

An Analysis of *Kim* from the Perspective of Initiation Stories

Yan Shi

Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an 710000, China.

Abstract: The novel *Kim* chronicles the adventures of Irish orphan Kim and Tibetan lama. During the journey, Kim, as a perplexed go-between in the Anglo-Indian world struggling with hybrid identity and looking for his true self during the adventures, experiences the physical and psychological transformation from being immature to mature. Based on the perspective of initiation stories, this paper intends to analyze Kim from three aspects: his disillusionment of innocence, the life guide on his way of growth and self-discovery of the meaninglessness of hybrid identity, which means that he finally breaks the shackles of identity with maturity.

Keywords: Rudyard Kipling; Kim; Initiation Stories; Hybrid Identity

1. Introduction

Rudyard Kipling is the first Englishman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature with 40 volumes of works covering short stories, novels and poetry, most of which involve the element of Indian culture. As an Englishman, he was born and raised in India until he was sent back to Britain for education at six. When he was seventeen, he returned to Mumbai as a newspaper journalist, which connected him to India with great passion and enthusiasm. It is such a unique life experience that makes Kipling consider himself as an “Anglo-Indian” and “distinguishes his novels for the entanglement in the complex issues of identity and ethnic belonging” (Xiao 128). As an Anglo-Indian, who bears the duality of emotional commitment to British imperialism and Eastern values, Kipling lies in the fact that he is split into two camps, unable to reconcile and unite; to be more precise, his two selves are internally divided. Therefore, his stories of India inevitably involve difficulties in maintaining racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. His best novel, *Kim*, is not an exception.

Kim develops two parallel strands: one focuses on Kim's prophecy, which eventually gives rise to Kim's participation in British spy work; the other concerns Kim's discipleship to the lama, who becomes his life guide. This paper aims to apply theories on initiation stories to analyze Kim, as a perplexed go-between in the Anglo-Indian world, struggles with his hybrid identity in his growth process and finally resolves the identity conflict with an epiphany on the meaninglessness of hybrid identity under the support and help of the lama.

2. The Analysis of Kim's growth Process

Mordecai Marcus defines initiation story as the story that “may be said to show its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world(222)”. It means that the initiation stories focus on the growth process of young protagonists who become physically and psychologically mature through an unusual experience that keeps them away from their original naivety. Marcus also divides them into three types. The novel *Kim* belongs to the third one called “decisive initiations”, which centers on the self-discovery. The protagonist Kim suffers full of perplexity, loneliness and confusion because he is stuck in a dilemma between British colonialism and Indian values.

2.1 Kim's Disillusionment of Innocence in the Growth Process

There is often an important psychological turning point called “the disillusionment of the innocence of the past: from pure happiness to the perplexity of life”. For Kim, there is no more pure happiness ever since he meets Mr. Bennette, who deciphers his identity prophecy and then compels him to receive British education at a remote school named St. Xavier's.

What he learns contradicts his subconsciously emotional commitment to Indian values.

Before meeting Mr. Bennette, Kim has an unshakably emotional commitment to Indian culture and values for he has lived in a unified Indian value system for thirteen years without any Britain cultural interference. He speaks the Indian vernacular by preference and even dreams in Indian vernacular. “That night he dreamed in Hindustanee, with never an English word” (Kipling 193). According to Freud’s theory of dreams, “dreams are the result of repression, and their true source lies in unconscious impulses” (Dong 239). It suggests that Kim shows an intense emotional commitment to Indian values and culture deep down in his unconsciousness.

However, Kim starts to be caught in the dilemma between British and Indian cultures and values after studying at St. Xavier’s. He suffers gradually from indescribable anxiety and psychological confusion inflicted by his hybrid identity. He is not allowed to mention his past of being a low-cast Indian boy, for “St Xavier’s looks down on boys who ‘go native altogether.’ One must never forget that one is a Sahib, and that someday, when examinations are passed, one will command natives” (Kipling 125). What he used to enjoy himself, like Indian clothes and Indian food, is denied by British culture. As a British Sahib growing up in Indian streets, Kim inevitably becomes “the Other” on both sides: A white schoolmaster “whacked him without reason” (106) while a native Lucknow driver satirizes him as “young Sahibs—all devils” (120).

Tao points that the collective identity selection of a certain cultural subject between a strong and a weak culture will result in a strong ideological shock and enormous spiritual suffering (38). Being entangled with this ideological shock, anxiety and perplexity caused by the hybrid identity, Kim starts to wander “who is Kim” (Kipling 117).

2.2 Kim’s Life Guide in Kim’s Growth Process

Life guide is a critical element of an initiation story. “From a sociological point of view, everyone’s growth will be influenced by some people who enrich protagonists’ life experience and social cognition from both positive and negative aspects. In the process of observing the social roles played by these people, the young gradually establish their own roles and life directions” (Rui 125). There are roughly three types of life guide: positive life guide, natural gods and negative life guide. The Tibetan lama is a positive life guide and exerts powerful influence over Kim.

