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### GLORIFYING THE ENGLISH EMPIRE: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF KIPLING'S POEM 'A YOUNG BRITISH SOLDIER'

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Colonial period is marked by massive cultural and political changes in various parts of the world. Colonial powers occupied various parts of the world and imposed their own political and social order. In the same connection, Afghans had turbulent relations during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During these adventures, certain colonial authors are found to be writing about them. Rudyard Kipling stands as a prominent literary figure whose works touch upon the theme of the politics of Empire. After the intellectual advancement in literary theory, such depiction appears immensely problematic and hence, questioned in the literary circles. The present study analyses the selected poem of Rudyard Kipling through Saidian theoretical lens. Through Qualitative Research Paradigm, the text of the selected poem is analyzed. After the detailed analysis, Kipling's depiction is found Eurocentric and one sided which evidently seems that the poet is on the specific mission of the Empire and its expansion and consolidation. He is concerned about the safety and the security of English imperial forces. They are given instructions and guidelines how to fight and how to counter the Afghan fighters. Colonial mission in Afghanistan is encouraged and glorified. Ironically, even Afghan women are termed barbaric, evil, and violent for defending their land. It is cautiously noted in the analysis that for him only the interest of the empire is paramount and supreme. Those resisting the imperial forces are nothing ironically but violent beings. Lastly, it is evident in the text that he glorifies the empire because it is the sacred mission of the so-called civilizing mission.

## INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial criticism developed and grew after 1970s. This theory deals with the complex question of the politics of empire. The colonizers consolidated their empires, and the natives were deprived of their political and cultural identity (Gandhi, 1998). The natives of the land were forced to change their social order. Their economic rights were violated. Moreover, they were not allowed to assert their political and social rights. Through colonial texts, the native subjects were not only misrepresented but rather considered them as sub-humans who are mere objects. Cultural and historical facts were distorted and mismatched. Literary texts were used as the colonial tools to advance the colonial agenda. These texts otherized the natives and hence declared to be less competent and intelligent. For the colonial masters, Europe was termed to be the main center of cultural meaning.

However, the new advancement in the critical thought questioned the colonial authors and their depictions. Hence, the postcolonial theorists and critics termed their viewpoints highly Eurocentric. These critics gave more voices to the oppressed natives who were the actual owners of their lands. They termed the colonizers' contact with the colonized complex and complicated. As Abrams (2011) wrote that postcolonial studies questioned the Eurocentric ideologies which has by and large thoroughly negated the colonized races and their cultural identity. The colonial other reassert itself and fight back into their world documents that are recorded by the Europeans.

The beginning of postcolonial theory could be derived from the master texts of Frantz Fanon's 'The wretched of the Earth, Chinua Achebe's Essay 'Colonialist

Criticism' (Fanon, 2001; Achebe, 2012). But Said's intellectual work 'Orientalism' could be the important and main base of postcolonial theory (Gilbert, 1997).

The west believes that it has the better knowledge as compared to the natives about themselves. The colonizer justifies the western superiority over the eastern races on the basis that it is more rational and more advanced. The colonized other is less developed and less rational; therefore, it needs the help and support of the western masters. However, it is proved that western mission is purely political in nature which portrayed the east barbaric and wild to pave the way for political domination in the eastern lands on the name of civilizing mission.

Like the other territories and races of the colonized land, Afghans also had very turbulent political engagements with the English empire; they fought three wars against the empire. 1<sup>st</sup> war was fought from 1839 to 1842; Second war was fought from 1878 to 1880 and the last one was in 1919. Resultantly, Afghanistan emerged as an independent state.

Rudyard Kipling, being the first recipient of Nobel prize in 1907, is considered as the spokesperson of English Empire. His major works are based on the

Eurocentric ideology and themes. Legitimization and glorification of the empire are the powerful themes present in his works.

### ***Research Objective***

To explore how the empire is glorified in the selected poem of Rudyard Kipling.

