

# RUDYARD KIPLING, *KIM*

CRITICAL PAPER

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How shall we approach this book, “Kim” by Rudyard Kipling? On one level it can be seen as a *Bildungsroman*, that is the educational and spiritual growth of a young Anglo street urchin in Lahore – one Kimbell O’Hara – as he grows into being an adult professional spy for the British Raj . On another level this is a tour of the complexities of British India, as we wander its various landscapes, towns, villages, roads, hills and valleys, and along the way encounter an array of peoples, men and women, secular and holy and whatever. And on yet another level it can be seen as a long rumination by an ambivalent British colonial of the religious and spiritual life of India as seen through the eyes of one spiritual traveler, in particular a Tibetan Lama, as said lama goes on his quest for the Healing River. Or maybe the story is none of the above, but rather an elaborate sort of metaphor or fairy tale about growth, religion, and what it means to be a human in bewildering times. Like so many stories of the fairy tale sort, it takes place in a far and strange land and is told in a language that is almost Biblical in its distance.

The opening of the story is symbolic enough. Kim sits astride the Zam Zammah, an actual 18<sup>th</sup> century bronze canon that actually sits outside the actual Museum in the then Indian, now Pakistani, city of Lahore. Kim, the mixed British-Hindi person sits in the shade of this tool of conquest. As does all of the Raj. Maybe there is some Freudian meaning in his sitting astride the gun; I leave that to you to figure out.

But back to our story. The general framework is what is called “The Great Game”, referring to the nearly century-long struggle between the British and the Russian Empires’ struggle over the control of Central Asia. Within this large frame, the story before us pivots around one set of intrigues. It seems that five kings in northern India (reminiscent of Genesis 14) are planning to rebel from their British overlords and ally themselves with the Russians. A horse-trader friend of Kim’s, one Mahbub Ali, hands Kim a secret message outlining this plot. This message Kim is to deliver to another undercover agent in Umballa. So Kim attaches himself to a wandering Tibetan lama and convinces this lama to head south in

search of the Lama's quest for the healing River of the Arrow. And so their, and our, journey begins. Kim successfully delivers his message but then takes up his own personal quest, namely finding the image of a red bull on a green field, an image promising good luck as prophesied to him by his father. It turns out this emblem is his British father's regimental insignia. And one day, sure enough, he sees a British army advance party planting a flag with just such an insignia. Kim runs up to introduce himself and is eventually recognized as his father's son. Kim thereupon abandons the Lama and ends up being kidnapped or coopted or adopted (depending on your point of view) and turned into a British student in a military school in Lucknow. Years later he is sent on another spy mission, links up miraculously with his Lama, encounters two Russian agents in the foothills of the Himalayas, and snatches from them important papers outlining the plot of the Five Kings. Kim is a spy hero; the lama finds (or is convinced he has found), his healing river and seems to adopt Kim as his sort of son and everything ends happily. Well, except for the two poor Russian agents who were led to Kim and his lama by Babu, another of Kim's friends/spies. After an altercation over a religious painting, they are forced to flee for their very lives leaving behind their provisions, and the letters Kim retrieves. Their guide, Babu not only leads them deep into the mountains and away from any European help, but he even extracts nothing less than a letter of recommendation from them. Silly Russians.

The central character in all this, at least on the surface, is Kim. We first encounter Kim as an impoverished and footloose orphan whom, we might assume, is searching for a father figure. He finds one at the very outset of the story in the Tibetan Lama. Kim quickly agrees to be his *chela*, that is, disciple and takes care of the old man as one would expect of a good son. But Kim collects other father figures as well, including Mahbub Ali, Lurgan (the one with the jewel game), and Colonel Creighton to name the most obvious candidates. In time, however, Kim abandons them all, including his beloved lama. For a while Colonel Creighton becomes his functional father, ensuring his well-being and education, although unexpectedly, the tuition is paid by the wandering lama who apparently has considerable financial resources. He also seems to consider the Kulu woman, and maybe the lady of Shamlegh as mother figures. Freud anyone?

