

PERCEPTION OF NATURE AND THE LANGUAGE OF IMPERIALISM IN RUDYARD KIPLING'S *THE JUNGLE BOOK*

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1894, The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling has become a great success in England. Telling the story of Mowgli who is raised by the animals in the Jungle, the book portrays Mowgli and animals as symbolizing the reunification of human beings and nature. The story is generally perceived as a Bildungsroman with undertones of imperialist discourse or Mowgli is perceived as a romantic hero who represents the noble savage that embraces and reunites with nature. However a closer look reveals the fact that the depictions of nature sanctified, function as discursive reproduction of its materialization and reinforcement of the modern hierarchy between man and nature and culture and nature. Thus, the aim of this article is to propose a fresh look at Kipling's text through the frame of human-animal studies.

Key Words: Rudyard Kipling, The Mowgli Stories, imperialism, binary of man and nature

RUDYARD KIPLING'İN ORMAN KİTABI'NDA DOĞA ALGISI VE EMPERYALİZMİN DİLİ

ÖZ

1894 yılında Rudyard Kipling tarafından yayınlanan Orman Kitabı İngiltere'de çok büyük bir başarı elde etmiştir. Ormanda hayvanlar tarafından yetiştirilen Mowgli'nin hikayesini anlatan kitap, Mowgli ve hayvanlar arasındaki ilişki üzerinden insan ve doğanın yeniden bütünleşmesini olumlu görür. Hikaye genel olarak satır aralarında emperyalist bir söylemin gizli olduğu bir büyüme hikayesi olarak yorumlanır ya da Mowgli doğayla yeniden bütünleşmiş bir soylu vahşi figürü olarak kabul edilebilir. Ancak daha yakından okunduğunda, hikaye içinde doğanın bu şekilde yüceltilmesine ziyade onun şeyleştirilmesini destekleyen bir söylemin eşlik ettiği söylenebilir. Bu da insan ve doğa arasındaki hiyerarşik anlayışı ortadan kaldırmak yerine güçlendiren bir etki yaratmaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışmanın amacı, insan-hayvan çalışmaları çerçevesinde Kipling'in metnine yeni bir yorum getirmektir.

Anathar Sözcükler: Rudyard Kipling, Mowgli Hikayeleri, emperyalizm, insan-doğa ikiliği

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Introduction

Ecocriticism basically aims to undermine the anthropocentric perception of the universe and the hierarchical relationship between human beings and the rest of the living and non-living beings that accompany the human existence. It aims to put an end to the “thingification” (Adams 22) of and the human hegemony over the non-human universe which is legitimized by certain ideologies which are based on: “(a) The alleged edicts of a supernatural power; (b) The assumed possession by humanity of higher faculties such as Reason; (c) The secular modernist faith in material progress, to be delivered by economic development and scientific experimentation” (Beatson 50). This separation and the justification of the hierarchical relationship between the human and the non-human stems from Humanism which granted humanity a central and a privileged position among the rest of the beings in the universe. One of the most out-standing Humanists,

Rene Descartes (1596–1650) is perhaps the most notorious example of a prominent thinker who presented a theory designed to bolster human privilege and power at the expense of dogs, rats, and any other nonhuman. By using reason and his Christian faith, he theorized that other species could neither think nor feel (Rachels 2007, 158). Vivisectionists and other exploiters were quick to accept Descartes’ theory (Descartes 1955, 115). (Kemmerer 70)

Through this reductionist perspective the non-human world is reduced to the status of a space to be explored, theorized about and made use of. As a consequence of this ‘great divide’ non-human and the human have been robbed off their interconnection. Furthermore this separation, objectification and loss is legitimized and reinforced through certain ideological tools such as literature in a subtle way. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to reveal the underlying discourse of such literature, specifically the Mowgli stories of Rudyard Kipling in the *Jungle Book*, which is one of the most widely read example of children’s literature which makes it especially crucial to decode.

