

### “What have the Free People to do with a British cub?”

Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) follows wild child Mowgli as he navigates growing up trying to balance his affiliations with the jungle of animals who raised him and the village of humans he originates from. In particular, “Mowgli's Brothers,” illustrates Mowgli's adoption by Mother and Father Wolf after the “man's cub” boldly approaches their cave and joins their other young to feed. They protect him despite Shere Khan's demands for his life, and with Baloo the bear and Bagheera the panther's endorsements, Mowgli officially joins the “Free People” of the wolf pack. Inevitably, the Pack splits between those who approve of Mowgli's acceptance and those who believe in Shere Khan's objections to a human running alongside animals. The chapter concludes with Mowgli retrieving fire from the village and returning to Council Rock in time to save Akela, the previous leader of the Pack, and relinquish his association with the jungle before he left for the village, leaving only the promise to return one day with Shere Khan's hide as his trophy.

Mowgli's conflict with Shere Khan reaches a conclusion in “Tiger! Tiger!” which begins with his introduction and attempted acclimation back to the village. Despite a rich couple adopting him and quickly expanding on his knowledge of human speech, Mowgli struggles to adapt to life in the village and its customs and manners he found pointless. However, he is eventually assigned to herding and reinitiates contact with Gray Brother wolf, who warns him about Shere Khan's planned attack. Gaining Akela's help, Mowgli executes an ambush on a sleeping Shere Khan and returns as promised to Council Rock, where he reaches the lonesome conclusion that he does not belong to neither jungle nor village. Mowgli's significant but different relationships with both the jungle and the village presents an idealistic representation of both British imperialism as a whole and how it affects the identities of the British citizens who grew up in the colonies.

Scholars extensively discuss the history of British imperialism in India that appears in Mowgli's tale. Don Randall remarks how *The Jungle Book* “presents an allegorical, empire-affirming restaging of the history of British India,” particularly concerning the Mutiny crisis with India's rebellions against Britain (98). Mowgli's triumph over Shere Khan to establish his own superiority and distinguish himself from all residents of both the jungle and the village captures “a figure of Kipling's ideal imperial subject, a subject capable of negotiating—not without hardship but with ultimate success” (Randall 106). The defeat of Shere Khan is emphasized with Sujit Mukherjee's exploration of how tigers, though a representation of historical India, gained prestige with the arrival of the British as the hunting of tigers became a European pastime. These scholars cover the role the general historical context of British imperialism manifests within *The Jungle Book*.

Furthermore, other critics focus on how factors of Kipling's personal life attributed to his imperialistic views, which then transferred to his stories. Viorica Banciu et al. argues that “[f]or the child who grew-up in his British parents' bungalow, comfortable and civilized, with local ministers, at the margins of the jungle, India looks beautiful and mysterious,” resulting in a positive perspective cited to imperialism (179). While Kipling could offer a deeper insight into

India than most British writers of the time, his privilege and status as a European limits an objective take on the matter. John McBratney explains how due to the physical isolation from Britain, colonists like Kipling “embraced the myth that one could grow up to be robustly free and yet remain resolutely manly, Christian, and British” (277). This attempt at achieving the best two opposing aspects of life had to offer also presents in Mowgli as he discovers how his identity can coexist with both the jungle and the village. Laura Stevenson proposes an uncommon assertion that Kipling’s intentions behind *The Jungle Book* were not political, but “a celebration of a state possible only in the Golden Age of youth” (377). However, as she details, the relationships present within the stories can paint an imperialistic interpretation, conveying how deeply ingrained the concept was for Kipling. The arguments these scholars present clarify why Kipling’s unique situation allowed for his political narrative messages in *The Jungle Book*.

