

Subverting Gender Roles in Kipling's "On the City Wall"

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Abstract

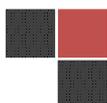
Rudyard Kipling is a man of strong opinion and words, his genius lies in his art of storytelling. He was the foremost writer in the last few decades of the 19th century. He has drawn on many themes surrounding the Anglo Indian men and women. My present concern moves around his portrayal of native Indian Women, but with an exception. Kipling's portrayal of Indian women has majorly included the victims of white men. The story *On the City Wall* is an exception, where the courtesan Lalun manipulates the British narrator in plotting an escape of a Sikh rebel of the revolt of 1857. The narrator falsely connects his desire to be the desire of the 'Other', hence, subverts the hierarchy of gender roles, turning the tables of colonial rule under the face of imperialism. Though the narrative seems to be rebellious it lacks the seriousness of the issue, but with a hint of how colonial ambivalence remains concealed in the narratives of Rudyard Kipling.

Keywords: subvert, other, gender, fear, desire, ambivalence.

Keeping in view the several imperialist assumptions and approaches to Rudyard Kipling, my study engages a more complex terrain of exploring his works that focuses on the Indian mistress and their misery on account of a white man who is unable to consummate a marriage with the Indian Mistress, just to protect his honour among the men of his class. Kipling's Indian stories in general show the native Indian woman as the sufferer in the end. The stories like *Lispeth*, *Beyond the Pale*, *Without Benefit of Clergy* are full of contradictions and complexities surrounding the legitimacy of the inter racial love often ends in the native woman compromising her wishes and ambitions. Kipling's presentation of such stories is well justified in the words of Benita Parry that Kipling was divided in his: "emotional involvement with India and his ideological commitment to the Raj" (254). *The Plain Tales from the Hills*, *Under the Deodars* and *In Black and White* are the three collections published in and around the same time, which highlight his colonial subjects when Kipling was a journalist in the *Civil and Military Gazette*. There is a dominant presence of Anglo-Indian woman in these collections with a few dedicated to the native woman. It is my observation that Kipling presents the Anglo-Indian woman as frivolous and ambitious in their appeal towards British men. He is critical and often scathing in presenting the characters like Mrs. Hauksbee, Mrs Reverie, while his Indian women are sensuous and victims of colonial enterprise.

Among the handful of stories on Indian mistress there are very few instances where Rudyard Kipling talks about power of a native Indian concubine who does not fall for the wisdom and glory of a British man, instead challenges the powerful men to lose their power in the hands of a beautiful seductress. *On the City Wall* was published under the collection of A.H. Wheeler & Co.'s Indian Railway Library series, in 1888. *In Black and White* was then published in book form in 1895. *On the City Wall* is one of the colonial stories that express how the men in the British administration fell for the Indian enchantress, Lalun. Lalun's beauty ensnares the heart and mind of British men. In Lacanian terms she is the 'Object of Desire' under the symbolic system. But it is surprising here that Lalun being the beautiful courtesan manipulates the powerful to yield their authority and in the process subvert the hierarchy of gender roles, turning the tables of colonial rule under the face of imperialism.

Kipling begins his story by criticizing the Western thinking of demeaning the job of a courtesan in moral terms. He argues that the Easterners/Indians treated the courtesans as professionals, properly trained to carry on their work which was not forced upon them; it was passed from one generation to the next, like the very great grandmother of Lalun named Lilith passed on her daughter the skills of being a true courtesan. Indian courtesans in the pre colonial rule were not seen as abhorred creatures. They belonged to a different community away from the normal domestic life of an Indian. It is only with the beginning of colony that the prostitutes were looked down as "fallen" beings. As Ratnabali Chatterjee quotes in her essay *The Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject Bengal 1864-1883* that: "The life of a professional courtesan in India is not of the same degraded character as that of a prostitute in England nor are prostitutes as a class looked down upon by other sections of community. They have special usages and rules of succession which are recognised by courts and they are not the same objects of mingled aversion and commiseration as persons who resort to a similar means of livelihood in more civilised countries." (Home Judicial File no. 48 1145). Kipling in his story directly challenges the British Enlightenment and Victorian morality in specially



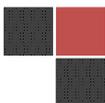
treating the woman as a subordinate class. A woman like Lalun: is considered a castaway in western thinking: which is not the case in India.

Lalun, the courtesan is a fusion of sensuousness, talent, beauty, shrewdness and is also politically presumptuous. Wali Dad, a twenty two year old boy and a great admirer of Lalun described her beauty in his poems, in one of his song he writes that: “[Lalun’s beauty] troubled the hearts of the British government and caused them to lose their peace of mind.” (38). Lalun’s character owes its name and story from the historical battle of Panipat. Daniel Karlin writes in *Rudyard Kipling, A Critical Edition*: “The story owes some of its names and atmosphere to a historical novel obscure even in its own day, *Lalun the Beragun* (1879) The author's name on the title-page, 'Mirza Moorad Alee Beg', is a pseudonym, and his real identity is not known...Besides a detail in 'the song of old days' and the name Lalun, the main bearing of *Lalun the Beragun* on Kipling's story concerns its treatment of the battle of Panipat (7 Jan. 1761), in which the Afghans defeated the Mahrattas.

