

A Critical Analysis of Travel and Tour in Rudyard Kipling's 'Kim'

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Abstract

Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is a very interesting and popular novel. It is not just a coming-of-age novel but also a complex travel narrative set against the vast landscape of late 19th-century British India. The protagonist of the novel is Kim, an orphaned Anglo-Indian boy, as he journeys across the subcontinent with a Tibetan lama on a spiritual quest but unknowingly drawn into the Great Game of imperial espionage. Tour and travel in *Kim* operate on multiple levels: it is literal movement across geography, a metaphorical journey of identity, and a political instrument of colonial power. Kipling uses travel to construct an ideal vision of India, to explore hybrid identity and to legitimize British imperialism.

Key Words: travel, narrative, British India, spiritual quest, journey, identity.

Introduction

Joseph Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), a Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1907, was a journalist, poet, short-story writer and a novelist. His famous novel *Kim* is a state-of-the-art novel but also a complex travel narrative set against the vast landscape of late 19th c. British India. The novel follows Kim an orphaned Anglo-Indian boy, as he journeys across the sub continent with a Tibetan Lama on a spiritual quest while simultaneously being drawn into the Great Game of imperial espionage. 'Tour and Travel' in *Kim* operates on multiple levels: it is literal movement across geography, a metaphorical journey of identity and a political instrument of colonial power. A critical reading reveals that Kipling uses travel to construct an idealized vision of India, to explore hybrid identity and to legitimize British imperialism, even as the text reflects contradictions. It reflects Orientalism and at the same time asserts European influence on the East sociologically, scientifically, politically and imaginatively. Kipling's attraction for India is enchantingly colourful, with plenty of memorable visits, sites, people, and nature like one of Grand Trunk Road. The literary travel and tour of India is mostly an evidence of its literature and culture. Kim is the central character portrayed as a positive and non-stereotypical representation of the colonized. This is one of the important aspects in colonial literature.

This paper makes a critical analysis of travel and tour. Tour and travel operate on multiple levels: it is literal movement across geography, a metaphorical journey of identity, and a political instrument of colonial power. A critical reading and understanding reveals that Kipling uses travel to construct an idealized vision of India, to explore a hybrid identity, and to legitimize British imperialism, even the text itself exposes contradictions within it. Kim pursues his own strategies and has his plan. It is clear that he is not completely aligned to his British superiors. On the other hand, the lama represents resistance, as he is outside of the Great Game. He is above the conventional notions of native India and British imperialism. These two different poles, East and West, are the literary travel and tour during the British India. Kim and the lama in British India are characterized by superiority and inferiority in British imperialism and inferiority in the natives of India. These two gaps between superiority and inferiority ideas are reflected in Kipling's works of fiction through tour and travel. Racism is the result of imperialism. As Edward Said is of the opinion that notions of superiority are used to frame depictions in tour and travel literature, as reflected in Kipling's *Kim*. The notion of superiority is related to colonizer and inferiority is to colonized. These contrasting representations

serve as irony of human behaviour. The characters of Kim and lama are significant as they underscore the dynamics of British India in Kipling's *Kim*.

Travel as Physical and Geographical Explorations

The protagonist of the novel *Kim* is Kim, an Irish boy accompanied with the Red Lama from Tibet. In the first half of the novel, they travel across northern India, covering one thousand miles. They travel from Lahore to Lucknow, Benares and Bengal by train and then on foot on the Grand Trunk Road, a major highway It lies in the northwest of India, and it touches major cities like Calcutta, Benares, Delhi and Lahore to the Punjab-Afghanistan border. Kipling describes these landscapes with vivid details like the heat of the dust, the smell of bazaar, and the rhythms of pilgrims on the road. Moreover, the English Empire established good relations with the local kingdoms. Some of them were like big tours of travel more than England itself. The travels and tours of the British Empire are well defined with comments of Said's Orientalism: "knowledge was a crucial element both in exercising and legitimizing power over subjugated people. So much so that British officers would spend a lot of money and energies in trying to gather knowledge". (Said, pg.7)

The British rulers and its merchants had their personal informers who in their tours and travels provided information to British rulers and merchants. The Grand Trunk Road becomes the main central part of the novel. For Kipling it is a microcosm of India itself, where all the peoples of India meet: merchants, soldiers, holy men and peasants travel on this road. Travel here is not modern tourism but pre-modern pilgrimage and mobility. They travel by foot or bullock-cart, so the pace is slow, emphasizing endurance, chance encounters and oral storytelling. This contrasts with the emerging railway network, which Kipling presents as quick and disruptive to the social order. By romanticizing slow travel, Kipling preserves an image of India as timeless and unchanging.

