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A Case for Rudyard Kipling as a Pro-Indian rather than an Anti-Indian

Mihir Dave

Assistant Professor

Department of

Communication Skills,

Marwadi Education

Foundation, Rajkot

Abstract

Rudyard Kipling has been one of the few British writers born in India whose writing exhibits a range of sentiments, strength and struggle of the British, the Anglo-Indians and the native Indians alike. His 39 stories published in *Civil and Military Gazette* under the title of *Plain Tales from the Hills* between November 1886 and January 1887 and later edited versions of the tales, 29 from Civil Military Gazette and 11 new tales, exhibit the said range. Most of these stories are concerned with Anglo-Indian life, civilian and military, that include Kipling's soldier trio, *Mulvaney*, *Learoyd* and *Ortheris*.

Keywords- *Indianness, Epigraph, Poverty, Consciousness*

The present paper aims at exploring this range and the shifts that Kipling is seen undergoing in the later editions of the *Plain Tales*, from stories of 'out hear' to stories of 'out there', in order to be accessible to the English reader. It will also be interesting to observe how Kipling chooses to discern these references of the world he belonged and his reader didn't. The study is made with the special reference to 5 selected and representative tales from *Plain Tales* viz: *Lispeth*, *Thrown Away*, *Beyond the Pale*, *In the House of Suddhoo*, and *The Story of Muhammad Din*.

First Shift – From Domestic Life to Official India:

In 1882 Kipling came back to India, in Lahore, Punjab (now in Pakistan). He joined *Civil and Military Gazette* (CMG) as a journalist which had been his first job. Later on he became an assistant editor of the same newspaper. Kipling's career as journalist helped him to come across larger part of the British India and the life conditions of Anglo-Indians. While

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writing for CMG, Kipling was seen exploring his relation to Indians in general and with Anglo-Indians in particular. Throughout his writing in CMG, one can see the gradual shift that Kipling went through, with some obvious uncertainties, of coming closer to choosing his audience. In the copy of *Echoes*, a collection of poems, he sent to Mrs. Tavenor Perry he asked:

Who is the Public I write for? / Men 'neath an Indian sky /
Cynical, seedy and dry, / Are these then the people I write for? /
No, not I" (Pinney 25)

However, increasingly it was the audience he chose to understand and address in his verse. From *Bungalow Ballads*, a group of six humorous and narrative poems published in summer of 1885 to *Departmental Ditties*, a collection of ten poems, published in spring of 1886, it was apparently clear that Kipling was shifting his focus from domestic life to official India.

In June 1886, he published a collection of 26 poems, *Departmental Ditties and other Poems* under his own supervision at the CMG press in Lahore. These poems were proved to be very successful, mainly due to the tone and the stance with which they represented the Anglo-Indian life like never before. *The Story of Uriah*, a characteristic tale of its kind, tells how Jack Barrett, an officer in British Raj, was transferred to Quetta, leaving his wife at Simla. Within weeks he was dead of fever. The story generated both, melancholy and humor. Kay Robinson, editor of CMG, commented that the *Departmental Ditties*,

Were personal and topical in their origin, and gained tenfold in force for readers who could supply the names and places. Those who had known the real "Jack Barrett", good fellow that he was, and the vile superior and faithless wife who sent him "on duty" to his death, felt the heat of the spirit which inspired Kipling's verse in a way that gave these few lines an imperishable force. (Robinson 74)

In *Thrown Away*, one of the Plain Tales, the narrator explains that India is a place where one must not 'take things too seriously.' Phillip Mallett in his book, *Rudyard Kipling – A Literary Life* averred in this regard that one who understands his society, will meet it cynically and not take it 'too seriously':

The proper view to take of the elaborate hierarchies and cumbersome machinery of government was that these were at once absurd and inevitable: only the young were taken in by them, only the naive expected to change them. The wrong man would always be appointed ('Public Waste'), the rejected man would prove a hero ('Giffen's Debt'), the authorities would always listen to the worst advice. ('Pagett, M.P.'). (Mallett 26)

Second Shift - *Plain Tales from the Hills*

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Plain Tales from the Hills (published in 1888) was the first collection of short stories by Rudyard Kipling. Out of its 40 stories, “eight-and-twenty”, according to Kipling’s *Preface*, were initially published in the *Civil and Military Gazette*, between November 1886 and June 1887. The remaining tales are, more or less, new.

The word “Plain” in the title referred to the narrative style that was deceptively simple style; and the word “Hills” referred to the fact that many of the stories were set in the Hill Station of Simla — the “summer capital of the British Raj” (In 1864, Shimla (then Spelled “Simla”) was declared as the summer capital of British India, succeeding Murree, northeast of Rawalpindi, Pakistan) during the hot weather. However, all of the stories were not based on the life in “the Hills”; Kipling had portrayed the sketches of many aspects of life in British India.

Long before Kipling started his career as a journalist, he had acquired the skill of manipulating the truth and fabricating tales. During his stay at Mrs. Holloway at Southsea, Portsmouth with his three year old sister Trix, he used to be crossed examined by Mrs. Holloway as a part of regular drill. To young Kipling it was not less than torture:

I have known a certain amount of bullying, but this was calculated torture—religious as well as scientific. Yet it made me give attention to the lies I soon found it necessary to tell: and this, I presume, is the foundation of literary effort. (Pinney 6)

As in his poems, Kipling addressed the issues of socio-cultural aspects of Anglo-Indians. In one of the plain tales, *Miss Youghal’s Sais*, Mrs. Youghal rejects the marriage proposal of Strickland, a police officer in British Raj, saying: “she was not going to throw her daughter into the worst paid Department in the Empire.” (Kipling 23)

However, there can be seen a second shift in Kipling’s focus where ‘natives’ received a sympathetic treatment, of course quite covertly - implicitly. It is interesting to see that all the *Plain Tales* used epigraphs at the beginning of the each tales and these epigraphs mostly of Indian expression and proverbs translated literally.

