

Kipling's Wolf-Child Story: An Allegory of Children's Socialization

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Abstract *The Jungle Book* and *The Second Jungle Book* written by Rudyard Kipling have been generally accepted as the classic of children's literature by readers, but interpreted as classic of general literature by scholars. Consequently, the image of Mowgli is always misinterpreted as the European-centered colonizers, and the phrase "The Law of the Jungle" that is repeatedly mentioned in the stories is misread as the proof that Kipling preaches colonialism or imperialism through writing with the theory of post-colonialism. In this paper, I attempt to reread the "wolf-boy stories" in Kipling's jungle stories with the method of ethical literary criticism, and hold that Mowgli's transformation from a wolf in the jungle to a member of human society is allegoric in that it symbolizes the children's socialization from a natural being to a social being, that is, a process in which children acquire social norms and behavior codes, and develop ethical awareness so that they may live harmoniously with others in human society. Mowgli's initiation is ethically educational to child readers in that it helps child reader to understand that the essential difference between animal and human lies not in the physical appearance, but in the ethical awareness that is unique to human beings.

Key words *The Jungle Book*; The Law of the Jungle; Mowgli; socialization

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Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) is the first Noble Prize winner among British writers, but he is also the most controversial one. Although his works were ever among “The 100 Best English-Language Novels of the 20th Century,”¹ he is generally ignored or denounced in China and other Asian and African countries as a lesser writer. In view of the colonialist subject matter in his writings, many scholars tend to interpret Kipling and his works with the literary theory of post-colonialism or Orientalism initiated by Edward Said, and naturally come to the conclusion that Kipling is “the king’s trumpeter,”² or “the preacher of imperialism, advocate of racial discrimination, and spokesman of chauvinism” (Xiao, “Rereading Kipling Today” 152). Since the beginning of the 21st century, some scholars at home or abroad have begun to question this conclusion about Kipling, and hold it necessary to reappraise Kipling. Chinese scholar Xiao Sha, for instance, argues that the conclusion about Kipling drawn from the traditional perspective may be too simple or too arbitrary, and “it is high time that the academic reread and reappraised Kipling from new perspective or with new methodology” (“Rereading Kipling Today” 152). No specific perspective or methodology, however, is mentioned or recommended by the scholars who advocate reappraising Kipling. In this article, I attempt to reread Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* and *The Second Jungle Book* (hereafter *The Jungle Books* for short), especially the stories about the wolf boy Mowgli with the method of ethical literary criticism. Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* is a collection of interesting stories that take place in Indian jungle, the most famous of which are those featuring a wolf-boy named Mowgli who is raised by a wolf family, and is educated by both the animals in the jungle and adopted parents in the human village. Judging the stories as children’s literature masterpiece rather than adult literature classic, I come to a conclusion that Mowgli’s transformation from a wolf in the jungle to a man in human society is allegoric in that it symbolizes the children’s socialization from a natural being to a social being, i.e., a process in which the children acquire social norms and behavior codes, and develop ethical awareness so that they may live harmoniously with others in human society. The image of Mowgli is educational in that it helps child readers to understand that the essential difference between animal and human lies not in the physical appearance, but in the ethical awareness that is unique to human beings.

The “Distorted” Image of Wolf-Boy and Academic Misinterpretation of Kipling

Kipling has great talent in telling child readers interesting and instructive stories, so he is undoubtedly a great children’s literature writer. His classic children’s

literature works such as *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Second Jungle Book* (1895), *Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902) and *Captain Courageous* (1905) are still widely read by contemporary child readers. In his *The Jungle Book* and *The Second Jungle Book* (Hereinafter the two books are referred to as *The Jungle Books*), Kipling constructs a colorful and mysterious world, which is appreciated by readers throughout the world. Among the jungle stories, the stories concerning Mowgli, a wolf boy, are the most popular. Most of the stories in the two volumes of *The Jungle Books* are set in India and all concern animals. The majority of the stories are about the boy Mowgli and his relationship with the beasts in the jungle. The Mowgli stories opens with “Mowgli’s Brothers” in which a human baby is given shelter by a wolf family after Shere Khan the tiger has attacked his parents who are woodcutters. From then on, Mowgli lives together with the wolf family and becomes a wolf boy until eleven, when Mowgli defeats and drives off defiant Shere Khan, who always hopes to hunt down the boy and challenges the right of Akela to lead the wolf pack, with a burning branch, and then leaves the jungle and returns to his own people, mankind.