The Mahratta leader, Mohadji Rao Sindhia, fled from the battle to Delhi with (in Alee Beg's romantic version) a courtesan, Lalun, on his saddle; but just before he reached Delhi she slipped from his horse in order to ensure his safety, and fell into the hands of a Muslim pursuer. He himself fell to the ground and fainted from exhaustion.” (543).

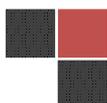
Lalun seemed to epitomize several colonial myths on Indian women¹, she has the say in political and courtly affairs which can be a fatal combination considered in a woman. Along with these talents, her court is a “repository of classified political information” (Sen 27). Further, the narrator compares her to the Egyptian Sphinx who is paid visit by the Gentlemen who have just come from England and often writes book about the ways and means of Lalun: “denouncing or praising it as their ignorance prompts.” (39). The narrator undermines the power of the British Government in comparison to Lalun; she is all powerful in the world of colonial rule, as she seemed to know more secrets of the Government Offices than the British Government itself. Her court is visited by all kinds of men both Indian and British from all caste, creeds and culture which turns the place into a “potential site of political and cultural ferment and subversion.” (Sen 27).

Lalun lived in a house against the city wall, in a secluded corner of the city. The house is an old haunted fort made by three Kings now left secluded reminding the past stories of kings and queens. Lalun rules her own fortress and considers herself the queen; she is the ruler who does not negotiate with the men of this world. Indrani Sen in her essay *Gendering (Anglo) India: Rudyard Kipling and the Construction of Women* underscore her character in light of certain ambivalence. She points out that: “at the heart of the narrative lies a central ambivalence, an inter-meshing of submerged oppositional strands, which in a sense converge on the figure of Lalun, as she comes to be located at the heart of the political resistance and even subversion” (27). Lalun’s role is vital in the story in the context of Khem Singh’s escape from the fort of Amara. Khem Singh was an active participant in the revolt of 1857. He was sent to Burma by the British Government, but the kind Government has sent him back from exile so that he can spend his last days in his country. Though Khem Singh has lost his memory after a long exile, but flashes of past keeps coming back to him and his hatred towards the government rages in his heart. The senior captain commanding the Fort of Amara was away on leave when the subaltern officer in charge of the fort gave permission to Khem Singh to move



around only at the word that he would not try to escape from the Fort. He was confined with some freedom to move from the flagstaff to the dry ditches. It was only from the rampart of the fort that his grey head was barely visible from Lalun's house. Lalun and Wali Dad Quietly admired his courage and bravery as a hero in 1957 war of revolt. The story is narrated in first person; the narrator seems not very adept about the ways of the court of Lalun. It is Wali Dad that reveals information about the Sikh rebel Khem Singh. Later he vetted the information from a subaltern officer in charge of the Fort of Amara in the absence of the senior captain. The narrator was in utter dismay remembering the day of Muharram when he was literally duped and distracted by Lalun in helping Khem Singh to escape from the fort. As the narrator describes that in the midst of the tazias he had lost Wali Dad and returned to Lalun's house to send some men to find Wali dad, but to his surprise he encountered a different scene. On entering Lalun's house he found that Lalun and her maid Nasiban was pulling an old Muhammadan from the ditch trying to save him from the Hindu mob, or else they might kill him. After quite a struggle the old man was pulled inside the house. Lalun suddenly with the show of gratification threw her arm around the narrator and whispered round his ears. The narrator found all his masculine power dismantled at the hands of the beautiful mistress. Lalun has requested him to take the old man across the city to the Kumharsen Gate and the narrator without asking another question moved out in the midst of the chaos. The narrator had to cross the troops with all risk only to find out that the man whom he was helping to escape was a Sikh, as he caught the bangle in his wrist while holding his hand in the crowd. The narrator had a late realisation as he confesses that: "I was not clever. When the news went abroad that khem Singh had escaped from the fort, I did not, since I was then living the story, not writing it, connect myself, or Lalun, or the fat gentlemen of the gold pince-nez, with his disappearance." (65) Lalun had used his white face as even a better safeguard for the escape.

