

**KIPLING'S IMPERIAL ANXIETY: A STUDY OF THE MAN
WHO WOULD BE KING**

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Abstract

While assessing Rudyard Kipling's position as a literary artist in the heyday of British imperialism, Harold Orel writes:

Rudyard Kipling's history as a writer illustrates one of the most serious problems in modern criticism, the relationship between members of the Establishment (in both England and the United States) and writers who, for one reason or another, do not seem to satisfy the Establishment's expectations of what they should be saying and writing. (Orel 213)

*The modest attempt of this paper is to explore the area where Kipling actually does not meet the Establishment's requirement in his short story *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888). With decolonization under way in India and former colonies, recent researches reveal several anomalies in Kipling's attitude to the Empire. Consigned to the role of Cassandra Kipling sets about the task of warning the people about the danger from within and without, from the Liberals in England and from the colonies where White rulers proved themselves unworthy of the burden assigned to them.*

Although generally acknowledged as pro-imperialist, Kipling betrays his uncertainty and fear about the fate of the British Empire in his fictions and poetry. One of his ways to do this is to castigate the corrupt elements active within the Empire thereby questioning its moral right to rule over.

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In his seminal work on Victorian Empire *The Expansion of England* (1883), Sir John Seeley identified two conflicting attitudes to the British Empire:

There are two schools of opinion among us with respect to our Empire, of which schools the one may be called the bombastic and the other the pessimistic. The one is lost in wonder and ecstasy at its immense divisions,...this school therefore advocates the maintenance of it as a point of honour or sentiment. The other is the opposite extreme, regards it as founded in aggression and rapacity...a kind of excrescence upon England...this school therefore advocates a policy which may lead at the earliest possible opportunity to the abandonment of it (Smith 36).

Seeley's analysis lays bare the unpalatable fact that even in the heyday of the British Empire one section of the British population viewed the Empire as a potential subject for assault and would prefer its dissolution. If patriotism is the watchword for Charles Kingsley, Alfred Austin, Henry Newbolt, William Ernest Henley figures like C.A. Parnell, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Robert Buchanan, Hillarie Belloc raised their voice against the imperial enterprise. Between these two opposite extremes literary analysts are often at pains to determine how to place Kipling. The majority of critics applaud or castigate him on the same premise, that Kipling expresses a form of jingo-imperialism in his works. In the second half of the twentieth century we have the authority of Homi K. Bhabha, Jeffrey Meyers, Edward Said and more recently Ashis Nandy and Zoreh T. Sullivan who show the anxiety and unease lurking beneath Kipling's apparently joyful proclamation of the Empire. The sole object of this paper is to analyze Kipling's shorter fiction The

Man Who Would Be King (1888) from this perspective.

As this is a less familiar story by Kipling it would not be unreasonable to sketch a brief outline of the plot before projecting Kipling's powerful critique of Empire. The whole book depicts the narrator's five encounters with one or both of Peachy Taliaferro Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, two former soldiers. In the first encounter the narrator only meets Carnehan while travelling in an "Intermediate" or "Third-Class Compartment". Before they part ways Carnehan requests the narrator to deliver a cryptic message to a friend i.e. Daniel Dravot. In the second, although the narrator keeps the request, he informs the authorities about them and persuades himself to believe that he saves them from bigger troubles. In the third, the narrator is confronted with both of them unexpectedly late one night and was somewhat dumbfounded after hearing about their impending adventure. They want to conquer Kafiristan, a vast and then uncharted region that lies beyond the North-West side of British-India's frontier. This almost God-forsaken stretch of land inhabited by heathen Kafirs, is first penetrated, informs Charles Allen, by "Captain Willaim MacNair of the Survey of India and a subordinate, Syed Shah, who was one of the explorer-spies trained by the Survey of India to covertly map the countries beyond British-India's northern borders"(Allen 278). The narrator provides them with maps and books and the two men divulge their scheme of setting themselves as rulers of Kafiristan. The fourth encounter takes place the following morning. Dravot and Carnehan disguise themselves as a mad priest and his servant respectively and the narrator initially fails to recognize the duo. After a couple of years the fifth and final encounter takes place between Carnehan and the narrator. The physical wrought by the ordeal changed him so much that the narrator fails to recognize him at first. However immediately after he entertains Carnehan with whisky and listens to his seemingly incredible success in Kafiristan with Dravot. They set almost everything with the aid of their long-range Martini rifles, army training and diplomatic cunning. The less sophisticated Kafirs are simply awestruck by the appearance of these two godlike figures and bowed down to worship them after the initial resistance is foiled. The whole country came under their direct control and being the natural charismatic of the two

