

Questioning the White Man's Moral Code: A Study of Kipling's *Lispeth* (1886) and *Beyond the Pale* (1888)

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Unanimously acknowledged as the Poet of the Empire, Rudyard Kipling sometimes sketches non-White characters who serve as counterpoints to unmask the misdeeds of their White counterparts. These misdeeds refuse to remain confined to master-servant plane and often penetrate the deep psychological spherewhere resides the tender instincts of human beings. Through these Kipling makes the White man betray his inhumanity in a two-fold manner. First being a bully and an arrogant overlord he proves himself an unjust ruler. But the more intricate form of cruelty occurs when the White man betrays a non-White, especially a woman, in spite of the latter's unquestioned allegiance and faith upon him. When stories like *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888) or "The Mark of the Beast" (1890) conform to the former pattern, "Lispeth" or "Georgie Porgie" (1888) may be viewed from the second perspective. The modest object of this paper is to analyze two short narratives – "Lispeth" and "Beyond the Pale" in the light of the above discourse.

"Lispeth" was first published in *The Civil and Military Gazette* on November 29, 1886. Afterwards it was anthologized in the first Indian edition of *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888). The setting of the story is Kotgarh region of northern India and it revolves around the life of its titular heroine Lispeth. Born to a mountainous tribe she was handed over to the Chaplain of the Kotgarh Mission due to poverty and famine. It is here where the baby was baptised as 'Elizabeth' which in course of time was distorted as 'Lispeth'. Later when her parents died of cholera she became, in the words of her creator, "half servant, half companion, to the wife of the then Chaplain of Kotgarh". (Kipling¹) She had had her Western education and manners under the tutelage of the Mission. When she attained maturity her stately physique and Greek face used to bear the identity of anyone but a domestic help. She turned a deaf ear to her mistress's plea for accepting some 'genteel' profession such as nursing at Shimla. Instead she developed, like many of her White companions, taking hikes amidst the natural landscape. Here, the narrative ironically puts forward the inborn vitality of the hill daughter which all her Western education failed to suppress: "She did not walk in the manner of English ladies – a mile and a half out, with a carriage ride back again. She covered between twenty and thirty miles in her little constitutions ... between Kotgarh and Narkanda". (2) During one such trips she accidentally came across a young English naturalist lying unconscious upon the road with a deep gash in the head. It was obvious that the man suffered a fall from the cliff and was in need of urgent medical attention. With no visible help nearby Lispeth single-handedly brings the man to the Mission. She blatantly announced her decision to marry the stranger after the latter's convalescence and even after being repudiated by the Chaplain and his wife refused to drop her fantasy. The Englishman recovered after a fortnight but was slow to gain back strength to travel. Finding Lispeth steadfast in her romantic world her mistress took the Englishman in confidence and advised him to behave discreetly – all in order to avoid an uproar at home and a scandal outside. The Englishman, being engaged at home with a White girl, behaved accordingly by fanning Lispeth's

sentiment. He felt no qualm in doing this because "It meant nothing at all to him, and everything in the world to LISPETH". (4) When the naturalist recovers considerably he departed with the assurance to come back and marry LISPETH. She waited for three months with anxiety and patience. But when LISPETH's forbearance reaches at the end of her tether the mistress finally brought the truth to light. The heartless admission is preceded by the racial snub by which she intended to keep LISPETH absolutely quiet: "...it was wrong and improper of LISPETH to think of marriage with an Englishman, who was of a *superior clay*, besides being promised in marriage to a girl of his own people." (5, italics mine) LISPETH became so shocked that at first she could not take it seriously because to her 'superior clay' could only produce morally superior man — one whose colour of skin resembled the purity of heart. When ultimately her long cherished illusion was driven away by the rude reality she retorted: "Then you have lied to me, ... you and he?" (5) It was time for her to dissociate herself from the company of snobs and liars. She took little time to forsake her faith and shelter, and return to her own people. Like all other hill girls she embraced the same fate — found herself in wedlock with a woodcutter who used to have her physically abused after the tribal manner. After all the bitter trials and tribulations of life she died as an aged woman but with a perfect command upon English until last. The tragic aftermath of the jilted girl stung the conscience of the author so much that he, observes Harold Bloom, made her reappear in the novel *Kim* (1901) as the 'Woman of Shamlegh'. (72) In this new incarnation after fifteen years Kipling bestowed happiness, nobility and leadership upon her but all these did little to ameliorate the wretched condition she suffered in the present narrative.

