

THE VISUAL IN RUDYARD KIPLING'S *KIM*. REVISITING ORIENTALISM AND SYNCRETISM THROUGH A MULTIMODAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM PERSPECTIVE

MONICA TURCI

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI BOLOGNA

monica.turci2@unibo.it

Received January 2026; Accepted June 2026; Published online September 2026

In the critical context of renewed interest in the works of Rudyard Kipling by key scholars in postcolonial studies, this article investigates the role of the illustrations and textually mediated images in the representation of racial relations in *Kim* (1901). It addresses the illustrations in the first Macmillan edition and the descriptions of the Wheel of Life that play such an important role in Kipling's characterisation of Indians, their relations to English characters and Kipling's own position with reference to Eastern forms of art. In doing so, it adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that includes multimodality, functional linguistics, cultural and postcolonial studies theories and literary criticism. It argues that racial representations in *Kim* remain unresolved between Orientalism and syncretism; the product of a complex writer divided between his political views that placed East and West as separate and irreconcilable entities and an imaginative force that overcame racial and geographical boundaries.

Keywords: Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, Multimodality, Orientalism, The Visual

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, interest in colonial fiction has waned following the demise of the British Empire, the development of postcolonial studies and, more recently, of critical movements of cultural decolonisation. And yet, Kipling's works endure; though they continue to be heavily criticised for their common racist views of their time, they remain among the most popular and best loved pieces of literature in English. The case of "If" (1910) is exemplary of this contradiction; voted in a BBC poll of 1996 as the nation's favourite poem, in 2008, its text was defaced by Manchester University students because of Kipling's reputation as a writer who expressed racist views¹.

The Nobel prize-winning novel *Kim* (1901) presents a similar case. Janet Montefiore (2007, 1) describes the critical debate around this work as a metaphorical battlefield

¹ Details on BBC poll can be found at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If%E2%80%9494> (last accessed June 15, 2026). On Manchester University students' action, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-44884913> (last accessed June 15, 2026).

between, on the one hand, those according to whom Kipling's works are mere racist representations of Indians and, on the other, those who contradict this view by highlighting Kipling's delight in cultural differences. The recent revival of interest in this novel by post-colonial critics has contributed an original critical perspective that has interrupted this impasse characterised by polarised responses:

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) [...] renewed interest in Kipling as a representative Orientalist, [...] Homi Bhabha's essays, collected in *The Location of Culture* (1994), opened the way to reading Kipling's texts as sites of colonial ambivalence and hybridity. (Rooney, Nagai 2010, 1; 2)

Bhabha's work, with its displacement of a logic of racial binaries and focus on hybrid and liminal spaces and identities, has proved of key importance in re-orienting attention on Kipling's work and paving the way for original critical trajectories that investigate issues of representation of race and racial relations. Also significant in this respect is the contribution of Abdul JanMohamed (1985) who singles out *Kim* as one of the most interesting attempts to overcome racial dichotomies (74), opening up the possibility of reading this work as an exploration of "racial barriers and syncretic possibility" (77).

This study provides a contribution to this still ongoing debate by focussing attention on the visual aspects of *Kim*. Though marginal in Kipling's criticism, commentators and writers have not failed to note the visual, painterly and even filmic style of Kipling's writing². The pervasiveness of images and forms of visualisations in *Kim* confirm their views. References to the visual here include the illustrations interspersed at all stages of the narrative in the original and in some of its later editions, as well as repeated instances of textual mediated imagery. As concerns the latter, *Kim* includes descriptions of religious paintings, sculptures and photographs kept in the Museum of Lahore, maps of cities and holy places that Kim must remember and learn to reproduce accurately for the Great Game. Particularly relevant for this study are references to drawings of the Wheel of Life made by the Teshoo Lama that have the peculiarity of being semiotically hybrid; they are in fact described as "half written and half drawn"³ artifacts that are difficult to categorise by Western standards because they fall between two semiotic modes: the visual and the linguistic.

By addressing the pictures in the first Macmillan edition and the descriptions of the Wheel of Life, this study investigates the relation between text and illustrations and connections between the act of drawing and writing. Private correspondence in which Kipling writes metacritically on illustrations (see for example Pinney 1990, 1: 325, and Pinney 2004, 5: 50) and discusses future cinematographic adaptations of his work (Pinney 1990, 2: 356; 410), the pictures that Kipling himself produced for *Just So Stories* (1902) and the numerous sketches found in the margins of the manuscript of *The Jungle Book* ([1894–1895]

² The visual dimension of Kipling's writings has been commented on in foundational criticism on Kipling over the last four decades – see for example Tompkins (1959) and Ricketts (1999) – as well as by Kipling's admirers and detractors, including Amit Chaudhuri (2000) and George Orwell (1942).

³ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* ([1901] 2002, 14). Hereafter, all references to this novel are taken from this edition and are indicated in parenthesis in the text with K followed by the page number.

2021) contribute a powerful testimony of an “author-artist” (Cheff 1987, 13) for whom book illustration and drawing are art forms that are connected with the process of writing.