As a humble and intelligent Buddhism scholar, the Tibetan lama sets a good role model for Kim with his honest and benevolent conduct. He pays high tuition so that Kim can receive the best education; He exhorts Kim to be charitable and compassionate to strangers; He scolds Kim for being smug and conceited. With the lama’s earnest teachings and sincere love for nearly four years, Kim not only grows up from a cunning and selfish street-wise boy to a considerate, humble and benevolent young man, but regards the lama as his spiritual beacon and respectable lifesaver.

Portraying such a marginalized figure as Kim’s life guide may have two implications: first, as a Tibetan lama, he is separted from the cultural mainstream and forms a cultural buffer zone, in which Kim can think thoroughly about his hybrid identity without being overwhelmed by British imperialism or Indian values; second, as Camus said that “[t]he world of the novel is only a rectification of the world we live in, in pursuance of man’s deepest wishes” (261), the Tibetan lama, who believes in the equality of all beings, embodies Kipling’s ideal solution to the cultural dilemma between Eastern and Western cultures.

2.3 Kim’s Self-Discovery of the Meaninglessness of Hybrid Identity

A man’s self-knowledge comes from both internal and external aspects: communication and introspection. Kim questions his hybrid identity three times in his growth process. With an epiphany on the meaninglessness of identity, Kim finally breaks the shackles of identity with maturity.

Having been “indigenized” in India for thirteen years, Kim fears for his mysterious fate of “being Anglicized” and questions his hybrid identity for the first time on the train to St Xavier’s. Only in the face of crisis does identity become a problem. At that time, what had always been regarded as fixed, coherent and stable was replaced by doubts and uncertain experiences” (qtd. in Larrain 195). Confronting to an unknown life as a British Sahib, Kim subconsciously refuses to recognize his white blood.

When Kim is used to the privileges his British identity grants to him at St Xavier’s for three years, he is asked to spend

half of the year wandering in India to “de-Englishised” so that he can become a perfect spy. With no explicit ethnic belonging, Kim feels rootless and questions his true identity again. This sense of loneliness manifests that Kim develops self-consciousness and realizes his unique individual existence.

Kim’s confusion on his hybrid identity for the last time ends with an epiphany, which is defined as a sudden mental phenomenon from the shocking events in life. “Through the epiphany, the protagonist has a deep understanding and cognition of himself or the nature of something” (qtd. in Rui 143). The defamiliarization intrigues the epiphany: “with an almost audible click he felt the wheels of his being lock up anew on the world without...Roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to”(282). Kim starts to realize the unalterable essence of everything—no matter what type of house is, it is used for living; no matter how beautiful the road is, it is used for walking; and no matter which one he chooses between British identity and Indian identity, his authentic self would never change. It does not matter what ethnicity and nationality he is, for all beings are under the illusion, waiting for the destined death. In fact, this essence is suggested once by the lama, who always believe that “there is neither black nor white, Hind or Bhotiyal. We be all souls seeking escape” (212). As Kroger points out that those who are important to the individual are independent and significant agents, helping the individual to recognize his identity (9). The lama teaches Kim the Buddhist idea of the “Wheel of Things”, which means that all men are ultimately the same, nursing the same hopes and ambitions, being locked in the cycle of birth, copulation, and death. By introspection, epiphany and the communication with the lama, Kim finally breaks the shackles of hybrid identity with maturity.

3. Conclusion

The novel Kim depicts a typical marginalized child stuck in the cultural dilemma. As a perplexed and anxious go-between in the Anglo-Indian world, Kim suffers anxiety and perplexity caused by his hybrid identity. With the Tibetan lama's earnest teachings and sincere guide, Kim gradually find the path to self-awareness and self-discovery and resolves the conflict with an epiphany on the meaninglessness of the identity with maturity.

References

- [1] Camus A. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt with a Foreword by Sir Herbert Read*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1956.
- [2] Dong XW. *Theories of Western Literature*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005.
- [3] Kroger J. *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance Between Self and Other*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1996.
- [4] Larrain J. *Ideology and Culture Identity: Modernity and the Third World Presence*. Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2005.
- [5] Marcus M. “What Is an Initiation Story?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 19.2 (1960): 221-228.
- [6] Rui YP. *A Study of American Initiation Stories*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2004.
- [7] Tao JJ. “A Brief Introduction to Indentity.” *Foreign Literature* 2 (2014): 37-44.
- [8] Xiao S. “Kipling’s Identity Anxiety.” *Foreign Literature Review* 2 (2015): 128-145.

About the author: Shi Yan(1993-). Female. Han. Shandong province. She is a graduate student of Xi’an International Studies University. Her research field is British Literature.