

THE 'WHITE WOMAN'S BURDEN' IN *PLAIN TALES FROM THE HILLS*

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Abstract

While the bulk of research on Kipling's work focuses on Masculinity, the Empire, and Nineteenth-century power politics, less light has been shed on the role of Anglo-Indian women in British India, and their portrayal in Plain Tales from the Hills. Although there are several characters worthy of close scrutiny, this essay shall analyse the Anglo-Indian female characters who assert their identity and exert their influence over members (strictly male) of the Indian bureaucracy and military. The essay is not a feminist reading of Kipling's Plain Tales, rather, it hopes to study the inter-dependence of the male and female members of the Anglo-Indian society who saw the need to portray themselves as citizens of Britain and not merely as settlers on the fringes of an 'extraneous accretion'. (McBratney 2002: 3)

There was an increasing number of English women visiting and living in India due to faster means of transport when Kipling wrote his Plain Tales (ibid. 2002: 21). It is not surprising, therefore, that the young Kipling, lately returned from his 'home' country, would glean from social intercourse, the ironic and yet, vital presence of Anglo-Indian women in the empire. While working as a journalist, and living with his socially well-connected parents, the young Kipling was exposed to genuine Anglo-Indian life and people, which would serve as excellent fodder for his narratives. (Khanum 1998: 16-17)

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Through the analysis of ‘The Rescue of Pluffles’, ‘Consequences’ and ‘Kidnapped’, the essay will touch upon the role of women who come across as subservient and ornamental, while actually fulfilling a very key purpose that shall be explored through the essay. Through these select short stories, the essay means to look at the women who are thoroughly in control. While using indirect means of power, like gossip and rumour, these Anglo-Indian women seem to hold the reins, not of the Empire, but how it is seen in the eyes of the natives and the fellow British at ‘home’. The Indian Government is seen as less of an official body, and more of a social one, making it easier for women to be the ones in charge. Kipling portrays Anglo-Indian women as transgressors of the European model of womanhood, one that Ledger and Luckhurst in their *The Fin de Siècle*, typify as someone who has ‘a penchant for self-sacrifice, a talent for home-making, a willingness to defer to men.’ (Ledger 2000: 75). These ‘efficient angel(s)’ (Ingham 1996: 22), who were the backbones of ‘society’, managed to steer, in fact, puppeteer the men in-charge into believing in their own Patriarchal authority. The women in the stories aforementioned are strong and self-willed and, socially, at the top of the ladder, they use their gender, sexuality and matriarchal authority to influence the top rung of men in a serpentine, indirect way. It is only suitable, therefore, that the men, the ‘official’ rulers of the Empire, take the help of women, even for official business.

Kipling investigates this power of women without displacing the image of normative masculinity¹ of the strong patriarchal Imperialist male². His portrayal is subtle and yet, the idea seems to be that in posing as the subservient ones, the women actually help to reinforce the propagandas of progress, portraying their settlements as a home away from home and complimenting the ideal Victorian man- ‘an earnest, mature, hard-working, morally upright pater familias, frock-coated and (in that decade) full-bearded (Deane 2014: 4). Their seductions and contrivances are part of the Imperial charade.

This ‘acting’ on the part of the Anglo-Indian women is important as a narrative form as well, interloping with theatre, they manage to wrest the narrative out of the power of the shape-shifting persona of the ‘official’ narrator, and through that, Kipling. Analysing these themes, this essay shall delve deeper into the lives and behaviour of the Anglo-Indian women, who are set against the background of their favoured ‘hunting- ground’, the hill station of Simla. And Kipling’s rationale behind highlighting the contradictions and inadequacies of the official agents of the Empire is to seek a remedy for and, defend the system by publicising its weaknesses (McClure 1981: 5).

The Hill Station in Contemporary Imagination

Hill stations, a perfect replacement for the homeland, served as an escape from the Indian summer heat and discomfort. The English settlers were delighted by the similarity between the hill stations and England, and with more and more settlers flocking to the hill stations during the ‘season’ that lasted from April to October, Simla, like other hill stations often became a flurry of socials. (Pradhan 2017: 1 of 125 paras)

Soirees, dinners and dances organised by socially well-placed members of the settler community, gave hill stations the ambience of a ‘play-space’. (Shields 1991: 55). In several of the stories Kipling illustrates

¹ (Deane 2014: 49)

² The phallic narratives of empire (the athleticism, hardness and combative manliness of the imperial hero) are normative not descriptive. (Knights 2004: 35)

the different aspects of Anglo-Indian social life, whether it be picnics in 'False Dawn', archery tournaments in 'Cupid's Arrows', or balls in 'Consequences', he has covered the social landscape quite efficiently and completely. In the stories under close study, interactions between characters happen over social engagements which were governed by a strict social etiquette (Kennedy 1996:108).