At some point it dawned on me that maybe the book was not about Kim so much but rather about these relationships, or maybe more accurately, about the various characters Kim ends up having relationships with. Consider Kim. At the start of the story Kim is a kind of cultural half-breed -- Hindi on the outside and English on the inside -- an orphan and a charming wiseass. In the end Kim is still a half-breed, Indian on the outside and English on the inside, an orphan and a charming wiseass. To be sure he

has grown into spy-dom, but outside of that he has not gone through any significant character development. But on his trek we meet a plethora of South Asian types. There is of course the Tibetan Buddhist known as the Teshoo Lama; there is Mahbub Ali, the Afghani Muslim horse trader; the elderly but wealthy Kulu woman who is also a Buddhist; there is the very proper British officer Colonel Creighton; there is the Englishman (or at least I think he is English) Lurgan and his strange apprentice the Hindu boy who tries to poison them; there is Hurree Chunder the so-called “Babu” or low level government clerk; there is the female ruler of the Himalayan village of Samlegh; we have the two British army chaplains, one Catholic and one Anglican of course; the old British war veteran from 1857; and a host of other minor characters – Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, whatever – who populate the Raj. In other words, what we have is not so much a *Bildungsroman* about the life and maturation of Kim, but a tour through some of the landscapes and peoples that make up the vastness and maybe even incomprehensibility of the Raj. Even the Russians make a cameo appearance. In this reading, the character Kim is simply a vehicle through which we are able to encounter these folks.

This variety of people brings up the topic of the religious types Kipling has us encounter. Kipling in this book, I would say, is focused on two things as we travel with him through India: race and religion. Pretty much every character we meet is given a racial and often a religious identity. In Kipling’s India (and his Britain for that matter) such things are not trivial, but rather are of tremendous social importance. In a society that was still bound by hierarchy and caste, race (and surely this means largely darkness of skin) and religion are significant markers in the social taxonomy. But what struck me, considering contemporary India, was how unimportant religion seemed to be, that is, the kind of religion one was. There seems only the mildest of tensions between Muslims and Hindus, for example, and the Buddhist lama is accepted virtually everywhere; in fact he is often given gifts or shown other honors merely because he is a holy man, irregardless of which religion he was holy in. We today have inherited a sense, maybe from the sixties, that India is a quintessentially spiritual place, and Kipling seems to think so as well, sort of. In fact, one can not help but wonder if for Kipling in some way thinks religion ultimately transcends, I hesitate to say trumps, social, class and caste distinctions. For example, the Lama once tells Kim, “To those who follow the Way there is neither black nor white, Hind nor Bhotiyal. We be all souls seeking to escape.” Another angle on this might be the symbolism of the Wheel of Life. The wheel of life goes round and round and sometimes we are up and sometimes we are down; those in power today (the British?) might be beggars tomorrow and vice versa. It is this mechanical fate that determines our social status, not an innate quality like race (white, Asian), religion (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist), economic status or even gender (we

have women who are rich and a woman who rules a village and its men). Maybe this is the real purpose of the book. Through Kim's eyes these various distinctions are interesting and sometimes relevant for certain situations, but ultimately of little essential meaning

One thing that Kipling has been criticized for is his colonial attitude, that is his assumption that British rule over India was not only good but also somehow right. I expected to find this attitude reflected in this book and am not sure I have. Kipling for sure has social commentary along the way but some of the most sympathetic characters are natives and many of the Europeans do not come across all that well. The two British chaplains, for example, do not seem to be at all superior to other religious types and maybe are their inferiors; the Anglican one is even called a fool. On the other hand, Colonel Creighton is portrayed much more positively, but then he is an ethnographer and is quite familiar with Indian folk culture, especially Buddhism. Like Kim, he is somewhere inbetween.

