

Kipling's Imperial Anxiety: An Analysis of "The Overland Mail" and "The Ballad of East and West"

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Literary analysts across the globe are often at odds as how to place Kipling — a mouthpiece of imperial expansion or a modern day Tiresias who sets about the task of warning British people about the impending doom that would befall the Empire. It is true that as a result of Kipling's works being little read and widely misinterpreted a majority of critics hail or censure him as the trumpeter of the Crown. Kipling's urge to the imperialist nations in his seminal poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899) drew sharp reaction from Wilfrid Scawen Blunt who wrote in "Satan Absolved" in the same year: "The White Man's Burden, Lord, is the burden of his cash" (Brooks and Faulkner 323). This angry denunciation of Kipling runs in the same vein in Henry Labouche's parody "The Brown Man's Burden" (1899): Pile up the brown man's burden/ To gratify your greed" (qtd. in Booth 118) and in Robert Buchanan's fear that Kipling's "hooligan spirit of patriotism" threatens to "corrupt the pure springs of [British] literature" (qtd. in Green). But in the later half of the past century scholars like Jeffrey Meyers, Kingsley Amis, Edward Said, Ashis Nandy and more recently Zoreh T. Sullivan, John McLeod, Gail Ching-Liang Low, Harry Ricketts unearthed the unease and anxiety that lies beneath Kipling's literary output—prose and poetry alike. While projecting this duality in Kipling's creative art, Harold Orel writes:

Rudyard Kipling's history as a writer illustrates one of the most serious problems in modern criticism, the relationship between

members of the Establishment (in both England and the United States) and writers who, for one reason or another, do not seem to satisfy the Establishment's expectations of what they should be saying and writing(213).

It is this area where Kipling refuses to endorse the stance of the Establishment and offers alternative viewpoints that attracts the attention of Kipling scholars in the post-colonial period. In his personal life, too, Kipling chose to stay miles away from the formality and grandeur of the officialdom of the Raj. His refusal of the 'Knighthood' offered to him in 1899 and 1903 by Lord Salisbury and Balfour consecutively, bears evidence to this statement (Carrington 393). The same accounts for his refusal to join the royal party thrown in the honour of the Prince of Wales (later King George V) in 1903 and 1911 on the occasion of his trip to India (ibid 393). All these instances only hint at Kipling's notion of the Empire, which far from being monolithic, is replete with contradictions and subversive ironies. The modest object of this article is to analyze two of Kipling's poems—"The Overland Mail" and "The Ballad of East and West" from this perspective.

• The Overland Mail •

"The Overland Mail" first made its debut in 1886 in the second edition of the volume entitled *Departmental Ditties and Other Verses*. The poem is wholly about the transportation of letters to British civilians and military personnel living in exile, mostly in the Indian hill stations like Quetta, Simla and Darjeeling. These hill stations have become popular retreats for those who found Indian summer intolerable. Peter Hopkirk in his book presented a very graphic description of these annual retreats (150-152). Subtitled as "Foot Service to the Hills" this poem celebrates a runner's spirit whose job is to carry mails to the exiled British officers. John McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* (1995) argues that it is possible to locate the areas of anxiety and ambivalence in his seemingly joyful celebration of imperial service (57-64). McLeod first draws the readers' attention to the fact that the Indian landscape permeates the whole poem. The runner has just received the post from the railway station and is about to commence his foot-journey through the hill road at night. Kipling makes his readers see and realize the threats awaiting the runner on his way. Yet Kipling hails the runner as 'Lord[s] of the Jungle' and expresses satisfaction about his efficiency. Significantly Kipling advises the runner to perform

