

NARRATING THE INDIAN NATION A NON-INDIAN PERSPECTIVE: A STUDY OF WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S *THE LAST MUGHAL* AND RUDYARD KIPLING'S *KIM*¹

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Abstract: This paper deals with the issue of the rise of nationalism in Indian context as a result of the events of 1857, and attempts to study the perspectives of two non-Indian writers interested in Indian nation, namely Rudyard Kipling and William Dalrymple in their novels Kim and The Last Mughal respectively as opposed to the Indian nationalist perspectives seen and portrayed in later narratives by Indians. The former is a fictional representation of the mutiny of 1857 whereas the latter is a fictionalized historical account. Published almost a hundred years apart, and coming at different defining moments in India's history, the two novels Kim (1901) and The Last Mughal (2006), both talk of a common set of events. It is one endeavor to see the different dimensions explored by these two writers.

Key words: India, nationalism, Kim, The Last Mughal

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INTRODUCTION

Indian national identity as it exists today has evolved not by some commonly shared language or culture, but by a shared struggle for freedom against a common enemy. Besides the assumption of the name "India" there is no palpable element - language, culture, religion, or region - common to all the people of India. "Unity in diversity" has been the rallying point of Indian nationalism during the freedom struggle and after. India achieved its freedom from the British in 1947 after a long struggle that many scholars today believe to have started in 1857 when all over north India Indian soldiers employed by the East India Company rose up in arms against their masters. The most interesting thing about this struggle was that, irrespective of religion and caste, people came together to fight their oppressors.

The year 2007 marks the 150th anniversary of this event. Till 1947 the idea of India as a single political entity never existed, as prior to the advent of and mostly during the British rule, India was divided into different and small princely states. The failed attempt of 1857 lay bare the need for people to fight as one, irrespective of caste, religion and region and that gave later Indian leaders fighting for independence a hope that people would be ready for the struggle, given right direction and an awareness about the ideals of freedom and equality.

Discourses about nationalism do not question the formation of nations; rather they take their existence from time immemorial for granted. However the idea of a nation is a far newer post-reformation western concept, which found its way to countries like India as a result of colonial rule and the subsequent spread of English education that empowered them with this knowledge. Nationalists in colonial India took up these ideals of nationalism, merged them with the prevailing discourses about the antiquity of their country as present in their ancient texts, to make it more accessible to people in the villages so that they all join in the common struggle against the colonial oppression.

It is true that the concept of a single entity called "bharatvarsha" has always existed in the minds of the people due to the cultural undercurrents that prevailed in the form of myths and epics in India. However, the actual borders of this mythical entity have never been defined in concrete terms

either in history or in literature. The paper plans to explore formation of national identity in the context of Indian people that became latent during the struggle for freedom, which began with what is today called the First War of Independence in the year 1857.

The assertion of Benedict Anderson (1992:6) that a nation is “an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... *imagined* because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” is partly true in Indian context. There was no common political community; nevertheless, in the minds of the people across India the image of a unified community always existed.

'Nationalism', taken in a positive sense, which deals with the rise of feelings of comradeship and association among people belonging to various regions and religions of India, is the central focus of this paper. It is an accepted fact that 'India' as a single political entity came to be conceived only after the British seized power from kings and princes ruling various parts of India beginning in late eighteenth century and culminating in the capture of Mughal Delhi after the unsuccessful Revolt of 1857.

The two texts discussed here have one common subject that is India, though they were different in terms of the time of their writing and in terms of the genre. Also it is to be noted that both were written from the point of view of an outsider as both of them were of non-Indian origin. Though the protagonists in both of these books are two dominant men, one white man and the other a brown king, the central character however, is 'India'.

The paper traces the formation of an identity in the people belonging to India when even the terms 'India' and 'Indian' were introduced by the British to refer collectively to the people of diverse states and regions and religions who formed part of the Indian sub-continent. What both texts show is that though people were essentially divided into groups along caste and class lines till that time and they fought their own individual battles during the Revolt, they fought against one common enemy, the British. The common enemy is what united them and gave them a common identity.

RUDYARD KIPLING'S *KIM*

Rudyard Kipling's "*Kim*", published in 1901 tells the story of a British orphan, Kimball O'Hara, an Irishman to be precise, born as well as brought up in India. Having been taken care of by an Indian woman, and growing up in the bazaars of Lahore, he knows and loves the country, the people and the culture yet all the while conscious that he is not one of them. He is a street-smart urchin who can change his personality with the change of clothing, become a Hindu or a Musalmaan or a British boy as and when the situation demands. He loves India with its numerous hues and colors, where each day is an adventure, yet the author cannot help giving him qualities that are British and hence superior. He is called "Friend of all the World" as well as "Friend of the Stars", and has an uncanny ability to transform himself into anyone that he wants to be, which is what helps him in getting recruited in the British Secret Service and become involved in the intrigue and the Great Game.