Appearing almost as a snapshot taken from real life the story itself is not devoid of reality. Sir George Macmunn in his *Kipling's Women* (1933) traces out the origin of the story from a familiar Shimla narrative. Apart from Elizabeth/LISPETH the other prominent figure is "LachmanHalwai, or Lachman the sweet seller, who for so many years had a sweet stall on the mall, near a house that from him is known to the older race of Jhampanies (rickshaw-pullers) as 'LachmanHalwai Ki Kothi', the house of Lachman the sweetseller". (99) Charles Carrington corroborates this supposition by stating that the original happenings took place at a house in Shimla called 'Alice's Bower'. (67) Kipling's dislike of missionaries and travellers alike are manifest in his alteration of the original tale. Whereas in the original narrative the girl is blessed with a conjugal life here she received only betrayal and censure.¹ In response to Macmunn's work which records mostly fate of native women betrayed or suppressed by their White paramours on racial ground, Kipling wrote to him "As to your work, I read it of course when it came along and it rather shocked me as representing me in the light of a 'giddy lothario' which, Allah knows, I ain't." (Pinney 138) It is obvious that the women characters could not be moulded in any single, unitary pattern but act differently as the situation demands. If LISPETH or BISESA's earthly course is sealed by betrayal or lust characters like Lalun in "On the City Wall" (1889) retains the potentiality to play the game back to the sahibs. In the present story the heroine can evoke sympathy only on moral ground. Even a casual perusal of the text informs readers on whose side the authorial approval rests. In her Mission days LISPETH did exactly what was expected of her: performing her duties towards the Chapel along with continuing studies. Kipling's pen never falls short of sketching her inborn virtue:

Lispeth took to Christianity readily, and did not abandon it when she reached womanhood, as do some Hill-girls. Her own people hated her because she had, they said, become a white woman and washed herself daily; and *the Chaplain's wife did not know what to do with her. One cannot ask a stately goddess,...to clean plates and dishes.* She played with the Chaplain's children and took classes in the Sunday School, and read all the books in the house...The Chaplain's wife said that the girl ought to take service in Simla...But Lispeth did not want to take service. She was very happy where she was. (Kipling 2, italics mine)

It is quite obvious that Lispeth's accomplishments in Mission make her, to quote, Bart Moore-Gilbert, "an exemplary convert". (121) Ironically it is this very characteristic which induces in her mistress's heart an irrepressible desire to chastise and censure Lispeth. That opportunity came to the mistress due to Lispeth's free will also characteristic of Englishman and hill-girl alike. The later part of the above citation suggests that Lispeth was very much attached to her taken for granted 'home' and would not risk deserting it for any otherwise lucrative offer of job or status. Underlying this statement is the presupposition that she would be safe as long as she could afford to avoid the allurements of the White world. Professor Angus Wilson voices this concern by referring to the author's visit to the Himalayas:

...it is notable that, in [Kipling's] work and in his life, the peoples of the foothills of the Himalayas seem to share something of the great mountains' grace. In 1885, he made a recuperative journey there as far as 9,000 feet and was enchanted by the hill people and the beauty of their women. Here, one feels, are people who need nothing save protection from the white world...harmful are the dreams of Christians who would seek to impose their beliefs upon the natives. In Kipling's eyes, this was never other than foolish throughout India, but here in these idyllic hill villages it is seen as actively cruel. (91)

