

THE MYSTIC PATH: A SUFI-BUDDHIST INTERPRETATION OF RUDYARD KIPLING'S KIM

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ABSTRACT

Rudyard Kipling's Kim novel (1901) is widely appreciated and recognised as a literary exploration of colonial literature; however, under its geopolitical narrative lies a deep meditation on spiritual growth along with mystical ways and practices. This study explores the novel through the comparative study of Buddhism and Sufism, focusing their shared philosophical thoughts and ideas of detachment, inner purification, and the quest of ultimate truth. By situating the narrative within the Far Eastern context, particularly Pakistan, China, this research examines how Kipling's portrayal of the Tibetan Lama's quest sounds together with Sufi traditions, while Kim's personal journey reflects and mirrors the mystical traveler's path toward self-realisation. Alongside scholarly analysis and interpretations of Sufi and Buddhist thought drawn on textual evidence, this paper discusses that Rudyard Kipling constructs a trans-regional vision of spiritual universality, connecting Eastern mysticism and Western literary imagination.

Keywords: Lama, Buddhism, Sufism, Spirituality, Quest, Path.

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INTRODUCTION

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) born in British-India, was a prolific novelist and poet. He is known for his most celebrated novel *Kim*, which carries the title character *Kim* too. The novel since its bringing forth has long been studied for its graphic depiction of colonial India, surveillance, adventures and quest of a young street urchin manoeuvring a complex social landscape (Harman, 2015). Yet, beyond the colonial and political dimensions, the novel engages deeply with spiritual themes, particularly the interactions between the protagonist *Kim* and the Tibetan Lama, whose pursuit of the River of the Arrow serves as a narrative metaphor for enlightenment (Nayar, 2006). The novel is set forth in Lahore city where Kimball O'Hara (*Kim*) an orphan lives a life of a street boy. One day he meets a Buddhist Teshoo Lama who travels from Tibet / China in search of the River of the Arrow. Both the Lama and *Kim* have the purpose in their life, which they leave for. This research paper explores the mystical quest of Teshoo Lama and *Kim* for the river of the arrow and red bull on green fields respectively. While their journey towards the destination, they come across certain situations, which show the comparative framework of mystical traditions of Sufism and Buddhism.

Buddhism, as Lopez (2013) writes, originating in the Indian subcontinent and flourishing in Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia, emphasizes the cessation of suffering through insight, mindfulness, and detachment from worldly desires. Lopez here aims to express the philosophy of being pauper. The mystical path doesn't carry the luxuries of life rather it is full suffering.

Similarly, Sufism, a mystical dimension of Islam prominent in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, advocates for union with the Divine, self-purification, and love-centered spiritual practice (Ernst, 1997). The meeting point of thought in both traditions is the foregrounding of the transformative journey of the self, making a comparative study of the Lama's and *Kim*'s spiritual progressions particularly illuminating. This paper is based on the research

question: How does Kipling portray the reflection of the Lama and Kim in shared spiritual ideals of Buddhism and Sufism in Far Eastern context? Throughout the textual evidence from Kim and synthesising insights from Buddhist and Sufi scholarship, it has been illustrated how the novel functions as a bridge filling the gap between mystical traditions and literary imagination, offering a transregional vision of spiritual universality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sufism and Buddhism have remained the literary and philosophical pursuits since centuries. From time-to-time, there has been a strong influence of these two traditions on literary works and practical lives in the different regions of the East. The research scholars and the critics have always found the raw material and stuff from these two pursuits. In J. Jeffrey Franklin's (2011) *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and British Empire*, a chapter on Kim is written which elaborates how the Lama expresses Buddhistic practices amid the agencies. Likewise, we can find Tim Christensen's (2012). *'The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Misrecognition, Pleasure, and White Identity in Kipling's Kim'*. This study shows the dual standards of white and black concepts about Kim. The Lama accepts Kim as former's chela (disciple) irrespective of the latter's identity and recognition.

M. Fellion (2013) *'Knowing Kim, Knowing in 'Kim'*, is another study in this context which shows the mystical theme of renunciation. Ahmad M. S. Abu Baker's (2009) *Identity Crisis: Rudyard Kipling's Kim – A Postcolonial Perspective*, can also be reviewed to carry out this type of investigation.