With his great knowledge of Indian character, be it of a Sikh or a Brahmin or a Jat or a Bengali and with his command over the vernaculars of most of these regions, he is portrayed as one best suited to rule India. He can mingle freely amongst the people, find out about their sentiments from the teeming yet vibrant bazaars of India and use this knowledge to rule better and with greater control over the natives. Time and again nationalists of the day in India pointed out the superiority of their people and the land by highlighting its spirituality, the one thing that a westerner, otherwise smart, could not lay a claim to. In response, Kipling as if to make up for this lack introduces the Lama in the text. Kim is a disciple as well as a son to him as the Lama provides for his education too, the best that a British boy can have in India, at St. Lawrence, Lucknow.

In other words, Kim, a representative of the White race, has all the supposed 'superior characteristics' of his race. Since East has always claimed spiritual superiority over the West, whatever its other drawbacks may be, Kipling introduces the Lama to take care of Kim's spiritual education to complement his academic education. He may be a child, but as it is perceived, even a small boy is superior to the grown up brown native. Kim's spiritual orientation by the Lama completes his requirement to become a competent ruler. One should not fail to notice that the Lama does

not belong to India either. The author brings him all the way from Tibet, as a native teacher would be far too 'inferior' to teach a White national.

The major difference between Kim and other such characters in the fiction of Raj is that Kim knows that he is white, British and thus somehow privileged, though he prefers the ways of the Indians, whereas in other texts like M.M. Kaye's *Far Pavilions* the protagonist, Ash, grows up being called Ashok, a Hindu boy, and does not know till in his teens that he was the son of an Englishman, and was named Ashton, that he was not what he had believed himself to be all his life. This leaves him in a state of conflict all through his life since he lives thinking from both points of view-Indian as well as English. But there is no such conflict in Kim. He knows he is not Indian though he lives here like the ordinary poor natives do. Yet he has the confidence that comes from belonging to the ruler's race. The novel opens with the scene where Kim dislodges successively a Hindu and a Muslim boy, and lays claim to the cannon, Zam Zammah, which always formed the first part of the bounty of the winner and thence the ruler of the country. He takes it as his exclusive privilege as the British were the rulers.

The author portrays some English characters who, with the exception of one, are knowledgeable about the Indian way of life which includes knowing how the natives go through their daily routine as also their psychological makeup. Though the native is spoken of as just one category, there are innumerable castes and regional characters, and each is very well understood by the British portrayed here. The Indian natives portrayed, such as - Mahbub Ali, the horse trader who comes from beyond the passes, the old talkative Rani from Sahranpore, Hurree Babu, the Bengali babu who has dreams of adding an FRCS to his name - are all amenable to and tolerant of both the British and their authority, a surprising fact at a time when the nationalists' call to fight against the British was becoming a norm rather than an exception.

These three people are apparent representatives of Indian sentiments in the novel, reinforced by other minor characters, like the disguised Mahratta, the Kamboh from Jullundar, and the old soldier in the village where Kim and Lama stay for the night. All of them have a story to tell about the British 'superiority'. While the Mahratta is a spy working on a mission for the British, Kamboh thanks the British for their law and order and for

providing facilities like the train, and the old soldier fought on the British side in the Mutiny of 1857 for which he was rewarded. Kim, a mere boy is the brave and resourceful person who with a great presence of mind of a white adult helps each of these in their times of trouble.

The Great Game that Kim, Colonel Creighton, Lurgan Sahib, Mahbub Ali and others are involved in was in fact the Rebellion. The story depicts the game of rebellion as being played by these to apprehend and to take action against the participants in the Indian struggle. Though the novel mentions a 'war of ten thousand', the memories of the 'Great upheaval', and that 'Black year' of 1857 at various points in the narrative, the struggle against imperial oppression is given no voice in the novel. Rather, the British rule is seen as something that people are pleased with and want to continue with since it has brought in an order that was not there under princely rulers. Mahratta mentions that under a local ruler a person can be charged with any crime, even that of murder and numerous witnesses can be found if the ruler wishes it so, while the British administration needs substantial evidence besides witnesses to prove the crime. The British brought in material advancements like the 'terain', post, and also employment and hence economic betterment, all things that the native rule lacked.

