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Embracing Selfhood beyond Social Diversity in Rudyard Kipling's novel Kim

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Abstract

Kim, Friend of all the world, is neither Irish nor quite Indian. Living his life in the streets of Lahore, he had learned the art of blending in the ethnicity of different cultures and traditions. The rootless Kim, only born with a birth certificate, is left astound when he meets Teshoo Lama. He had never seen a man so pure and knowledgeable. He decides to be the monk's disciple and accompanies him in finding the legendary 'River of The Arrow'. Along with the search for the great soul, he is also curious about his sense of belonging and looks forward to deciphering the tale of two men and a red bull in the green field, which was the only thing he remembered about his father. His quest for identity makes him a part of The Great Game. The game is a clash between Britain-occupied India and Russia. His destiny turns him into a Sahib but nevertheless his soul cries for his selfhood. He often asks himself about his true worth. Stuck between the roles of being a disciple and a Sahib he is often found introspecting himself. This paper aims at exhibiting the differences in Kim's life and his search for individuality in the backdrop of a multi-cultured society and tries to symbolize Kim's perplexity as to the conflict between the English culture and Indian Culture. The methodology used here is entirely descriptive and analytical. The search is purely qualitative and mainly reflects the social aspect of a sense of identity.

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Introduction

Kim, (Kipling, Kim, 1901) written by Rudyard Kipling narrates the period of colonization of India by Britain and the war between Russia and Britain occupied India. Kipling is believed to be born and raised in India and Kim is said to be one of the finest works. The detailed portrait of India's people, religions, colonization, and culture is remarkable.

Kimball O'Hara is a teenage orphan who has spent his tender years in the streets and markets of Lahore. Quite a mixture of Irish and Indian, he has seen the world on his own but with a different view. His very friendly nature has given him the manner of accepting every tradition and community. But his lack of roots has always haunted him. He has no clue about his identity and the motive of his life.

The problem of a sense of belonging is vital to any individual. One is always curious about oneself, one's worth, and one's purpose of life. Social identity and belonging are the ways one defines himself. No doubt individuality is prime but membership in the community is the major key to a sense of identity. Dignified selfhood is required to sustain in society. But Kim, being an orphan always, lacked this social aspect. He remained in his inner puzzle right from childhood. Neither was he of western culture nor the Indian soil. Being the lama's disciple satisfied him for a while but being part of the great game leads to more complexity. He hangs between the two prominent civilizations because the values and cultures are entirely not related. It is the result of colonization that results in the mixing of two powerful societies. This leads to inevitable chaos. His English roots do not fit into Indian culture. He does not belong to any caste. This is also evident when he asks lama about his caste. Nevertheless, he joins the lama in his journey. Such a case can be attributed to the original cause of a lack of sense of belonging. However, it is not trouble for him because he belongs nowhere. Their relation grows into the bond of brotherhood, but his tragedy begins after encountering the Irish regiment. The progress of Kim's selfhood is intervened by his responsibility of being a Sahib. He knows that his father was a sahib and his social principle binds him to be one. His responsibility as a sahib strikes him thoroughly. The three years of education do not contribute to his quest and he

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becomes more isolated. He is sent to school where he feels like an outsider. He waits for his journey with lama. His identity crisis becomes a serious problem after becoming a sahib. He re-joins with lama after completing his education. He is again jumbled between his duty to the lama and his service as an agent. The crisis of sense of belonging haunts him mentally. When lama's journey comes to an end Kim is left in a state of tragedy. His shield covering his problem of selfhood falls away. His life suddenly becomes meaningless. He faces an inescapable question: Where do I belong? The novel has not answered his question. In the end, the lama is eternally satisfied and enlightened. He finds his River of Arrow. He is free from all the sins, but Kim remains blank and vacant.

Identity crisis and sense of belonging is a very general social issue. Several research scholars and articles have over time and again highlighted this societal issue. This issue is of grave concern for any individual and requires a solution from the root cause.