Paudel (2022) in *Buddha's Middle Path: A Journey of Self-evolution in Rudyard Kipling's Kim*, explores the middle path in the Buddhist doctrine and shows how such path is reflected in the Lama and Kim's character. Syed Hossein Nasr's (1972) *Living Sufism* in this context explores the *sufi* path, *sufi* states and *sufi* stations. The Buddhist and Sufi concepts of stations can be found in this study. The various states of staying at different places show this element.

David Lucking's (2025) *Double Visions: Eastern Mysticism in Kipling's Kim and Forster's A Passage to India*. In this study, Lucking has called the Lama's quest as Buddhist metaphor and has linked it to mystical theme. Prasantham's (2018) *Kipling's Advocacy of Buddhism in Kim*, shows Kipling's reason for choosing Tibetan Lama to represent spiritual life in the south east along with Buddhist moral teachings.

These studies, as a whole, cover major concepts of Buddhism and Sufism in the Kim.

Buddhism

Based on the spiritual and philosophical traditions of Siddhartha Gautama -the Buddha, Buddhism was founded in 5th century BC. According to the teachings of this thought, life is not an easy place to live; it is rather full of sufferings caused by the individual's own desires and unnecessary attachments as well as ignorance. However, there is also a solution to these sufferings. To overcome these troubles is possible through developing wisdom, moral living and meditation. Buddhism through its four noble truths and eightfold noble paths, teaches the humanity of their suffering and liberation. It focuses on achieving Nirvana (enlightenment) rather than worshipping abstract beings.

The influence of Buddhism, across the Far Eastern and broader South Asian regions reflects a vibrant fusion of shared origins and culturally shaped interpretations. As the tradition moved through different regions, it developed into notable strands such as Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. In Asia and its southern parts, Buddhist practice often situates on early teachings, disciplined monastic life, and meditative focus, while Far Eastern forms focus on philosophical insight, compassion and schools like Zen and Pure Land. Despite their distinct expressions, these regions remain unified by Buddhism's foundational aim: freeing beings from suffering through ethical conduct, mindful awareness, and the cultivation of inner clarity.

Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition represented by the Lama in Kim, emphasizes the pursuit of nirvana, the ultimate liberation from suffering, through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom (Williams, 2012). The Lama's journey to locate the River of the Arrow symbolises the Buddhist path of spiritual awakening, reflecting not merely physical travel but also profound internal transformation (Gowans, 2013). In Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia, Buddhism has historically been intertwined with local cultures, emphasizing moral discipline, meditation, and compassion as essential to attaining enlightenment (Keown, 2013).

The four noble truths and eightfold noble paths took the noble minds and thinkers to its folds. The spiritual freedom and fearlessness are the strengths of this school of thought.

Sufism

Sufism is the inner purification of soul. It searches divine truth through love and service to mankind. It emphasises that true knowledge lies in awakening of the soul, not decorating the outer structure of the body. The inner enlightenment can be acquired through remembrance, devotion and self-discipline. The interiorisation and intensification of faith and practice in many religions depend upon Sufism. So far as the meaning of word Sufi is concerned William C. Chittick (2000) writes:

The Arabic word 'Sufi', however, has been used in a wide variety of meanings over the centuries both by proponents and opponents, and this is reflected in both the primary and secondary sources the derivation of the used has often been debated. Modern scholars have concluded that the most likely original meaning was 'one who wears wool.'

The wearing of wool suggests uncomfortable clothing or coarse clothing which keeps the Sufi's restless. The very aim of Sufi lies in quitting comfort zone. They engage their every moment in serving suffering humanity.

'Sufism, prevalent in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, represents the mystical pursuit of God through love, devotion, and ethical conduct (Schimmel, 1975).

'The Sufi path emphasizes self-annihilation (fana) and union with the Divine (baqa), paralleling the Buddhist concept of transcending the self to achieve enlightenment' (Chittick, 2000).

Sufi masters (pirs) guide disciples along this spiritual journey, fostering personal transformation and ethical refinement, mirroring the Lama's mentorship of Kim in the novel. Sufism, in broader sense, promotes doing the beautiful and helps the one who practices this (Sufi) to achieve proximity to the ultimate truth. Implying such virtues that enhance doing beautiful spreads peace and happiness on earth. The reason for adapting this path almost by every religion is because it resolves the social evil. Islamic Sufism, Hindu Vedantism, Chinese Buddhism and Christian Mysticism are ideals leading to the one same and single goal- harmony and peace. Live and let live. The insistence of masters upon disciples for this philosophy to adopt, only to be harmless to others.

