

## Race and Colonization as seen in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*

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**Abstract:** *The concept of Orientalism (Edward Said) has a significant influence on postcolonial readings in literary studies, yet it can cloud one's perception of ambiguity in literary descriptions of the Orient. This paper proposes that the analytical and theoretical formulations of Edward Said need to be reconsidered, because Kipling's Kim displays ambiguity while establishing the relationship between colonizers and colonized. Problematizing Said's analysis of Kim, this paper argues that the character of the main protagonist Kim cannot be easily categorized in terms of race and nationality. Homi Bhabha's, the leading contemporary critic in postcolonial writings, introduced the concept of hybridity to post-colonial studies in order to disclose the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse and to further give more accurate description of Kim's character, in its flexibility preventing an analysis containing ideological blind spots.*

**Keywords:** *Orientalism, hybridity, Post colonialism, Rudyard Kipling, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Literature as a medium mirrors society and also plays a part in shaping society. In this regard, it is essential to look closely at the values which are conveyed in literature among other things; compassion, human values, race, and colonization, etc. The novel *Kim*, written by Rudyard Kipling in 1901, is of great importance and has been an area of discussion in numerous times throughout the past century in various contexts. Many scholars have given their views and opinions, some criticised the idea of the novel. Despite these contrasting views of scholars about the novel, it somehow managed to remain at eight ranks among 100 non-fiction books as stated in a survey conducted by the Guardian in 2016 (McCrum, 2016). The idea of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* revolves around an orphan Irish teenager named, Kimball O'Hara. The novel is written in consideration of the era 1890s in British India. The kid, Kim is a mischievous and care-free child who roams around in the city of Lahore, and throughout his journey, he has befriended people from various nationalities and religions. Kim has grown up in India, without a label or identity, and is considered as a 'Friend of all the World.'

Many scholars and philosophers proposed their opinions regarding the novel *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, of which, the opinion and statement of two scholars; Edward Said and Homi Bhabha's is taken into consideration for this research paper. Edward Said was born in 1935 in Palestine and later shifted to U.S in early 1951. He wrote various books about fiction (A&E, 2017). His book *Orientalism* influenced largely on the western as well as the eastern side of the world (Cronin, 2015). His work is most commonly divided into three major categories, of which the main area consists of the intensive research and critique on orientalism. His two books – *Orientalism* and *culture and imperialism* deal with the political consequences of colonization and distinguishes between orientalism and Occident. The terms defined assisted in the enhancement of institutional and administrative procedures within the western jurisdiction. The book *Orientalism* consists of deep insights and critical evaluation of various aspects; literature, colonial administration and several other aspects (Kennedy, 2013). Said is an influential scholar in post-colonial theory, who also proposed his views regarding the concept of this novel and interprets it as a racist and orientalist. However, a critical reading of both the novel *Kim* and Said's critical analysis reveals that the theoretical perspective of Orientalism distorts the novel. Therefore, the analytical and theoretical formulations of Said needs to be improvised while taking into account that Kipling's *Kim* displays ambiguity in establishing the relationship between colonizer and colonized in context of race and nationality.

Homi Bhabha (1949–) on the other hand, is a prominent contemporary critic and one of the most important figures in contemporary post-colonial studies. Bhabha tried to unveil the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer's ambivalence with respect to his position towards other colonized. The simple presence of the colonized other within the textual structure is enough evidence of the ambivalence of the colonial text, an ambivalence that destabilizes its claim for absolute authority or unquestionable authenticity.

Here, it is worth mentioning that Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity has become one of the most recurrent concepts in postcolonial cultural criticism. It is meant to foreclose the diverse forms of purity encompassed within essentialist theories. Hybridity can be seen as a useful alternative theoretical formulation to

make a post-colonial analysis of the relationship between colonizing and colonized as displayed in *Kim*. This paper will support this statement first, by briefly considering Said's concept of Orientalism. The main argument will be a critical analysis of Said's reading of *Kim* based on his theoretical formulations. Due to the limited scope of this paper, the discussion will focus primarily on the interpretation of the title character Kim. Then it will be argued why hybridity is a better mobilizing point in order to reflect on *Kim* in comparison of Orientalism. In conclusion, an evaluation of these findings will be discussed in a broader context by considering the implications for the field of postcolonial studies in general.

