instead, felt that he would benefit more from a spiritual and practical education. Kim had spent his vacations being schooled in the various, practical aspects of the Great Game's surreptitious trade-craft. He had mastered the art of mapping, sketching, and donning various disguises. Lurgan, who like Kim, at the same time, also helps train Kim to assist the Empire in the future by testing his ability to resist mind control and the events that unfold such as Kim invoking the English multiplication table is testament to him coming under the influence of the English education system despite his resistance to it. Lurgan is closest we come, to see what Kim's future might turn out like if he followed the institutionalized form of learning, for just like Kim, Lurgan was an Englishman, brought up in India amongst natives.

Thus, Kim is the story of an unintentional quest for identity. Kipling sheds light on the internal conflict which encompasses Kim's mind, in other words, the juxtaposition of the Eastern and Western cultures. Kim, Kipling's protagonist, was born to parents but raised on the streets of Lahore. Hence, he had the ability to constantly move across the Eastern and Western cultural settings, resulting in his lack of belonging to either one of the two cultures and his need for some sense of attachment or belonging. Through the mention of White, Mohammedan, and Buddhist in the same breath, Kipling, conflates, in the most poignant manner, different kinds of nativism, to explore Kim's hybridity and represent him as a 'Friend of all the World' [footnoteRef:6], as someone who was capable of maintaining his image as a Sahib and his relationship with and respect for the natives he grew up amongst. It may be interesting to note that this hybridity is represented in the form of a problem posed to Kim's self-identity, though, in the larger scheme of things, it is useful for a young boy who grew up in the Empire. Kim's hybridity causes the much-needed disintegration of the restrictive categories of the colonial census prevailing in the nineteenth century. Kim is an instance of colonial contact and is perhaps, Kipling's way of acknowledging the complexity of racial or cultural make-up. [6: Rudyard Kipling, Kim, Edited by Zohreh T. Sullivan, Norton Critical editions, 160]

Huree Babu is another important example of the same for he is a native by blood but was educated according to Western ideals which are in direct contrast to Kim, who was white by blood but grew up as a native in the streets of Lahore. Kipling's characters are thus, in a state of 'in-between' which allows for important cultural and personal exchanges within the constricted space permitted by imperial relationships. Kipling has, through these characters maintained the vitality of both Western and native education for all members of the Empire. Macaulay has in a 'Minute of Education', 1835, advocated English-language as a medium of instruction in all Indian higher education since he believed that this would inevitably promote Indian loyalty to rule.[footnoteRef:7] From that time onwards, English education played a crucial role in establishing colonial power. However, Kipling suggests that although this form of education might help promote superiority, it would not promote loyalty or help sustain the Empire. In order to do so, one must respect the traditions of the natives which could be done by allowing young, white, boys both their institutionalized and native education. [7: Elmer H. Cutts,

‘The Background of Macaulay’s Minute’ Oxford University Press, 824]

The lama, perhaps one of the most critical characters in the story, believes in the Wheel of Life. He refers to Kim as his chela and encourages him to forget all his worldly affairs and embrace enlightenment. He urges Kim to join him on his search for the River of Arrows and during their journey, Kim finds himself to have been changed for the better. Both were on the lookout for something- for Kim, it was the sense of belonging and for the lama, it was a detachment from worldly affairs or estrangement. Their quests intertwined and they each found someone else to help alleviate their struggles by sharing them. Thus, the convergence of the lama’s path with Kim’s has an underlying symbolism and its impact is greatly reflected in the lines that follow.

I was made wise by thee, Holy One,’ said Kim, forgetting the little play just ended; forgetting St. Xavier’s; forgetting his white blood; forgetting even the Great Game as he stooped, Mohammedan fashion to touch his master’s feet in the dust of the Jain temple.[footnoteRef:8]
[8: Rudyard Kipling, Kim, Edited by Zohreh T. Sullivan, Norton Critical editions, 160]

The lama was a representation of the spiritual education Kipling thought Kim should experience while Mahbub Ali was the embodiment of the practical education. Mahbub Ali seems to play a trivial role in Kim’s education but alas at the outset, it is his perspective on education that seems to be most befitting for Kim. He, like Colonel Creighton, is a supporter of the Great Game but has views, distinct from him, since he is not convinced that Kim requires an institution like St. Xavier’s to serve Empire. “They will send him to a school and put heavy boots on his feet and swaddle him in these clothes. Then he will forget all he knows”[footnoteRef:9], was Mahbub Ali’s opinion of institutions like St. Xavier’s. [9: Rudyard Kipling, Kim, Edited by Zohreh T. Sullivan, Norton Critical editions,198]

Mahbub Ali was the first to introduce Kim to the Great Game and shares Creighton’s imperial mindset but he also believes in the system of hands-on learning. He advocates freedom and a non-institutionalized form of learning. For a young, white orphan boy in India, this perspective might be of paramount importance for it greatly helped Kim to find his place amongst the other members of the Empire and develop life skills that could not be learned within the four walls of an institution. Thus, Mahbub Ali embodies an alternate approach to education. He has a positive attitude towards Empire but at the same time, is not of the opinion that Kim’s nativism must be completely washed away for him to be a good servant of the Empire, very much like Creighton.

Perhaps, one of the best pieces of evidence of Kim’s use of both his Western and his native education is the last scene or the climax of the adventure storyline, when a few men callously destroy the lama’s ‘Wheel of Life’ who in turn, forfeits his tenet of non-violence when he finds himself, thirsty for vengeance. He calls upon Kim, who, by supervising the destruction of the surveying equipment, weapons, and supplies of the foreigners, sabotages their mission and is able to serve not only the lama, as he did not use any violence and caused no bloodshed to destroy the enemy, but also the Great Game since he used his tactics and strategies to his benefit. Kipling thus presents the idea of how “native India can be contained by an English boy in Pathan disguise so long as he has the gun”[footnoteRef:10] and also signifies the importance of both educational forms to Kim’s development. [10: Zohreh T. Sullivan, ‘The Narratives of Empire’, 1993]

Thus, Kim, one of Kipling’s most unconventional novels, has an underlying theme of education

and pedagogy which has been explored in this essay. Kipling is of the opinion that India promotes spiritual growth and its customs are, therefore, worthy of protection, thereby constructing an image of a benevolent Empire, which seeks to obtain a well-rounded education for all its members. Kim proves himself as a champion of both spiritual seekers and the Raj by portraying his understanding of spiritual, practical, and imperial education measures, thus providing him with all the skills, Kipling thought were necessary for him to become a true and improved imperial leader.

Bibliography:

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