This study argues that the illustrations and the description of an imagined half written and half drawn artifact are central to Kipling's characterisation of Indians, their relations to English characters, as well as the author's position as concerns interrelated cultural issues, providing an argument about the importance of the visual for this novel's representation of race and racial relations. As will be shown in the first part of this article, the illustrations make forcefully visible, and indeed place at the centre of readers' attention, all the main Indian characters in a way that was unusual in colonial fiction, where the colonised were reduced to sketched types with marginal roles, at times almost invisible. And yet, this making visible is complicated by a style of representation that reinforces an Orientalist view of Indians. This mismatch is elaborated further by the descriptions of the Wheel of Life that will be analysed in the second part. These trace a more complex and subtler range of interpersonal and racial relations than the illustrations that also extend beyond characters' representation and involve Kipling as author. The distinct characteristic of the Wheel of Life to be half drawn connects with the medium of the illustrations but relates to Kipling's art and imagining in a different way from the latter. This difference can be explained through John Bayley's description of Kipling's “compartmented mind”. This describes Kipling's stance in respect to his own art as “at once outside and inside, safely distanced by an encircling frame [...], yet imprisoned within and endangered by the text at the same time” (Kemp, Lewis 1996, xxii). The illustrations in *Kim* appear outside Kipling's stance both because they are the workings of another artist – his father – and because of their position in the novel, where they are reproduced in separate pages and hence appear distanced from the text. By contrast, the Wheel of Life – textually mediated, half drawn and half written – is a hybrid visual representation that is not only inseparable from the text, but also a persistent motif in Kipling's writings that will return in the themes and structure of *Just So Stories*. Here, Kipling practices his own version of half written and half drawn art by taking up the double role of illustrator and writer and playfully challenging boundaries between not just drawing and writing but also Eastern and Western art forms. Similarly, in *Kim*, the motif of the Wheel of Life constructs narratives and characterisations that problematise long-established binaries that divide East and West, creating syncretic possibilities. In particular, these involve the Lama, on the one hand, and, on the other, the curator of the Museum of Lahore and Kim.

For the analysis that follows, this article employs an interdisciplinary methodology that includes multimodality, functional linguistics, cultural studies and postcolonial theories, as well as a close literary and intertextual analysis of descriptions of the Wheel of Life. The early multimodal framework devised by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) in conjunction with Edward Said's theories of Orientalism (1979) contribute a close reading of the illustrations that connects with the cultural context in which this novel was written and read by the Anglo-Indian audience of the time. Descriptions of the Wheel of Life in the second part will be investigated through a close analysis of characters' interaction, as well as intertextual references to Kipling as the author and illustrator of *Just So Stories*.

This article argues that, in contradistinction to those interpretations that attempt to fit this novel within clear-cut, essential, but misleading, binaries, the representation of Indian characters and Anglo-Indian relations in *Kim* remain complexly articulated and unresolved. Elements of Orientalism co-exist with the problematisation of racial boundaries opening spaces of contact and dialogue between Indian and English characters. Kipling's self-identification with the Lama via the Wheel of Life defines these contradictions as the product of a writer divided between orthodox political views that placed East and West as separate and irreconcilable entities and an imaginative force that knew no geographical boundaries and persistently drew Kipling to India and to its population. This was nurtured by never forgotten and cherished childhood memories and experiences during Kipling's time as a journalist for major Anglo-Indian newspapers that, as Charles Allen (2007) has suggested, played a crucial role in Kipling's formative years.

2. *The Illustrations: Watching Indians*

Illustrations in the first Macmillan edition of *Kim* consist of ten full-page photographic reproductions of terracotta plaques in low bas-relief inserted into the book as sepia plates. These were realised in unusually close collaboration with the writer, making this novel an example of what Michael Toolan (2010) has called "old-tech multimodal narrative" (127). In keeping with the text-image connection, the method of analysis adopted here is based on the early multimodal framework by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. This is applied to a selection of Kipling's illustrations to provide a close reading that is comparable to a qualitative linguistic analysis set in the context of the text's creation and reception. By adapting M.A.K. Halliday's model of functional linguistics (Halliday [1985] 1994; Halliday, Matthiessen 2014), Kress, van Leeuwen's framework provides a way to analyse illustrations that bridges the divide between word and image. In a way comparable to Halliday's (1979) understanding of the operations of language, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that visual images are socially situated and simultaneously instantiate three types of social meanings, called metafunctions. The textual metafunction focuses on issues of the composition of the image and will be investigated here with reference to the position of elements in the illustration and to framing (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, 175–214). The interpersonal metafunction explores the relation between those who are represented and the viewers (114–174) – in this case the Indian characters and Kipling's audience respectively. Finally, the ideational metafunction considers the participants represented and their relations "in a world outside the representational system" (42); here, this metafunction connects representations of Indians with the Anglo-Indian context at the time in which *Kim* was written.

The context of the creation of illustrations in *Kim* has its own peculiar story that sets them apart from other book illustration projects in Kipling and elsewhere. At the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century the practice of book illustration remained very common. It was "a 'golden age' of illustration and second only to the illustrious [eighteen] sixties" (Kooistra 1995, 1). What sets *Kim*'s illustrations apart from coeval ones is the fact

that these were not commissioned from professional illustrators or artists, but realised by the father of the author, John Lockwood Kipling, offering an instance of a special close connection between writer and illustrator. Indeed, biographical studies show that at the time in which *Kim* was written, father and son were so close that their relationship could be described as one of mentor and apprentice. As Charles Allen (2013) has noted, from the early 1890s on "it is no exaggeration to describe John Lockwood Kipling's role [...] as that of guru to his son" (149). For his part, in his posthumous memoir, Kipling ([1937] 1990) recalls that right from the beginning *Kim* grew as a shared project:

In a gloomy, windy autumn Kim came back to me with insistence, and I took it to be smoked over with my Father. Under our united tobaccos it grew like the Djin released from the brass bottle. (82)

