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India as the Uncivilized Other: Reading Kipling's *Letters of Marque*

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Abstract

While various critics have explored the mainstream literary works to deconstruct imperialism, the alternative sites such as letters, diaries, and travel writings have not yet been sufficiently investigated. It would be interesting to read and subject some of Rudyard Kipling's other writings which he termed as 'the bulk of the special correspondence and occasional articles', published between 1887-89, and later compiled in a volume titled, *From Sea to Sea,* to a fresh and thorough investigation.

The paper explores the first part of the volume titled *Letters of Marque* containing articles that throw open a rich site of a 22-year old Kipling's unsubstantiated value judgments on India. These articles are mostly Kipling's description of life in the semi-Independent States of India but they are interspersed with observations which brand India as the uncivilized other as against the sophistication and profundity of the English. Kipling's *Letters of Marque* vividly captures the imperial mind in its rare moment of lapse when a young Kipling abandoned political correctness and brazenly depicted India as the uncivilized other whom perhaps only the Empire had the wisdom and where withal to civilize, modernize and liberate by colonizing!

Keywords: Other, imperialism, deconstruction, travel writing.

Lead In

For those who still believe in categories such as centre and margin, there is a statutory warning that while you hunt for the truth in the centre, truth has the inclination to sit on the margin and watch you grope in the dark at the centre. For those who understand the world in Derridian terms, there is no centre and hence, logically, we now operate in centreless world. In a centerless world, it seems that margin is the new centre because discourses seem to be guided by margins. As Mary Louise Pratt comments in *Imperial Eyes:*

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> For one of the things it brings most forcefully into play are contestatory expressions from the site of imperial intervention, long ignored in the metropolis; the critique of empire coded ongoingly on the spot, in ceremony, dance, parody, philosophy, counterknowledge and counterhistory, in texts unwitnessed, suppressed, lost, or simply overlain with repetition and unreality. (2)

While various critics have explored the mainstream literary works to deconstruct the imperialism and modes of empire building, the alternative sites of knowledge such as letters, diaries, and travel writings have not yet been sufficiently investigated. Apart from the popular works of Rudyard Kipling, it would be apt to subject some of Kipling's other writings, which he termed as 'the bulk of the special correspondence and occasional articles', published between 1887-89, and later compiled in a volume titled, *From Sea to Sea,* to a fresh and thorough investigation.Travel writings have long ceased to be innocent, harmless writings, as Marry Pratt says:

> Travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the "domestic subject" of Euroimperialism; how they have engaged metropolitan reading publics with (or to) expansionist enterprises whose material benefits accrued mainly to the very few. (4)

Mary Pratt raises a number of questions with respect to travel writings:

> How has travel and exploration *writing produced* "the rest of the world" for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory? How has it produced Europe's differentiated conceptions of itself in relation to something it became possible to call "the rest of the world"? How do such signifying practices encode and legitimate the aspirations of economic expansion and empire? How do they betray them? (5)

To turn to the text in question, the origin of the term Letter of Marque is quite interesting as we find in Wikipedia:

> In the days of fighting sail, a letter of marque and reprisal was a government license authorizing a person (known as a *privateer*) to attack and capture enemy vessels and bring them before admiralty courts for condemnation and sale. Cruising for prizes with a letter of marque was considered an honorable calling combining patriotism and profit, in contrast to unlicensed piracy, which was universally reviled. In addition to the term *lettre de marque,* the French sometimes used the term *lettre de course* for their letters of marque. "Letter of marque" was sometimes used to describe the vessel used: a "letter of marque" generally refers to a lumbering square-rigged cargo carrier that might pick up a prize if the opportunity arose. A "privateer" was a fast and weatherly fore-and-aft-rigged vessel heavily armed and heavily crewed, intended exclusively for fighting. (Wikipedia)

A "letter of marque and reprisal" would include permission to cross an international border to effect a reprisal (take some action against an attack or injury) authorized by an issuing jurisdiction to conduct reprisal operations outside its borders.

The first part of the volume titled *Letters of Marque* containing articles that throw open a rich site of a 22-year old Kipling's unsubstantiated value judgments on India. These articles are mostly Kipling's description of life in Rajasthan but they are interspersed with observations which evidence not only the quintessential Englishman's rejection of native traditions but also brand India as the uncivilized other as against the sophistication and profundity of the English.