### ***Research Question***

How does Rudyard Kipling glorify the empire in the selected poem?

### ***Delimitation of the Study***

The study focuses one important poem of Rudyard Kipling which is 'A Young British Soldier' to see and note his Eurocentric approach and to analyze his highly problematic narrative about the Afghans. The poem is written in the colonial context and background. The selection of the important poem has a specific purpose: to analyze and see Kipling's efforts for not only the extension of the empire but its glorification and legitimization.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section comprises the past studies on Kipling's works and other research studies on Rudyard Kipling through certain theoretical frameworks. Kipling's own works: short stories and poems are reviewed to find the gap for the present research study.

Khan (2014) analyzed Kipling's 'Ballad of East and West'. The account of this poem dealt with an Englishman who came to know that a tribal Pashtun, Kamal Khan had stolen mare of his father. The Englishman followed the person and confronted him wherein an encounter took place. Eventually, colonel's son was defeated. However, the two opponents forgot about their fight which was followed by an oath of friendship and loyalty. Later on, the young Englishman who was highly confident and proud went to a wild area and brought back his lost horse. Hence, it is evident here Kipling justifies the surrender of the colonized native and the native is shown to agree with the white colonizer. Even the native is shown agreed to employ his son in the government and to serve the empire.

Hence, quite contrary, a border wanderer changed into the personnel of Guides of the empire. The poem carries the symbolic meaning, Kamal Khan depicted as a thief represented the east and on the other hand, the West was symbolized through the character of the colonel and his son. The poet put the Pashtuns by generalizing them thieves, who lack civilization. The poet showed them that the sole option is to be subservient to the colonial administration and to accept the authority of English Empire (Khan, 2014).

Furthermore, Kipling (2014) used derogatory and insulting language about the Pathans in his short story "A Sahibs' War". He termed the Afghans vultures and found

them slaughterers. He used words thief, dog (sag) and liar for the Afghan character, Sikandar Khan in the story. Sikander Khan was depicted a strange character who has no human feelings and emotions. Contrary to this, Kipling used words like wise, protector of the poor and heaven born for the colonizer and the white character which stands to the reason that the author is on the mission to spread the propaganda of colonial justification and expansion.

Kipling (1888) has also showed his colonial mind-set in the story 'Dray Wara Yow Dee'. The story is told to an Englishman by a Pathan horse dealer who burns in anger to avenge his honor. Kipling attached all negative words to the Pathans like thieves and lowland bastards. It is stressed that Pathan is returning evil for good. Kipling in this story compared the whole Abazai tribe (a Pathan tribe) with dogs and their women are called the servants of sin. Kipling used words like 'houseless dog' for the Pathans in the story. Dehumanizing the native people is very common in the colonial discourse. On the other hand, English character is called the chief among the friends. Over-obsessed with white supremacy, Kipling has thoroughly ignored the positive traits of the native inhabitants (the Pathans).

Similarly, as a spokesperson of the empire, Kipling showed Afghanistan as uncivilized country and strategic asset in the colonial management. His insight into the Afghans and his ideology has by and large been of colonizer concerning the interests of the Empire merely. Natives do not deserve to be depicted equally with the white colonizers.

"Ford o' Kabul River", a poem, he wrote of the threats awaiting the British forces in Afghan land. For Kipling, Kabul was hell-like and blasted place. (Kipling, 1879). Kipling's other poems 'The King's Mercy' and The Ballad of the King's Jest depicted Afghans cruel, brute, and uncivilized (Kipling, 1889). Negative portrayal has a politically driven that is to pave the way for occupation and domination.