Edward Said (1953- 2003) is one of the key thinkers in the field of post-colonial studies. His background in comparative literary studies led him to research, among other things, the way the Orient is portrayed in fiction written by writers from the Occident. The genre of fiction is crucial because it reveals as well as shapes the conceptions about the Orient in society. "Liberal cultural heroes like; Ruskin, George Eliot, and even Dickens expressed definite and strong opinions on race and imperialism. The opinions and thoughts of these heroes can easily be identified in their work and writing" (Said, 1978, p.22). In his book *Orientalism*, Said states: "The Orient has assisted in defining Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience, yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral element of European material civilization and culture" (Said, 1978, p.10). Thus, the Orient is portrayed as the other, contrasting with the self-image of the Occident, therefore, it is always ideologically charged. The portrayal of the Orient as a homogeneous other is described as Orientalism by Said. He also advocates that in discourse, there is a simple dichotomy found between the Orient and Occident.

Edward Said himself describes civilizations in a more nuanced and inclusive way, refuting the idea of an essence. Said claimed that the Orient is an integral element of the Occident, which refers to financial dependence of the Occident on its colonists in the Orient in the nineteenth century. The fact that they are not colonies anymore, does not necessarily mean a withdrawal of Orientalism in texts: "Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and thesis about the Orient and the Oriental" (Said, 1978, p.10). He further argues that the image created about the Orient does not correspond to reality; rather, it's merely an idea created by the writers. A point of critique often found in Said's work is the inaccuracy and the oversimplified way of Orient's representation: "My two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus" (Said, 1978, p.16).

Said's main objective is to disclose these dogmatic generalities about the Orient and about the relationship between the colonizing and colonized. Regarding his analyses of texts he states: "My concern with authority does not entail analysis of what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text's surface, its exteriority to what it describes. Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, and my analyses employ close textual readings" (Said, 1978, p.28). These premises of his method to analyze texts which he considers Orientalist, are important because the theoretical formulations of Orientalism influence the conclusions one conceives when using this perspective to understand texts. One of the many novels Said has analyzed in the point of view of Orientalism is *Kim*

In his book *Culture and Imperialism* Said devoted a paragraph to a comprehensive analysis of *Kim*. In his initial statements, Said marks about the novel that "it has primarily brought to an insular and provincial British audience. The color, glamor, and romance of the British oversee enterprise" (Said, 1993, p.160). The use of language achieves this romance. The narrator's style is omniscient, encyclopedic and filled with immense foreign words to make the description of life in India more authentic. A contextual analysis can confirm this statement on the reception of the novel. The "romance" Said mentions is taken up by early reviews of the novel. For example, R. Thurston Hopkins wrote in his book *Kipling: a literary appreciation* (1915): "Kipling knows the odors of India as a man knows the woman he loves. His [Kipling's] aesthetic appreciation of landscape, color and odor are so subtly and intimately blended that the picture he provides, is a place that is quite remarkably vivid and concrete" (275). This statement seems to confirm Said's generic statement about Orientalist writers: "What he [the Orientalist writer] says and writes is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (Said, 1978, p.29).

Indeed, Hopkins states that Kipling wrote *Kim* as an outsider, a man who describes the woman he loves (275). There is, however, one detail which deconstructs this simple dichotomy. Kipling himself is of British descent, "Kipling not only wrote about India, but he was also of it" (Said, 1978, p.160). Although, Said himself made this remark, but he does not take this up as a deconstructing point in his analysis. It is, however, an important factor in the interpretation of *Kim* as different, for lack of a better word. Moreover, Said only involves a textual analysis; he states in his book *Culture and Imperialism* that "obviously Indians will judge the book as racist whereas, English and American readers will focus on the affection for India shown in the book (Said, 1993, p.163).

