

Trauma and Catharsis in Kipling's The Jungle Book

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Abstract

Literature is as much a lived expression of life as it is a microcosm of life itself. Literature in all its forms– the oral, the written, the illustrated and the enacted– has always been an expression of life. The pre-historic man drew to document life. The onset of civilisation meant the advent of language. As human civilisation advanced, it saw the development of written language, and when it reached the acme of its perfection, it took the form of literature.

One of the primary ways the human spirit manifests itself in literature is by using literature as a springboard to express what has remained suppressed/ repressed. The present paper explores the life and work of one of English literature's most prolific, decorated and, at the same time, much-maligned author, Sir Rudyard Kipling. The extremes of love and hatred that Kipling has evoked through the ages stand testimony to an extraordinary life. Rudyard Kipling belonged to two worlds- a world he was born into and one he had lived in. Kipling's life was strangely enriching as well as conflicted life. Nature and nurture were at war in his personality and life; his writings were a personal journal. Unconsciously, his writings became a means of release and healing for him. This is especially true for his later works. This paper seeks to study this trauma and cathartic release in Kipling's work with special reference to The Jungle Books. The present paper attempts to read The Jungle Books as the cathartic expression of release and healing by a compassionate and much-maligned author. The paper seeks to go back to the conception and realisation of The Jungle Books and the character of Mowgli himself, trying to locate in it the deep personal history that the populist, colonial readings of Kipling have often overshadowed.

Keywords: Trauma, Catharsis, literature, Kipling, The Jungle Book

The Appeal

“And for the little, little span
The dead are borne in mind
Seek not to question other than
The books I leave behind.”

Rudyard Kipling

With this appeal, the present paper tries to dive into the life and mind of one of the most prodigious, maligned, and politically tricky writers, Joseph Rudyard Kipling. The paper begins with a snippet from one of the lesser-known of Kipling’s poems, which stands in defence of this controversial and very private writer who has seen tidal waves of admiration and abomination in his lifetime and beyond. Literature is as much a lived expression of life as it is a microcosm of life itself. Literature in all its forms – the oral, the written, the illustrated and the enacted has always been an expression of life. Pre-historic man drew to represent life; the onset of civilisation meant the advent of language. As human civilisation advanced further, the written language was developed. When this written language reached its perfection, it took the form of literature.

One of the primary ways the human spirit manifests itself in literature is by using literature as a springboard to express what has remained suppressed/repressed. The present paper seeks to explore the life and works of one of literature’s most prolific and decorated authors, Sir Rudyard Kipling, who is, at the same time, a much-maligned author. Kipling belonged to two worlds—one he was born into and one he had lived in. Kipling had a strangely enriched and conflicting experience of life. Nature and Nurture were at war in his personality as in his life. Literature for Kipling began as a journalistic endeavour, and its journalistic principles were to remain at the core of Kipling’s writings. However, this literature was a journalistic depiction of a troubled life at some difficult junctures, though Kipling’s art kept this documentation well disguised. The present paper proposes to read the Mowgli stories of Kipling’s “The Jungle Books” as a disguised journalistic depiction of the author's troubled life as he tried to make sense of a world where his heart and mind led him in two different directions. The present paper proposes to read the autobiographical elements in the character of Mowgli, looking at it through a psychoanalytical angle and trying to go back to the conception and development of this character while co-relating it with Kipling’s mental turmoil as he negotiated life. This

present paper attempts to locate in the Mowgli stories of “The Jungle Books” the deep personal history overlooked and foreshadowed by the more populist colonial readings of Kipling.

Rudyard Kipling was born to immigrant British parents, John Lockwood Kipling and Alice Kipling, in December of 1865 in erstwhile Bombay. John Lockwood Kipling was the first dean of the JJ School of Art, Bombay and the Kipling family lived on campus. Kipling was to memorialise the city of his birth in the poem “Dedication: To the City of Bombay”, where Kipling proudly says,

“Neither by service nor fee
Come I to mine estate—
For I was born in her gate,
Between the Palms and the sea,
Where the world-end steamers wait.”

Kipling was to describe his childhood further, a very short, distinctly Indian childhood that was cruelly cut short in words that emanate the magic and wonder that must be the essence of childhood. Kipling describes the surroundings of his house in his autobiography, saying, “Far across green spaces round the house was a marvellous place filled with smells of paints and oils and lumps of clay with which I played”. While the original house crumbled away, the “Kipling House” structure, which came up adjacent to the original bungalow, was constructed in 1882, almost a decade after Kipling left for England. It is only a metal plaque and a bust of the author standing outside the dilapidated bungalow that speaks to the visitors today of the man who once lived there and gave the place its name.

