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The Childhood of Empire and the Politics of Representation: A Study of Ex-Child, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books*

Dr. Ashis Biswas

Abstract: *Mowgli, the child protagonist of The Jungle Book, belongs to the created space of the childhood dream of the Sahib Kipling. In the book, the ideal space for the child and that of the British Empire are in a state of equilibrium. India is a romantic playground of the ex-child Kipling and the playground of imperialism for the Sahib Kipling. Therefore, the constancy of his childhood dream is always dependent on his illusion of the constancy of the Empire as a positive source of power. So, Mowgli is an outsider very easily accepted as superior and given attributes of racial superiority. Therefore, The Jungle Books, beneath its allegorical framework, brings together the politics of representations associated with children's literature and the literature of the Empire.*

Keywords: Colonialism, Kipling, *The Jungle Book*, British Raj, Children's literature.

Joseph Rudyard Kipling, or the Sahib Kipling, the unofficial laureate of the British Empire, as the critics of the post-colonial era have called him, is also a master storyteller for children. But sadly, and unfortunately, Kipling, the great weaver of children's fiction, is often overlooked for his imperialistic stand. Therefore, literary critics often find it hard to place him among the literary canons of his time or any time, especially in the aftermath of colonial history. Most literary critics choose to avoid him or give him a passing mention unless their focus is on the issues of empire, as in Joseph Bristow's *Empire Boys* (1991) or Daphne Kutzer's *Empire's Children* (2002). Recent important studies on children's literature, such as Perry Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult* (2008), brush him off with the courtesy of mentioning. What went against him is that he took a very clear political stand for the empire, even at the expense of its evil effects, which he did not see or did not want to see. This is perhaps a simplified version of the view, but since it is a very sensitive issue, very few have tried to get involved in it, probably for fear of inviting unwanted questions and criticism.

However, Kipling's political setback and negative literary reviews do not affect the readership of Kipling's children's classics, such as *The Jungle Book* (1893), *The Second Jungle Book* (1894), *Kim* (1901), *Just So Stories* (1902), and *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) over time. These books have never been out of print since their first publication and have been avidly read by adults and children for generations in the British Isles and the previous colonies for over a hundred years. In Nineteen Forty-Five, when Kipling's reputation had much declined, Hilton Brown wrote: "...far too much has been made of his 'Imperialism' by those with good political reasons for purveying a distorted version. There is much to be said for the view of the New York columnist twenty years later who wrote, at a time [in the 1920s] when his countrymen were smarting under Kipling's criticism of their part in the last war: 'What difference does it make if he is an insufferable Tory? He wrote *The Jungle Book*. Has everybody forgotten that?'" (*The Jungle Book* no page). The same notion is held by the beloved children's fiction writer of India, Ruskin Bond; in the 'Introduction' to *The Adventure of Mowgli*, he writes: "In England, public opinion went against Kipling during his lifetime, and he was ridiculed as a racist and champion of empire at a time when empires were going out of fashion. 'Why, then, are you still reading Kipling in India?' asked a puzzled visitor

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