the work in the name of the 'Empress of India', i.e. Queen Victoria. Any reader familiar with colonial discourse will not fail to notice that the 'Lord[s] of the Jungle' (the word 'Jungle' can stand for anything apart from its surface meaning) is ordered to obey the diktat of an overseas Queen and the sheer power of that diktat is enough to overcome all obstacles. Apparently conforming to the role of a royal imperial subject the poet makes the runner overcome all obstacles. India, with all its malignant forces such as dark forests, the rivers, ravines, rock-ridges, tempests and floods cannot check the runner. It is this re-reading which makes the readers compare the runner's ascent to the hill with the conquest of the rocky and rugged Indian terrain by the British with Queen Victoria leading from fore. In accomplishing his task the runner gives the impression of himself as not only loyal to the colonial rule but also as a potent weapon capable of taming a wild India. It is an historical truth that in the days of the Raj it is the loyal Indian soldiers under British generals who kept the imperial pride intact from Peshawar to Lower Burma. The impression which one gets is that the benighted runner moves up "through the wild undomesticated India" only to "come to the civil daylight of British colonial rule" (ibid 60). A reader will obviously relate this fact to British army's venture into the remote parts of India to bring it under the Queen's authority whose messenger might call attention from the sun: "For the great Sun himself must attend to the hail:—/ In the Name of the Empress, the Overland Mail" (Kipling 33). No wonder that Peter Keating regarded this poem as "not simply a celebration of the postal service [but] one of Kipling's most unshamedly joyful endorsements of imperial endeavour, with the postal activity offered as a microcosm of the far-flung Empire"(21). But while Keating calls this poem as the only poem in *Departmental Ditties* written "in a mood of unqualified happiness", John McLeod chose to accept a completely different view to prove this joyful endorsement of Empire rather unsteady (21).

In order to prove this McLeod makes his readers see that apart from the 'runner' the only human being which figures in the poem is the 'robber'(60). The Queen is too deified to be considered as a being of flesh and blood. Following this logic it appears that although mentioned only once the robber is not at all a marginal figure in this poem that at first reading the reader intends to assume. On the surface he is simply one of the various dangers of the wilderness of India and the runner must avoid him en route. Although Kipling has never suggested, it is quite obvious that like the runner, the robber too, is a native of India. It is here that McLeod invites

his readers to recognize the “split positions commonly available to the colonized subject in colonial discourses” (60). Viewing thus the runner must either be a highwayman posing a threat to imperial service by snatching the mail or he must necessarily be a loyal servant who is bound to deliver mail to the exiles. Conforming to the traditional binarism of colonial discourse no other position of the colonized is recognized and this is what accounts for Kipling’s portrayal of depopulated landscape. The same reason stands for the namelessness of the runner and the robber. Both of them belong to the wild, rock terrain of India and must be judged by the yardstick of their loyalty or disloyalty to the Crown.

A close reading of the poem reveals that from the very outset a sharp contrast is imposed between the runner and the robber. In the succeeding lines he almost dispels the fear of the robber by making him retreat into his den, i.e. the jungle. Readers familiar with colonial discourse will obviously relate this fact to the overcoming of all the obstacles by the runner who and hence the process of colonizing the native people, emerges victorious at the end. But again to cite McLeod

the threat of the robber is *never entirely banished*, but instead hunts the speaker’s representation of the runner throughout the poem. Runner and robber threaten to merge. The messages entrusted to the colonised need not get given back to the British. The speaker anxiously recognises that the colonised have the potential for subversion—a recognition which he attempts to disavow (62).

While the subversive potential of the runner is explicit the readers cannot forget the indispensability of the same. It is obvious that to accomplish the daily affairs of the government native officials and workers are required. In other words the process of colonization would be jeopardized if the line of communication is blocked between different levels of administration. So for the sake of its very existence the Empire needs thoroughly domesticated stout runners who can simultaneously serve the Empire and curb the untrustworthy robbers. It is this train of thought which leads the readers to the realization of the poet’s thrice use of the word ‘must’: ‘must ford’, ‘must climb’ and ‘must bear’ (Kipling 33). Knowing full well that the demand is too high to meet the poet wants to have the runner engaged thoroughly in the service of the Empire and thereby quashing any possibility of dereliction on the runner’s part. But by doing

so the poet only foregrounds the Raj's half-hidden anxiety because dereliction, at worst, keeps alive the possibility of the runner's assuming the role of brigand. Therefore not content in warning him once, the poet again proclaims in the third stanza: "The service admits not a "but" or an "if"/ While the breath's in his mouth, he must bear without fail..."(Kipling 33). There is little room for doubt that Kipling is less a poet than an imperial spokesperson here and this warning is intended to wipe out any chances of disobedience by runner. Needless to say all the applause preceded by subsequent warning bestowed upon this young 'Casabianca' is an attempt to hide the unpalatable fact that the runner may use his potential to subvert order.

In the fourth chapter entitled "Of Mimicry and Man" of his pioneering text *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha theorises the subversive qualities of mimicry thus:

...colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference...mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal (86).