The first three stories of the *Jungle Book* begin with a baby boy being taken by the vicious tiger Shere Khan. Somehow he manages to take refuge at a wolves den where he is nurtured and grows up with the other wolves. As he grows up the tiger holds a grudge and continuously tries to capture him. As the boy keeps growing his differences and power become more frustrating for the other wolves and as a result of the tigers provocative attempts

Mowgli is cast out of the wolf pack and he is forced to live among people in a village. However after so many years in the jungle, Mowgli cannot adapt to the ways of human beings and finding them incapable, unrealistic and foolish, he realized that the village is not where he belongs. After killing Shere Khan with the help of his wolf brothers and the cattle of the village, he is cast out of the village for being a sorcerer and he returns back to the Jungle where he belongs.

Dipika Nath suggests that Kipling is inspired by real or mythical stories of feral children in India. She suggests that the perception of the cases of feral children in India are quite different compared to the ones in Europe. She argues that the 'animality' of these children became a basis for the legitimation of the colonial rule. Nath indicates that

In documenting cases of feral children in India, Sleeman had speculated on the reason for the great number of such individuals in India—a speculation that immediately became established as truth not least because of Sleeman's authority. He had pointed to greed and a love of ostentatious display, as well as less diligent parenting and a concomitant lack of civilised familial life more generally among the natives, as the real reason that wolves carried away native children—a phenomenon clearly avoidable, in Sleeman's view, and thus an indisputable sign of native degeneracy and barbarism.

Here was clear evidence that left to themselves, the natives were liable to degenerate into or be wiped out by animals. Not only was the existence of feral children itself demonstrative of native incapacity for self-rule, to make matters worse, native response to feral children removed any doubt of the need for colonial domination. (Nath 263)

As Nath clearly suggests a close connection is drawn by the colonizing powers between the tendency of the natives to be assimilated in to the animal world and their supposed need to be civilized. Therefore the marginalization works both ways in this case: the marginalization of nature as the second, inferior order and the marginalization of the native as a half human being who cannot use his abilities to rise above nature and dominate it. Nath's suggestion also highlights the fact that the basis of European colonialism is their anthropocentric perspective which legitimizes the reification of both nature and human beings who live in accordance with nature.

The Voice

Although the European colonialism tends to treat being close to nature as a sign of deficiency and of the need for being civilized, Kipling takes another turn and portrays the feral child in the story as a noble savage, who manages to restore the long lost human connection to nature. Mowgli is portrayed as living within nature with respect and harmony with the other animals. He obeys the law of the jungle living in accordance with the natural operation of the ecosystem. He “was born in the jungle. [he] ha[s] obeyed the law of the jungle, and there is no wolf of [his] from whose paws [he] ha[s] not pulled a thorn. Surely they are [his] brothers!” (Kipling 27). So at first sight, it can be observed that the non-human universe is idealized as a more meaningful and capable mode of life and animals are granted voice and dignity while the village life is ridiculed in the story. However, upon closer look, it is clearly seen that although the animals are given voice and an opportunity to express themselves, it is obvious that this representation is anthropomorphic and is just a projection of human characteristics. In other words Kipling’s animal representations epitomize Gregory S. Szarycs’ suggestion that as human beings “[w]e polish, in a certain way, an animal mirror to look for ourselves,” and “[w]e give animals a script and through that script they can say something to us” (Szarycs 149; 171). Therefore certain binary oppositions of the human communities are also projected onto the animal world. The binary oppositions such as the mind and the body and rationality and irrationality, which ironically lie at the very basis of the thingification of nature, are reinforced through Kipling’s anthropomorphic animals. For instance, Tabaqui the Dish Licker, the jackal, is despised by the other animals.

But they are afraid of him too, because Tabaqui, more than anyone else in the jungle, is apt to go mad, and then he forgets that he was ever afraid of any one, and runs through the forest biting everything in his way. Even the tiger runs and hides when little Tabaqui goes mad, for madness is the most disgraceful thing that can overtake a wild creature. (Kipling 2)

The dichotomy of mind and the body, sanity and insanity is attributed to animals, the latter ones occupying the lower half of the hierarchical scale.

