

Revisiting the Surfiction: A Study of Kipling's *The Mark of the Beast*

- Beetoshok Singha

Abstract: Although generally acknowledged as a pro-imperialist litterateur, some of the works of Rudyard Kipling — poetry and prose alike — reflect on close reading the author's deep-seated anxiety and unease regarding the fate of the Empire in erstwhile colonies. The commonly accepted rationale behind the White rule in non-White colonies is the racial superiority of the former. But where White man misuses his power or shrinks back from the burden assigned to him the ideology of White supremacy collapses and the rule is sustained by the exercise of brute force. Louis Althusser informs us that no rule can be perpetuated by mere repression. The repression, devoid of ideology, can successfully be resisted or even thwarted when confronted by competent and self-assertive indigenous people. The possibility of retreat of the colonial power is embedded in the ignorance of the native ways of life and the abuse of power. Through an analysis of Kipling's short story "The Mark of the Beast" this paper exemplifies how the retreat of a representative of the Whites foreshadows the possible retreat of the colonizers.

Keywords: Empire, Repressive State Apparatus, Power, Knowledge.

While defining the word 'surfiction', a term very closely related to postmodern discourse, J. A. Cuddon is of the opinion that it "denotes fiction which makes little or no attempt to be realistic or naturalistic, and it emphasizes its fictional status" (Cuddon, 1999, p. 882). But whereas Cuddon hints at the possibility of surfiction's not indicating anything, some of Kipling's imperial gothics which might claim to belong to this genre poignantly refers to the utter futility of the Occidental rule in the Orient. In many of his short stories such as "The Return of Imray" (1891), "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888), "The Mark of the Beast" (1890) Kipling portrays the Orient in general and India in particular as a place of happenings which are beyond any human or rational explanation and consequently the White men are not empowered to face dangers arising out of such situations. The modest object of this paper is to make an appraisal of Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Mark of the Beast" (1890)¹ in the light of the theoretical perspective discussed above and to show how in spite of being widely regarded as a typically colonial text it fulfils some of the important criteria of postmodernism. As this is a less familiar short story by Kipling it would be pertinent to sketch a brief outline of the story before discussing the postmodern perspectives of this very powerful critique of the Empire. A cursory glance at the events related in this short story will tempt the reader to accept it as simply a tale of gothic horror. Fleete, an English landowner arrives in India and got drunk at a New Year's Party. While returning home he leaves his companions and rushes in the temple

of Hanuman, the monkey-god in Hindu mythology. Before the priests of the temple or Fleete's companions prevent him, Fleete grinds the ashes of his cigar-butt into the forehead of the red-stone idol. He then ejaculates drunkenly: "Shee that? Mark of the B-beasht! I made it. Ishn't it fine?" (Kipling, n.d., p. 246) Then in no time a naked and leprous 'Silver Man' emerges and before anyone can intervene touches his head on Fleete's chest. At this the priests became silent and the Englishmen are allowed to leave. Strickland and the narrator carry the still drunk Fleete back home and the readers are left to see the gradual transformation of Fleete into a beast in the very next day. As Fleete begins to lose his human qualities, everyone including his own favourite pony shunned him. The European doctor, too, diagnosed this affliction as 'hydrophobia' and considered it as a lost case. At night the 'Silver Man' appears and begins to roam outside. On a sudden impulse it appears to Strickland and the narrator that this leper is the real cause for affliction. So they drag him into the room where Fleete lies and ordered him to cure Fleete. When the leper remains silent they tied him to a bedstead and tortured him with heated gun barrels. At dawn the leper finally adheres to their injunction. He simply touches Fleete's left breast and Fleete gradually returns to his normal self and falls asleep. Then they released the leper and Strickland called on the temple of Hanuman to offer redress for Fleete's desecration of the idol. He has been assured that the alleged desecration never took place. The next morning Fleete, too, cannot recollect anything and puts the blame for his unconsciousness on mixing up the liquors. Kipling closes his narrative with the ironic insight: "...it is well known to every right-minded man that the gods of the heathen are stone and brass, and any attempt to deal with them otherwise is justly condemned" (Kipling, n.d., p.259).