Mowgli’s lack of complete acceptance into the jungle elucidates the elite distinction assigned to British colonists born and raised in the colonies by natives. From the beginning of Mowgli’s encounter with the jungle creatures, his exclusion for being a human is evident, with only Baloo and Bagheera vouching for him to stay within the Pack. Mowgli’s acceptance outside of Mother and Father Wolf are therefore only present in two creatures who are not wolves among the Pack Council; he remains initially segregated by the actual members. Similarly, for the European living among the natives of a colony, equal treatment and regard was unexpected. Rather, they “met the surface obedience necessary for the English master,” a trait also present to a degree within Mowgli (Banciu et al. 179). As Mowgli grew up, despite growing closer to his fellow wolves, “he discovered that if he stared hard at any wolf, the wolf would be forced to drop his eyes, and so he used to stare for fun” (Kipling 25). This “forced” submissive behavior of the wolves establishes Mowgli’s innate superiority, dominating no matter how close their relationships grow. Additionally, Mowgli’s ignorance, arguably even childish apathy, of why the wolves felt compelled to submit, illustrates how this social caste is an occurrence Mowgli perceives as natural, even “fun,” further forbidding him from ever fitting in among the wolves. Even as a young child, “Mowgli enjoys...an ideal imaginary relation with the jungle world: he is able to apprehend it in specular relation to himself, as a self-affirming system of similitudes and equivalences organized around his own body and selfhood” (Randall 102-103). Mowgli acknowledges the different ways in which he is treated, but retains the privilege to not have to question it.

The departure of Mowgli from the jungle, and his denouncement of it on the way, depicts the loyalties of the British citizens living in the colonies. Mowgli directly strikes against Shere Khan and his followers after he obtains fire and rushes to Akela’s aid, fighting their onslaught with his flames and denouncing that “[he] see[s] that [they] are dogs” and that “[he] go from [them] to [his] own people,” referring to the village (Kipling 40). Demoting the wolves, the animals he called his own brothers throughout his life, to “dogs” dehumanizes them in Mowgli’s eyes, and by specifying that he now “sees” that, Mowgli implies that they were always beasts below him; he was just blind to the fact previously. Mowgli defining the humans as “[his] own people” clarifies his personal, intentional dissociation with the jungle due to the acts of savagery

he has witnessed among its residents. This behavior is reflected by British colonists who “protected sedulously the image of themselves as young English gentlemen, guarding themselves against the possibility of ‘going native’ or otherwise being ‘contaminated’ by the Africans, Asians, Native Americans, or Pacific Islanders with whom they came in contact” (McBratney 278). When Mowgli disapproves of the actions of the jungle animals, he immediately distinguishes himself as a man and relinquishes any affectionate titles referring to the wolves as brothers so that he is not associated with their base behaviors. However, this does not mean that Mowgli nor the British colonists can perfectly belong with their “home” cultures.

Mowgli’s estrangement from the village reflects the isolation faced by British citizens wholly dislocated from their home country. When Mowgli returns to the village, joining his community of humans, “Mowgli was uneasy, because he had never been under a roof before” (Kipling 97). Regarding “uneasy” to mean “productive of physical discomfort” and “causing mental discomfort,” Mowgli’s return to a home he should belong to produces an abundance of negative responses in him rather than eliciting any of the “comfort” typically associated with the idea of belonging (“Uneasy, adj.”). Additionally, “uneasy” can also mean “of animals: restless, unsettled,” which Mowgli exhibits, associating him more to a beast than a human, further ostracizing him from the human village. Moreover, attributing the source of this unease to “[being] under a roof,” a structure symbolizing a home and civilization, demonstrates Mowgli’s unfamiliarity with those two concepts. Moreover, even after three months in the village, the “ways and customs of men” either “annoyed him horribly,” “he did not in the least understand,” or “he did not see the use” (Kipling 101). These negative reactions, especially after a prolonged time of exposure further demonstrates Mowgli’s inability to acclimate. Identifying these unfamiliar actions as “customs of men” also dissociates Mowgli as he is excluding himself from the title of “men” who follow this lifestyle. Therefore, though Mowgli makes efforts to blend into the culture that is supposed to be his own, he finds only a sense of displacement. According to McBratney, these sentiments are replicated as “Kipling spent much of his early and middle life trying to solve a conundrum of cultural affiliation unique in British life,” his seclusion from the empire, which led to a “private quest for a secure sense of citizenship” (279). For Mowgli, as is for the British citizens raised in the colonies, an inability to relate to the community he is from, and is repeatedly told he is from by the creatures of the jungle, to which he also does not belong, creates a sense of confusion and frustration in identity. As Stevenson puts it, “Mowgli, ostensibly a member of two societies, has no place in either; he is vulnerable not only to the dangers within each society but to those resulting from their opposition” (371). However, Mowgli’s unique relationship with the village and jungle allows for his portrayal of imperial relations.