Colonialism has its roots in the complex issues of civilization, race, nation and religion. The colonizers always had a dim view of the colonized spaces. They seemed to believe that these regions probably needed the colonizers to intervene and lead the march to what they termed as civilization and progress. They had a tendency to dismiss the native culture and its time-honoured traditions as outdated and whatever they had developed in the West as superior and scientific. Macaulay's Minute has served as the classic reference point for colonizers' view of India. They could find no rational design to this country's many religions, traditions and languages and they found it absurd that there is no single and specific book of worship or law to govern them. Their view of the Indian contribution to arts is equally biased. In all, it appears that the colonizers seemed to believe that civilization is something that the West invented and they hold the patent and distributor rights as well. They decided to dish it out in selective installments such as railways and universities as they deemed fit. In spite of rich intellectual traditions and pronounced contributions to knowledge domains, the colonizers always believed at a deeper level somewhere that India was a land of uncivilized and uncouth people and its native traditions, arts and other timeless treasures were a thing of the past.

In order to critique such tendencies of the imperial West, it may not suffice to read the mainstream works of writers such as Kipling because as creative writers they can play with the layers of meaning and shadows of characters they portray without much of accountability. But in the margin, where we locate alternative sites of insights such as memoirs, diaries and letters, there is a lot of excavation possible with respect to the imperial mindset that these apparently great writers possessed and the kind of image of India they projected through these alternative discourses.

It is fascinating to study how colonization affects the human psyche. Colonization weakens people to their core. When a fairly good scholar who has spent years in research in India has to go and address an audience in the West or write a book for the Western readership, she/he feels nervous or desperately looks for the sanction of the West. On the other hand, we have the curious case of a 22-year old Kipling having the audacity to pronounce value judgments one after another. It is not that he finds fault with any one aspect of Indian life and culture; he finds fault with the culture, religion, languages, architecture and so on and so forth. Moreover, he equates every apparent folly or limitation with being uncivilized and projects the aspect as the evidence of an uncivilized society.

To cite a few instances, he considers visiting India as someone would pay a visit to the zoo, "Except for those who, under compulsion of a sick certificate, are flying

Bombaywards, it is good for every man to see some little of the great Indian Empire and the strange folk who move about it." (*Letters of Marque*17)

Kipling was publishing these travel articles and conveying a message to the world that please come and see these 'strange folks' in India. What he seems to mean by 'strange' means 'not quite British' and hence, 'not quite civilized', same human race but a class of inferior quality.

Kipling comes across as a self-proclaimed expert on civilizations and non-civilizations as he concludes that Udaipur is "as backward as Jeypore is advanced—if we judge it by the standard of civilization". (36) One wonders what could be the rationale behind such a statement. For better or worse, he clarifies by saying that "It does not approve of the incursions of Englishmen, and, to do it justice, it thoroughly succeeds in conveying its silent sulkiness." (36)

One marvels at his courage to state this without much of either expertise or research. He also points out that "The modern side of Jeypore must not be mixed with the ancient." (26) Of course, how can we? We must follow Kipling Sahib's instruction and go by his word on what is modern and what is ancient and what these categories mean. For him, ancient seems to mean outdated and irrelevant. While we are prohibited, Kipling marches on to make further pronouncements:

> Let us consider now with due reverence the modern side of Jeypore. It is difficult to write of a nickel plated civilisation set down under the immemorial Aravalis in the first state of Rajputana. The red grey hills seem to laugh at it, and the ever-shifting sand-dunes under the hills take no account of it, for they advance upon the bases of the monogrammed, coronet-crowned lamp-posts, and fill up the points of the natty tramways near the Waterworks, which are the outposts of the civilization of Jeypore. (28)

Although it is difficult to interpret what hills convey, but Kipling reads between the hills and concludes that they are laughing at Jaipur!