This passage is followed by an unusually detailed account of the process that led to the creation of the illustrations:

the crown of the fun came when [...] was issued an illustrated edition of my works, and the Father attended to *Kim*. He had the notion of making low-relief plaques and photographing them afterwards. Here it was needful to catch the local photographer [...], and to lead him up the strenuous path of photographing dead things so that they might show a little life. (Kipling [1937] 1990, 83)

The expression "crown of the fun" gives the impression of the illustrative process as a light exercise to create decorations, providing one of the several possible explanations for the neglect of these illustrations in critical studies. However, this impression is challenged not only by Rudyard Kipling's lifelong interest in the visual (Turci 2011, 170–171; 174–176), but also by another passage of his memoir, where Kipling parallels his own feelings about the text layout with those of his father about the illustrations, portraying in this way writer and illustrator as equally involved, and indeed central, in the creative process:

Naturally when he [Lockwood Kipling] got his final proofs he was sure that 'it all ought to be done again from the beginning,' which was rather how I felt about the letterpress [...]. There is one picture that I remember of him in the tin tabernacle, hunting big photos of Indian architecture for some utterly trivial detail in a corner of some plaque. He looked up as I came in and, rubbing his beard and carrying on his own thought, quoted: 'If you get simple beauty and naught else, You get about the best thing God invents.' (Kipling [1937] 1990, 83)

The final quotation, taken from Robert Browning's poem *Fra Lippo Lippi* (1855), expresses Lockwood's intentions to use the illustrations to increase the beauty of the book, closely following William Morris' project with the Kelmscott Press as part of the Arts and Crafts Movement (Crane [1896] 1984, 153–160). In providing a close analysis of the illustrations, it is important to point out that the beauty referred to by the Kiplings is also cul-

turally coded, informed by, and simultaneously contributing to a worldview. According to Edward Said (1995), the years in which *Kim* is written see

the realization of a great cumulative process [...]: on the one hand, surveillance and control over India; on the other, love for and fascinated attention to its every detail. The overlap between the political hold of the one and the aesthetic [...] pleasure of the other is made possible by British imperialism itself. (195)

Said's afore-mentioned comment provides a context for the following close reading of *Kim*'s illustrations that create the possibility to see them as fulfilling not just the function of decorations to the writing, but also as partaking of a hermeneutical process in which aesthetic pleasure intertwines with a hegemonic discourse on the Orient "that channel[s] thought into a West or an East compartment" justifying the existence of "a battlefield that separates them" (Said 1978, 46; 47–48) and their population.

This close reading begins with some reflections pertaining to the textual metafunction, in particular the information and semiotic value of the elements placed at the centre of the image, and on framing. The former provides a way to single out a group of six illustrations all portraying Indian characters: *The Lama* (Figure 1), *Mahbub Ali* (Figure 2), *The Ressaldar*, *Hurry Chunder Mookerejee*, *The Jat and his Sick Child* (Figure 3) and *The Woman of Shamleggh*.

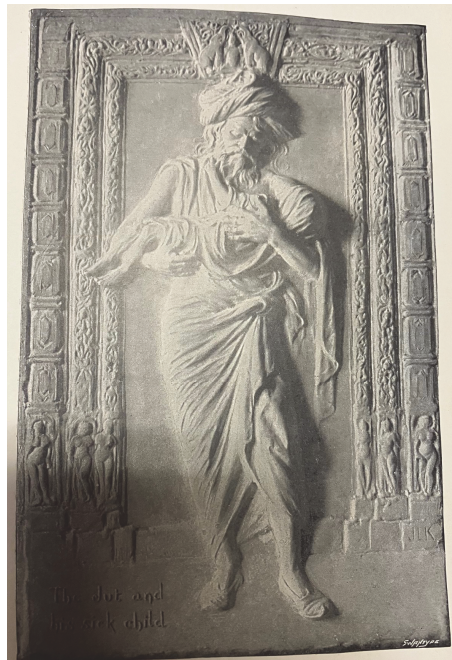
Figure 1 - *The Lama* (Kipling 1901, 21)



Figure 2 - *Mahbub Ali* (Kipling 1901, 33)



Figure 3 - *The Jat and his Sick Child* (Kipling 1901, 268)



In all these illustrations, the Indians are placed in the centre foreground. This compositional strategy not only makes the Indian characters visible for a Western audience but, feeding on a long and well-established convention in Western visual arts (Arnheim quoted in Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, 194), also points to their pivotal role. Instances in which the central position is occupied by important political and religious figures abound in painting of all times. Andrea del Castagno's cycle entitled *Famous Men and Women* (1448–1451)⁴, is only one of several examples that closely recalls the style of Lockwood's illustrations. In keeping with this, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), elements in central position have salience, by which they mean that they are not only important but also “made to attract the viewer's attention” (177).