Rudyard Kipling writes about the Great Game as the only thing worth working for, which has both the intrigue as well as the thrill of action. This is a sentiment expressed by Kim, Mahbub Ali and Hurree Babu which is amply illustrated when Kim studies and trains with both Lurgan Sahib and Mahbub Ali. Even when he goes off with the Lama after his studies end, it is in continuation of his education to prepare himself for his future life as a spy. However, it must be said that this has not been given enough depth of treatment even though this game of spying and counter spying forms the underlying theme throughout the novel. Though the peaceful countryside belies this, it becomes clear that this training was given to him to help the British find out about the nature and whereabouts of the native centers of revolt. The novel brings out the contrast between the apparent peace that prevailed and the undercurrents of preparation for the Great Game in a very graphic manner.

This picture of apparent peace and complacency is totally shattered in Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal*. *Kim* portrays peace and quiet conditions in India, and it appears as if this state of things would continue for times to come. Dalrymple writes about the same region, of places in and around Delhi, and of almost the same set of events in the same time frame, the "Black year" (Kipling 1994) of 1857 when the "Earth shook" (Kipling 1994). However, the picture drawn is that of a country in turmoil, and the countryside afire, speaking figuratively and literally, and intrigue is part of the day-to-day life rather than something below the surface of things as portrayed in *Kim*. Though the citizens of Delhi and other surrounding areas are keen to go on with their routine lives and fulfill their basic survival needs, and want to be left alone by those in authority, they are all invariably drawn into the struggle due to the almost daily influx of battalions of sepoys pouring into the city from other centers of Mutiny.

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S *THE LAST MUGHAL*

William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal*, published in 2006 deals with the life of the last Mughal ruler of India, who came to the throne when British had taken over the running of affairs all over India in all but name. It sets out to tell the tale of the city of Delhi and its ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal to sit on the throne of Delhi. It attempts to reconstruct the life in the city during the turbulent times of the Revolt of 1857 through the accounts of residents of Delhi, their letters of appeal, complaints and firmans issued from the Mughal Court, as well as British accounts, diaries, telegrams, orders and letters of correspondence from various sources. Though termed the 'Emperor' of India, Zafar's rule was limited only to the environs of Delhi, and more specifically to the Red Fort that could be called a walled city within the city of Delhi. In this novel too, Delhi is the central character while the life of the King forms the backdrop and it highlights the character of the city. King was the weak link that connected the people to the British Empire. Once the British subjugated him, the people came under their direct control. Until the time of the Revolt of 1857 people enjoyed the laid back life that was the characteristic of the Mughal ruler. Nevertheless, they looked upon the Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar as their master though his powers had been curtailed to a large extent by the British Resident.

While *Kim* portrays fictional characters to highlight the events of the times, *The Last Mughal* portrays real flesh and blood characters that were active and alive during this struggle. They were not only involved in fighting but were the movers and shakers on both British and the Indian side; they were also the people who used this struggle as an opportunity to further their interests. But if we draw a parallel about some common people and events that take place in the two novels, it would illustrate the sentiments that prevailed then as portrayed in *Kim* and the change in perception we see in *The Last Mughal* one can see the evolution as a result of thorough research into an event which had taken place a hundred years earlier. Here one can say that while *Kim* does not formulate either the beginning or development of a national identity, *The Last Mughal* does bring out the patriotism, the urge to work for or against the British as well as the feeling of oneness against a common enemy in the residents of Delhi and elsewhere irrespective of caste or religion.

The Last Mughal's account of Nicholson's march from Punjab with his army struck terror not only in the hearts of Indians, but also created scare and unease in British minds as the cruelty exhibited was for no other reason than that of their being natives. His march to Delhi to help in the siege was recorded as a chilling fact that played havoc throughout. It was also known for its swiftness that aimed to take revenge for the pillage and rumored rapes perpetrated by the natives. It acted thus on the rumor that White women were raped and killed along with children in Kanpur, Lucknow, Benaras, Delhi and other centers of Mutiny. By acting thus they intended to make the 'brown' people bend before the fury of White supremacy.

There were others like Nicholson, Metcalf and his fellow residents of Delhi who fought and killed for vengeance. However, later studies show that though White women and children were murdered there were hardly any rapes. On the other hand there is evidence to show that natives did try to save them at the risk of their own lives.⁴ It is also a fact that until late in the Mutiny when Indians in various places were gaining an upper hand, when morale of the British troops was low, there was no news of rapes; it was then, suddenly

⁴ Based on Amresh Misra's his forthcoming book, "War of Civilisations: India 1857AD".

that these rumors started spreading. The assumption was that the British themselves were spreading these rumors to find an excuse and a justification for their cruelty.