Kipling was born and grew up in India, where he worked for a long time except for a brief period of education in Britain. It is safe to argue that Kipling knows the facts and truth about the wolf child, for there were documents recording and reporting the life of wolf children or monkey children in India before he began his literary writing. For instance, Robert Sterndale introduced the real life of Indian wolf children in his monograph *Natural History of the Mammalia of India and Ceylon* in 1884, ten years earlier than the time when Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* was published. Just as Kamala and Amala, two Indian wolf children found by English clergyman Joseph Amrito Lal Singh in 1926, could not get accustomed to the life in human society, so other Indian wolf children or monkey children could hardly survive in the human society. The image of Mowgli in Kipling’s stories, however, is thoroughly contrary to the facts and truth about the wolf children. To a great extent, the image of Mowgli as a wolf boy is totally “distorted”, for he not only lives comfortably and harmoniously in the jungle, but also manages to lead an admiring life in the human society. On the one hand, Mowgli grows to be “the Master of the Jungle” (Kipling 393) by overawing the Wolf Pack and tiger with his courage and wisdom; On the other hand, Mowgli successfully takes revenge against those villagers who had hurt him deliberately, and protects his adopted parents after he returns to the village. From *In the Rukh*, a short story that is not included in *The Jungle Books*, we know that Mowgli has not only been married with a girl and has a baby, but also has been offered a job as forest-guard by Government, with

a pension. In some sense, Mowgli manages to transform from a jungle beast to a socialized member of human society.

Kipling had been living and working in India for many years, and he should know that it is almost impossible for a wolf child brought up by a she-wolf to blend himself into human society. Kipling, however, invents a completely different image of Mowgli, which is totally contrary to the facts or truth about the wolf children. Why does Kipling “distort” the facts or truth of wolf child in his literary writing? Different scholars have explained Kipling's writing intention concerning the image of Mowgli from quite different perspectives, which could be roughly summarized into three explanations.

The first explanation is Kipling's inexperience in characterization. Some scholars such as Wen Meihui, a translator who translated Kipling's works into Chinese, argue that the happy ending concerning Mowgli's final fate is unexpected and unbelievable. “Just imagine that Faunus-like Mowgli who overawes all the ferocious beasts in the jungle would finally condescend to take a social position as a forest-guard offered by the colonial government, which is a wet blanket” (Wen 4). According to the scholars like Wen Meihui, it will be better for Mowgli to stay in a raw and uncivilized state than to be employed and civilized, so Mowgli's final socialization embodies the writer's inexperience in the construction of the literary image.

The second explanation is that Kipling is defending British colonialist policy through his writing. Many scholars believe that Kipling writes because of the necessity of promoting colonialism. With the literary theory of post-colonialism, many critics such as Li Xiuqing hold that Mowgli represents the European colonialists, and the jungle beasts such as the tiger and wolf represent the barbaric indigenes. Just as the white colonialists managed to overawe the aboriginal people with guns (“thunder and lightening” in the eye of the indigenes), so Mowgli uses fire (“red flower” in the eye of the jungle beasts) as an invincible weapon to overawe the jungle beasts. “When the wolves and tiger attack him, Mowgli defeats and conquers them with fire as the weapons. Considering fire is the kind of weapon that can only be employed by the civilized human, so the relationship between Mowgli and jungle beasts mirrors the duality opposition between Orientals and Occidentals in the colonialist context” (Li 243). It is quite easy to come to the simple conclusion that Kipling is a preacher of colonialism or a prophet of British imperialism from the perspective of Orientalist discourse.