As concerns issues of framing, the Indians represented in the selected illustrations are always enclosed by one or, in some cases, multiple frames. With reference to the outer space of the illustration, the white space of the page surrounding them can be seen as a covert external framing that has the effect of creating a visual interruption between the illustrations and the text. This interruption is also semiotic; in stark contrast to the text that portrays these characters continuously moving along the Great Trunk Road, living their every-day existence, exchanging views and conversations, telling stories, praying, plotting and showing a rich range of emotions – from joy to despair, from fear and hatred to love and passion – the illustrations present readers with immobile figures frozen in unnatural poses. In some cases, overt internal framing contributes to this effect adding further meanings. This is particularly evident in Fig. 3 that represents the Jat enclosed by a richly ornate door frame. This compositional detail has a double meaning providing an example of the connection between aesthetic and political: it is a sample of a richly ornate Indian architectural structure that would have fascinated Lockwood Kipling, and, on a different semiotic level, it would have evoked physical lines of demarcation in Anglo-Indian cities that served to shelter the Anglo-Indian community from whatever threat the Indians posed⁵. The aesthetics of the composition of this illustration with reference to framing provides the visual correlative of Anglo-Indians' attempts to contain natives within physical and symbolic boundaries, as well of the persistent interest in the demarcation and classification of Indians on the part of Orientalists, scholars and Imperial administrators.

The salience produced by positioning the Indians at the centre of the illustration is connected to the interpersonal metafunction that articulates in a more specific way the relation between the Indians represented and readers/viewers. If the characters' salience is made to attract viewers' attention, the representation of the Indians' gazes and the type of shot used to photograph these sculptures complicate relations with viewers and produce an ambiguous effect where viewers' attraction co-exists with their distancing.

With reference to the gaze, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that:

⁴ See the Web Gallery of Art's display at https://www.wga.hu/html_m/a/andrea/castagno/2_famous/index.html (last accessed June 15, 2026).

⁵ On Anglo-Indian topographies as cultural and political spaces in connection to Kipling's works, see Gail Ching-Liang Low 1996, 156–168.

[t]here is [...] a fundamental difference between pictures from which represented participants look directly at the viewer's eyes, and pictures in which this is not the case. When represented participants look at the viewer, vectors, formed by participants' eyelines, connect the participants with the viewer. Contact is established, even if it is only on an imaginary level. (117)

In all the illustrations analysed, contact following Kress and van Leeuwen's approach is consistently avoided as no character looks directly at the viewers. The Lama and the Jat look down. Hurry Chunder Mookerejee, the Woman of Shamlegh, and the Ressaldar direct their gazes towards an indistinct point in the upper left corner. Mahbub Ali (Fig. 2), who is represented facing the viewers, is the only exception in this respect; however, while the direction of his gaze would have had the potential of establishing a sort of contact, the disturbing absence of his pupils turns this possibility into a void. By denying eye contact, what is also denied is a reciprocal exchange between Indians and viewers and the possibility of constructing identification, empathy or any other interpersonal connections between the two. The distancing effect produced by the characters' gaze is further reinforced by the representation of the Indians through a long shot that shows their whole figures with space around it, in this way placing Indians and viewers at a "far social distance" (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, 124–125).

Consideration of the ideational metafunction contributes insights into the social and political roles of the Indians represented, as well as issues of power relations. Analysis of participant roles following Kress and van Leeuwen's framework is here combined with Ruqaiya Hasan's cline of dynamism (1989, 46) that orders participants according to their degree of dynamicity, that is to say according to their possibility to act and exercise power. As shown in Table 1 below, with the sole exceptions of the Lama (Fig. 1) that is represented as the object of Kim's loving gaze hence as a Phenomenon (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, 77) and the Jat who, by gazing at his suffering child, has the role of Sensor (77) – an active participant of a mental perceptive process – all the other Indians are represented as part of analytical processes (87–92), which portray them as Carriers of possessive attributes, that is to say that their only function is to pose for the viewers displaying their costumes⁶.

⁶ Kress and van Leeuwen and Hasan draw on M.A.K. Halliday's pioneering work, particularly his description of the clause as representation of experience. Participants are, along with processes and circumstances, a constituent of the 'transitivity system' and their meaning is connected to the processes they are semantically connected to, which in turns defines the nature of the action performed. Hasan's cline of dynamism deploys this classification and focuses on the distinction between active and passive participants as a sign of agency and power. For a description of processes and participants, see Halliday 1994, 106–144.

Table 1 - *Indians' roles in a selection of illustrations in Kim on Hasan's cline of dynamism*

DYNAMIC

- 
- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | (Actor + Animate Goal) |
| 2 | (Actor + Inanimate Goal) |
| 3 | (Sayer + Recipient) |
| 4 | (Sayer + Target) |
| 5 | (Sayer) |
| 6 | (Phenomenon + Sensor). <i>The Lama</i> |
| 7 | (Sensor) <i>The Jat and his Sick Child</i> |
| 8 | (Actor – Goal) |
| 9 | (Behaver) |
| 10 | (Carrier) <i>Mahbub Ali; The Ressaldar</i>
<i>Hurry Chunder Mookerejee;</i>
<i>The Woman of Shamlegh</i> |

PASSIVE

Taking line 6 in the table as the halfway point separating active and passive roles (Hasan 1989, 46), it is interesting to note that all the Indians are placed in the bottom half of the cline that lists the more passive roles. These are characters that rarely feel, think, or act; they are, in this way, deprived of quintessential human qualities and made to fit the stereotype of the irrational, backward, uncivilised, and weak Oriental (Said 1978, 7; 40; 178; 207; 253). Moreover, the frequency with which Indians are represented as part of analytic processes defines their predominant role as bearers of native costumes and ornaments that are always elaborate, distinctly Oriental and made up of a head-dress, a robe, slippers or, in some cases, boots. They are, thus, identified through the wide and general category of the exotic garment that deprives them of a distinct and individual personality. The Lama's costume deserves particular attention as it has the peculiarity of creating an incongruous effect with the way it is represented in the text. Where the novel describes the Lama as a priest dressed in rags (K, 6), in the illustration (Fig. 1), he appears with rich garments and precious ornaments. As Rachel Fleming (2003, 42) has noted, this illustration is reminiscent of another one captioned *Rae Doona Chund, A Banker*, taken from a volume entitled *People of India* (1908), a study commissioned by the British government intended to provide a complete guide to different casts and ethnic groups in the Indian subcontinent. The deviation between text and illustration, along with this illustration's similarity with another one taken from an anthropological essay, deprive the Lama of the rich personality that Kipling's story endowed him with and transform him into a specimen of an anthropological inquiry. Furthermore, the peculiar choice of providing the Lama with an opulent costume is symbolic of imaginary representations of India as a sub-continent of immense wealth that for decades fuelled British imagination leading to its colonial exploitation.