Besides, animals speak of human violence and domination almost as a natural part of the life cycle situating the human to the master position. The animals in the jungle accuse Shere Khan for

hunting for cattle although it is Shere Khan's nature as a carnivore. They complain about him saying:

Now the villagers are angry with him, and he has come here to make our villagers angry. They will scour the jungle for him when he is far away, and we and our children must run when the grass is set alight. [This] means, sooner or later, the arrival of white men on elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gongs and rockets and torches. Then everybody in the jungle suffers. (Kipling 5-7)

The wolves are afraid that the humans are going to destroy the jungle and they think that Shere Khan is to blame which shows that the text embraces the predetermined belief that humans are above animals and they have a right to preserve their boundaries at the expense of other lives in the jungle. This acknowledgement of violent and vengeful behaviour of man by the animals normalizes the hierarchical superiority of human beings above nature in the eye of the reader and, in this case, children.

The Hierarchy

The problem of social hierarchy and hegemony is not limited to the relationship between human beings and nature but extends to the relationship between different groups within the human communities. However, the hierarchical lining of the subjects on this scale is determined through their 'naturalness' or their association with nature. As Lisa Kemmerer argues

White men once theorized that Africans were innately incapable of equality, of being granted freedom, of morality. For centuries, Caucasian male theories have defended their own thinly veiled selfinterests, and have helped to maintain the status quo, a society where Caucasian men held power and privilege while African Americans worked hard for pitifully little, and enjoyed few privileges. Men around the world have relentlessly theorized about the nature of women, about the feminine mind and body, about childbirth and menstruation, and about women's rightful role in society; male theorizers have generally concluded that women rightly tend homes and raise children, rather than selling cars or building bridges. Theories developed by those in power about "others," those who are not in power, have tended to be partial and biased, selfish and self-serving, and they have greatly harmed "others" (Kemmerer 78).

As Kemmerer argues the lower part of the scale is always occupied by the colored and women as people associated with nature and the body and thus they are attributed with negative characteristics such as incapability, weakness and even evil. The very same distinction is made by Kipling through animals in the Mowgli stories. The distinction between the 'good' animals and the 'bad' animals depend on their loyalty and usefulness to Mowgli in Kipling's narrative. The tiger, the monkeys, the jackal and the frog are depicted as either stupid and useless or as evil.

Shere Khan is depicted as evil because he refuses to acknowledge the superiority of Mowgli as a human being and he degrades Mowgli to his animality seeing his merely as meat, or just as a part of the natural order. Monkey-people are also depicted through a negative lens because they are unreliable. "They have no law. They are outcasts. They have no speech of their own, but use the stolen words which they overhear when they listen, and peep, and wait up above in the branches. Their way is not our way... They are very many, evil, dirty, shameless, and they desire, if they have any fixed desire, to be noticed by the Jungle-People." (Kipling 52). They represent the Id and the insensible side of the human psyche which is the lower half of the binary opposition of sanity and madness. In this sense they are a threat to order because they belong to the Dionysian order. This is perhaps why Bagheera, the masculine strength and Baloo, the intellect panic when Mowgli is captured by the monkeys. They, in a sense, lost Mowgli to his irrational side. This evaluation makes more sense when it is revealed that Kaa, the python is the only animal that can kill the Monkey people as the phallus of the forest. The monkey people kidnap Mowgli to a deserted city, they are about to get lost into an unknown place and Kaa (the phallus) Baloo (the intellect) and Bagheera (the masculine strength) rush to rescue him. It is a place that is outside of law and order. And the monkey people are narcissistic and loose. When the battle between the monkey people and Bagheera and Baloo begins the advantage was on the side of the monkeys until Kaa enters the scene. So symbolically manhood is the key to the defeat of the Dionysian because Monkeys cannot "stir foot or hand without [Kaa's] order" (Kipling 88).

The desperate need for the Apollonian order is also depicted through the desperate situation of the wolf pack during the absence of Mowgli:

Ever since Akela had been deposed, the Pack had been without a leader, hunting and fighting at their own pleasure.