Moreover, when involving a contextual analysis, this appears not to be obvious after all. Both by Indian contemporaries of Kipling and by modern Indian scholars the book is defended because Kipling's life experience in India gives his books a more authentic representation of life in India. Lancelyn Green describes an

early review by an Indian writer: "An Indian writer, Kiran Nath Dhar ['Some Indian Novels' in the *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XXXVII, p. 561, October 1908] declared that 'Kipling was more of a true Anglo-Indian than any other writer. His short stories are vivid, and a genuine sympathy for all things Indian pervades his works' (Green, 1971, p.29). Professor Abdul R. JanMohamed as well, defended the novel by saying that "Kipling has produced the novel that more intriguingly explores the issues of racial barriers and syncretic possibility" (JanMohamed, 1985, p.77). Although, this seems like a minor point, but it does shed some light on the conflicting views on whether or not the novel is racist. This conflict shows that there is more ambiguity in the portrayal of the relationship between colonizers and colonized in the novel than Said acknowledges in his analysis.

When describing the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized in *Kim*, Said takes race as the fundamental structure: "The division between white and non-white, in India and elsewhere, was absolute. The division is alluded in throughout *Kim* as well as the rest of Kipling's work: a Sahib is a Sahib, and no amount of friendship or camaraderie can change the rudiments of racial difference" (Said, 1993, p.162). This is an unpersuasive argument when reading *Kim*. Sahib is a word used to refer to the white rulers in India. Even though, this seems like a clear dialectic between the colonizer and the colonized as ruler and slave, this is continually deconstructed. However, being a Sahib is not a natural state yet, some characters argue "once a Sahib, always a Sahib" (Kipling, 1901, p.83). Kim contests this rightaway by saying "I do not want to be a Sahib" (Kipling, 1901, p.84). At first, the focus is on the process of becoming a Sahib, but even after that, when one is already a Sahib, this is not a natural state: it is emphasized that "one must never forget that one is a Sahib" (Kipling, 1901, p.96). Kim denies being a Sahib rather he preferred to be the Lama's chela ("I am not a Sahib. I am thy chela" (Kipling, 1901, p.202)). Even beyond the formalities of being a Sahib or not, whiteness is not an unproblematic division.

The eponymous character himself is not easily defined as white or non-white. As JanMohamed aptly declares, the narrator and the character Kim are in contest: "while Kim insists that he is an Indian, the narrator adamantly asserts Kim's British origins" (JanMohamed, 1985, p.79). The narrator says: "Kim was English. Though he was burned black as any native; though he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song. Though, he consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small boys of the bazar; Kim was white—a poor white of the very poorest" (Kipling, 1901, p.2). The fact that Kim is burned black like a native already problematizes whiteness as a classifying point because this relies on the visibility of skin color. However, even though the narrator wants to classify Kim as English, and thus the colonizer, Kim is better classified as a double colonized because he grows up in India, and has Irish parents.

Ireland was another colony of Britain at the time. Said himself states that "white colonies like Ireland and Australia too were considered made up of inferior humans" (Said, 1993, p.162). This means that skin color and colonialism does not fully correspond, in the novel as well as in general. This is severely problematic and when Said takes skin colour to be an indicator of the distinction between colonizer and colonized: "Kim knows how a white Sahib can enjoy life in this lush complexity; and, I would argue. The absence of resistance to European intervention in it – symbolized by Kim's abilities to move relatively unscarred through India – is due to its imperialist vision" (Said, 1993, p.192). This argumentation is flawed because it takes whiteness as an absolute standard and Kim is repeatedly described as black as an Indian, and he speaks the vernacular. Thus, there is little to assume Kim's treatment as an indicator of how white people in India were treated.

As demonstrated above, Said's notion of race as an absolute division is invalid when analyzing *Kim*. The dichotomy between colonizer and colonized proves to be ambiguous, especially when taking race into account. Another influential scholar in post-colonial studies, Homi Bhabha, criticizes Said for assuming such a fixed, simple dichotomy between colonizer and colonized in texts. Said condemns the firmness of opinions in texts when describing cultures and makes this his major thesis that this fixity is continually reinforced in texts. However, Said himself seems to express the same strong opinion because he does not recognize when a text proves to be more intricate, just like the writers of the texts he criticizes as well. Bhabha proposes the concept of hybridity, which does not neglect the power relations build up in texts about race and colonization, but views it in a more nuanced, deconstructive way. "Hybridity is the evaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (Bhabha, 1985, p.34).