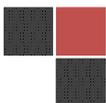
Lalun's involvement in such a chaotic struggle against the British is an echo of the role of the prostitutes played during the revolt of 1857. The prostitutes then actively participated in fetching news from the white men and inform the native sepoy to rise up against the British Imperialism. Lalun re-writes the role of the courtesan as written in the colonial narratives after the revolt. Indrani Sen points out that Lalun not only tricks his admirer to help in the escape of a former 1857 rebel, in the process she: "momentarily transforms the white man into an anti-British collaborator" (27). Lalun dares to reach a point of culmination where she is both a symbol of woman empowerment and resistance towards the colonial subjects. Instead of slipping into vulnerable sexuality, colonial subjugation and female suffering, Lalun re-constitutes a new discourse of feminine power through the narration of her story as a document of female resistance in the voice of the narrator. Lalun belongs to a different professional world in which woman are the dominant class constructing their own identity as subjective individuals. They have no real husbands instead they marry a tree which in reality is the objectification of the desirable 'Other'. The British narrator is a complete alien in such a symbolic world. According to Jacques Lacan the mirror stage in the process of the development of a child is a time when "the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power" (Ecrits, 2). This power is only achieved by acquiring the speech act, thus it is a constant process of the development of power. Each and every individual thrives to acquire this power. Lalun's profession being hereditary thrives for such procurement of power. The world of courtesan figures their mother as the replacement of the symbolic father; it is a topsy turvy world where the women are burdened with the responsibility of continuing their



artistry through ages. Lalun when gazed from the world outside her realm, like the native orgies or the British officials she is seen as the 'object of desire', the 'Other' that needs to be possessed. On entering her world the subject wishes to be desired by her (as Lalun cannot be possessed by one man), hence, mis-recognises the desire of the 'Other' as his own desire, unconsciously subverting the gender roles and instead of colonising the desired object themselves are held captive under a delusion that transforms the subject into an alien. The narrator was certainly tempted at that point when Lalun threw her arms and looked deeply in his eyes; her gaze is both engaging and repelling. In this context we can associate the famous character of Ayesha, the femme fatale in Rider Haggard's novel *She* written around 1886, almost the same time as Kipling's story. Ayesha is the Queen of Death; she is the White Goddess of the lost city Kor where she is an anarchist ruler, disobeying her orders leads to the death of the people in her kingdom. But she possesses such beauty that men fall helplessly in love with her. She is malevolent and alluring at the same time. She is a combination of both fear and desire which is why she exerts an uncontrollable power over men. Her beauties possess a threat that endangers the ego misleading it to fear. Though in Rider Haggard's story Ayesha kills the man who disobeys her, but in Kipling's Lalun is just a harmless beauty, often manipulating men to meet her demands. At the end of the story the narrator in a fit of self recognition admits that: "I was thinking how I had become Lalun's vizier after all" (67).

Benita Parry in her essay *The content and discontents of Kipling's imperialism* locates that: "the interlocution of voices in 'On the City Wall' [is] noteworthy, for in this fiction the Indians are autonomous and oppositional speaking subjects" (129). She finds that the "Indian scene is represented in a vocabulary of parodic romanticism, its ironic effusions alternating with the pompous diction of British rule..." (129). The ending of the story in Khem Singh's return to the Fort of Amara makes the plot more comical, reducing the seriousness of the narration. Lalun's failure to protect the old Sikh hero is a rewriting of the history of the battle of Panipat, as Daniel Karlin compares the situation of Khem Singh to that of Scindia: "the old man turns out to be as exhausted, as defeated, as Scindia at the end of his flight to Delhi." (543). However strong and resisting might be the character of Lalun, the failure to liberate the old imprisoned Khem Singh is a suggestion from the author's end that such incidents are occasional. Lalun if given a chance might emerge as a strong and empowered woman. But the intent is assertive as Parry points out: "Still inchoate as an insurgent discourse, the speech of Indians confronting and rejecting British authority points up what Kipling's writing elsewhere effaced" (130).

For Kipling England and its authoritarian stance works as the univocal superego that must be heard and followed. The absence of the real father figure in Kipling's formative years has given way to his acceptance of the national father figure in the form of authoritarian England. But attaining this stage of symbolic order was only possible by oedipal stabilization. Kipling's stories of the Raj is a process of sublimation by which he attains the threshold of the Big Other. As Julia Kristeva, points out that sublimation comes from the "artistic endeavour", the artist with his creativity can transform the Freudian 'death drive' into the poetic language, painting, dance etc. Kipling challenges both the rationality and enlightenment of the British through this story. This story brings forth the duality of vision as Benita Parry suggests that Kipling's stories can be read as a "grandiloquent self presentation of Britain as well as an inadmissible desire for the Indians". Thus, Rudyard Kipling wrote both for fear and desire of the empire. His fear



was based on the diminishing glory of British Empire and his desire to be desired by the Indian readers both prompted his way towards ambivalence. This present research intends to unearth the ambivalence that shapes the colonial discourse evident in the writings of Rudyard Kipling.

Notes:

¹The narrator refers Lalun as the great “Sphinx of the Plains” (39); she is like the mythical character of the Sphinx in Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex*. Greek myth records that this creature has a woman’s head, the body of a lion and the wings of an eagle. She is merciless, treacherous and can kill or devour if one is unable to solve her riddle.

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