Rudyard Kipling was sent “home” to England at the tender age of six, in the care of foster parents, to be raised as an Englishman by parents who could see the strong Indian imprint that their highly impressionable boy was showing. As Kipling mentions in his autobiography, “Something of Myself”, he was more likely to speak in the vernacular than English and was often reprimanded for it. Kipling’s short, idyllic, magical childhood was the only anchor of a life that took a cruel turn when he was sent “home” to England in foster care. Kipling was to return to India as a nineteen-year-old, and India was once again to become his professional training ground. It proved to be the launch pad for the immense success that established him in the firmament of the great writers of the empire.

Kipling's connection with India kept coming up throughout his life. He was to famously exclaim, "There are only two places in the world where I want to live, Bombay and Brattleboro. And I cannot live in either". Interestingly, neither Bombay nor Brattleboro was what Kipling's ancestors, or Kipling's parents, had called 'home', but both were home to Kipling. Bombay was home because it held the relics of a few precious childhoods snatched too soon, and Brattleboro perhaps because of its raw, wild quality, which allowed for moulding according to one's taste. One is wont to believe that it was no coincidence that Kipling built a sprawling Indian-style bungalow in Brattleboro for himself and named it Naulakha, which in vernacular Hindi means an expensive jewel. As much as its conception, the name speaks for the Indian heart of the British man who built it, Kipling himself. Naulakha was Kipling's Indian refuge in wild, untamed America, a piece of land he was working hard to reclaim, a life he could not publicly speak about.

"The Jungle Books" has been variously and widely read in several different themes. One of the most popular readings of the "The Jungle Book" has been its post-colonial reading as a narrative of the Empire. Mowgli has been seen as the advocate of the British Empire, the law of the jungle as the sacred laws of the Empire, meant to uphold the hierarchy on which the Empire stands. However, what most critical readings of Kipling have missed, especially about the Mowgli stories of "The Jungle Books", is the profoundly personal element that lies deep within its structure. Where critics have read in "Kim" specific autobiographical notes, Mowgli has largely been ignored in this respect. The present paper attempts to read the character of Mowgli as the alter-ego to Kipling's Kim. Where Kim is all fun, adventure and banter in the kaleidoscope of India's settings, Mowgli is dark, menacing and traumatised as he oscillates between the jungle and the village. The present paper attempts to read the conflicted history of Rudyard Kipling's life in the Mowgli stories as he found himself torn between nature and nurture. Though Kipling was never to find that balance between what his heart desired and where his mind led him, his literary counterpart, the carefully camouflaged Mowgli, was to face those dilemmas that a young Kipling faced. Unlike Kipling's real life, the literary shadow figure of Mowgli attains a sense of equilibrium, a place of contentment, a sense of belonging as he settles on the edge of the forest that was home to his childhood and the male village that was the home he had been born into.

"The Jungle Book" is not only a carefully camouflaged representation of the Empire as it has been read, but also the story of the man Kipling himself as he found himself caught in the spotlight of the empire, the role of its spokesperson almost thrust on him. Mowgli, the wolf

boy, and young Ruddy, the British boy with uncanny Indian features, share the same psychological and ideological battles. As he finds himself torn between the Jungle and the man village, Mowgli's despairing cry says, "*As Mang flies between the beasts and birds, so fly I between the village and jungle. Why?...I am two Mowglies*". Kipling was to later write "The Two-sided Man" in "Kim", saying, "Much I owe to the lands that grew—More to the lives that fed-/ But most to Allah who gave me two / Separate sides to my head...I would go without shirt or shoe,/ Friend, tobacco or bread,/ Sooner than lose for a minute the two/ Separate sides of my head!" Where Kipling, in the two-sided man, was expressing the sense of a mental equilibrium which he sadly lacked in the physical space, Mowgli in "The Jungle Books" was describing the troubled inner journey of the mind which led to this final acceptance and growth.