Comparative Perspective

Buddhism and Sufism, while arising in the different and distinct religious frameworks, share the similarities on philosophical, ethical and mystical grounds detached from material desires, self-discipline, cultivation of compassion and the quest of ultimate truth.

'In the Far Eastern context, both traditions have historically influenced social and cultural practices, contributing to a shared ethos of spiritual striving (Nasr, 2007).

By placing the Kim novel within these customs and traditions, it appears to be clear that Kipling gets engaged not only with exotic locales but also with trans-regional spiritual ideas that echo across Pakistan, Tibet, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Spiritual Symbolism in Kim

Kipling's narrative retains symbolic spirituality that permeates geography, dialogue, and character interactions with such spiritual symbolism. The Lama's quest, the pilgrimages, and even Kim's streetwise adaptability serve as metaphors for the mystical journey of self-discovery. As Kipling writes:

'The Lama leaned back upon his carpet, and his eyes, deep and patient, seemed to look into the heart of things' (Kipling, 1901, p. 142).

This moment signifies a Buddhist attentiveness to inner truth and compassion, paralleling the Sufi emphasis on seeing the divine in all aspects of existence (Ernst, 1997). Kim, initially concerned with worldly survival, gradually internalizes these mystical lessons, demonstrating the transformative power of spiritual guidance. Mystical lessons and the spiritual guidance are the sources of spiritual awakening lighting the ways to primeval power. And such is the power that amalgamates the internalisation and externalisation of jiv.

The Lama's Buddhist Quest

The Lama embodies the Buddhist ideal of detachment and enlightenment, undertaking a journey to the River of the Arrow, a symbolic representation of liberation. His emphasis on patience, observation, and moral conduct aligns with core Buddhist principles (Lopez, 2013). The Lama's teaching that:

'A man who is content with nothing is he who is truly rich' (Kipling, 1901, p. 148), reflects the Buddhist understanding that desire is the root of suffering, and liberation requires letting go of attachments (Gowans, 2013). The Lama's interactions with Kim also reflect the Sangha principle, or spiritual community, where guidance is essential for the seeker's progress (Williams, 2012). The renunciation and denouncement are the two elements common in both Buddhism and Sufism through which a mystic's state of being pauper is revealed. According to the mystical tradition, the belongings attach to the worldly desires; the worldly desires thwart the spiritual progress of

the mystic. Kim and the Lama have the same state—they are paupers. Even at the time when they start their quest for the different destinations, they have nothing to eat; nothing to ride and nothing to make do with their day-to-day needs. Their entire journey goes without comfort. They follow Buddhist philosophy of four noble truths by quitting all belongings and attachments. Wherever there is night, they sleep; wherever they feel hungry and whatever food they find, they eat.

The Sufi Path Reflected in Kim's Journey

Kim's personal growth mirrors the Sufi path of love and self-purification. Though not formally a disciple, Kim embodies the Sufi seeker (murid) through his openness to learning, ethical discernment, and loyalty to the Lama. As Chittick (2000) notes, Sufism emphasizes the gradual transformation of the heart, aligning closely with Kim's moral and spiritual development throughout the novel. This happens when Kim accompanies Tibetan Lama. The theory and practice of Lama's daily life brings this gradual transformation of Kim's heart. The very moment when they see a snake (cobra) and Kim gets frightened and tries to kill it, Lama stops him from doing so and teaches him about the philosophy of "Live and let live ". The only beauty living things cherish is their life. This should not be captured in any way from them. Accordingly tells Kim that possibly the snake may be outer shape (externalisation) of good and evil. This leaves a deep impact on Kim that he can't help living with the Lama. At the time of his new identity as a white, he tries to relinquish birth rights but does not want to lose the company and hand of affection of the Lama. The course of peaceful life in Sufism and Buddhism shares the same values.