But they answered the call from habit, and some of them were lame from the traps that had fallen into, and some limped from shotwounds, and some were mangy from eating bad food, and many were missing ... 'Lead us again, O Akela. Lead us again, o Man-cub, for we be sick of this lawlessness, and we would be the Free People once more.' (Kipling 132)

Ironically, as Mowgli returns and takes over the rule, order is restored again and animals embrace the regulation of the wild life through human intervention for the sake of order.

Obviously, although Mowgli is a member of the wolf pack, he is depicted as higher than the rest of the pack and other animals. From the first moment that he is accepted to the wolf family he is destined to "hunt Shere Khan as he has hunted [him]" (Kipling 13) and the wolves that help him become a member of the pack are referred to as "Mowgli's own wolves" (Kipling 20). Therefore Mowgli in a sense possesses the wilderness from the moment he sets foot in it and it is acknowledged by Akela, the leader of the Wolf pack for "Men and their cubs are very wise" (Kipling 20). And as Bagheera, the panther suggests "All the Jungle is [his]" normalizing and embracing the reification of the jungle along with all the living and non-living beings in it (Kipling 24). Mowgli also reveals this superiority when he is confronted in the council: "Ye have told me so often to-night that I am a man (and indeed I would have been a wolf with you to my life's end), that I feel your words are true. So I do not call ye my brothers any more, but sag (dogs), as a man should. What ye will do, and what ye will not do, is not yours to say. That matter is with me[...]" (Kipling 38). Obviously, although it is suggested that Mowgli is just like the other animals in the jungle, it is also continuously suggested that both the animals and he himself highlights the fact that he is "the master" (Kipling 39).

The master position is attributed to Mowgli primarily because Mowgli as he grows up has to learn much more than the other animals about the laws of the jungle. Every animal has to know only the details that concern its type, but as Mowgli is not an animal he has to learn all the codes of the jungle (Kipling 47-8). He learns the word of each of the animals in the Jungle and "Father Wolf taught him his business, and the meaning of things in the Jungle, till every rustle in the grass, every breath of the warm night air, every note of the owls above his head, every scratch of bat's claws as it roosted for a

while in a tree, and every splash of every little fish jumping in a pool, meant just as much to him as the work of his office means to a businessman” (Kipling 21). Mowgli’s ability of learning and decoding different languages is suggested to form the grounds for his superiority however although “Homo sapiens were given a gift for making speech-like sounds and the making of tools, but this did not mean that they understood things on a different plane from all creatures” (Savage-Rumbaugh 136).

The Gaze

Perhaps the most important sign of the superiority of human over animals in the book is the issue of gaze. It is continuously pointed out in the text that no wolf or other animal can look directly into Mowgli’s eyes for they are all afraid of him (Kipling 22). That is why, Bagheera tells him, he should eventually return to humans: “Not even I can look thee between the eyes, and I was born among men, and I love thee, Little Brother. The others they hate thee because their eyes cannot meet thine – because thou art wise – because thou have pulled out thorns from their feet – because thou art a man.” (Kipling 29). The animals are depicted as unable to look back at Mowgli because through the animal gaze human is just another version of existence, stripped off from its hierarchical privilege. In other words, “‘man’ is unmanned when confronted by the gaze of an animal” (Armstrong 178) as it is also implied by Derrida in “The Animal that Therefore I Am.” Derrida mentions his epiphanic experience with his cat, in which his gaze meets with the gaze of his cat when he is totally naked. Being naked in front of animal reminds him of the fact that the two have indeed the same origin and that they have “an existence that refuses to be conceptualized.” (Derrida, 378). However Mowgli’s animals are unable to look back at him for they do not share the same mode of existence in Mowgli’s perspective. They are simply creatures of a lower order. John Berger also suggests that animals are unable to return the gaze because they have been turned into spectacles (15). These spectacles of animals that we encounter in literature, cartoons, zoos and at our homes are humanized versions of animals which have been ripped of from their origins turning into virtual existences, spectacles. They are objectified to represent human qualities far from their natural beings. That is why Berger suggests they avoid meeting the eyes of humans (21). Therefore an animal is not an organic entity anymore, but “a simulacrum, a sign of the absence of an authentic human-animal relationship” (Armstrong 176). Nilsen Gökçen agrees, suggesting that

"These animals cannot return our gaze back at us because when they appear, if they do at all, they are already something else" (Gökçen 37).