Research Methodology

This research paper aims to emphasize the social aspect of the novel Kim written by Rudyard Kipling. It is believed that the storyline is based on the life of the author and is inspired by his personal experiences. There are instances of the colonial Indian era and the conflict between Russia and Britain. The researcher has highlighted the social aspect of a sense of belonging and identity crisis faced by the protagonist of the novel. The portrayal of social stigma in the backdrop of a multicultural society has been accentuated. The objective of this study is to bring out the issue of selfhood and how it is important for an individual to display an acceptable identity and belong to a certain community. The prevalent caste system in India is also analysed in this study. The researcher has referred to few research papers and articles with the help of online databases. The researcher has analysed the social issues raised in the novel and examined their relevance. The research has been purely qualitative and mainly based on the novel with the support of literary works.

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Literature Review

In the article *Empire of the senses or a sense of empire?* (Viola, 1997) The imaginary and the symbolic in Kipling's *Kim* written by Andre Viola in 1997, the writer thinks that the character of Kim is a consequence of the author's nostalgia and personal life experiences. Thus, Kim is what exactly Kipling faced and grasped through his childhood. He was both a disciple and a Sahib and his balance of life kept changing sides again and again. It was tough on him to be a Sahib at one instance and a disciple on the other. Not only his persona was attacked by the conflict but also his duties were stuck in the middle of two directions. His soul was devoted to the lama but his blood and skin belonged to the Irish regiment. His life was terribly jumbled and his stuck in the middle of nowhere.

In the article *Search of the British Indian in British India: White Orphans, Kipling's Kim, and Class in Colonial India* were written by Teresa Hubel (Hubel, 2004) the writer has picked the notions which shows the societal set up in the novel *Kim*. The background is set in the Indian culture which is overpowered by the Britishers. Although there is a great influence of religion-based strata and caste system. The people follow it and have mindsets based on this configuration. Also, the dominance of Britishers could not successfully mitigate the real division of classes. This indicates the inseparable societal essence of Indian cultural

"The unbearable whiteness of being: Misrecognition, Pleasure, and white identity in Kipling's *Kim*" (Christensen, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Misrecognition, Pleasure, and White Identity in Kipling's Kim*, 2012) is a research paper written by Tim Christensen published in 2012. In this research paper, the writer has tried to resolve the conflict of the novel. This research paper mainly focuses upon the white identity of Kim and how it proved to be a menace in British-occupied India. He has tried to figure out the real belonging of Kim by explaining that he was positively accepted by his society on one hand but he always celebrated himself amidst the differences on the other. He kept struggling between aesthetic pleasure and empirical power. He was white from the skin but Indian from within and thus faced racial

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discrimination throughout his life. Every person requires a community to associate with and existential negativism can undermine anyone's selfhood.

Knowing Kim, knowing in Kim (Fellion, 2013) written by Matthew Fellion in 2013 where the writer has referred to the uniqueness of the conflict of the novel as the Kipling effect by owing it all to the perspective of the author. The writer finds Kim as a whole protagonist and states that knowing Kim is itself a matter of concern. According to him, Kim is the culmination of different ways of seeing the conflict represented in the novel. He believes that this character lived in the third space of the novel which according to him is the secluded characteristic of Kim. Kim had never lived under anyone's guidance and none of his questions were ever answered. He dwelled in his own mindset and imaginations. Thus, it is very complicated to perceive his quest and identity crisis.

The sense of belonging in Kipling's Kim (Yildiz, 2013) written by Firat Yildiz in 2013 in which the writer has explained the reason for the quest for a sense of belonging in the novel Kim. He has once again focused on the colonization of India and blamed it to be the only reason for Kim's crisis. Being an orphan in a country that is overpowered by others can be extremely challenging and unhealthy for a boy of thirteen-year-old. His being Irish and Indian at the same time served to be his reason for the dilemma and lack of identity. The paper analyzes the scientific angle of the importance of a sense of belonging. Any person needs to be recognized not only by his acts but his community and social position. In the case of Kim, these elements were absent and resulted in his inner sickness.

The charismatic adolescent in Rudyard Kipling's Kim (McCloskey, 2015) is written by Roisin McCloskey in 2015. It focuses on the selfish nature of Kim and the way he always thought of his benefit. Kim was all alone since his childhood and never really cared about anyone else. He is a very charismatic person and did not require external assistance. He remained within himself and his deeds were merely for his personal satisfaction. Be it the great game or being a disciple, Kim had always placed himself on the top. The writer relates his self-centred nature to his

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identity crisis. He perceives that being self-involved and self-centred has deprived Kim of all the guidance and opinions.