It is therefore interesting that Kipling chooses the centre of *cultural* and social activity to set some of his stories. Being a member of that very community and the son of people of high profiles, Kipling uses the hill station, not only as an inspiration for the 'plain tales' that he tells but also as the backdrop for the stories to be set against. Simla is the perfect habitat for the well-to-do. It is a place of leisure, and therefore, flooded with gossip and *gup* that has fuelled Kipling's semi-factual, fictional rendition of hill life. (Kanwar 1984: 215)

In the short stories that the essay narrows down on for further exploration, one can see Kipling's use of the cultural landscape. It is in this hotbed of social activity where the slight ambiguity behind the truth of a tale can be built. The hill station is the land where all social possibilities and improbabilities become possible, without a great stretch of the imagination, as the wide information gap about the activities of people like Mrs Reiver and Mrs Hauksbee occurs not solely due to censorship but also because the intended audience would understand the meaning of those loaded silences and unexplained coincidences (Chemmachery 2013: 40):

Plain Tales from the Hills will teach more of India, of our task there, of the various peoples whom we try to rule than many Blue Books. Here is an unbroken field of actual romance, here are incidents as strange as befall in any city of dreams, any Kor or Zu Vendis, and the incidents are true (Lang 1971:48).

Gossip and Rumour: Subversion and Defence of the Empire

Known for their official papers and red tape, it is hard to imagine British Imperialists lending their ears to gossip, but such was the case in Simla and other popular hill stations, where leisure and official business would find a common platform (Kanwar 1984: 216). Although far away from the centre of business and control, the hill stations were ripe with news of the goings-on in the rest of Colonial India. In his book, *The Rumour: A Cultural History*, Neubauer gives thoughtful insights into the idea that history can be changed by the 'voice of rumour':

Whether they travel from the periphery to the centre or the other way around, rumours provoke panic and pogroms, fear of war or ecstatic triumphalism, that is to say, they make history. (Neubauer 1999: 1)

It is necessary, therefore, to look at the workings of this artful technique that builds upon its ambivalent power to reinforce or subvert the 'official' wielder of authority. Neubauer goes on to say:

'Even in a rumour one is not alone; that is its ambivalent promise. It is always connected with the fears, hopes and expectations of people. (Neubauer 1999: 4)

And, according to Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine in *Rumour and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*, ‘rumours seem most often fuelled by a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure; gossip seems motivated primarily by ego and status needs. (Rosnow 1976: 4) Kipling’s Anglo-Indian female characters certainly identify the power of gossip and rumour. In ‘Consequences’, Mrs Hauksbee prides herself on being able to do anything she turns her mind to. By what seems to be a fortunate coincidence, some ill-directed official papers come into her possession that strengthen her influence over the Viceroy. It isn’t made clear as to how, but Mrs Hauksbee obviously goes out of her way to acquire the necessary information to fulfil the favour that she owed to Tarrion. In another story, ‘Kidnapped’, Mrs Hauksbee is influential in changing Mr Peythroppe’s matrimonial plans: whatever the objection to his intended, Miss Castries, she is considered quite an ‘impossible’ (98) match from the start. In this case, Mrs Hauksbee connives to break the engagement between Peythroppe and his fiancé, assuring his availability for someone more suitable. The reader is later informed about his ideal future, with a socially desirable wife and many official connections. The reader is made to believe, without the dissemination of any details that Mrs Hauksbee is capable of orchestrating official and personal liaisons through her dubious influences:

For whoever masters the social technology of the rumour, whoever can speak with the voice of hearsay, with the voice of the loophole, has mastered the high art of mastering. It is the art of being able to say something without being identified as the author, the art of being someone who can drive a stake into the eye of an opponent while remaining the one who remains without a name. (Neubauer 1999: 80)

Therefore, Kipling’s Anglo-Indian women come across as people who understand human nature and the ways of the hills. They use their powers to subvert official authority by their indirect means, only to re-establish the official figures of authority by obtaining the right kind of results. However, they may utilise this power, the intent is never seen as malicious, even though Kipling ironically states: ‘Anglo-Indian ladies are in every way as nice as their sisters at Home.’ (44)