I have talked so far about Kim as the central figure in the novel, either the direct subject of a sort of failed *Bildungsroman*, or as the excuse for touring India. But there is part of me that wants to say that the main character in the end is not Kim but the Teshoo lama, the Tibetan holy man. He is described as following a middle way, and as of the "Red Hat" order, from the Such-zen monastery. The lama it should be noticed at the outset is a very real devotee of his religion; he is not a fake or a fraud but the real thing. He does lead a simple and religious life although as it turns out he is quite wealthy; recall that he pays for Kim's education. And he is pretty consistently dressed and mannered throughout the tale; he just does not change. This is in quite contrast to Kim who is a master of disguises and maybe of multiple identities. The lama is pretty consistently recognized as a holy man, and often honored as such, even by non-Buddhists. Throughout the book the lama has a consistent goal in mind, to find the metaphorical River of the Arrow which will free him from sin, or rather will give him enlightenment. Despite all the ups and downs of the road and his on-again-off-again relationship with Kim, this quest is the everpresent golden thread that runs through the narrative.

Along these lines, it is worth taking a moment to wonder about the real relationship between the lama and Kim. On the one hand, Kim seems to be willing to let the Lama be his father and guide but on the other hand, it is really Kim who is taking care of the aged lama. On the one hand, Kim seems to

be devoted to him, yet he at one point abandons him for the sake of his spy mission. On the one hand, the lama seems at first to be just what he appears to be, a wandering Buddhist monk, looking for a disciple, a *chela*, but then later he pays for Kim's British education at St Xavier's. Does the lama, with his seeming obliviousness really understand what is happening to Kim? Is the lama himself part of the Great Game? Hard to say, but the lama does become a religious, or rather, spiritual, guide for Kim. At one point Kim wonders if he fulfills his own quest and finds the red bull standing in a green field, he will become king. The lama, more mature and realistic, responds, "I will teach thee the other and better desires upon the road". [See Rasoul Sorkhabi, "Kim's Lama: Spiritual Quest in Kipling's Novel: Mandala (Oct/Nov 2007), pp 52-54.] ". It is also worth noting that after all their travels and struggles and searches for the great river of forgiveness and/or enlightenment, the River of the Arrow, it turns out to be a small irrigation canal in a remote farm that the lama finds at his very feet. Here he attains enlightenment. Maybe this is the whole point of the novel. With all the exotic drama and color of this rambling novel, maybe real truth and rest lies not out there in the exotic, but at our very feet, in our very inner beings, if we just stop and give it room to come forth.

So this is where Kipling leaves us. The lama finds his meaning and his self. And Kim, the putative hero of all? Kim is left with all his multiplicities to go forward to play some imagined role in the "Great Game". Does he ever achieve his goals, achieve enlightenment and happiness, achieve anything? The novel does not tell us because maybe that is not the point.

## QUESTIONS for Kipling's *KIM*

1. There has been some criticism of this novel that there is barely a plot and that the story is little more than a rambling account of a journey across parts of British India. Although it focusses on the growing up of one individual, namely Kim, there is no real character development. Do you agree with this assessment? Is this book a *Bildungsroman* that failed?
2. Kipling has at times been censured as being a colonialist writer, certainly accepting British rule over India and often depicting the native in less than flattering terms. Does India and its variety come across here as positive or negative? Does this novel strike you as pro-colonialist, anti-colonialist, or is the question itself simply the wrong question to be asking about this book?
3. It has been suggested that the real hero, or at least focus, of the novel is not Kim but the Teshoo Lama. In other words, this novel is really about the quest of a particular Indian holy man as seen through the eyes of his quirky sometime *chela*, Kim. Do you agree with this assessment? If so, would it be accurate to say that this novel is really about a sincere but ultimately empty religious quest, and so maybe a negative commentary on all religious quests?
4. Certainly a major theme of the book is searching – whether by Kim, the Teshoo Lama, the Kulu woman, among others. Is this novel a rumination on the process of searching for meaning altogether, whether religious or personal? What has been achieved and by whom? What have we achieved through reading this novel?
5. Ginger Saha noted that The *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, probably the most widely used anthology in America, does not include even one work by Kipling, even though he was the first English writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1907). Why do you think that the editors of the *Anthology* chose not to include a single work by Kipling.