This analysis of illustrations in *Kim* has provided a contradictory and open conclusion as regards the representation and reception of the Indian characters. If, on the one hand, the illustrations bring the main Indian characters to the attention of the readership in such a way that their power of fascination can hardly be denied, this is the cultural fascination of “the theatre of Empire” (Low 1996, 203; 206) that in the Victorian period thrived on Oriental display and portrayed Indians as mere spectacles of alterior beauty and picturesque excess. The illustrations, far from being just beautiful decorations that embellish the book, are charged with a political and cultural message that constructs the Indians as incapable of actions, passive, exotic and harmless objects of observation that Western viewers could admire from a safe distance; emanations of an Imperial imagination that saw them as specimen for display in staged narratives of a mythical colonial El Dorado.

3. *The Wheel of Life: Where Indians and British Meet*

References to the Wheel of Life provide a different take on the representation of Indians and the relationship between East and West; these contribute narratives of encounters between British and Indian characters in *Kim* and offer a persistent motif in Kipling's oeuvre that connects the Lama and Kipling as artists. Though the Wheel of Life was at the time of Kipling a central and well-known component of Buddhist philosophy and religion (Shaw 1995, 14), Kipling imaginatively re-fashioned it. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Kipling represents the Wheel through textual descriptions, despite the fact that when *Kim* was written several of its visual representations circulated in popular studies on Buddhism. These include Henry Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translation* (1896) and L.A. Waddell's *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (1897); the latter is, according to Kipling's scholars, among the sources for *Kim* (Allen 2007, 358; Shaw 1995, 14). Providing descriptions instead of faithful visual reproductions of the Wheel allowed Kipling to move away from the constraint of facts from Western interpretations of Buddhist philosophy and construct a representation that mixes imaginary details with actual information. From scholarly sources Kipling took one of the purposes of the Wheel in Buddhist religion, that is the use of iconology to make universally accessible and teach young disciples – in the novel *Kim* – the philosophy of the realms of being. What is not mentioned in the sources, and hence can be presumed to be the sole product of Kipling's imagination, is the way the Wheel is described as partaking of a mixture of drawing and writing; this becomes a persistent motif of Kipling's art that will resurface in his *Just So Stories*.

Though not frequently mentioned in criticism on *Kim*, the role of the Wheel of Life is the focus of an article by Bruce Shaw (1995) who has noted its crucial role in Kipling's representation of the search for Enlightenment. In a complementary fashion, this article illustrates how the Wheel is also a structuring element of the plot and characterisation, where it plays a central role in the representation of relations between British and Indian characters.

The first mention of the Wheel is found at the beginning of the novel and the completion of its drawing coincides with its end, thus providing whatever closure is affected in this open-ended work. The Wheel also shapes the characters' roles and their relations, with

reference to the Lama on the one hand and on the other Kim the curator of the Museum of Lahore – a fictional persona evidently based on Kipling's father (Ankers 1988, 53).

The encounter between the Lama and the curator of the Museum of Lahore occurs at the beginning of the novel when the Lama first appears. The first mention of the Lama is likely to disorient Western readers at least as much as it disorients young Kim. Based on this initial description, readers' impression is of a striking, wise, yet vague and helpless, old man who has drifted away from his monastery into a foreign land and come to rely on chance information and help given by Kim, at that point only a child:

The man turned helplessly and drifted towards the boys. He was old, and his wool-len gaberdine still reeked of the stinking artemisia of the mountain passes.
 'O Children, what is that big house?' he said in very fair Urdu. 'The Ajaib-Gher, the Wonder House!' [...]
 'Ah! The Wonder House! Can any enter?'
 'It is written above the door – all can enter.'
 'Without payment?'
 'I go in and out. I am no banker,' laughed Kim.
 'Alas! I am an old man. I did not know.' (K, 7)

The curator welcomes the Lama with a mixture of polite hospitality and deference for his age, but also condescension. He is described as smiling "at the clumsy, childish print" (K, 9) of the Lama's handwriting and, during their conversation, shows such an extensive knowledge of Buddhist imagery to leave the Lama surprised and momentarily caught off guard. The curator's cultural superiority emerges from the following passage in which he shows the Lama some photographs of the very place he used to live while in Tibet:

The lama, haltingly at first, spoke to the Curator of his own lamassery, the Such-zen, opposite the Painted Rocks, four months' march away. The Curator brought out a huge book of photos and showed him that very place [...]
 'Ay, ay!' The lama mounted a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles of Chinese work. '[...]
 And thou – the English know of these things?' (K, 9)

Though only a character, in this exchange, the curator momentarily takes up the role of the omniscient narrator who has complete knowledge of the Lama's life, his culture, his past and origins; his gaze is that of the all-seeing mastery of colonial power which, through the medium of photography, has symbolically appropriated territories even beyond the British Empire⁷. The gift of glasses that the curator bestows on the Buddhist priest can be interpreted along this visual metaphor, as granting the Lama the lucid clarity of vision of a self-assured superior British culture.

