

## The Dangers and Pleasures of Teaching Orientalist Classic Books\*

Eleanor Zelliot  
Robert Drexler

### *Kipling's Kim in the Classroom* Eleanor Zelliot Carleton College

Rudyard Kipling's masterpiece, *Kim*, has been in print since 1901 and currently there are about 15 editions, which gives a suggestion of its continued popularity. One new edition includes an introduction by Edward Said, the master of Orientalism, who can't help but be lured into loving the book because of Kipling's exuberant love of India, even though he finds the book to be a "master work of imperialism (p. 45).<sup>1</sup> Said tells us to be aware of two things: that *Kim* is written from the dominating viewpoint of a white man describing a colonial possession, and that Kipling was "a historical being, albeit a major artist" (p. 10). I don't intend to contend with Said, however, but to show how *Kim* can delight students and awaken them both to the color of India and the nature of imperialism.

At the beginning, I would remind students that the writing of a century ago may be a bit difficult to get into, but once in, the reader will be very comfortable. I would also hand out a glossary so that words can be instantly looked up, and the facts of the Frontier and the Great Game made clear.<sup>2</sup> The Penguin edition has a massive series of notes, not all of which are necessary for a first read. I might also begin by showing the film, *Kim*, starring Errol Flynn as the dashing Pathan, MahbubAli; Dean Stockwell as Kim; and Paul Lukas as the lovable Lama from Tibet. The movie is a far cry from the book, but it offers some interesting contrasts, which the students will notice as they read. For instance, no racism of any kind is apparent, no "white blood stood him on his feet" kind of comment. Even the figure of fun, the Babu from Bengal, is quite reasonable, even heroic. And the hero of the film is the Pathan from Northwest India, i.e., Errol Flynn, who conquers all.

Kipling's use of the phrase "white blood" is a clue to his stereotyping "orientals" and Europeans, at least in certain matters. I ask students to look for ideas on race as they read, and to jot down examples (and page numbers).

What does "Kim could lie like an Oriental" really mean? What other comments on "Oriental nature" does Kipling make? And why does he use "Oriental" instead of "Indian"? When gems of superiority are found, students might read them aloud. I am a firm believer in reading literature aloud in class, and *Kim* makes excellent reading.

But *Kim* is not all black and white. The class should consider his idea of what the Empire is. Kipling paints in all its "pettiness and grandeur, its variety and energy, its miseries, its hardships, and its heroism." So many of the English people in the novel are not admirable, the Protestant chaplain and the schoolboys, for instance, that one is forced to ask, why does Kipling think the English should rule this magnificent land? Who does Kipling think ought to rule, for surely he thinks the British ought to rule India—that is a given. And he thinks the gifts of the English to India, the all-important railway, for instance, are suited to India. What else? I can think of four more things. Is the sum total of Kipling's attitude that only the best of the English should rule, but they will rule wisely and well by virtue of being English?

Kipling's India is much more than a British possession, and that is what makes *Kim* such fun. I think next I would ask students to look for characters they find interesting, read aloud about them, and tell us why. The lama from Tibet, of course, a most endearing figure, who both needs Kim and helps Kim. And the women are wonderfully strong, for instance "the woman of Shamlegh" and the old lady behind the curtains they meet on the road, a real tyrant. Huree Babu represents the educated Indian, and he is a rather tiresome character, but why? Is it his speech? His curious English? His love of 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature? Look for what he actually does in the Great Game. And think about Colonel Creighton, who does not have the "dull fat eyes of the other sahibs." The novel is full of real people, and many of them are treated with affection and respect, just as the gentle old Tibetan lama and the wild bright boy who has lived as a homeless Indian lad are true friends. Students might enjoy seeing how many separate and distinct representative characters there are from the countless facets of Indian life.

---

\*This issue includes two of the four presentations from this panel. The remaining presentations, by Chuck Hayford and Dan Meissner, will be included in the Winter issue of the *ASIANetwork Exchange*.

Kipling is at his best in describing the myriad facets of Indian life, the kaleidoscope of color and noise that is the Indian city and the Grand Trunk road. India today is all worlds—first, second, third, fourth and some others—in one. Kipling does little with the Indian educated middle class (except for the Bengali babu) and nothing with India's budding nationalism (the Indian National Congress was founded sixteen years before *Kim* was published), but otherwise, and fortunately there is a lot of otherwise, he captures the varied sights and sounds, the endless parade of all sorts of people, that still enthrall many who visit India.

<sup>1</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, edited with an introduction and notes by Edward W. Said. London: Penguin Books, 1989. The map shows us a Grand Trunk Road stretching to Bombay. Historians beware. Another recent long introduction in a paperback edition is by Alan Sandison. See *Kim* published by Oxford University Press in 1987 (with the same inaccurate map!!)

<sup>2</sup> The Frontier and the Great Game are in the Glossary, but teachers who want to read what a writer's infatuation with *Kim* can lead to and also learn about these things may consult Peter Hopkirk, *Quest for Kim: In Search of Kipling's Great Game* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

#### A Glossary for Kipling's *Kim*

**Bhang:** an opium derivative used in some rituals.

**Caste:** India's complex social system whereby a person is born into a certain group, ranked hierarchically. Castes mentioned are the Brahmins, the priestly and ritually highest caste, and the Jats, a great farming caste of north India. Kipling also mentions half castes, British combined with Indian, which are generally despised, and low castes, which includes artisans and those who work with leather and other polluting matter. Many believe that doing the duties of one's caste results in a higher status in one's next birth.

**Frontier:** The Northwest area of India, a network of independent kingdoms and clans, controlled by the British up to a certain point, but they were never able to take Afghanistan, just over the mountains from India. The famous Kyber Pass runs from Peshawar on the Frontier to Kabul in Afghanistan.

**Great Game:** The attempt to stop the advance of Russia, which was seen as coming ever closer to India. It involved spies, efforts to keep the rulers on the Northwest under control, and constant vigilance against any penetration of Indian territory by Russians.

**Haji:** One who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five chief duties of all Muslims, the others being alms giving, fasting during Ramadan, praying five times a day, believing in Allah and his Prophet Mohamed.

**Jain:** A religion born in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE which is pious but atheistic, and so totally vegetarian that being a merchant is about the only occupation permitted.

**Jataka:** The Buddhist tales of morality based on the various births of the Buddha as a bird, animal, wise man, etc.

**Lama:** The name for a bhikshu or monk in the Tibetan tradition.

**Mohamedan:** A Muslim, a believer in Allah, guided by the sayings of Mohamed and the Koran which he received from Allah. Mohamed is a Prophet, not the son of God, and the term Mohamedan is incorrect.

**Mutiny:** The rebellion of 1857 that involved both Indian soldiers in the British Army (sepoys) and many North Indian areas. Kipling's only reference to this is a soldier who remained loyal to the British!

**Sikh:** A member of the religion founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Guru Nanak which stresses monotheism and piety but which also has a militant tradition. Turbaned, bearded Sikhs are still visible in India and throughout the world.

**Sunni:** One of the two great divisions of Muslims, the other being the Shia; the chief divisions between them are Arabic vs. Persian and the nature of the leadership following the death of Mohamed.

**Wonder House:** The Museum at Lahore which contains huge amounts of Indian art. Kipling's father was the curator.

**Xavier:** A Jesuit traveler in the 16<sup>th</sup> century whose name is used for many Catholic educational institutions of very high standard.

In the Winter Issue of the  
*ASIANetwork Exchange*

\*Keynote Address by Dr. Anthony Yu\*

\*Panel Presentations\*

\*The latest information about the 2001\*  
ASIANetwork Conference

\*And much more!\*