In other words: the hybridity of stereotypes both enhances and unsettles the same stereotypes. Following this theoretical statement, Kim as a character is a hybrid for multiple reasons. He is of Irish descent but born and raised in India. He is considered English by the narrator but rejects this label himself. Moreover, he is in transition between childhood and adulthood and falls between all social classes. He does not belong anywhere and is isolated. This leads him to repeatedly ask himself about who he is: "Who is Kim-Kim?" (Kipling, 1901, p.140). This character does not fit in Said's concept of Orientalism because this concept is based on the explicit representation of race and colonization in texts. Bhabha however, states that "the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space" (Bhabha, 1985, p.44). By encompassing this

ambivalence in this theoretical formulation, he surpasses the problem of over-simplification of textual representations of race and colonialism, while still being able to scrutinize these texts intricately. This is a change in perspective in which “the effect of colonial power is witnessed to be the *production of hybridization* rather than the noisy command of colonist authority or the silent repression of native traditions” (Bhabha, 1985, p.44). This production of hybridization is perhaps most visible in *Kim* in the use of language. The narrator’s style follows the Orientalist idea of a European perspective that is omniscient and encyclopedic, but it also used lots of foreign words, incorporating the Indian language in the English language.

Kim’s use of language also enhances his hybridity: he speaks the vernacular and flawed English when he is a boy, indicating that he is more Indian than English. Later on, he learns to speak Standard English, but he uses this language sparingly, alternating between vernacular and English when thinking and speaking. The use of these languages shows the co-existence of different languages in the colony, but also their interplay. This is part of the concept of hybridity which Bhabha talks about, because “it reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion” (Bhabha, 1985, p.44). As demonstrated above this ambivalence is manifested when taking into account the voice of the narrator against the voice of Kim. Although the narrator seems omniscient, he is subverted by Kim’s voice. In theoretical formulations, it can be argued that the multiplicity of voices “turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention” (Bhabha, 1985, p.44).

The field of post-colonial studies is highly significant because it discloses ideology in texts in ways it would not have been disclosed otherwise. Said, as an influential thinker, has considerably contributed to this field. However, since the field is intrinsically occupied with ideology, it always expresses ideology as well. Said acknowledges that “my own experiences of these matters are in part what made me write this book” (Said, 1978, p.35). This is not necessarily a disadvantage, but it can cloud one’s judgment when analyzing a text. In the current analysis of *Kim*, this paper repeatedly used Said’s analysis, his insightful observations – for example, Kipling being “*of India*,” to show that the dichotomy between colonizing and colonized in *Kim* is intricate and ambivalent. Although Said continued to make these insightful observations, he still concludes that race is the absolute indicator of colonization because this is his conclusion based on this theoretical formulation of Orientalism. He concludes his analysis by saying: “In reading *Kim* today we can watch a great artist in a sense blinded by his own insights about India, confusing the realities that he saw with such color and ingenuity, with the notion that they were permanent and essential” (Said, 1993, p.196). Though, he is talking about Kipling; one can ask if we cannot say the same thing about Said himself. His insight of Orientalism in discourse makes him see this Orientalism as permanent and essential, even though these colors and ingenuity are not always present in the books he analyses. Thus, he employs the same “dogmatic generalities” he fears (Said, 1978, p.16).

In addition, Said proclaims he does not look at “the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original” (Said, 1978, p.29), this denial is incorrect because these points are intrinsically tied to the ideological nature of post-colonial studies. An example in Said’s analysis of *Kim* is his remark “Some features of *Kim* will strike every reader, regardless of politics and history” (Said, 1993, p.165).

The features Said alludes to turn out to be gender representations. This shows that Said does take into account the ideal representation and some great original because he believed these should transcend history and politics. This is a meaningful lesson in post-colonial studies. The expression of ideology always accompanies the disclosure of ideology. For this reason, it is essential to compose theoretical formulations which show insights about ideology but are also flexible enough to do justice to the content of texts and not let the theory cloud the empirical knowledge, thus preventing to be blinded by insight.

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