Carnophallogocentrism

As the embodiment of the concept of noble savage, Mowgli is depicted also above the other humans, the villagers in the story. Although Mowgli is curious about the villagers and the village life, he does not trust them (Kipling 22). After the council night Mowgli goes to the valley to meet other humans. As he walks into the village even the domestic animals are afraid of him. He finds the village and their ways of life very strange and he finds it difficult to sleep under a roof so he slips out at night and sleeps on the edge of a field. The strange point is that Mowgli is idealized not only over animals but also the natives for being an animal and a human being at the same time or a humanimal. The stranger point however is that animals are also idealized over the natives. Thus on the hierarchical scale Mowgli the humanimal is on top following the privileged place of the British officer Gisborne, and he is followed by the other animals and the lowest part of the scale is occupied by the natives. Mowgli is unable to understand and adapt to the ways of the villagers. He listens to the stories of the villagers about the forest and although they live at the edge of the Jungle, and realizes that they know nothing about it and that they are completely separated from it. They embellish their stories with supernatural elements because they do not understand nature and they lost their connection to nature which marks Mowgli's superiority over them. However, the villagers are debased not because they are human beings who have lost their connection to their animal selves but because they are men who cannot acquire the knowledge of nature and control it. So although on the surface level, the Mowgli stories seem to embrace the concepts of animality and naturalness, these stories indeed reinforce the colonial ideology which reifies nature along with the natives. The debasement of the natives, thus, is a Baconian debasement which, as Foucault suggests, epitomises that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (100).

Dipika Nath suggests that although feral children do not identify themselves as human or feel any kind of loyalty to humankind, Kipling depicts Mowgli as "indisputably human, initially on the basis of physiological characteristics and an innate psychological dominance evident in his inexplicable ability to outstare all other animals and later through self-identification" (Nath

266). Nath goes on to argue that this case makes Mowgli a proper character for the legitimation of the operation of the colonial relations because “[t]he native Mowgli’s preference for the company of the white man and of animals excludes ordinary natives from the story altogether, except as caricatures” (Nath 266). Nath suggests that Mowgli’s blurring of the line between human and animal and his natural animality is used to legitimize the existence and necessity of ‘the empire’.

Mowgli knows and controls the forests and its animal populations because he is an exceptional and a proper native (that is, because he is *unlike* real natives—it may in fact be more appropriate to call him an *improper* native), and Gisborne knows and controls Mowgli because he is an exceptional and proper British forest officer. In these negotiations, animal populations serve as the primary object of control, and Mowgli’s animality not only does not disrupt animal human hierarchies, it serves precisely to reinforce them. (Nath 270)

Nath argues that Mowgli’s animality is different than the animality of the other non-human animals in the jungle. Yet this animality is the very core of his superior “human animalness” or “*proper native colonised humanity*” in Nath’s words (276). In Kipling’s hierarchical scale, native humanness occupies the lowest part, followed by the romanticized anthropomorphic animalness and non-native, nobly savage humanness which can enable power and control over his environment. Such a hierarchical positioning of the white man, the humanial, animals and the natives can be explained through Derrida’s concept of carnophallogocentrism, the centrality and domination of the symbolically carnivorous male, who can consume others within his own will, over other human and non-human animals.

Conclusion

Although Kipling changes the general perception of the Cartesian mechanization of animals and their evaluation as soulless machines he is still in line with the understanding of the Great Chain of Being in which humans are situated at the top of all the other forms of living. The book not only makes a differentiation between nature and man but also between men who can use nature to their advantage and men who cannot. The animals in the book are not depicted through a wholistic perspective, regardless of their usefulness to the human beings. That is why the book keeps

containing the marginalization, exploitation and categorization of nature, also serving to reinforce imperialist discourse.

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