The third explanation is that Kipling is expressing his identity anxiety through writing. Some scholars such as Bernice M. Murphy, Kipling's biographer, hold

that the Mowgli's confusion in identity choice between wolf and human mirrors Kipling's anxiety or confusion in cultural identification³. Kipling was born in India and worked as a journalist in India for quite a long time, so he was deeply immersed in Indian culture. Meanwhile, he was educated in England, and was deeply influenced by the English culture as a white colonialist. "This kind of complexity and multiformity of the cultural influence are reflected in his writing" (Han 115), which leads to his contradiction in both thought and personality. Angus Wilson writes in 1977 that Kipling is "a gentle-violent man, a man of depression and hilarity, holding his despairs with an almost superhuman stoicism" (Qtd. Carpenter 297). The contradictoriness is also embodied in his identity confusion. Xiao Sha observes that "Kipling is full of contradictariness. As a person who grows up in the fissure England-India society, Kipling's thought is full of contradictoriness, and his literary writing and self experience represent his anxiety over identity confusion" ("Kipling's Identity Anxiety" 128). In summary, Mowgli's identity confusion between beast and human mirrors the writer's own confusion and anxiety over identity choice.

The above mentioned academic interpretations of the image of Mowgli are the conclusions that drawn by the scholars who read the wolf-child stories as the adult literature with the method of the general literature studies. These interpretations enrich our comprehension of Kipling and his stories, but they are misreading to some extent, for critics generally regard Mowgli's stories as adult literature rather than children's literature works. In fact, Kipling's jungle stories have long been accepted as canon of children's literature and have been widely read by child readers since it was published more than a century ago. Wayne Booth argues that "the ultimate problem in the rhetoric of fiction is, then, that of deciding for whom the author should write" (Booth 396), so it is vital to decide for whom the work is written when we study a literary text. Different from the rhetoric employed in writing the literary works intended for adults, the children's literature follow a more children-oriented logic, which conveys more or less coming-of-age secrets to its child readers. It is widely recognized that Kipling's jungle stories are intended for child readers, who come to understand themselves and the world in a different way from the adults, so it is improper to apply mechanically the general literary theory to children's literature studies. In this essay, Kipling's "jungle stories" is taken as children's literary text and is reread with the method of ethical literary criticism, a literary criticism method constructed by Nie Zhenzhao, a distinguished scholar in China. From the perspective of children's initiation, we hold that Kipling's wolf-child stories is a metaphor of children's socialization in that Mowgli's

transformation from a jungle beast to a human being symbolizes children's coming-of-age process, in which a child develops from a beast-like being to a civilized human being.

Identity Choice and Mowgli's Transformation from Beast to Man

The core value of children's literature lies in its fusion of delight and construction. Reading the stories concerning Mowgli's identity choice between wolf and human, child readers may gain the insight into human, and begin to understand the ethical nature of social life. The process that Mowgli grows from a wolf-like baby to a man employed by the government is a metaphoric process in which he gives up the identity of beast and chooses the identity of man. According to the ethical literary criticism, the line between human and animal lies in that animal has only animal factor, while human has both animal factor and human factor. The newly-born baby is similar to the animal as far as the ethicality is concerned, for during the early life of a baby, it is the animal factor, i.e., the animal instinct that guides all his response and action to the outer world. Besides animal factor, the human baby still has human factor, which a child gradually intensifies by learning social norms, getting the social knowledge and forming ethical consciousness. Socialization plays an irreplaceable role in a baby's process of strengthening his human factor and weakening his animal factor. Only in this way, can a human being learn to suppress his animal instinct and develop moral consciousness.

Mowgli's quitting the identity of wolf and identifying with human is metaphoric, for the image of Mowgli is a mirror reflecting the choice a child has to face in his initiation. Children's growth is embodied more in rational maturity and moral betterment than in physical development. The process of children's growth is, in a sense, the process of children's socialization from an ignorant and uncivilized natural being to a rational social being who has gradually understood and internalized the social norms and has the ability to make ethical judgment. Children's literature provides rich mental nutrition for children's ethicalization and socialization in that reading enables children to be mentally enlightened, emotionally touched and morally edified. Children's literature achieves the artistic effect of fusing instruction with delight by constructing a variety of artistic images for readers to imitate, or to develop moral sentiment through esthetic empathy. The image of Mowgli is a case in point.