Subsequently, Kipling (1894) praised the British army, and even the animals present in the force in his famous short story 'Her Majesty's Servants'. The scene is shown so dangerous that the Afghan Amir appeared to be gone mad and out of control. Kipling mockingly depicted that the king's cruelty seemed to be bursting to take out the sword and kill the British men and women. Hence, Rudyard Kipling took pride in the superiority of the British order and called the ruler of Afghanistan, a wild king of a very wild country. The king's bodyguards were termed savage men and the horses were considered savage horses. Such depiction of the native people and its king clearly showed his biased and partial viewpoint. There is stark binary noted in his portrayal (Kipling, 1894).

Kipling (1915) used colonial strategy to show the Afghan culture and its people in his short story 'The Head of the District'. Here, he praised the colonial administrators and idealized them by giving them the status of demigods. On the other hand, Afghans were shown having extreme hatred and a blood thirsty race that did not

have any specific way of life. Afghan land is shown with horrible stories of devils. Hence, Rudyard Kipling's representation is one sided and based upon his implicit racial prejudice. His only concern seems to perpetuate the colonial agenda of occupation and domination.

The Amir's Homily, A Young British Soldier, The Man who would be King, 'Lord Robert' and 'Arithmetic on the Frontier' are also written in the same backdrop of orientalist perspective particularly about the Afghans in which Kipling advanced colonial mission of the British empire expansion. In short, Kipling, the 'Bard of the British Empire' always sang and admired the hardworking soldiers of the Empire who were fighting wars in the strange and alien territories. His jingoistic passions lay at the core of these works (Kipling, 1914).

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative in nature because it analyzes 'words and phrases' of Kipling's poem, 'A Young British Soldier'. The researchers analyzed this poem through Saidian theoretical lens with the help of textual analysis along close reading.

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

#### ***An Introduction to the Poem***

'A Young British Soldier' is short poem by Rudyard Kipling. Kipling always likes and loves to sing for the soldiers of Empire who are fighting in the strange territories of the colonized land. Kipling composed this poem about English troops. He talks about their happiness and griefs, showing great kindness and sympathy to these soldiers. These are the soldiers who always respond quickly when required by the Empire. He gives pieces of advice and instructions to the soldiers who are fighting in the alien and strange land of Afghanistan. Furthermore, he warns them of cholera, heat-stroke. He also gives them instructions that they should not wait for the dead companions rather proceed with their arms and weapons fearlessly ahead. Finally, when they are injured in Afghan land, they rather should attack themselves with their own weapons before the Afghan women come and to destroy them violently. The Afghan women are depicted blood thirsty and violent. It is quite ironic the forces which had come from the west to attack Afghan land for their own interests are glorified and the women and the men defending their lands are termed violent and barbaric.

Specifically, He refers to the disastrous Anglo-Afghan War. He sees the Afghans violent especially as thirsty for revenge. He gives pieces of advice to the young British soldiers. He tells them how to cope up with the unfavorable situation in war. Kipling like a professional instructor guides them and wishes best ahead for these soldiers. He considers them the real assets of the empire in perpetuating the supposed mission to civilize the brute races of the other parts of the world ironically. Kipling believes that all these non-white races are to be trained by white men because they are the burden on the white people. Hence, the literary honesty to be objective is explicitly violated.

Kipling is considered the poet of Empire. He always sings for its soldiers as they were fighting difficult wars in the hard terrains. The weather is hard and different which may cause problems for the soldiers, and they may become victims of cholera and other diseases. Kipling advises and warns the young British soldiers about the unfavorable geographical condition of the East in general and of Afghanistan in particular. As In fifth stanza he writes:

*But the worst o' your foes is the sun over'ead:  
You must wear your 'elmet for all that is said:  
If 'e finds you uncovered 'e'll knock you down dead...*

Kipling draws a very grim picture of the whole territory and landscape. Therefore, he warns the soldier of the Empire to be aware and cautious so that their health may not be harmed. Kipling being a spokesperson of the empire is always concerned about the welfare of the imperial soldiers. He does not write a single word about the native Afghans and their inborn rights. Their just mission carries no value to Rudyard Kipling.