Dravot assumes the role of king with Carnehan his commander-in-chief. But their real apotheosis occurs when a native chief gives Dravot a secret Masonic handshake of the second degree with Dravot returning with the third. His authority reaches its apogee when the "Master's Mark" put on his newly made apron matched the mark carried on the underside of a temple stone. But soon this absolute power overwhelms Dravot's better judgment. He intends to break his formerly made contract with Carnehan and the unwritten codes of godhood by marrying a native girl. But the girl, frightened with the prospect of marrying a superhuman bites Dravot's lips, draws blood and exposes him as a mortal. A general mutiny breaks out at once with the howling of the natives: 'Not a god nor a Devil but only a man!' (Kipling 109). Although they try to flee they are quickly overtaken. Dravot heroically assumes the sole responsibility in the hope of saving Carnehan thereby fulfilled his right to kingship to some extent. He tries to pass through a bridge over a ravine. The Kafirs cut the bridge and Dravot falls to his death. Crucified between two pine trees, Carnehan survives miraculously and was sent back to India by the Kafirs. A shadow of his former self, Carnehan relates his experience to the narrator, shortly afterwards he dies.

The fact that a White man among non-Whites will naturally rise to a position of authority, is, says Harold Bloom,

"a reflex action among white writers from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to John Boorman's film *The Emerald Forest*, and the idea of white incomer being taken for God is at least as old as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (Bloom 36).

Far from establishing a responsible government, the two young adventurers set to plunder the land of its wealth. It is this materialistic attitude which makes them to set foot on Kafiristan instead of India where the government could only discourage private entrepreneurship. Kafiristan is a place where says Dravot 'two strong men can Sar-a-whack' (Kipling 80). Here Jeffrey Meyers observes that Dravot's reference corresponds to the northern part of the rich East Indian island of Borneo that became the personal property of

James Brooke in 1841 (Meyers 7). Meyers goes on telling that Brooke's motives in undertaking his voyage from England to Borneo was largely motivated by his desire to conquer and impose British rule into Borneo. During the time of his arrival in 1840, a rebellion against the tyrannical officials of the Malay Sultan of Brunei was in progress. Brooke took active part on behalf of the Sultan to suppress the rebellion and as a reward was made the ruler of the island which remained in the hands of his descendants until after the Second World War. The deeds of the two adventurers, again shows Meyers, are comparable to the deeds of Lord Jim in Joseph Conrad's eponymous novel (Meyers 8). Like Dravot, Jim also sets up order in a previously chaotic community of Patusan and came to be regarded as Tuan Jim (i.e. Lord Jim). The fact that Dravot willingly assumes the sole responsibility of the hoax of presenting themselves as gods, as has been mentioned before, makes him comparable to Jim who willingly dies at the hand of Doramin.

There is no room for doubt that like James Brooke (often referred to as Rajah Brooke) or Tuan Jim, Dravot's kingdom depends upon the absolute rule by conquest. But whereas Rajah Brooke or Jim show genuine concern for their subjects Dravot and Carnehan only betray lust for power. This lust for power, based on absolute control is epitomized in Lord Acton's maxim: 'power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (Meyers 9). To them Rajah Brooke represents personal and independent colonialism as opposed to national colonialism. These new kings covet power, wealth, title and fame. After their initial success in Kafiristan Dravot's pride knows no bounds as he proclaims: 'we shall be Emperors—Emperors of the Earth! Rajah Brooke will be a suckling to us. I'll treat with the Viceroy on equal terms' (Kipling 102). It is but natural that the rule of Dravot as Carnehan remains largely his sidekick will have a disastrous effect upon his subjects. Their preconceived notion of the affairs of independent states in British India is one of grim oppression and horror. The rulers of these states are

“drugged, drunk or diseased from one end of the year to the other. They [dwell in] the dark places of the earth, full of unimaginable cruelty, touching the Railway and the Telegraph

on one side, and, on the other, the days of Harun-al-Rashid”(Kipling 73).