In the light of the above observation it is possible to identify the runner as a reformed, recognizable 'Other'. Yet it is this 'Otherness' which makes the Whites suspicious about his course of action and take every precaution to remind the runner of his loyalty to the Empire. Any instance of indeterminacy i.e. the possibility of the runner's flinching from his duty against the natural calamity or at worst his assuming the role of a highwayman will have in Bhabha's words "profound and disturbing" effect upon the colonizer (86). Acknowledging his debt to Bhabha, McLeod urges his readers to take note of the fact that in the final stanza the runner's body the description of which was so prominent in earlier stanzas almost becomes invisible (63). Reduced to a 'dot' or 'speck' he is still able to indicate his presence by the jingle of his bells and his hail to the Empress. Clearly he delivers the mails at the end and the mere sight of him is enough for the British exiles to rest in peace. In other words with all their assumed racial superiority and technological advancements

the British have to depend on this native runner whose loyalty to the Empire is not beyond doubt. “The menace of mimicry”, argues Bhabha “lies in its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority (88). In line with Bhabha’s theory it may be argued that the runner’s hail to the ‘Empress of India’ is a sign of menace which in turn reverses and mocks the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized (63).

All these arguments and assumptions inevitably draw a picture of the runner who is quite different from the loyal servant of the Raj. The runner, already identified as an ambivalent figure, is both praised and disciplined. His efficiency puts the life of the British in order. But he who is “*almost the same but not quite*” may use this efficiency to sabotage the smooth running of their lives. The threat to British supremacy is at first generated in the figure of the robber and attains full maturity in the runner. Thus Kipling’s seeming celebration of the loyal colonized subject lays bare the deep anxiety and disquietude at the prospect of the Other’s subversive potential.

• The Ballad of East and West •

“The Ballad of East and West” was written in 1889, although published a year later in *Macmillan’s Magazine* (December, 1890). Subsequently it was included in *Barrack Room Ballads* (1892). On its first appearance the poem created much upsurge and much of its fame or infamy rests upon the opening lines: “OH, *East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, / Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;*” (Kipling 233). These two lines for which Kipling was stereotyped as a typical colonial poet apparently epitomizes the irreconcilable racial difference between the Occident and the Orient. “Ironically, Kipling’s slogan like quotability,” writes Harry Ricketts, “obscured the real point” (Booth 114). Instead of projecting an affirmation of the essential incompatibility between East and West here Kipling really intended to reconcile the differences, albeit in exceptional circumstances. The succeeding two lines will establish this hypothesis clearly:

*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from
the ends of the earth!* (Kipling 233).

Kingsley Amis observes that the first line, often quoted out of context and the second line to consolidate the implication are largely responsible for “the ignorant castigation of Kipling as a racist in the full aggressive sense” (54). He adds to this observation that the succeeding two lines serve as an antithesis to the first two lines (54). A brief sketch of the incidents narrated in the poem will help the reader to understand how and in which circumstances the two strong men can transcend these apparently irreconcilable racial and cultural barriers. Kamal, an Afghan chieftain, steals the horse of an English colonel and is pursued relentlessly by the colonel’s son. Impressed by the youngster’s courage Kamal returns him the horse. As a token of friendship, the English lad presents his pistol to the Afghan and Kamal in turn returns this good gesture by sending his own son to serve in the imperial army. Both the English and the Afghan lad set out for the British camp after taking “the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood” (Kipling 236). It is worthwhile to have a glimpse upon Kipling’s own opinion of the Pathans’ attitude to the British in general. Citing *Civil and Military Gazette* 1 April 1885, Andrew Lycett writes: “As an Englishman passes, they [the Pathans] will turn to scowl upon him, and in many cases to spit fluently on the ground after he has passed” (32). Describing their dexterity in carnage Kipling himself writes in the poem “Arithmetic on the Frontier” (1886)

No proposition Euclid wrote
 No formulae the text-books know,
 Will turn the bullet from your coat,
 Or ward the tulwar’s downward blow. (Kipling 45)

Thus in Kipling’s pen , the Pathans are:

magnificent scoundrels and handsome ruffians; all giving the on-looker the impression of wild beasts held back from murder and violence, and chafing against the restraint. The impression may be wrong; and the Peshawari, *the most innocent creature on earth*, in spite of History’s verdict against him; but not unless thin lips, scowling brows, deep set vulpine eyes and lineaments stamped with every brute passion known to man,...(Lycett 32, italics mine).

This view strikes an almost incredible note of harmony with Bhabha’s projection

of the 'Other'. Written more than hundred years afterwards, Bhabha describes the colonized 'Other' in the following manner:

The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet *innocent as a child*; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar,...(82, italics mine).