The act of grinding the cigar-butt on the forehead of the red stone idol, opines Paul Battles, announces not only his mastery over Indian ape-god but also over the natives who worship before the idol (David, 2007, p.130). Viewed from this angle, when Fleete calls the brand the "mark of the beast" and then boasts about his having done this he actually proclaims his and thereby Englishmen's superiority over the natives. In the essay entitled *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* in his book *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1968), Louis Althusser draws our attention to the Repressive State Apparatus by stating that it "functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology" (Althusser, 1968/2006, p.97). While the mark of the cigar-butt bears the sign of repression on the red-stone idol the ideology behind this move underscores the superiority of Christianity over paganism. As has been pointed out before, the inferiority of paganism, or in this case Hinduism, is confirmed by the narrator at the end of the story by assigning the status of stone and brass to the gods of pagans. It is a well known fact that Kipling had a lifelong aversion for Hindus, especially educated Bengali Hindus. He was largely in favour of letting the natives remain as they were and would oppose any move to spread either European education or Christianity in India. It is informed by Kipling's biographer David Gilmour that Kipling felt that "The West,..., should not interfere with

non-Christian creeds because they were vital to their believers' cultures and social systems" (Gilmour,2003,p.82). In the present story, too, Fleete had no intention to convert the Hindus to Christianity whichever way we may try to interpret the story. During his Indian years and long afterwards Kipling continued to oppose missionary activities in his works. In a letter to Reverend John M. Gillespie, a leading American Presbyterian, he confesses :

It is my fortune to have been born and to a large extent brought up among those whom white men call "heathen"; and while I recognize the paramount duty of every white man to follow the teachings of his creed and conscience as "a debtor to do the whole law", it seems to me cruel that white men, whose governments are armed with the most murderous weapons known to science, should amaze and confound their fellow creatures with a doctrine of salvation imperfectly understood by themselves and a code of ethics foreign to the climate and instincts of those races whose most cherished customs they outrage and whose gods they insult (Pinney,vol 2,1990,p.205).

As the history of Christianity is not untainted it possesses no right to teach lessons to other religions. Thus the ideology namely, the assumed superiority of religion and culture of the Caucasian race strengthening the Repressive State Apparatus, is questioned and denied by Kipling. It is certainly beyond doubt that if the ideology itself is reduced to hollowness and sham then the taken for granted superiority of Whites is based upon power. To put it in other words the British rule in India is founded upon repression of the natives. A visible proof of this repression is branding the ape-god with the cigar-butt. It appears in the second time when the narrator and Strickland decide to torture the "Silver Man" to cure Fleete. But the arrogance necessary to inflict torture would have been impossible if the two Englishmen did not take the leper as subhuman. This assumption is also corroborated by Paul Battles who writes : "Just as Hanuman seems a mere beast to Fleete, the narrator describes the Silver Man as a "foul creature;"...It is the Silver Man's less-than-human status that allows the narrator to justify the tortures that follow" (David,2007,p.136). Battles goes on to add that this torture "makes particularly clear the connection between knowledge and power", 'pouvoir/savoir' in Foucauldian discourse (ibid,p.137). In his seminal text *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault draws the interrelation between power and knowledge thus :

...power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault,1975/1991,p.27).