When readers encounter Mowgli for the first time in the story, Mowgli is nothing but a baby adopted by wolf and lives together with his wolf family. He is "a naked brown baby who could just walk — as soft and as dimpled a little atom"

(Kipling 15). Mowgli learns from Father Wolf the necessary skills to survive in the jungle, and the language of the Wolf Pack as well. He plays together with the wolf cubs, and is amiably referred to as “little naked son of mine” (Kipling 35) by Mother Wolf, and “Little Brother” by Bagheera, a Black Panther in the jungle. During this period, Mowgli does not know that he is the son of an Indian woodcutter, and totally identifies himself with the wolf. “He would have called himself a wolf if he had been able to speak in any human tongue” (26), writes Kipling.

If Kipling only vividly narrates Mowgli’s jungle life in a realistic way, then the narrative will be only a simple depiction of the wolf child life as many naturalists did, which will be forgot by readers very soon. What distinguishes Kipling from other second-rate or third-rate writers is that Kipling “distorts” the fact of the wolf child. Mowgli’s story is canonized because it represents Mowgli’s socialization process, so the story is endowed with rich ethical value. According to Nie Zhenzhao, “the value of the literary canon lies in its ethical value” (142), i.e., a classic literary text is bound to be rich in ethical value. The reason why Mowgli’s story has become a classic text of children’s literature is that the image of Mowgli is not only interesting but also educational to child readers. Mowgli’s story is instructive in that it not only represents wolf child’s life in the jungle, but also represents Mowgli’s identity confusion and his final identification with human, which renders the work educational value.

Mowgli’s identity transformation from a wolf to a human being results from both didactic guidance and life-threatening lessons. The didactic guidance comes from his friends in the jungle and his adapted parents in the village, while the life-threatening lessons come from his enemy Shere Khan, a tiger in the jungle who usually breaks The Law of the Jungle and is finally killed by Mowgli. Mowgli grows up in the jungle, but fortunately he has the opportunity to be educated by Baloo the Brown Bear who teaches Mowgli “The Law of the Jungle”, Bagheera the Black Panther who “was born among men” and “had learned the ways of men” (Kipling 27), and Messua who adopts Mowgli and teaches him “the ways and customs of men” (Kipling 70). Mowgli benefits greatly from their education, which prepares him well for his future life among human beings. From these teachers or tutors, Mowgli learns to “wear a cloth round him”, to “learn about money”, and to “keep his temper” (Kipling 70-71), which are the core knowledge that a child need to learn in the process of blending himself or herself into the human society. Mowgli’s learning in the jungle and his living experience with his adopted parents helping him to acquire the social norms, develop his consciousness of morality,

and help him to doubt his previous identity as a wolf in the jungle and identity with human beings.

After acquiring the social norms and ethical principles of the human beings, Mowgli comes to see the difference between human and beast. In the short story "The Spring Running", Kipling describes Mowgli's identity confusion. Before he is cast out of Wolf Pack, Mowgli is firmly convinced that he is a son of Mother Wolf and Father Wolf, a brother of the four wolf cubs. After experiencing the life among the villagers, Mowgli begins to doubt his identity. He keeps asking himself: Am I wolf in the jungle or a man among the villagers? On the one hand, he is brought up in the jungle by the wolf family, and lives together with the "free people of the jungle" such as the bear, the panther and other beasts, who regard Mowgli as their "Little Brother" (Kipling 26). But on the other hand, Mowgli has the appearance of human being, has the wisdom that is far beyond the beast in the jungle, and is capable of taking advantage of fire (red flower) or cattle herd as the tool to deter and defeat such fierce beasts as tiger and Red Dog. In summary, Mowgli is human in the eye of the jungle beasts, but he is animal in the eye of human.

Mowgli's image as both human and animal is an excellent scenario for child readers to comprehend the process of socialization. Nie Zhenzhao observes that "The most difficult problem that human beings have been faced in human civilization is to distinguish between human from animal and to make identity choice between human and animal" (32). The recapitulation theory generally compares human's civilization history to the children's coming-of-age process, which is regarded as the miniature of human evolution. In this sense, Mowgli's coming-of-age process is a case in point. Mowgli's initiation is, in essence, the process of knowing himself and choosing the proper identity, which helps him to transform successfully from a wolf in the jungle to a man in human society. Through the vivid image of Mowgli, Kipling conveys to child readers that children's initiation has to undergo the process of ethicalization in which one acquires the social norms, develops the necessary awareness of morality and makes ethical choice. A beast can do anything based on his animal instinct, but a man has to act according to the specific ethical principles in a given society, or he will be condemned in Chinese culture as a "Yi Guan Qin Shou" (beast in human clothing).