While going through the novel, the reader comes across several dialogues and episodes that go in harmony with Sufi ideals which reveal Kim's following of Sufi path. Such tradition is obvious when Kim reflects on his loyalty to the Lama:

'I shall follow him, because his road is clear and his heart is clean' (Kipling, 1901, p. 153), he illustrates the Sufi notion that the spiritual guide illuminates the seeker's path, paralleling the Lama's mentorship as both a Buddhist and Sufi archetype. The parallelism between outer journey and inner transformation underscores the universality of mystical pursuit across cultural and religious boundaries. The seeker and the sought become spiritually one. The light leading to the sought emits from the ultimate truth (sought). Here is the point where no offering be it greed, prosperity, power or pelf buy the seekers conscience as it breaks shackles of soul to liberate it from the bandages of the worldly charms.

Convergence of Mystical Paths

By examining the Lama's and Kim's journeys together, a convergence of Buddhist and Sufi principles emerges. Both traditions emphasize:

Detachment from material things as Buddhist non-attachment and Sufi renunciation of the ego

- Love and compassion for all beings
- The guidance of a spiritual mentor (Lama as guru, Sufi pir)
- Inner purification leading to enlightenment or union with the Divine

Kipling's narrative demonstrates that, despite differing cultural and theological frameworks, these traditions share a common vision of spiritual realization, which is further contextualized by the Far Eastern regions. For instance, the Lama's Tibetan background connects to Buddhist Tibet/China practices, while Kim's exposure to wandering mystics evokes Sufi practices in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Nasr, 2007; Schimmel, 1975). The novel thus functions as a trans-regional meditation on spirituality, where mystical paths converge in human experience. The meeting point of thought in both spiritual ways is beyond time and space. The characters of Teshoo Lama, Kim and Mehboob Ali emerge from different religions and cultures though, they share a unanimous view through which they represent humanity. The Lama and Kim irrespective of their colour

and creed pass the days together, journey together and eat together. Kim wholeheartedly agrees to be the chela (disciple) of the Lama and verily introduces the latter as the Holy man. Kipling, keeping the norms and traditions of the regions in mind, conveys the themes fairly well. Though Kim and Mehboob Ali engage in worldly affairs, they do not harm the message and philosophy of the Lama searching the valley of the arrow.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Meeting Point of Sufi and Buddhist Thought

This novel as a literary point becomes an unintentional crossroads meeting point of Sufi inwardness and Buddhist detachment represented through Kim and Teshoo Lama. Through the complementary mentorship of Teshoo Lama and Mahbub Ali, the novel frames Kim's spiritual growth as a movement between two resounding mystical traditions, each guiding him towards a mutual horizon of self-transcendence.

A street urchin who lives an undisciplined life having imbalance in all walks; who remains in identity crisis without shelter, food and any other belonging, when comes in the company of a Buddhist person, he feels as if it were his own family member. The very first sight of the Lama captures his attention. The attire, appearance, expression and the manner of the Lama, makes Kim ask to be the former's disciple. The point here is that sometimes not only your actions but also the appearance and get up attract the attention and touch the soul. The Lama's company enriched Kim's soul with love and compassion that he forgot naughtiness and mischief, which is a child cherishes as a basic right of childhood.

Mystical Journey a shared path of Harmony

While their quest for destinations, the Lama and Kim's coming across a Sufi like dervish who offers them the unconditional service of shelter and food, is the token of Sufism and its influence, though Rudyard Kipling has not used such word throughout the novel.

Their meeting with the travellers on the way and falling in a discussion with the mutual respect has been penned down by Kipling (1901) as: 'They sat in a ring—Mullah, Lama, Sahib, and peasant—each speaking wisdom in his turn'.

This is spiritual unity, which is beyond race and creed. The people belonging to the different schools of thought and cherishing the single opinion and harmony. This is only possible in Buddhism and Sufism.

Kim's adventurous and mystical journey towards enlightenment suggest that spiritual progress, in both traditions, arises not from pullback alone but from plunging into the unthinkable lived experience. The known and predictable results of a journey does not come into the realm of mysticism whereas unpredictable is always the basis of this quest.

The Quest for Truth and Enlightenment

It was also found from the textual analysis that both the traditions go together. The Lama's search for the River of the Arrow embodies here the Buddhist pursuit of insight, while Kim's search for Red Bull on Green Fields and two clergymen as well as Mahbub Ali's intuitive guidance evokes Sufi trust and surrender. Though Mahbub Ali is involved in worldly affairs; he works for British agency and gets Kim to work for the same too. Their influence reveals merging paths toward inner illumination.