They also came to know the history of the Kafirs which strengthen their prejudice against their subjects: ‘They was fighting one against the other and were fair sick and tired of it. And when they wasn’t doing that they were fighting with the Mohammedans’(Kipling 100). All these circumstances only consolidate their notion that the rule of White men is bound to be better than the native rule. The deification of them by the Kafirs removed the last trace of hesitation: ‘They think we’re Gods’(Kipling 94). Seeing the Kafirs willing to succumb to their rule they set to wipe out the least shred of dissidence by employing traditional imperialist *divide et impera*. They side with one sect of the tribes and slaughter the primitively armed opposition by means of their long range rifles, which, needless to say, keep them far beyond enemies’ weapons. Carnehan and Dravot take these skirmishes as notable military exploits. It is not simply a handful of sophisticated weapons which made them victorious but the imperial tactics of *divide et impera* and above all the credulous nature of a primitive race who failed to see through the colonizers’ real nature and intention. The ruthless nature they betray in suppressing any sort of resistance and protest closes them in one frame with the native Degumber Rajah whom they want to blackmail at the outset of the story.

Such calculated and brutal form of conquest, combined with an insatiable desire to rob the land of its wealth, represents the very worst kind of colonialism. Citing Kipling’s poem “For All We Have And Are”(1914), Jeffrey Meyers opines that they embody ‘No law except the sword/Unsheathed and uncontrolled’(Meyers 9). The rapacity of the kings for the gold that lies in the rocks, the turquoise in the cliffs, the garnets in the sands of the river, and the chunks of amber may remind the reader of Edmund Burke’s eloquent condemnation of the East Indian Company in 1783:

Animated with all the avarice of age and all the impetuosity of youth, they roll in one after another, wave after wave; and there is nothing before the eyes of the native but an endless, hopeless

prospect of new flights of birds of prey and passage, with appetites continually renewing for a food that is continually wafting. Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is loft for ever to India (Burke 40).

Lodged in a country so resourceful the aim of these two adventurers are like those of Kurtz or the Eldorado exploring expedition—a lust for wealth devoid of all moral purpose. Apparently, the reader is led to think that Kipling does not castigate imperialism as a whole as Burke or Conrad did. But he vividly sketches the futility of imperial control devoid of all moral authority. At this juncture it is worthwhile to note that the remnant of moral value which redeems Kurtz in Marlow's eyes in spite of his descent into bestiality is totally absent in Carnehan and Dravot. As they retain no commitment to morality, Kipling assigns them their doom without any compunction. Dravot's pompous claim: 'I won't make a Nation...I'll make an Empire!' (Kipling 102) is as fragile as the 'contract' he has made with Carnehan before their journey. The defenders of Kipling's imperial prejudice would like to convey the fact that such humiliating situation for Whites will emerge if they fail to accomplish their imperial duties. To put it in other words, if the organized governments of civilized powers are denied the task of colonialism, the supremacy of White men is bound to fall at the hand of non-Whites.

It is this fall of the authority of the Whites, resulting from the inefficacy of meeting their claim with their deeds that Kipling sketches quite exhaustively in his story. This inefficacy centres around the question of Dravot's success as a ruler. After the subjugation of the Kafirs through military, diplomatic cunning Dravot begins to talk about dream of doing things beneficial to his subjects. But the only thing he actually does or rather is able to do is to improve the infrastructure necessary to keep the Kafirs under his control thereby fulfilling the usual accomplishments of a dictator. These accomplishments, i.e. their ability to rule over the Kafirs for a short span of time only foregrounds the hollowness of their claim—to make the Kafirs civilized. Their pride in their own people is only a