The Mowgli stories in "The Jungle Books" are both an expression of the great love that Kipling had for the country of his birth and, more importantly, for chronicling the mental conflicts of Kipling himself as he straddled two worlds, longing to belong and finding himself an outcast. Much like Kipling himself, Mowgli faced a crisis of existence quite early in life- an existential crisis of identity. Just like Kipling's short-lived idyllic childhood, Mowgli too has a brief stint with the wolf pack, running with them as a brother, learning the law of the jungle that has been a home to him for all the years that he can remember, only to be told that hat he, a man-cub, belongs to the man-village, and there it is that he must seek a home for himself. There is more than a passing resemblance between Mowgli's dilemma and Kipling's life. Mowgli, we see, is almost pushed out of the jungle by the very wolves with whom he had once claimed kinship. Unfortunately, Mowgli has to use the fire he brought from the man-village in self-defence against the young wolves of the jungle, who deny the kinship that an older generation had accorded to Mowgli. In a very critical moment in the story "Mowgli's Brothers", we are told how,

"Mowgli stood upright, the fire pot in his hands. Then he stretched out his arms and yawned in the face of the council, but he was furious with rage and sorrow, for, wolf-like, the wolves had never told how they hated him. "Listen to you!" he cried. "There is no need for this dog's jabber. Ye have told me so often that I am a man (though indeed I would have been a wolf with you to my life's end) that I feel your words are true. So I do not call ye my brothers any more, but sag(dogs), as a man should." (Kipling 16)

In this poignant passage, where we are given a glimpse into Mowgli's inner life, we see the extreme pain and anguish with which he starts moving towards the search for an authentic

identity. What remains unsaid in the passage above is more important than what is said. It is a fundamental crisis of existence that Mowgli faces as he stands on the brink of manhood, outcasted from the home he knew and pushed towards a 'home' that he does not know but where he belongs because of the accident of birth. How the new generation of wolves turns against Mowgli, betraying the trust that an older generation had bestowed on him, is symbolic of Kipling's fears, had he, like Mowgli, sought a home and kin in India, the beloved country of his birth. Mowgli's inner voice saying, "I would have been a wolf with you to my life's end", is a pointer to inner turmoil as he must stand and protect himself from those very wolves with whom he had claimed kinship. One is wont to believe that in Mowgli's confrontation with the wolves, Kipling was projecting a part of his fears had he forayed too far into his Indian self. It is essential to mention here that just like the young Ruddy, the adult Rudyard, too, was fascinated by the Indian way of life, and his journalism gave him more than one opportunity to delve into the native's life. Moreover, the insomniac Kipling was known to explore the city of Lahore on many sleepless nights, as many of his short stories would testify to this.

In the Mowgli stories, we see a constant reverberation ringing throughout, "Man must return to man". It is as if Mowgli's destiny is pre-decided. Raksha, Akela, Baloo, and Bagheera all know that Mowgli must return to the man village one day. From the time that a young Mowgli roamed the jungle, believing himself a wolf, the wise ones of the jungle knew that he must return one day to the man village, just as a young Kipling soaked in the colours and stories of India oblivious to the fact that he would soon have to leave it for another 'home' across the seas, the home of his ancestors. In the Mowgli stories, we constantly see Mowgli's conflict as he tries to figure out who he is and where he belongs. While the wolves' treacherous revolt against him has made him wary of them, he cannot trust men either. In the Song of Mowgli, we once again see Mowgli's great grief as he sings,

"...The Man Pack are angry. They throw stones and talk children's talk. My mouth is bleeding. Let me run away. /Through the night and hot night, run swiftly with me, my brothers. We will leave the lights of the village and go to the low moon waters of Waingunga; the Man-Pack have cast me out. I did them no harm, but they were afraid of me. Why? Wolf Pack, ye have cast me out, too. The jungle is shut to me, and the village gates are shut. Why?... My mouth is cut and wounded with the stones from the village, but my heart is very light because I have come back to the jungle. Why?... My heart is heavy with the things that I do not understand."(Kipling 61).

In the quote above, one can sense the distinct voice of the highly private and sensitive Kipling as he traversed the two sides of his head. Although Kipling could never claim his “jungle” (India), Mowgli does so! In the conclusion of the Mowgli stories, “In the Rukh”, which also happens to be the first story which brought to life the character of Mowgli, we see Mowgli enlisted in the services of the Raj and living on the edge of the forest, away from the man-village. Mowgli’s spatial location symbolises the equilibrium he has achieved in his mental space. To see Mowgli’s children play with wolf cubs is a symbolic, cathartic end to Mowgli’s story, as he finally claims a neutral space that belongs neither to the wolf pack nor the man pack but is a harmonious meeting ground for them all.

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