The quest for a home: identity, agency, and the interstitial space (Swamidoss, 2016) in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* written by Hannah Swamidoss in 2016 where the writer has highlighted the element of cultural displacement in the backdrop of Kim's isolation. His alienation of selfhood was the direct consequence of his homelessness. Kim was an orphan which deprived him of his first culture that is the culture of his parents. He was Irish but born and brought up in India which took away his second culture, that is the culture of his roots. Therefore, he was raised in the third culture which gave birth to the interstitial space he was living in.

"The portrayal of Indian backdrop in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*: A diasporic perspective" (Chaudhari, 2017) written by Bhagvanbhai H. Chaudhari in 2017 where the writer has applied diasporic literature in reviewing the novel and pointed out certain social aspects of identity and nostalgia from the character of Kim. The writer has displayed the diversity of India and explained its role in relation to the quest of Kim's identity. He has convincingly explained that the identity crisis faced by Kim was the result of the multicultural society he lived in. The prevalence of varied casts, religion, and community pushed him into the zone of low esteem and lack of selfhood. Also, the fact of colonial-era resulted in existential crisis and nostalgia.

Kim by Rudyard Kipling: intertextuality, interculturality, colonialism (Schiopu, 2019) is written by Marinica in 2019. In the article, the writer has depicted the approach of intertextuality in framing the histrionic character of Kim amidst the scene of colonialism and interculturality. Kim was a friend to all and he had the ability to mix with any community or class. This quality never allowed him to settle for one kind. Rather, he utilized it to his leverage by adopting several appearances and makeovers. The writer finds it amusing that despite being volatile to ethnicity Kim was disturbed about his selfhood and often remained puzzled.

The value of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*- An ethnocentric perspective (Yuan, 2020) written by Xin Yuan in 2020 where the ethnocentric perspective presented in this research paper makes it

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very different from the other literary works done on Kim. The writer has dropped the essence of controversy by applying an imperialist viewpoint in the story. Since the story deals with several aspects of life and society and also is a part of interdisciplinary subjects, therefore it is not easy to look from one specific lens.

Analysis

After reading the novel thoroughly and examining ten research papers published by different scholars, the researcher has come to the following observations and findings regarding the social aspects of the novel.

The researcher has aimed to study the importance of selfhood and a sense of belonging arising out of the novel. While going through it several instances were taken into account which speaks about the concerned issue. Kim asks himself “No; I am Kim. This is the great world, and I am only Kim. Who is Kim?” on page 94 of chapter 7 of the novel. On page 146 of chapter 11, Kim is again found questioning himself “Now am I alone- all alone, in all India is no one so alone as I! If I die to-day, who shall bring the news- and to whom? If I live and God is good, there will be a price upon my head, for I am a Son of the Charm- I, Kim”. The dialogues are a clear indication of the identity crisis which Kim was suffering through. Being an orphan and a wanderer, he had never associated himself with a certain community or group of people. This thing always bothered him and caused an identity crisis. This shows that a permanent identity is very crucial for one’s survival.

Also, the researcher wants to display the prevalent caste/religion system of India which is not only prevalent in today’s time but also was an inherent part of the society since always. Kim is bewildered about his religious background. He asks himself “What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist” on page 113 of chapter 8. He meets lama for the first time and asks “What is your caste?” on page 6 of chapter 1. The instances mentioned here evidently prove that even in the colonial era of India the caste or religion-based approach was crucial. Kim who was Irish by skin and blood and Indian by soul nevertheless finds himself free of religion but in some

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instances wonders about the religion to which he belongs to. Even he asked lama about his caste in their first meet. This points out the very basic societal configuration of India.

Conclusion

After analysing the novel and examining a few research papers written by scholars the researcher has come to the point that the novel Kim is a masterpiece written by Rudyard Kipling in the era of British ruled India. The novel has taken the social aspects of an individual and society into account. It has displayed the multicultural setup of India. Also, the protagonist has been projected in a very basic manner and the crux of the story is related to basic human nature. The requirements of a sense of belonging and the problem of identity crisis have been described along with the caste and religion-based societal setup. The researcher has culminated all the points and arrived at the conclusion that selfhood is the nature of human and it needs to be preserved throughout one's life. People associate with a society or a group of people which provides them with dignified recognition. Lack of sense of belonging can cause serious troubles which can be the reason for inevitable depression and frustration. Hence, it is very important for any person to stick to his roots and culture to get along with society.

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