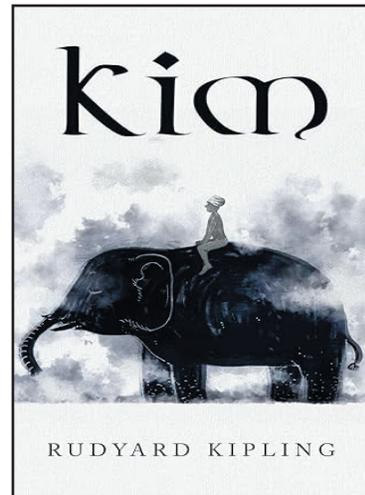


Reviving Kipling's Kim

Review by Ramlal Agarwal

Rudyard Kipling famously said, "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." (The Ballad of East and West). Nevertheless, they not only meet but also walk hand in hand in his novel *Kim* (1901). This captivating novel explores the contrast between the mysticism of the East and the practicality of the West. It takes readers on a journey through the poetic heights of the Himalayan hills and the mundane plains of power and politics, all through a masterfully crafted story centred on a 13-year-old boy.



Kim, the protagonist of the novel, is born to low-class Irish parents. His mother died when he was three years old, and his father hit the bottle. His father, Kimball O'Hara, was a sergeant in an Irish regiment. He was discharged from the regiment and found a job with the railways, and died shortly afterwards. He was worried about the future of his son and therefore gave his son three papers, which, he warned his son, he was never to part with. The first was his signature, which he called "Nee Varie." The second was his discharge letter from the army, and the third was his birth certificate. He believed that these letters would help Kim get established in life. He also told Kim that a Red Bull on Greenfield would claim him. It was the emblem of an Irish regiment in which he had served. Left with nothing to fall back on, Kim joins the street urchins and revels in the pranks and games the street boys are fond of. A half-caste woman, who looked after him, folded the papers, put them in a leather purse, and tied it around Kim's neck. He becomes the domineering figure among children. While sitting astride the great gun Zam-zammah, he notices a strange man shuffling round the corner from the bazaar.

He was nearly six feet tall and dressed in a long robe of grey horse blankets. He was inquiring about the Wonder House. The police officer on duty did not understand the Lama's language, so he turned towards Kim and his friends. Kim takes him to the Wonder House. When the Lama leaves the Wonder House, Kim follows him. Kim had overheard the conversation between the lama and the English curator. He had to come to know that the lama was visiting all the places the Buddha had visited, and he was seeking a river that sprang up when an arrow the Buddha had shot in the test of the bow hit the ground. It is a holy river, and anyone who bathes in it is freed from the wheel of life. The lama told Kim that he was seeking it, but he was new to the place, and the disciple who had accompanied him initially was lost. He felt alone and hungry, unfamiliar with the customs of the land.

Kim becomes his disciple and fetches food for him. During their journey together, they stop at Kashmir Sarai, where they meet Mehbub Ali, a horse dealer also involved with British intelligence. He has secret information that neighbouring kings were conspiring to attack British territory.

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He prepares a note in coded language and wants Kim to deliver it to Mr. Creighton, the head of British Intelligence at Umbala. He gives Kim the message and three silver coins to complete the task. Umbala was on the way to Banaras, where the teacher and the disciple were headed. At Umbala, Kim successfully conveys the message to Creighton.

Upon receiving the documents, Mr. Creighton promptly ordered the assembly of an army consisting of eight thousand soldiers to prepare for the impending attack by hostile forces.

Mr. Creighton is impressed by Kim's performance and is considering inducting him into the force. However, before doing so, he wants the child to be properly trained for the service, and he sends him to St. Xavier's school. This means parting with the Lama, but the Lama is pleased and promises to provide the expenses of his schooling, and he continues to meet him during the holidays. Alongside formal education at St. Xavier's, Kim also learns practical skills for espionage. In this game, Mr. Langan, Babu, Harree Babu, and others, guide him. After completing his training, Kim returns to the Lama at Banaras. At Banaras, a man came to Kim and requested him to bless his ailing son. Kim opens the box he had received during his training and gives him some pills with instructions. After his son makes a complete recovery, he decides to visit the lama and Kim, bringing along generous offerings of food for them. The teacher and the disciple set off on their journey north, driven by their quest to find the sacred river. As they traversed the rugged Himalayan terrain, they encountered Harree, who informed them that he had spotted two foreigners moving stealthily in the area and that he had been tracking them. He wants them to follow him in case of an emergency, and they agree. Eventually, Harree gains the spies' trust by claiming he serves the Rajahs. The spies are travelling to Simla. On their way, they spotted an old man holding a picture and teaching a young boy. Curiosity drags them to the old man. Harree tells them that he was a holy man. The spies approach him. The lama starts explaining the wheel of life to them. They are impressed, and the Russian wants the picture for money. The lama refuses to part with it, which angers the Russian, prompting him to try to snatch it away and strike the lama. The lama falls, and the picture is torn. Kim loses his temper seeing the teacher being hit by the Russian, and he rushes at him and beats him severely. The bearers with them are agitated to see a holy man beaten, and they all scattered away with their baskets. The Frenchman tries to kill Kim, but Harree dissuades him. The bearers share the boxes but give the papers Kim needed. Kim ensures that they are delivered to the right person. The incident renders the lama and Kim ill. When they recover, Mehbub Ali and the lama discuss the future of Kim. The lama suggests that Kim become a teacher, while Mehbub suggests he assist the state. However, the lama realises that his search has ended, and he is free from the wheel of life. He is confident that Kim will also be free from the wheel and sufficiently trained to achieve this. Therefore, he releases him from his bond.

However, Edward Said, in his introduction to the novel for the Penguin Edition, says, "Kim is a masterwork of imperialism; I mean, this is an interpretation of a rich and absolutely fascinating but profoundly embar-

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rassing novel.

Said finds the novel confusing because it does not conform to his theory of the white man's attitude towards the non-whites. It takes no cognisance of the reality of colonial rule, and it treats the white and the non-white on par with each other.