Apart from her 'free will' it is this cruelty of the civilized world which played a leading role in her later undoing. Having natural (and therefore 'savage' in colonial code of conduct) urge to give vent to feelings she did not feel ashamed to express her love at first sight. Neither was she prepared to revoke her proclamation after the admonition of the clergy couple. The only person who could make her see through the matter was her fiancé himself. This anonymous traveller, presumably a Christian, being enthused by the clergy played all along the role of a womanizer. The falsity and deceit by which Lispeth has been phased out from the life of the Englishman implanted doubt and then disbelief in her adopted creed, i.e. Christianity itself. The unchristian practice of the people, supposed to hold the great tradition of the religion, made Lispeth once again give ear to her instincts. Her desertion from the fold of Christianity drew the tantrum from her mistress: "There is no law whereby you can account for the vagaries of the heathen,...and I believe that Lispeth was always at heart an infidel". (Kipling 6) Kipling's irony reaches at its height when he passes judgment upon the mistress:

Seeing [Lispeth] had been taken into the Church of England *at the mature age of five weeks*, this statement does not do credit to the Chaplain's wife. (6, italics mine)

The bare fact of Lispeth's life proves that the Church of England and not the tribal tradition was solely responsible for her upbringing. She identifies honesty and integrity

with Christianity without which the whole creed holds little value for her. The moment she recognizes the deviation from these founding principles she relapses into the custom of her ancestors. The return to 'home' underpins the existence of true spirit of Christianity and therefore true spirit of humanism in her.

"Beyond the Pale" made its debut in the first Indian edition of *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) which was followed by many subsequent publications. The narrative centres around an Englishman named Trejago. He let himself get entangled with Bisesa, a widowed native woman of fifteen. Their chance meeting, Bisesa from behind her grated window and Trejago walking the street, followed by several nocturnal rendezvous — all have the contour of a traditional romance. But later Trejago's paying court to an Englishwoman became the bone of contention between them. Bisesa was quite unreasonable, of course from Trejago's view, which led Trejago stop seeing her for a month. Finally when the separation began to tell upon his nerve he paid a final visit to Bisesa. He almost choked to horror to see that the girl's arms were mutilated from the wrists. No sooner had Trejago realized something amiss than he was stabbed inside his boorka by a howling, dark figure, presumably Durga Charan, owner of the house. The adventurer escaped narrowly as the main thrust missed his body but penetrated his groin. The grating was slammed shut before his face and all he could remember was shouting like a lunatic between the 'pitiless walls' of Amir Nath's Gully. For the rest of his life the young man became fated to limp slightly. Kipling concludes the narrative with his typical deadpan: "There is nothing peculiar about him, except a slight stiffness, caused by a riding-strain, in the right leg". (Kipling 151)

In the opening lines Kipling has made such a generalization about interracial relationship which is liable to categorize him as a biased spokesperson of the Raj:

A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race and breed. Let the White go the White and the Black to the Black. Then whatever trouble falls is in the ordinary course of things — neither sudden, alien, nor unexpected. (145)

That Kipling does approve such relationship is apparent in his story "Yoked With an Unbeliever" (1886) or "Without Benefit of Clergy" (1890), albeit the latter one a tragedy. In both these stories there was no dearth of emotional and cultural exchanges between cross-racial couples. A close reading of the present text with reference to the texts previously mentioned brings to light the truth that it is the feigned or forced isolation of 'self' which Kipling really disapproves. If the White and non-White races are to unite then they must take reasonable time and must meet on equal terms. But bypassing these two criteria and accomplishing the inevitable happening of history simply by leading a double life is not what Kipling intended to admire. Of course the protagonist in "Without Benefit of Clergy" used to live a double life and was duly punished by the moral judge of a Kipling. But even then this *doubleness* refrains from casting its shadow upon his self. In "Yoked With an Unbeliever" an amoral Phil Garron is seen to have undergone a moral upliftment with the tender care of his native spouse. In both narratives the native women play integral roles in the lives of their White husbands and nowhere either identity — non-White and White — appear to be imposing or at stake. Trejago's fault lies in the fact that his superficial knowledge of native custom and rituals, especially the one with which he could decipher Bisesa's

message, lent him a false air of wisdom or insight. Their misunderstanding, which precedes the catastrophe of Bisesa's mutilation, and Trejago's stabbing wound, is an outcome of this false wisdom. In her study of Kipling's shorter fictions, Helen Pike Bauer draws the curtain from this sordid truth:

...Bisesa's life has always been unknowable to Trejago. Thinking his experience of Indian life and the ways of the Anglo-Indian world gave him power, Trejago tries to erase the boundaries between the two domains. But Bisesa's passionate response to her misreading of Trejago's social rituals suggests the gulf that separates their mentalities, a void too great to be bridged. And her mutilating punishment, so horrifying to the reader, epitomizes the distance between her culture's values and [the White's]. Trejago thought he understood her world, but, in important matters, he was as ignorant of hers as she was of his. His facility with the more accessible aspects of her culture, its poetry and traditions of object-letters, blinded him to a more profound ignorance of the values that sustain it. (46)

It is this ignorance which propels Trejago to transgress the racial cultural barrier.

In Kipling's ethical and moral code such transgressions are welcome if they entail, as has been pointed out, the moral high ground or serve colonial purpose such as the policeman Strickland does in many stories. Bereft of such aims Trejago's is a carnal one, no matter how arduous his passion grows which even the author acknowledges:

Bisesa was an endless delight to Trejago. She was as ignorant as a bird; and her distorted versions of the rumours from the outside world that had reached her in her room, amused Trejago almost as much as her lisping attempts to pronounce his name — 'Christopher'. The first syllable was always more than she could manage, and she made funny little gestures with her roseleaf hands, as one throwing the name away, and then, kneeling before Trejago, asked him, ...if he were sure he loved her. Trejago swore that he loved her more than any one else in the world. Which was true. (Kipling 148-149)

The reader should not fail to notice that in this hilarious courtship Trejago and Bisesa play the roles exactly opposite to what traditional courtship demands. With Bisesa kneeling before him, Trejago plays the role of lover/lord simultaneously. Ironically it is this role, i.e. standing before the suitor performing genuflection, which seeks to identify him with weaker vessel. This argument may be substantiated if the reader resorts to Gail Ching-Liang Low's discourse on veiled sexual identity:

In his night-time visits to Bisesa, Trejago wears a native cloak — a *boorka* — which enables him free passage into alien and forbidden (Hindu) territory. But this is an article of dress belonging properly to a woman's wardrobe...a *boorka* cloaks a man as well as a woman. But one cannot be certain if the reference to sexual ambivalence is proleptic — the narrative tripping over itself by offering dreaded information ahead of time — or is meant to cast doubt on Trejago's masculinity. In either case, the sexual identity of Trejago is deliberately put into question. (132-133)

It requires but little effort to realize that the masculinity which allows itself to be shrouded and thereby questioned on metaphorical level could be brought to book by the alleged attempt of castration on the material plane. With this assault, observes Phillip Mallett, the narrative turns a full circle as the reader reflects upon the second sentence of the epigraph: "I went in search of love and lost myself". (12) The cut

actually, sums up Mallett, 'hollowed out' his identity and reduced him to nothingness. (12)

One has to be in accord with the perception that the authorial mindset which was used to receive homage in colonial administration pervaded subtly but surely the sphere of personal relationship. Ethically speaking, there is no wrong in paying or receiving homage from subordinates or dear ones. But ethical obligations are dispelled when the acknowledgement and reciprocation remain unpaid. This dispelling of obligation both in personal and political life foreshadows a not too distant future when the Raj would face stiff opposition from the indigenous mechanism as well as from the emerging national movements.

Notes

1. In another of his studies on Rudyard Kipling, MacMunn unravels in brief the outcome of the heroine's life. (167) She was honourably married and graced with a son. Kipling's alteration was probably spurred by the influence which the missionaries used to wield upon the local populace. See *Rudyard Kipling: Craftsman*. 1937. London: Robert Hale, 1938. Print.

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