manifestation of their self-seeking nature. Because they merely use the natives as tools to meet their objectives and do not hesitate to slaughter wantonly their defenceless men in the same way they once killed their enemies. The reader has to take note of the fact that after their initial triumph in Kafiristan Carnehan looks for the 'brown of the men' (i.e. Kafirs supporting their dictatorship) and fires into the 'brown of the enemy' (i.e. the opposition). When Dravot is bitten and bleeds, he carelessly opens fire at the Kafirs and dropped three of them dead. Far from showing tolerance or love they took the natives as simply cannon fodder. But this tyranny, no matter how much Dravot tries to bring in efficient administration is bound to break as soon as the Europeans, i.e. the gods betray weakness of the flesh. Once the fear of the gods among the natives fades away, for it is fear that apotheosizes them, the power of the gods too ceased to exist.

Down ages Kipling scholars agreed to the fact that in general Kipling's works deal with heroism with a set of values generally identified as masculine (Brooks and Faulkner 37). But far from being monolithic in nature they are replete with subversive ironies and inherent contradictions. In "Ave Imperatrix"(1882) Kipling joyfully proclaims:

And all are bred to do your will
By land and sea—wherever flies
The Flag, to fight and follow still,
And work your Empire's destinies. (Kipling 169)

The divine right attributed to the colonizers can be sustained only by the European norm of progress, cultural superiority and the almost religious ideas of Empire. Regardless of the tricks they employed to conquer the Kafirs, Carnehan affirms their kingship by alluding to the Gospel: 'It's true...True as gospel. Kings we were, with crown upon our heads—me and Dravot...' (Kipling 88). After their authority is established, Dravot also allowed the Kafirs to live and procreate according to their choice: 'Go and dig the land, and be fruitful and multiply...' (Kipling 93). But the Biblical saying, as points out Sullivan, strongly resents kings' infatuation

with women (Sullivan 107). Herein Dravot deviates and by wanting to get married with a native girl he breaks not only his contract with Carnehan but even, as says Sullivan, 'an unspoken code of imperial male bonding that surpasses the love of woman'(Sullivan 106). Sullivan goes on to add that at this stage of final crisis over Dravot's lust for a girl he actually monopolized and appropriated all meaning within himself thus becoming Nietzsche's 'Antichrist' who represents the gigantic stature that he actually does not possess. Throughout his imperial career Dravot does not betray the slightest sign of fear or remorse. At the end judged by Kipling's imperial ethics he is proved guilty and is executed remorselessly.

By contrast, Carnehan who clearly sees through their guilt and has the ability to repent once tried to convince the Kafir priest about their mortality: 'the King [Dravot] and me are nothing more than two of the finest men that God Almighty ever made. Nothing more, I do assure you'(Kipling 107). Carnehan's questioning of their right to rule, observes Meyers, finds echo in Shakespeare's *King Richard II* where the king questions his kingship (Meyers 6). Likewise the epigraph of the story 'Brother to a Prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy' is associated with Richard II's confession: 'Sometimes am I a king,/ Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,/ And so I am'(Meyers 6). Helping Dravot in every other way and yet betraying his fear and remorse Carnehan proves himself rather a pathetic figure and is allowed to return pathetically with Dravot's severed head.

Throughout the story, opines Shamsul Islam, Kipling teaches a lesson to the imperial power: 'what can happen in Kafiristan may happen to *pax Britannica*'(Islam 81). The duty assigned to the Empire builders is certainly beyond human power but they must undertake this painstaking mission to their level best; otherwise they are sure to meet their doom. The fallen colonizers of Kipling—Dravot and Carnehan in the present story, Fleete in "The Mark of the Beast", Morrowbie Jukes in "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes", the unnamed Englishman in

“Naboth”, Hummil in “At the End of the Passage” either die or go through terrible humiliating situations making the claim to White superiority questionable. In the present story the depiction of two youngsters’ rise to power and fall only foregrounds the narrator’s deepest fear which inevitably alludes to the self-destructive mechanism of imperialism (Sullivan 110).

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