### ***Poem as Medium of Extending British Empire***

Since the main theme of the poem is about colonialism and extension of the English Empire over the unconquered land (Afghan land) because Afghan land was important for the English Empire to contain Russia and its growing influence in the central Asian region. Kipling, being a poet of the Empire always trumpeted through literary genres for this very imperial cause. In the poem, Kipling like a guide and teacher gives advice and instructions to the young soldiers about their roles. At the same time, Poet warns them of the impending threats in enemy's land (Afghans are enemies for Kipling). Moreover, he uses the word soldier 32 times in this short poem of 13 stanzas. Soldier of Queen, words are used two times in the first and last stanzas twice. Using over wording in any literary work is preoccupation of the author with certain aspect and idea. Therefore, it shows emphasis or stress on soldiers reflects Kipling's so-called noble cause of civilization which was only possible through British occupation. The word "Afghanistan" is used once in the last stanza of the poem but with negative connotation in which Afghan women are reduced to violent beings. They are some other wild and less developed human beings.

### ***Afghans as Violent Others***

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet depicts the Afghans violent and brute; the women are brute, violent and dangerous. As the line reads:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,  
And the women come out to cut up what remains,  
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains'...*

Britain had fought two hard wars with the Afghans before the above poem was composed. The first one was fought in from 1839 to 1842 and second one was fought from 1878 to 1880. Britain had considered it quite easy to occupy Kabul

in the first Afghan war in 1838 but when the war ended, only one man could return alive. The Second Anglo-Afghan War of from 1878 to 1879 was comparatively less lethal and disastrous. British soldiers were forced to leave Kabul and started a march towards Kandahar. From the force of 40,000, the British suffered the loss of 2,500 casualties which included 500 from cholera. It is probably due to this incident that he warned the soldiers about the threat of the cholera in the poem. Ironically, it could be argued that English soldiers had come far from Europe and even thousands of miles away to Afghanistan, if Afghans were defending their land from foreign occupation, they were violent and blood thirsty for Kipling. Showing resistance and defending homeland, Afghans become as animalistic objects to be hated, marginalized, and shown as blood-thirsty creatures.

He creates such image of the Afghans through Eurocentric perspective. On the other hand, Afghan nation has great love and respect to those brave men and women who fought against the colonial and occupying forces to defend their motherland from the occupation of the foreign troops. Even today, Malai of Maiwand' is recognized, celebrated, and respected. She has become a mythical character who has become a poetic subject and who is sung through ages in the folk stories and local poetry. Even her name has become an inspirational name.

### CONCLUSION

Postcolonial theory critically deals with the western literary texts which were written during the colonial enterprise. it brings forth and exposes the political agenda behind it. Through Saidian lens, we can easily note the portrayal done in two binaries. The native other is shown irrational, wild, and barbaric and who always needs the support and help of the white race which according to Kipling is developed and rational and has the capability to train and teach the supposed civilization to the other races of the world. Hence, it is justified to capture and occupy the eastern lands and their masses on the pretext of teaching them the civilization which the western writers like Kipling deems universal.

Since English empire had problematic ties with the state of Afghanistan and fought three wars against them. The poem under study was written in the same context in which he is preoccupied and concerned about the security of the colonial forces. In the poem, he even gives them advice about the harsh weather. Their mission is shown to be just and dignified.

Quite contrary, Orwell wrote about him, "Kipling is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting....as "the prophet of British imperialism in its expansionist phase...". He always sings about the glory of the empire. Said (2012) adds in his famous book '*Culture and Imperialism*' that Kipling always saw the politics of empire. If the natives (here Afghans) struggle to protect their land and its security; Kipling terms them the violent others who lack civilization and manners. The research has carefully noted his Eurocentric approach who believes in the expansion of the English empire. Hence, it could be concluded with the words of Edward Said, "...it is true to

say that his fiction represents the empire and its conscious legitimizations..." (Said, 2012, p.146).

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