The Indian troops fighting for the local leaders believed Zafar to be their rightful king and Emperor. They fought with enthusiasm because they believed in the cause and also they fought as much for the spoils. But none had foreseen the emptying of the Royal treasury or the dearth of ammunition or anticipated the superior quality of British weaponry or the collapse of central leadership, a few of the major reasons for the failure of the Revolt of 1857. What Kim says of Bikaner, that its resources would not be enough for an army of a thousand on attack was true of any of the centers of revolt.

Even though those in authority forcibly took provisions and money, nothing proved enough for the hungry and starving troops. They proved to be a liability to the citizens because of their rowdy behavior. Some people even started wishing and working for the return of the British to power, since they had enjoyed security, peace and justice under their rule. *The Last Mughal* chronicles the attempts by the prominent citizens of Delhi to bring the British back to power by resorting to spying.

The period of 1857 is now being re-looked at because of its importance in establishing the British imperial authority in India. Also had the first revolt been organized, coordinated and sustained even for a couple of more months it would have resulted in an early eviction of the British. Later Indian nationalists like those belonging to the Indian National Congress distanced themselves from this because of the fear of repression that followed, it was afresh in the minds of the people even after decades. Negligible literary output was produced during this period, especially in English at that time and even later because of these very real fears. However they also understood that for any revolt to succeed common man needs to be involved. They explicitly did not mention the names of any of the leaders of the rebellion but fell back on characters from earlier times either from mythology like a Ram, or a later day reformer like Raja Ram Mohun Roy who made efforts for social change and presented a contrasting image to the leaders of the Revolt, such as Tantiya Tope or even Zafar.

William Dalrymple writes from hindsight and lays bare the fissures present in the Indian leadership at that time. He asserts that Indian leadership failed because of, among many other reasons listed above, the failure to gather information regarding the activities and plans of the British troops who on the other hand had a good network of spies in the Mughal Court. National identity can be said to have evolved from this period. *The Last Mughal* presents a picture where though Indians were fighting a common war, they also had their own battles of personal gains to fight for.

Each faction of the troops coming to Delhi from various centers of revolt under their battalion leaders, not trusting the others of their kind with either supplies of ammunition or food or payment, did their best to gain an upper hand, by despoiling the city of Delhi, or even by not going out to battle during the days of the siege. The only remarkable thing was that battalions from various princely states came to the Court and crowned Bahadur Shah Zafar as their king. It amply illustrates the need felt by these troops for an able leader who would lead them to victory and freedom from the foreign invaders. Zafar was perceived as a native king and was hence qualified. But unfortunately he proved to be too weak a monarch to shoulder this burden.

CONCLUSION

Both texts, *Kim* as well as *The Last Mughal* present a British point of view. Dalrymple manages to draw a humane picture of the life and plight of the ordinary citizens, and also condemn the ruthlessness of the British suppression in their effort to regain power, Nicholson's march to Delhi and the merciless killings of Zafar's sons who had surrendered on the condition that their lives would be spared, being just two instances to prove it. Yet his is also a very much non-Indian point of view. His scatheless criticism of British cruelty could also be due to the fact that he is, within the larger British framework, after all a writer of Scottish origin.

These two texts have been taken up for analysis because both have drawn great response after their publication. The comparison of a work of fiction and a non-fictional text appears odd, but it has been done because both, coming hundred years apart, are by non-Indians, portraying events

that shook the foundations of East India Company and led to the advent of British imperial rule in India. The paper attempts to give an idea of a nation that existed in the minds of the people of the times and to see whether there was any existence of an Indian national identity, of which the Revolt of 1857 could have been the genesis.

Though this analysis is rather limited, it has managed to make clear that both works are in agreement as to the superior nature of the British rule, that law and order under the native rulers was in a poor state, and that common people were constrained to favor the imperial rule because of these reasons. It is interesting to note that a beginning for national identity emerges from the writings of these non-Indian accounts-fictional as well as historic.

Regional identities of caste and class and religion were strong at the time of the narratives. The notion of one nation was beginning to be formed as a result of the common British rule. However it can be said that the national identity did find a beginning in these events but was not very pronounced as it provided only the germ of the idea that spread widely during the successful struggle for independence that was to follow.

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