Although strikingly handsome in physiognomy the frontiersmen like the Africans are presumed to be monolithic in postcolonial discourse. Thus after taking the oath of 'Brother-in-Blood', the English lad can accept the young Afghan as he would accept any newly recruited loyal English soldier. But the kith and kin of the frontier youth would remain as hostile to the British as they were before: "Belike they will raise thee to Rissaldar when I am hanged in Peshawur!" (Kipling 236) Thus although in outer appearance the Afghans are irreconcilably 'Other', far from endorsing strict binarism Kipling creates a sense of camaraderie between the English lad and the Afghan chieftain. In his highly sceptical critique of Said's *Orientalism*, John MacKenzie argues that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled needs to be viewed in the context of "a repeated realignment of sympathies"(xiii). This new approach to the discourse of Orientalism reveals that the East/West encounters do not remain confined to the field of the unequal and essentially hostile power-relations of colonialism. Instead this approach argues in favour of a sympathetic representation of colonized subject. Kipling, himself having Indian experience for many years, could not turn a blind eye to these few instances of loyalty and love in a country where people are generally presumed to be either obsequious or inimical. This almost impeccable delineation of harmony existing between the English lad and the frontier youth ("They have looked each other between the eyes, and there they found no fault" Kipling 236) does not present the poet as the mouthpiece of racial superiority which is often implied in the first line: "OH, *East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,...*"(Kipling 233)

But apart from this theoretical approach if we probe the background of the poem we are yet to confront an almost shocking revelation of Kipling's questioning the racial superiority. Citing Karl W. Deutsch and Norbert Winner, Vasant A. Shahane tells that the English colonel in the poem is Sir Robert Warburton, famed as the

founder of 'Khyber Rifles' (112). This information also draws the curtain from the truth that Jr. Warburton, i.e. the English lad in the poem, is of interracial lineage. Robert Warburton, who as a hostage in Kabul in 1842, was released only after the intervention of an Afghan princess. He later married the princess and his son is the hero whom Kipling so admiringly presents in this poem. Thus Shahane is right to claim that "East and West had already met in the person of Warburton, Jr. and as such one of the two principal characters in the ballad nullifies the argument of the incompatibility of East and West" (112). Implicit in this assumption is the question as to why Kipling chose to suppress the parentage of the English lad. The reason put forward by Shahane makes the reader realize a poetic mind which far from being prejudiced is actually very humane chalking out a bridge of love and sympathy between the ruler and the ruled. In the poem by placing Jr. Warburton and the son of the Afghan chieftain side by side Kipling conforms to the Occidental approach to the Orient. But although White and non-White, advanced and backward, superior and inferior are allowed to confront each other, Kipling did not allow the White to be triumphant over his non-White counterpart. This confrontation achieves credibility and poignance simply because the English lad is shown as a pure Anglo-Saxon. If Kipling disclosed his real identity the assertion: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/ When two strong men stand face to face..." (Kipling 233) could have been put into question and along with it the poet's sincerity about his own creation. But here Kipling actually did endeavour "to synthesize this in-group feeling with the notion of two powerful men who could overcome the barriers of East and West" (Shahane 112). By so doing the poet attempts to resolve the tension generated in the first line and admitted that the Whites need not be necessarily superior to non-Whites.

To conclude it may be stated that to read Kipling in the light of jingo-imperialism would be a misreading of the complexity of his works. These two poems as examined here give the impression of a man who is either apprehensive of the fate of the Empire in the long run (as in the first poem) or devoid of the prejudice of racial superiority (in the second poem). Citing M. M. Kaye it may be argued that he outlived the dream of Empire in the midway of his literary career and "even during his most pro-Empire period he spent far more time lambasting its failings than blowing its trumpet" (xviii). The insight presented by Kaye makes the readers explore numerous instances in poetry and prose where Kipling chose to endorse the view of the other

side than the accepted British one. In “Recessional” behind the triumphal façade Kipling warns the English about the ambitions of young imperialist powers like Germany; in “Mesopotamia” he lashes the incompetence of the British to safeguard their soldiers; in “The Widow at Windsor” he makes Queen Victoria his butt for attack; in “Hadramauti” Kipling makes his protagonist, a desert Arab voice his repugnance at the White man and all his ways. Examples can easily be multiplied. Even “The White Man’s Burden” (1899), generally regarded as the epitome of imperial cult, is not free from ambivalence. In his revisionist reading of the poem Craig Raine writes that the final line (“The judgment of your peers!” Kipling 323) made it “clear that in the end, the judgment of the colonised on the colonisers will be the judgment of equals” (qtd. in Booth 118).

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