The Spiritual Tour: The Lama's Quest

The Lama's journey is framed as a religious pilgrimage to find the River of the Arrow, a place of spiritual enlightenment. This gives the novel its cyclical structure - a search, wandering, and eventual fulfillment. For the Lama, travel is detachment from material life and a path to *Nirvana*. Critically, Kipling juxtaposes this Eastern spiritual journey with Western materialism. The Lama's innocence and devotion are portrayed as pure compared to the corruption and deceit of the Great Game. Yet Kipling does not fully surrender to Eastern mysticism. The Lama remains dependent on Kim for practical navigation, money, and protection. This subtly reinforces the colonial idea that while the East has spirituality, the West has agency and practicality. Travel thus becomes a hierarchy: the Lama seeks inner truth, Kim gains outer knowledge. The lama's Buddhist sect is the search of the 'the Arrow of River' that fairly deserves fictional critical attention. Jeffrey Franklin's broad study is related to Buddhist influence on Victorian England which devotes a whole chapter to 'Kim' (Franklin, pg.45) Kipling depicts two worlds of Buddhism in India representing the Lama with 'red hat' from Tibet and the lama with 'yellow hat' from India. His appearance in India surprises one as an odd minority.

The Imperial Tour: The Great Game

Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* represents the portrayal of India as the vision of British formal imperial domination. The British dominion has assumed a special place in many different fields of imperialist literature. Although the exaggerated racist patriotism of the imperialist domination is generally acknowledged. *Kim* still represents a true sense of India. His art of presenting India invokes a sense of conflict. Parallel to the spiritual quest is Kim's induction into espionage for the British Secret

Service. This is travel with a political purpose - surveillance, mapping, and intelligence gathering. Colonel Creighton and Hurree Babu use Kim as a courier because he can move invisibly across social and ethnic boundaries. Kipling presents this as a noble duty. The landscape is no longer sacred but strategic terrain. Rivers, mountain passes, and villages become data points in Britain's defense against Russian expansion. Travel in the Great Game is clandestine, purposeful, and hierarchical. It reflects the 19th-century "scientific" approach to empire: to know is to control. Kipling's detailed descriptions of maps, codes, and routes give the novel an aura of authenticity and justify British presence as protective and administrative.

Hybrid Identity and Travel as Liminal Space

Kim himself embodies hybridity - born to an Irish soldier and a native woman, he is neither fully white nor fully Indian. Travel becomes the space where this identity is negotiated. On the road, Kim can pass as a Hindu, a Muslim, or a European sahibs' servant depending on the situation. His ability to "code-switch" is his greatest asset. This liminality is central to Kipling's vision. Travel erases fixed boundaries of race and class, but only temporarily. Ultimately, Kim must choose between the "Way of the Red Bull" - his white imperial destiny - and the "Way of the Lama" - his spiritual, Indian affiliation. He does not fully choose either, ending in a state of suspended identity. Critics like Edward Said argue that this reflects Kipling's anxiety about racial boundaries. Travel allows Kim to cross them, but the novel ultimately reasserts colonial order by placing Kim in service of the Empire.

Orientalism and the Construction of India

Kipling's depiction of travel is deeply embedded in Orientalist discourse. India is portrayed as exotic, colorful, chaotic, and spiritually rich, but also disordered and in need of British governance. The natives are either loyal, wise, or treacherous stereotypes. Women are largely absent except as comic or threatening figures. The travel narrative thus serves colonial ideology. By showing a white boy who understands and is loved by Indians, Kipling suggests that British rule is benevolent and natural. The diversity of India is celebrated, but only within the framework of Empire. There is no Indian political agency or nationalism in *Kim* - a striking omission given that the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, 16 years before the novel. Travel in *Kim* erases contemporary Indian resistance and presents a static, pastoral India that requires British stewardship.

Contradictions and Subversions

Despite its imperial bias, *Kim* contains moments that undercut Kipling's project. The Lama often questions the value of Kim's worldly work, and Kim himself feels divided. The character of Hurree Babu, the Bengali spy, is both comic and intelligent, revealing the agency of educated Indians within the colonial system. The novel's openness - its lack of a neat ending - suggests that identity and loyalty are not as fixed as colonial discourse claims. Moreover, the sheer density of Indian voices, languages, and cultures in the novel makes it impossible to reduce India to a single colonial image. The travel narrative becomes polyphonic, even if Kipling's narrator remains firmly Anglo-centric.

Conclusion

In *Kim* tour and travel function as both narrative device and ideological tool. Physically, it structures the plot and showcases India's diversity. Spiritually, it represents the search for truth. Politically, it maps and controls colonial territory. Personally, it shapes Kim's hybrid identity. However, a critical analysis shows that Kipling's travel writing is not neutral. It aestheticizes and depoliticizes India to serve British imperial interests. Yet the novel's complexity, its attention to Indian detail, and its unresolved ending prevent it from being a simple imperial propaganda. Kim

remains a foundational text in colonial literature precisely because its tour and travel reveal both the power and the fragility of the British imperial imagination.

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