The Anglo-Indian Matriarch

Similar to their ability to control what’s being said about whom, several Anglo-Indian women also exert their maternal influence over the men in the stories. The matriarchal figure often uses her maternal power, to play the part of a puppet-mistresses in the *Plain Tales*. This may have much to do with the ‘exemplary’ nature of Kipling’s mother, on whom the character of Mrs Hauksbee is roughly based. (Seymour-Smith 1989: 70). In the stories that have been chosen for close consideration, the reader can perceive explicit instances of the matriarchal behavioural traits of the Anglo-Indian women. Mrs Hauksbee in ‘The Rescue of Pluffles’, snatches “the boy” away from the coils of Mrs Reiver. (46) Kipling reveals that Mrs Hauksbee ‘began to talk to Pluffles after the manner of a mother, and as if there had been three hundred years, instead of fifteen, between them.’ (46) The very fact that she ‘had seen an earlier generation of his (Pluffles’s) stamp bud and blossom, and decay into fat Captains and tubby Majors’ (46), emphasises her ability to nurture the men in her life to one day become successful members of the bureaucracy or military. Even Mrs Reiver’s ‘schooling’ or ‘training’ of Pluffles, is an indication of her superiority as a mother, to him. (44)

In ‘Consequences’, ever tactful and helpful, the respect Tarrion has for Mrs Hauksbee as one wise and

superior is akin to the regard a son has for a mother. As Tarrion does her a favour by forging an invitation card, the host, a senior member of the Indian bureaucracy 'really thought that he had made a mistake... realised that it was no use to fight with Mrs Hauksbee' (76).

Later in 'Kidnapped', Mrs Hauksbee is trusted to the task of separating a man from his ineligible fiancé. It is because of her wisdom, in the matters of the heart and the matters of careers that her friends of Peythroppe believe she is the only person who can be entrusted with the task. She is the one who comes up with a solution that suits all parties and that causes the least embarrassment or scandal.

Even in 'Three and—an Extra', Mrs Bremmil who must reclaim her husband, first physically attracts her husband by dressing and dancing 'divinely' and later flirtatiously scolding him for his behaviour, she 'shook her finger at him, and said laughingly, 'Oh, you silly boy!'" while her husband looked like 'a naughty little schoolboy' (14-15). In this story, the appearance of motherly correction and the need for moral guidance in the child through gentle disciplining is made an example.

The irony is strong when we realise that imperial subjects were often seen as children in constant need of supervision and that the white man was seen as the father, regimenting and controlling their chaotic impulses. (McClure 1981: 24)

Enacting the Empire

Men speak the truth as they understand it, and women as they think men would like to understand it; and then they all act lies which would deceive Solomon, and the result is a heartrending muddle that half a dozen open words would put straight.' (Kipling 1887: 2 of 23 paras.)

In this witty sentence, we get a clear idea of the social life in British India was, as Kipling sees it, mimesis (McBratney 2004; 22), for, 'Only as fiction—as a lie or as jest—can truth escape censorship, be it self-imposed or otherwise, a tale 'escapes the control of censorship precisely by being subversive in the costume—the print petticoat or the jester's garb—of its fictiveness.' (Hai 1997: 620)

This perspective helps us understand Kipling's own shape-shifting persona of the narrator (McBratney 2002: 7) and the ability of the women in perspective, to change their 'costume(s)' as the situation demands. Mrs Hauksbee changes from playing the role of a mother, seducer, confidant, etc. in the various stories in which she appears. Mrs Reiver too goes from a nonchalant lover to a fierce defender of her admirers when at risk of losing them. Several other women in the *Plain Tales* face the need to create an illusion of themselves to get what they desire while avoiding strict moral surveillance and social judgement. Yet, their aim in doing so is not to subvert the official hierarchy upon which the administration of the Indian Empire resides, or to propel themselves above it, rather, 'with little freedom to explore the word on their own' and being 'confined in domesticity to the role of companion', women would act alongside these set structures of the Empire to portray a picture of harmony. (Nagai 2011: 77)

Empire and Masculinity

Hence, the need for the white woman to carry her burden as a counterpart to the white man, is what this part of the essay shall discuss. The need for this comforting and very able figure in Anglo-Indian life

springs from the inadequate and inappropriate methods of upbringing. Kipling himself was 'sent away to England at the age of six, mistreated, all his favourite things taken away. Locked (him) in the cellar where he would imagine himself as Robinson Crusoe, the archetype imperialist' (McClure 1981: 11). What one concurs through such a dreary image of the English male child's upbringing is that being 'psychologically crippled' (ibid.: 56), men needed the homely support of the woman to complete and substitute for the overwhelming 'sense of inadequacy' of the Imperial officers who saw themselves, 'not as powerful rulers but as isolated and impotent exiles.' (ibid.: 31)