The introduction of the Wheel in this exchange has the effect of complicating readers' first impression and overturning the power relation that sees the curator as a culturally superior coloniser and the Lama as an inferior colonised. When the Lama is about to leave

⁷ On the role of photography in Imperial discourse, see James R. Ryan 1998.

the museum he reciprocates the curator's gesture with his iron pen-case and the promise of another gift:

When I return, having found the River, I will bring thee a written picture of the Padma Samthora such as I used to make on silk at the lamassery. Yes – and of the Wheel of Life, [...] The Curator would have detained him: they are few in the world who still have the secret of the conventional brush-pen Buddhist pictures which are, as it were, half written and half drawn. (K, 13–14)

In the final part of the quotation, the omniscient narrator reports the thoughts of the curator that portray the Lama as the object of his admiration and respect for possessing an ancient skill that only a few have. The fact that the Lama is able to reciprocate the Englishman's gift with another, whose cultural value is far superior, places him on an equal footing with the curator. Moreover, the introduction of the motif of the Wheel transforms a polite but distant exchange into an intimate and personal one. The conversation between a benevolent and superior coloniser and an inferior colonised subject is turned into one in which the Lama and the curator reciprocally address each other as "we be craftsmen together, thou and I" (K, 14), showing that their common interest for representations of the Wheel has the effect of creating the conditions of shared intersubjective relations that overcome personal, cultural and geographical boundaries.

References to the Wheel also shape the power relation between the Lama and Kim with similar effects to those noted above. This is a more complex relation that unfolds throughout the novel in two broad sections: the first one includes the first part of *Kim* and the Lama's journey, starting at the beginning of the novel and ending with Kim joining St Xavier school – including chapters 1 to 5. Here references to the Wheel are limited to the afore-mentioned episode involving the curator but otherwise absent from the relationship between Kim and the Lama. The second section consists of the second part of their journey when Kim joins the Lama again after completing his education. This includes chapters 11 to 15. Here the motif of the Wheel recurs frequently, marking the stages of the Lama and Kim's daily travels and setting up pivotal incidents, such as the dramatic encounter between the Lama and the Russian spies in chapter 13. In this part, the introduction of the Wheel causes a development in the characterisation of the Lama and his relationship with Kim marking another reversal of their power relation.

In what has been referred as the first part of Kim and the Lama's journey, Kim's decision to follow the Lama in his pilgrimage and become his *chela* (disciple) is undertaken out of a mixture of curiosity and compassion for the Lama's simple ways:

'I have never seen anyone like to thee in all this my life. I go with thee to Benares. And, too, I think that so old a man as thou, speaking the truth to chance-met people at dusk, is in great need of a disciple.' (K, 17)

While the Lama thinks that the role of the *chela* is a very serious matter and crucial for the successful completion of his journey, Kim makes fun of it; his wish to become the Lama's

disciple does not imply that he believes the Lama can teach him something or lead him to higher spiritual grounds. On the contrary, it is the Lama who, he believes, needs his protection and guidance. When Kim is questioned by a suspicious Mahbub Ali on his reasons for joining the Lama, he answers using the same irony verging on contempt. He says to Mahbub Ali that the Lama is “quite mad” (K, 20) and the reason why he travels with him is simply because he wants to leave Lahore: “I am tired of Lahore city. I wish new air and water” (K, 20). During the first part of their journey, it is Kim who gives instructions, decides where to go and when, gets food and finds ways to avoid trouble, all the while the Lama is lost in meditations and prayers only he can understand. Though generally treated with tolerance and sometimes reverence by other characters, he is described by the omniscient narrator in derogatory terms, a holy man like many others in India

stammering gospels in strange tongues; shaken and consumed in the fires of their own zeal; dreamers, babblers, and visionaries: as it has been from the beginning and will continue to the end. (K, 31)

References to the Wheel of Life in the context of the Lama’s relationship with Kim begin to appear in the second part of their journey. As in the episode of the Lama’s encounter with the curator, the introduction of the Wheel has the effect of reversing the relationship between the Lama and Kim. If Kim was once the Lama’s guide, now he becomes his disciple:

‘I [the Lama] write pictures of the Wheel of Life. Three days to a picture. I was busied on it [...] when they brought word of thee. It is good to have thee here: I will show thee my art – not for pride’s sake, but because thou must learn. The Sahibs have not all this world’s wisdom.’ (K, 161)

To convey the message that the Wheel provides higher spiritual standards of education for its complexity and tradition than the best English schools in India, and that the Lama is one of the greatest authorities on this subject – hence portraying him as culturally superior to the English – the narrator states:

In cleanest, severest outline he [the Lama] had traced the Great Wheel with its six spokes, whose centre is the conjoined Hog, Snake, and Dove (Ignorance, Anger, and Lust), and whose compartments are all the Heavens and Hells, and all the chances of human life. Men say that the Bodhisat Himself first drew it with grains of rice upon dust, to teach His disciples the cause of things. Many ages have crystallized in into a most wonderful convention crowded with hundreds of little figures whose every line carries a meaning. Few can translate the picture-parable; there are not twenty in all the world who can draw it surely without a copy: of those who can both draw and expound are but three. (K, 162)