To him, the history and glory of Rajasthan means nothing as he goes on to simplistically and summarily dismiss its history as he pronounces, "If any part of a land strewn with dead men's bones have a special claim to distinction, Rajputana, as the cock-pit of India, stands first." (20)

Kipling seems to be conveying that the British are the only people who fight wars and earn glory and hence, the rest are backward and inferior. As if it is not enough, he seems to be suggesting that a lot of what we honour as our history is a bunch of lies:

> It should be noted, none the less, that in this part of the world the soberest mind will believe anything—believe in the ghosts by the Gau Mukh, and the dead Thakurs who get out of their tombs and ride round the Burra Talao at Boondi—will credit every legend and lie that rises as naturally as the red flush of sunset, to gild the dead glories of Rajasthan. (88)

When he writes about the use of weapons, one begins to develop the image of Kipling as a Gandhian, who believed in non-violence and world peace:

> There is a certain amount of personal violence in and about the State, or elsewhere would be the good of the weapons? There are occasionally dacoities more or less important; but these are not often heard of, and, indeed, there is no special reason why they should be dragged into the light of an unholy publicity, for the land governs itself in its own way, and is always in its own way, which is by no means ours, very happy. (41)

By 'our' means, says Kipling which is different from India, 'the uncivilized other' who has no clue about how to govern itself.

To Kipling, education is the only way India could have been civilized but there too, we seemed to have disappointed him. He comes across a school where he observes:

> Thirty or forty little ones, from five to eight years old, were sitting in an open verandah learning accounts and Hindustani, said the teacher. No need to ask from what castes they came, for it was written on their faces that they were Mahajans, Oswals, Aggerwals, and in one or two cases, it seemed, Sharawaks of Guzerat. They were learning the business of their lives, and, in time, would take their father's places, and show in how many ways money might be manipulated. (153)

The Durbar supports the school, which is entirely free and open; a just distinction being maintained between the various castes. The old race prejudice against payment for knowledge came out in reply to a question. "You must not sell teaching," said the teacher; and the class murmured applausively, "You must not sell teaching." (87)

By this account, all we have taught our children in India is how to manipulate money. Of course, it is completely irrelevant that it was the West which mastered the art of manipulating money by establishing giant banking institutions. Even if India did manipulate money, which is certainly not the case, but even if it did, it was Indian money, it was not like the British who went out of their way to manipulate the economy, politics and culture of the half of the world! But how can Kipling Sahib be wrong?

He denounces the education system and he does not stop at this and goes on to write off the languages, particularly the languages on the margin, "Now the little Bhil is an aborigine, which is humiliating to think of. His tongue, which may frequently be heard in the City, seems to possess some variant of the Zulu click, which gives it a weird and unearthly character." (42)

He also denounces and maligns the local language at another place when he remarks, "The Englishman caught a camel-driver who talked to him in Mewari, which is a heathenish dialect, something like Multani to listen to." (40) Or sample this:

> They speak a pagan tongue in Boondi, swallow half their words, and adulterate the remainder with local patois. What can be extracted from a people who call four miles variously *do kosh*, *do kush*, *dhihkas*, *doo-a koth*, and *diakast* all one word? The country-folk are quite unintelligible; which simplifies matters. It is the catching of a shadow of ameaning here and there, the hunting for directions cloaked in dialect, that is annoying. (90)

Of course, there is only one great language in the world-English. The other dialects and languages are evidence of our being further uncivilized. Long live English, long live the Empire. The native, heathenish languages may very well be damned. Kipling championed the cause of imperialism in ways that will call for a completely different sort of research and investigation.

His scorn for Indian architecture mixed with criticism of Indian religion is of particular significance. At various places where he observes the architecture, he denounces it as uncivilized carvings of an uncouth race. Upon visiting a Shiva temple, he finds 'no repose in this architecture', and for him, 'the entire effect is one of repulsion' leading him to conclude that it only had 'the clustered figures of man and brute seem always on the point of bursting into unclean, wriggling life.'(42)

He elaborates upon his special disdain for the architecture:

> Those who care to look, may find elsewhere a definition of its architecture and its more striking peculiarities. It was in kind, but not in degree, like the Jugdesh Temple at Udaipur, and as it exceeded it in magnificence, so its effect upon the mind was more intense. The confusing intricacy of the figures with which it was wreathed from top to bottom, the recurrence of the one calm face, the God enthroned, holding the Wheel of the Law, and the appalling lavishness of decoration, all worked toward the instilment of fear and aversion.
>
> The builder had left no mark behind him—not even a mark on the threshold of the door, or a sign in the head of the topmost step. The Englishman looked in both places, believing that those were the places generally chosen for mark-cutting. So he sat and meditated on the beauties of kingship and the unholiness of Hindu art, and what power a shadowland of lewd monstrosities had upon those who believed in it. (60)