Furthermore, Shere Khan’s identity as a tiger and his subsequent defeat mirrors the British conquest over India. From Mowgli’s arrival, Shere Khan posed himself as Mowgli’s direct opposition, threatening violence and promoting insurrection. With the understanding that “the tiger has been a native of India from pre-historic times,” Shere Khan presents a symbol of Indian resistance to the imperial rule of an outsider, Mowgli (Mukherjee 2). Within the story, despite the disdain some of the animals feel towards him, his power is acknowledged, with

Mowgli jokingly answering that Bagheera has warned him of Shere Khan ““as many times as there are nuts on that palm,”” (Kipling 27). Bagheera’s role as one of Mowgli’s closest allies emphasizes the importance of his repeated warnings, meaning he sees Shere Khan as a true threat while Mowgli’s nonchalance conveys his disbelief and hubris. This clashing of two powerful forces “thus takes shape as a contest between conquerors, one modern and one archaic. By his victory over the tiger, the British tiger-slayer implicitly lays claim to imperial authority, as the tiger’s successor” (Randall 111). Mowgli’s victory is also secured by assistance from allies within the jungle and his own wit and resources from the village with the buffaloes.

Accomplishing the act this way showcases Mowgli’s superior intellect, a trait the British imperialists often assigned to themselves as justification. The greater resources available to Mowgli reflect the same technological, economic, and physical resource superiority the British held over its colonies. Furthermore, according to Mukherjee, “the British in India had turned tiger shooting (not just casual hunting) into an organized sport. Loyal Indian subjects readily developed a liking for this sport...and joined their rulers in decimating the tiger population of India” (1). In this context, the animals on Mowgli’s side against Shere Khan are his loyal imperial subjects, disregarding any relations they may have with a fellow animal from the jungle for obedience to Mowgli.

Finally, Mowgli’s role as both the protagonist and a symbol of British power portrays imperialism as a beneficial system. Despite the struggles against Shere Khan and certain members of the village, Mowgli achieves beneficial cooperation with members of the jungle. Though at the end of the tale, he is left admitting that he does not belong to neither jungle nor village, he is not alone, for four cubs declared that ““[they] will hunt with [him]”” and the five traverse through the jungle together (Kipling 131). The focus on “hunting,” an act of survival and bonding within the culture of the Pack, demonstrates Mowgli’s, and Britain’s, ability to coexist alongside the traditions of the jungle and India by forming mutually beneficial relationships. The four wolf cubs also voluntarily saying this as opposed to Mowgli asking them to come along illustrates an acceptance from the subservient party present in the ideal model of imperialism. As Banciu et al. mentions, “Mowgli’s coexistence with wild animals of the jungle, is so fruitful in building his character, it is a lesson given to the people by Kipling in order to end enmity between the two kingdoms.” (181). However, this enmity still resides on an imperial relationship as throughout the story, “the animals which recognize the man as master, fulfilling the true, eternal law of creation, are simple and good and do not know lawlessness. Those who dare wicked acts against men are punished, as Shere Khan,” by death at the hands of Mowgli (Banciu et al. 182). The ultimate peace brought to the jungle, though achieved through violence, portrays Mowgli as the protagonistic hero who, though treated as superior, can be regarded as a friendly presence. In this sense, “strong England, one that brings order and discipline in the chaos of India is forgiving in Kipling’s eyes and this is crucial, not the behavior of individual mistakes in the English part” (Banciu et al., 179).

Mowgli’s unique adventure to define his identity, split between the jungle and the village, portrays the journey of British colonists and British imperialism in India. With most modern day

adaptations of *The Jungle Book*, especially with kids as the target audience, this politically imperialistic viewpoint remains arguably untranslated despite the similarities in the main story. This message, whether intentional or not by Kipling, becomes clearer only with historical context of the period in which it was written. This, in turn, begs the question whether the creators of adaptations, especially for kids, have a responsibility to carefully choose their source material as even if they eliminate any negative messages, adaptations will continually celebrate these stories to an extent.

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