This passage marks frequent mentions of the Wheel that elevate the Lama into an exceptional spiritual guide and scholar, illuminating for Kim – his disciple – rare and ancient spiritual knowledge that will lead to the completion of his education. In the same way in

which Buddhist priests hung representations of the Wheel outside their temples for the benefit of illiterate peasants, the Lama draws the Wheel so that Kim can learn:

When the shadows shortened and the lama leaned more heavily upon Kim, there was always the Wheel of Life to draw forth, to hold flat under wiped stones, and with a long straw to expound cycle by cycle. [...] Let the *chela* study the troubles that come from over-eating – bloated stomach and burning bowels. Obediently, then, with bowed head and brown finger alert to follow the pointer, did the *chela* study; (K, 177)

In the above quotation, the Wheel is the medium through which Kim and the Lama are described as forming a reciprocal relationship. The image of the old priest leaning upon Kim for physical support, and Kim, in turn, leaning over the priest to watch and listen to tales of the Wheel, is a powerful description of the symbiotic relationship between the two characters.

The ending of the novel confirms the role of the Wheel in redefining the relationship between Kim and the Lama and also connects with issues of Kim's identity that remain open to debate. As occurs so often, critical interpretations of the ending have been polarised: will Kim join Mahbub Ali and Colonel Creighton and become a regular player of the Great Game, or will he stay with the Lama and follow his spiritual path? Far from moving to a denouement, the novel ends with the dilemma of Kim's future and identity torn between Oriental spirituality and Imperial power. Among critics that have explored this ambiguous ending, Mark Kinkead-Weekes provides a particularly illuminating reading that draws attention to the role of the Wheel in the concluding passages. He notes that, though not directly mentioned, references to the Wheel in the final stages of the novel are implicitly present through lexical choices that belong to its semantic field. Referring to the passages where Kim questions his own identity, Kinkead-Weekes (1964) comments that

[A]s the 'gear' imagery makes clear, this is commitment not to the Game with which we are no longer concerned but, at a far more fundamental level to the Wheel of earthly and human life. (231)

Soon after, Kim has felt "the wheels of his being lock up anew" (K, 234), the Lama tells him that while he was lying ill, he had wrenched himself from the nirvana, so that he could come back and be with him on that very Wheel of Things he wanted to transcend.

At the beginning of the novel, Kim and the Lama start a journey together, each of them towards different destinations: the Lama in search of the river of the arrow, Kim for a red bull in a green field as prophesied by his deceased father. Initially, what draws them together is a chance meeting; by the end, after they have both fulfilled their search, they seek each other out of a reciprocal desire to be together again. If, at the end of their daily travels, when the shadows shortened on the Great Trunk Road, the Wheel was what drew them together, at the end of their journey one of its realms – the Wheel of Things, the Buddhist earthly existence and the Western every-day reality – is the space where a deep but quite unexpected almost impossible bond between an English Sahib and a Tibetan Lama is

formed against social and cultural norms and made possible through commitment to each other and mutual affection.

Explicit references to the Wheel and its semantics stop with *Kim*'s ending, but its echoes survive and extend beyond this novel and re-appear in the *Just So Stories*. It is in these stories that Kipling, following in the Lama's footsteps, practices for the first time his own version of a half written and half drawn art. In this collection that has been defined as his most experimental work (Lewis 1995, xli), Kipling explores hybrid semiotic spaces. In the same way that in *Kim* the Lama shifts seamlessly from writing to drawing, so, in these stories, the hand that writes is the same hand that draws. Kipling's double role of writer and illustrator conjures narratives and produces illustrations where words and images continuously overlap and refuse to occupy separate grounds. In the stories entitled "How the First Letter Was Written" (Kipling [1902] 1995, 91–109) and "How the Alphabet Was Made" (109–129) the intertwining of drawing and writing is narrativised in the stories of Taffy and her father, who develop pictures first into letters and then into the alphabet. On an iconographic plane, the decorative capital letters in the stories entitled "How the Whale Got His Throat" (3) and "How the Leopard Got His Spots" (33) are a practical demonstration of a semantic co-existence of writing and drawing, providing a further example of the way Kipling challenges boundaries between the two. These decorative letters, with the letter "I" traced in the shape of a knife in such a way that "the physicality of [this] object, conveyed through an intense attention to detail, co-exists with [the letter's] abstract symbolic function" (Turci 2011, 165) are an example of half written and half drawn art forms.

If in *Kim* the Wheel constructs narratives of harmonious connections between Indian and English characters, in *Just So Stories* its peculiar feature of mixing writing and drawing echoes Kipling's art leading to further encounters between East and West. As Lewis (1995) has noted, these stories are inspired by and provide references to a wide variety of visual artists and movements ranging "from Aubrey Beardsley, Burne-Jones and the Arts and Crafts movement to Hokusai and other Japanese artists" (xxiii). References also extend to the art of Oriental penmen that Kipling knew from his father's studies, an art that, like Kipling's decorated capital letters, wove "the fine forms of Persian letters into the outlines of animals or birds" (Kipling 1892, 325–326).

The semiotic and cultural encounters between Indian and English characters, between writing and drawing and Western and Oriental arts and forms of writing provide a poignant testimony of the writer of *Kim*, one whose art not only refused to demarcate different semantic modes but moved beyond cultural boundaries that separate East and West.