Annihilation/Beautiful Merger

The beautiful merger also is a best find. The Buddhist and Sufi tradition calls it *anatta* and *fana* means annihilation. Kim undergoes this situation from time to time by losing one identity and receiving another one. Here he is black and there belongs to the white people all of a sudden and gets everything changed for himself. While he is in Lahore, he is a street boy a wanderer; when meets Lama gets merged with the holy man; likewise when he reaches the destination he is found as belonging to the race of white having received all his basic rights as a white retains. His fluid selfhood becomes emblematic

of the seeker who loosens rigid boundaries to approach a deeper, freer mode of being. The same way Lama appears, despite having faced many difficulties, tortures -physical and emotional, he does not lose courage rather teaches practical lesson of a Buddhist stoic who deals pleasure or pain in the same way.

Cultural Integration

The spiritual exchange between the two traditions has been an other element. The Lama along with his outlook, attire and style has been shown accepted and respected; wherever he goes in Lahore and outskirts, he is provided with the things he needs. No one stops him from doing his spiritual and cultural practices. The people of Lahore consider Tibetan Lama as holy man the same way as the local holy man. The novel's vibrant mosaic of monks, Sufis, ascetics, and travellers recalls the historical zones where Buddhist and Sufi cultures intersected. Kipling's canvas thus evokes genuine grounds of spiritual exchange. Thus, concept of finding the River of Arrow in the Southeast Asian region reveals the cultural integrity of the region to the extent that the English writer like Rudyard Kipling felt it befitting to introduce the characters and places of the area.

Silence as Mystical Voice

The most important and common virtue of Buddhism and Sufism is bliss of silence. The Lama's intuitive wisdom comes from silence that attracts Kim and other followers. Throughout the journey the Lama keeps the pace of uncomplaining nature. He engages himself in meditation through which the element of *maa'rifa* (nearness) is expressed. Both the traditions cultivate the power of silence and sound of silence as a form of knowledge. Kim's sensitivity to contemplative quietude emphasises a mysticism grounded in harmony rather than creed. All the great mystics and Sufi saints have uplifted the spirit of silence because it is silence that makes them achieve the truth and reach the ultimate truth which otherwise is not possible. The tumultuous situation snatches the spirit from them. The power of silence is the intuitive power of Sufism and Buddhism. This

element is also drawn from the novel.

Limits and Possibilities of Inter-Tradition Dialogue

While affinities between the two traditions surface throughout the text, their metaphysical boundaries remain intact, preserving distinct spiritual identities. Overlapping and racing are not encouraged. The mutual respect seems to be the foremost characteristic of both traditions. Kipling does not at any point demean the relationship between the two distinct ideals-Buddhism and Sufism

'Live and Let Live' Mystical Philosophy of Both Traditions and Mysticism as Counter-Narrative to the Violent Setting

Live and let live is a philosophy of both spiritual traditions in common. The Lama's faith in not killing any beings whatever shows that the peace can be attained only the life of others is made secure while being more powerful. Viewed through a Sufi-Buddhist lens, Kim reveals an undercurrent of contemplative resistance—a celebration of inner freedom that subtly unsettles violent and despotic authority.

CONCLUSION

The mystic path, wherever it be, is the inner journey of the soul, which makes the seeker see the ultimate truth. This path leads to the truth through practical experience, not through argument. The Sufi-Buddhist study of Kipling's Kim reveals that this philosophy makes the reader aware of the beautiful merger, intuitive voice of silence and its power, mutual respect of metaphysical and cultural differences, live and let live and the quest for the ultimate truth. One can attain such merits by relieving oneself of the materialistic approach towards unnecessary desires. The four noble truths and eightfold noble paths of Buddhism, and the forty states of Sufism are the ways to deliverance of human suffering. Through these lenses of Buddhism and Sufism, the Kim emerges as a profound exploration of spiritual universality. The Lama's Buddhist quest, combined with Kim's Sufi-like journey of the heart, illustrates shared mystical principles—

detachment, compassion, guidance, and inner transformation. These virtues of Sufi-Buddhist faith make us see through Far Eastern context. This study reveals Kipling's spiritual integrity too. Ultimately, Kim presents a literary meditation on the human quest for truth, emphasizing that mystical wisdom transcends geography, religion and culture.

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