It is in stories like 'The Rescue of Pluffles', that Mrs Hauksbee deems it her duty to stand in as the buffer between the easily persuaded Pluffles and Mrs Reiver. It is also Mrs Hauksbee, (championed by the narrator) who stands in for the highly desirable Matrimonial Department in 'Kidnapped'. It is made obvious that the beautiful Miss Castries would be an inappropriate match for the young Peythroppe simply because she would not serve to complete the perfect picture. It is only the wise and experienced members of the empire who would understand the insignificance of love and the importance of submitting to the colonial ideal. At the end of the story, the reader does get a glimpse of this highly desirable ideal future, one where Peythroppe, the archetype for the young imperial servant, goes on to 'marry a sweet pink-and-white maiden, on the Government House List, with a little money and some influential connections, as every wise man should'. (101)

In 'Consequences', Mrs Hauksbee decides to do the newcomer Tarrion a good turn. She uses her mastery over the social scenario to cement the foundations of Tarrion's career. Furthermore, in 'Three and an Extra', Mrs Bremmil steps out from a state of depression to win back her husband. The satisfactory ending and Mrs Bremmil's 'swansdown cloak' (15) suggest the sexual purity of the union, another completion of the Anglo-Indian ideal. (Karlin 1989: 6)

Even the social antagonist to Mrs Hauksbee, Mrs Reiver and many other women who are merely mentioned in the stories act as catalysts for one another. They help one another in creating a perfect tableau of Anglo-Indian life. And although it is often seen in a negative light, Kipling seems to suggest that the social distractions were necessary for the development of the Empire.

Through these instances, one can conclude that the motivations of these women were benign. Unlike their male counterparts, their motives were not founded on the military and violent aspects of Imperialist propaganda, but rather, on creating a picture of Anglo-Indian life that was wholesome and aided the men's ability to rule. Like the famous (infamous?) lie Marlow tells Kurtz's intended, the need to propagate the idea of domesticity, as opposed to the "horror(s)" of the Empire, is necessitated.

Conclusion

Since Kipling inferred from his life in India that there is a 'huge variety of human behaviour' and that 'people behave as they do for deep reasons' (Havholm 2008: 15), one can only conclude that since his work challenged the image of the colonist as 'manly, fair, and supremely self-confident' (McClure 1981: 4); owing to which came the need for the Anglo-Indian women to help balance the unpleasant reality that they came face-to-face with. If women were the ones ahead of the men in the social sphere and if they were the agents of control in the hill station socials, it becomes obvious that they did so through clever means, still pretending to be subservient. Since the Imperial officer is often seen in a fatherly manner,

and the natives as children, in constant need of supervision, it is only logical that the White woman would share the 'White Man's burden' and be his help-mate. Ironically, there are instances where he is seen as someone who in turn requires supervision, and in need of maternal guidance. Nonetheless, however overt the methods used by the women, to solidify the ideal of and the 'viability of Empire', women never act as direct propagators of the violent "horrors" of Imperialism. (Chemmachery 2013: 38) They are the ones who vex the rules of subversion, knowing the rules, yet breaking them. Kipling tends to be misogynistic and yet, a flatterer of women, he knew that they were the more 'deadly' than men and yet, mothers, were ranked high up in his life's considerations (Seymour-Smith 1989: 12). That Anglo-Indian women exercised a kind of psycho-sexual power over the white men may hardly be very different from the flirtations of women back in Britain. But the fact that White men outnumbered White women three to one, might pertain to the fact that the paucity of female company might have changed power-relations between men and women. (Sen 2000: 13)

Kipling's contemporary, Flora Annie Steele had likened the Anglo-Indian home to the Empire and believed that the proper running of the household was as necessary as the proper administration of the Empire, but Kipling goes a step further by creating a scenario where Mrs Hauksbee enters the strictly male-only realm of the running of the Empire. (ibid.: 16-17) Kipling like other male writers writes about women like he does not understand them (Sherwood 1919: 45). Though they are less convincing than their male counterparts, Kipling's women are strangely enough, better equipped to take on the duties that their gender roles force them to play.

Taking the 'anthropological view', Kipling has made certain assertions about the women whom he encountered in everyday Anglo-Indian life (Thrilling 1964: 88). Using the means of certain short stories, the essay has attempted to develop the idea that while placed at the periphery, with a diminished status in comparison to men, women still had to assert themselves for the sake of the Empire. Moving away from the bare necessities of the colony, to constructing an idea of Britain as an international power," while constantly remembering that, '[t]he English woman has to this day remember—too many Indians she represents all they know of England. We in India may not be flowers of our kind, but by us will our kind be judged'. (Fitzroy 1926: 214)

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