4. Conclusion

This exploration of forms of visibility in *Kim* has provided yet another example of the complexities of Kipling's work in the way it represented India, its population and cultures, while at the same time reinstating the importance of visual elements. Where the illustrations make Indian characters visible for the audience only to transform them into passive

subjects of an Orientalist discourse, the representation of the Wheel of Life provides a far more complex motif that balances and even contradicts this view.

The close readings of illustrations and writing show that to pose the question of Kipling's attitude to Orient as one of positive or negative, as is so often the case, would be to pose the question too simplistically; what *Kim* reveals is rather the complexity of the author's position, informed on the one hand by rigid cultural attitudes shaped by British Imperialism in the late Victorian period, but also by what Kipling found there that contradicted and exceeded the limits of this frame. The predeterminations of the former clearly cannot be said to have limited and contained the power of Kipling's imagination or his ability to perceive the separations of his experience of the two worlds he existed between and find bridges across them through his art.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers and the members of the editorial board for their insightful and constructive comments and support throughout the publication process.

References

- Allen, Charles. 2007. *Kipling Sahib. India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling*. London: Abacus.
- Allen, Charles. 2013. "The Young Kipling's Search for God." In *Time's Eye: Essays on Rudyard Kipling*, edited by Janet Montefiore, 142–158. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ankers, Arthur R. 1988. *The Pater. John Lockwood Kipling His Life and Times 1837–1911*. Otford: Hawthorns Publications.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Castagno, Andrea del. "Famous Men and Women". *Web Gallery of Art*. https://www.wga.hu/html_m/a/andrea/castagno/2_famous/index.html (last accessed October 13, 2025).
- Chaudhuri, Amit. 2000. "A feather! A very feather upon the face!" Review of *The Unforgiving Minute. A Life of Rudyard Kipling*, by Harry Ricketts. *London Review of Books* 22 (1). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n01/amit-chaudhuri/a-feather!-a-very-feather-upon-the-face> (last accessed May 9, 2026).
- Cheff, Jim. 1987. "'With Illustrations By The Author': Some Author-Artists of the Nineteenth Century." *American Book Collector* 8 (2): 13–19.
- Crane, Walter. (1896) 1984. *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New*. London: Bracken Books.
- Fleming, Rachel. 2003. "John Lockwood Kipling and *Kim*." *Athanas* 21: 41–47.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1979. *Language and Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985) 1994². *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K, Christian Matthiessen (revised by). 2014³. *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Hasan, Ruqaiya. 1989. *Linguistics, Language and Verbal Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- JanMohamed, Abdul R. 1985. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1): 59–87.

- Kemp, Sandra, Lisa Lewis. 1996. *Writings on Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kincaid-Weekes, Mark. 1964. "Vision in Kipling's Novels." In *Kipling's Mind and Art*, edited by Andrew Rutherford, 197–234. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kipling, John Lockwood. 1892. *Beast and Man in India: A Popular Sketch of Indian Animals in the Relations with the People*. London: Macmillan.
- Kipling, Rudyard. (1894–1895) 2021. *The Jungle Book*. Manuscript. British Library, MS 45540. London. Cambremer, France: éditions des Saints Pères.
- Kipling, Rudyard. 1901. *Kim*, London: Macmillan.
- Kipling, Rudyard. (1901) 2002. *Kim*, edited by Zohreh T. Sullivan. London: W.W. Norton.
- Kipling, Rudyard. (1902) 1995. *Just So Stories*, edited with an introduction and notes by Lisa Lewis. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kipling, Rudyard. (1937) 1990. *Something of Myself and Other Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Thomas Pinney. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kooistra, Lorraine Janzen. 1995. *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books*. Brookfield Vermont: Ashgate.
- Kress, Gunther, Theo van Leeuwen. 2006². *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, Lisa. 1995. "Introduction." In *Just So Stories*, xv–xlii. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Low, Gail Ching-Liang. 1996. *White Skins / Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Montefiore, Janet. 2007. *Rudyard Kipling*. Horndon: Northcote House Publishers.
- Orwell, George. 1942. "Kipling." *The Orwell Foundation*. <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/rudyard-kipling/> (last accessed May 9, 2026).
- Pinney, Thomas, ed. 1990. *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling 1872–89*. Vol. 1. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Pinney, Thomas, ed. 1990. *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling 1890–99*. Vol. 2. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Pinney, Thomas, ed. 2004. *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling 1920–30*. Vol. 5. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Ricketts, Harry. 1999. *The Unforgiving Minute. A Life of Rudyard Kipling*. London: Pimlico.
- Rooney, Caroline, Kaori Nagai, eds. 2010. *Kipling and Beyond. Patriotism, Globalisation and Postcolonialism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ryan, James R. 1998. *Picturing Empire. Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. London: Pantheon Book.
- Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture & Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Shaw, Bruce. 1995. "The Tibetan 'Wheel of Life' Versus the Great Game in Kipling's *Kim*." *The Kipling Journal*, 69: 12–21.
- Tompkins, J.M.S. 1959. *The Art of Rudyard Kipling*. London: Methuen.
- Toolan, Micheal. 2012. "Electronic Multimodal Narratives and Literary Forms." In *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, edited by Ruth Page, 127–141. London: Routledge.
- Turci, Monica. 2011. "Kipling and the Visual: Illustrations and Adaptations." In *The Cambridge Companion to Rudyard Kipling*, edited by Howard J. Booth, 169–186. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Waddell, Laurence Austine. 1895. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*. London: W.H. Allen
- Warren, Henry Clarke. 1896. *Buddhism in Translation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.