As in a number of stories of Kipling in which an Englishman loses or comes near to losing his identity, in the story ‘Beyond the Pale’, a secret interracial relationship between the Englishman Trejago and the young Hindu widow Bisesa is depicted. The story ends with Trejago stabbed in the groin and Bisesa mutilated. The first sentence of the epigraph, a Hindu proverb, identified by Kipling reads: “Love heeds not caste nor sleep a broken bed.” (Kipling 101)

The narrator seems very much cautioned in offering counsel and watchful in class and cast conscious. The first sentence of the story, in the voice of the Anglo-Indian narrator, reads: “A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race, and breed.” (Kipling 101)

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These remarks voice the Anglo-Indian narrator who is class conscious yet can't conceal the double life: a routine work of the day and 'madness'. At the end of the story, Trejago left with renewed double-ness and haunted by his loss. This loss is hinted by the narrator in the second line of the epigraph: "I went in search of love and lost myself." (Kipling 101)

The first tale in the collection is "Lispeth", set in Kotgarh, a valley about 30 miles from Simla. Lispeth was born to Sonoo and his wife Jadeh, Hindus, turn Christian. Lispeth was baptized as Elizabeth locally known as 'Lispeth' - *pahari* pronunciation. Cholera killed Sonoo and Jadeh, and Lispeth becomes servant/companion to the Chaplain's wife at Kotgarh. She grows very lovely and stately lady. One day on her walk (of 20 to 30 miles says Kipling, with fine irony and huge admiration of the hill people) she found an unconscious Englishman whom she carried back to the Mission, announcing that she has found her husband. This horrified the Chaplain and his wife, and they: "...lectured her severely on the impropriety of her conduct". (Kipling 7)

The stranger, a traveler Englishman although engaged to an English girl enjoyed prolonging his convalescence by flirting with Lispeth. He was told of Lispeth's matrimonial plan, and was amused; on leaving, the Chaplain's wife advised him to say that he will return to marry Lispeth. On one hand, the wife is referred as a "good Christian", on the other hand, Lispeth is ironically referred of "being a savage by birth, [...] took no trouble to conceal her feelings." When the Englishman did not return even after three months, the Chaplain's wife told the truth. Lispeth was shaken deeply not just because of the Englishman's betrayal but more because the Chaplain's wife also lied to her. Lispeth went back to his own people and married a woodcutter, suffered domestic violence common to *Pahari* household. The epigraph to 'Lispeth' expressed the agitation that Lispeth, a convert, felt:

To my own Gods I go.

It may be they shall give me greater ease

Than your cold Christ and tangled Trinities.

The Convert. (Kipling 5)

The tragic end of Lispeth, shows the ambivalence of Kipling at the end of a story in which the 'native' is shown as honest, simple and admirable, and it is the Christians who are the hypocrites and liars.

The Story of Muhammad Din", the shortest of the *Plain Tales*, is a moving tale. It tells a story of an unnamed English officer who comes across Muhammad Din, the son of his *Khitmatgar* (a servant). Their acquaintances are limited to the exchange of 'Salaam'. The officer seems appreciating the young Muhammad's presence. The suggestive epigraph of the story reads:

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“Who is the happy man? He that sees in his own house at home little children crowned with dust, leaping and falling and crying. (Kipling 161)

However, neither Iman Din, the father of Muhammad Din, nor the officer is a ‘happy man’ as neither is ‘at home’ in their own house. As Phillip remarks:

Neither Imam Din nor the narrator is ‘in his own house at home’; each is denied the pleasure of children; they are linked by a sorrow they cannot share. Yet the boundary between them appears to be impassable. Only in the fiction, in the wider view which encompasses and goes beyond that of the narrator, is there any possibility of reaching across it. (Mallet 34)

Hence, Kipling in his early verse writing displayed the first shift towards Anglo-Indians as his audience and in his early prose writing displayed the second shift where not only ‘natives’ were portrayed realistically and truthfully but Kipling was found lashing the hypocrisy of Anglo-Indians in an explicit tone. Thus in the *Plain Tales* one can see more expressively ambiguous and less diplomatically naïve Rudyard Kipling that he can be seen becoming with his later publications. In the fictional world of *Plain Tales*, Kipling was found alluding the ‘boundary’ between the Anglo-Indians and the natives which was impassable. In a wider and deeper view one can see that the fictional world of *Plain Tales*, incorporated and went beyond the narrator and deliberated the possibility of trace passing the alluded boundary. It would be ample to conclude the paper by quoting Phillip, which would help one to consider Kipling as Pro-Indian, at least in this phase of his life when he wrote *Plain Tales*:

In the best of the *Plain Tales* – in this story (The Story of Muhammad Din), in ‘Lispeth’, and perhaps in ‘Beyond the Pale’ – Kipling is patrolling the boundary not merely to defend it, but also to discover its weak point, and push against it. (Mallet 34)

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