One might ask, what is the yardstick by which Kipling evaluates the architecture? The answer lies in one of his remarks:

> The first impression of repulsion and awe is given by a fragment of tumbled sculpture close to a red daubed *lingam*, near the Padal Pol or lowest gate. It is a piece of frieze, and the figures of the men are worn nearly smooth by time. What is visible is finely and frankly obscene to an English mind. (58)

Therefore, for the record, whatever is obscene to an English mind is not great art. Art that is sanctioned, validated and recommended by Kipling and his tribe is the only great art. The rest is all uncivilized stuff, meant to be forgotten in time.

Where Kipling approves of India, it is also done in a humiliating way, "The Rajput is a man and a brother, in respect that he will ride, shoot, eat pig, and drink strong waters like an Englishman. Of the pig-hunting he makes almost a religious duty, and of the wine-drinking no less." (49)

Among many, there is one passage that is especially significant and stands out is one which contains all the varieties of Kipling's scorn; he ridicules almost everything, denounces the native traditions, passes value judgments on the people, and their education, and upholds what he calls'the European standards':

> The last resting-place of the Maharanas of Udaipur is at Ahar, a little village two miles east of the City. Here they go down in their robes of state, their horse following behind, and here the Political saw, after the death of a Maharana, the dancing-girls dancing before the poor white ashes, the musicians playing among the cenotaphs, and the golden hookah, sword, and water-vessel laid out for the naked soul doomed to hover twelve days round the funeral pyre, before it could depart on its journey toward a fresh birth.
>
> But to return from the burning-ground to modern Udaipur, as at present worked under the Maharana and his Prime Minister Rae Punna Lal, *C.I.E.* To begin with, His Highness is a racial anomaly in that, judged by the strictest European standard, he is a man of temperate life.
>
> The one drawback in the present Maharaja, from the official point of view, is his want of education. He is a thoroughly good man, but was not brought up with the kingship before his eyes, consequently he is not an English-speaking man. (47)

Lead Out

The reason why Kipling fails to appreciate anything that is Indian is because as he innocently admits, "They were all Mahometans, and consequently all easy to deal with. A Hindu is an excellent person, but ... but ... there is no knowing what is in his heart, and he is hedged about with so many strange observances." (96)

> Kipling writes about how to explore India:
>
> There are many, and some very curious, methods of seeing India. One of these is buying English translations of the more Zolaistic of Zola's novels and reading them from breakfast to dinner-time in the verandah. Yet another, even simpler, is American in its conception. Take a Newman's *Bradshaw* and a blue pencil, and race up and down the length of the Empire, ticking off the names of the stations "done." To do this thoroughly, keep strictly to the railway buildings and form your conclusions through the carriage-windows. These eyes have seen both ways of working in full blast; and, on the whole, the first is the most commendable. (28)

To put it simply, if reading English translation of Zola's novels in the verandah is the best possible way of seeing India, that is what Kipling should have done. If he had read Zola's novels and not travelled and not written about it, it would have saved us from his travel articles called *Letters of Marque*. Further, it would have saved him from fall from grace like this, and a dent in his otherwise, fine literary reputation!

Kipling's *Letters of Marque* vividly captures the imperial mind in its rare moment of lapse when a young Kipling abandoned political correctness and brazenly depicted India as the uncivilized other whom perhaps only the Empire had the wisdom and wherewithal to civilize, modernize and liberate by colonizing! As Marry Pratt remarks:

> While the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery (in the emanating glow of the civilizing mission or the cash flow of development, for example), it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis—beginning, perhaps, with the latter's obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself. Travel writing, among other institutions, is heavily organized in the service of that imperative. (*Imperial Eyes* 06)

The future of the discourse on imperialism lies in re-reading of these writings on the margin and ask questions to Kipling and his clan, be it travel writings or other genres.

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