It is obvious that Strickland and the narrator uses the red hot gun barrel to give vent to their pent up fury upon the leper: "...thinking of poor Fleete, brought to such degradation by so foul a creature, I put away all my doubts and resolved to help Strickland from the heated gun-barrels to the loop of twine...with all tortures that might be needful" (Kipling,n.d.,p.255). The immediate purpose is of course to get Fleete

back to his normal self. But the intensity with which the torture was administered indicates a dormant motive that suggests the inability of the colonizers to penetrate the enigma of the leper. It is true that Kipling makes the leper abide by the diktats of the colonizers by healing Fleete. Even then the leper puts up this torture until the first light of dawn. He succumbs to their demand only when the torture is beyond the endurance of his flesh. But there is no denying the fact that the colonizers failed to unravel the enigma of the leper. The narrator's voice bears evidence to this assumption :

Some years later, when Strickland had married and was a church-going member of society for his wife's sake, we reviewed the incident dispassionately, and Strickland suggested that I should put it before the public. I cannot myself see that this step is likely to clear up the mystery;... (Kipling,n.d.,pp.258-259).

Thus although power is exercised, it fails to produce knowledge and the mystery remains. Hence is not presumptuous to take the red hot gun barrel as a weapon for Repressive State Apparatus. Then the narrative or to say more precisely 'the pen' by which the narrative comes into existence may as well stand for ideology. As the tool of repression fails to bring knowledge 'the pen' is forced to acknowledge the failure. In his pioneering philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard dealt with different stages of sign to show how sign arrives at its final stage of emptiness. Citing Baudrillard, Peter Barry writes that the “second stage for the sign is that it misrepresents or distorts the reality behind it” (Barry,2007,p.87). It is in this context that one may attempt to disentangle the interrelations of the trio—Hanuman, the Silver Man and Fleete. Throughout the text the Silver Man remains as an unresolvable enigma for upon him lies the real cause of Fleete's affliction and whether it is curable or not. For a European reader, unaccustomed either to Indians or their ways he poses the same trouble as the red stone idol of Hanuman. Kipling depicts him as half human and half animal—a naked, faceless creature that howls like a wolf and mews like an otter. But Kipling's use of the Biblical phrase “a leper as white as snow” to show the hideousness of this dehumanized creature actually bears evidence to his divinity defined in the *Book of Leviticus* :

...the priest shall consider: and, behold, *if* the leprosy have covered all his flesh, he shall pronounce *him* clean *that hath* the plague: it is all turned white: he *is* clean. But when raw flesh appeareth in him, he shall be unclean (*The Holy Bible*,1957,p.118, cited also in David, 2007,p.135).

From this Biblical discourse it appears that the 'Silver Man', as he is entirely covered with leprosy is 'clean'. Hence all the degrading epithets applied to him and the insults inflicted or to say the signs or their meanings helped to form a totally misleading idea about his identity and role in the mind of the reader. Viewed thus the ape-god, too, does not remain confined to the role of a lifeless idol. Fleete's act of grinding the cigar-butt on the forehead of the idol, is an act of utter contempt intending to show the bestiality of Indians and their gods. As Fleete marks Hanuman, he too in turn, is nuzzled by the 'Silver Man', i.e. he is also marked. Here Paul Battles raises the relevant question—what is the

mark of the beast? And more explicitly who is the beast? (David, 2007, p. 132.) For any reader of Kipling 'mark of the beast' simply implies Fleete's branding of Hanuman. But Battles' logic derives a second sinister connotation, namely "a mark which a beast makes" (ibid, p. 132). Fleete's subsequent actions and degradation only validate the second meaning. Following this logic it may be argued that by marking Hanuman Fleete plays the role of a beast. His bestiality is witnessed and confirmed by Dr. Dumoise, narrator and Strickland. Thus the sign of Fleete's marking the idol of Hanuman with the assumption that he is marking a beast actually begets a gross misrepresentation of the reality. Another subtle form of subversion of authority occurs in the figure of Strickland. Policeman Strickland makes his debut first in *Plain Tales From The Hills* (1888) and like there he also assumes authoritarian attitude. But more significantly he possesses knowledge of Indian ways and techniques of surveillance. It is in this context that one may once again resort to Foucauldian analysis on the nature of surveillance and power in *Discipline and Punish*. The power assigned to the policemen, writes Foucault, should be

the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network... (Foucault, 1975/1991, p. 214).

The readers can easily understand why he dislikes being mystified by the natives. As a policeman his business in profession is to defeat the natives in their own game. To put it in Foucauldian words, in order to make his surveillance omnipresent he has to make himself remain invisible, to maintain 'a faceless gaze'. There is no doubt that he belongs to a colonial community where everything in a man's life is considered to be a public property. The surveillance that he imparts upon the natives in disguise has to serve sheer colonial purpose. He is the unit of an organized body whose job is to ensure, to resort to Foucault again,

that no part of the Empire is without surveillance, no crime, no offence, no contravention [that] remains unpunished, and that the eye of the genius who can enlighten all embraces the whole of this vast machine, without, however, the slightest detail escaping his attention (ibid, p. 217).

But this kind of surveillance, notices Andrew Hagiioannu, is 'paradoxical' because his exposure to the native community as a native, "feeds hostilities towards both native culture and the mother country, whose searching eye is perceived everywhere" (Hagiioannu, p. 33). The inference which a reader may derive is that along with the natives this type of surveillance brings Strickland under colonial jurisdiction and censure by placing him in the position of the colonized. Thus while working in disguise Strickland obviously confronts the powerful, authoritarian gaze of his peers from the position of a native. For this reason, his experiences do not simply reflect knowledge of native society through the technique of surveillance in disguise, "but also knowledge of

England as an estranged culture, a 'colonised other' " (ibid,p.33). Thus in the story the triangular relation between Hanuman, the Silver Man and Fleete and the ambivalent nature of Strickland are the two bases upon which the superstructure namely a surfiction is built up. The inconclusiveness of what actually befalls Fleete or the denial of the alleged desecration of the shrine of Hanuman by the priests prevent the story from being a close-ended one. This open-endedness of the text is perfectly in keeping with one of the basic tenets of postmodernism. Even Edward Said opines that the text "can never be completed as a voyage is completed, in stages, but is conceived in terms of something beyond even the massive effort that characterizes the continuing enterprise of the career" ² (as cited in Rajnath,2000,p.81). The efforts exerted by Strickland and the narrator to put everything within the rational framework of cause and effect and their failure may exist with the experiences gained by them in their long period of imperial service but these certainly could not complete the voyage thereby counterpoising the Western arrogance of understanding the monolithic nature of East.

Endnotes:

1. Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" was first published in the *Pioneer* on 12 and 14 July, 1890. It was subsequently collected in *Life's Handicap* in 1891.
2. Actually Said writes this in his text *Beginnings :Intention and Method* (1974). I have quoted this passage from the essay "Edward Said and Postcolonial Theory" by Rajnath anthologized in *Journal of Literary Criticism* (Vol. IX, No I, June 2000).

References :

- Althusser, L. (2006). "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. (Ben Brewster, Trans. pp.85-126). Delhi: Aakar Books for South Asia. (Original work published 1968).
- Barry, Peter. (2007). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2nd ed.) Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Battles, Paul. (2007). "The Mark of the Beast: Rudyard Kipling's Apocalyptic Vision of Empire" in C. David (Ed.), *Rudyard Kipling: A Critical Study*. (pp.127-143). New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Cuddon, J. A. (2010). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Critical Theory*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel. (1991). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). London: Penguin. (Original work published 1975).
- Gilmour, David. (2003). *The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling*. London: Pimlico.
- Hagioannu, Andrew. (2003). *The Man Who Would Be Kipling*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- Kipling, Rudyard. (n.d.). *Life's Handicap*. Miami: Hardpress.
- Pinney, Thomas. (Ed.). (1990). *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling* (Vol.2). London: Macmillan.
- Rajnath. (2000, June). Edward Said and Postcolonial Theory. *Journal of Literary Criticism*, Vol IX, No.1. pp.73-87.
- William Collins Sons and Company's *The Holy Bible*. (1957). London.