As mentioned earlier in the essay, some scholars believe it is a faulty stroke for Kipling to arrange Mowgli to be employed by the colonial government in India, to which I hold a totally different opinion. I am convinced that the plot that Mowgli is gradually enlightened and initiated while growing up is a stroke of genius, which is the reason why Mowgli's story can be canonized in the world children's

literature. Mowgli's coming-of-age represents the common experience of human beings, who need to distinguish ethically themselves from lesser animals, develop ethical awareness, and abide by the ethical norms and behavior codes in human society. Mowgli's story is intended for children, who are growing both physically and mentally as Mowgli does. Mowgli's life experience is an allegory of children's socialization, from which the child reader may gain the insight into the social life of human beings. From the image of Mowgli, child readers may come to realize that only after ethicalization, can a natural being transform to a human being. The premise of Mowgli's development is that he needs to identify with and accept human the social norms and behavior codes of human beings. Being accepted and employed by human society is the symbol that Mowgli finishes his socialization.

Mowgli's transformation from a jungle animal to a member of human society symbolizes children's initiation from a natural being to a social being. Socialization involves ethical education, and as far as Mowgli is concerned, learning the "the law of the jungle" is a necessary part of his socialization education.

The Law of the Jungle and Mowgli's Ethicalization

The phrase "the Law of the Jungle" repeatedly appearing in Kipling's jungle stories has caused considerable controversy. As stated above, Kipling was accused of imperialist because of the colonial subject matter and "the Law of the Jungle" in his works. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "the Law of the Jungle" is defined as "the code of survival in jungle life, usually with reference to the superiority of brute force or self-interest in the struggle for survival."⁴ This popular definition is widely taken by common readers, so the phrase is negatively associated with such much-criticized theory as social Darwinism or colonialism. In view of the negative meaning like "survival of the fittest", "survival of the strongest", and "eating or being eaten", the phrase is cited by some scholars as proof that Kipling is justifying British colonialism or imperialism through his literary writing. In fact, the phrase is used by Kipling in *The Jungle Books* to describe such ethical norms as obligations and behavior code with which an animal in the jungle society should comply. What Kipling is intended to express with this phrase is not survival of the fittest in natural selection, but the ethical principles needed to maintain an ideal and harmonious society. As C.D. af Wirsén, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, expressed in his presentation Speech in 1907, "The Laws of the Jungle are the Laws of the Universe; if we ask what their chief purport is, we shall receive the brief answer: Struggle, Duty, Obedience. Kipling thus advocates courage, self-sacrifice, and loyalty."⁵ In Kipling's jungle stories, The Laws of the Jungle does not

refer to the cruel survival struggle, but refers to the norms and codes needed in an ideal or harmonious society. After close reading, I find the main points of *The Laws of the Jungle* in Kipling's *Jungle Books* can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, it advocates the ethical principle of protecting the weak and young. *The Laws of the Jungle* lays down clearly that any adult wolf may withdraw from the Wolf Pack when marries, but he must bring his cubs to the Pack Council "in order that the other wolves may identify them" (Kipling 18) and give them the necessary protection and help until "they have killed the first buck" (Kipling 18), which indicates that the young cubs have become strong enough to protect themselves. This item of *The Law of the Jungle* aims to prevent the stronger from bullying and killing the weaker so that every one can live in peace. Protecting and taking care of the younger generation is the important ethical principle that helps to build a harmonious society, which is quite similar to the moral principle of respecting the elderly and taking care of the children in Chinese society.

Secondly, it lays down the moral principle of gratitude. Mowgli was refused to enter the Wolf Pack when he first attended the Pack Council until Baheera the Black Panther paid for him at the price of a newly killed fat bull. In some sense, bull is Mowgli's lifesaver and does great help to Mowgli so that he has the opportunity to live peacefully and safely in the jungle. According to the principle of gratitude and fairness, Mowgli "must never touch cattle because he had been bought into the Pack at the price of a bull's life" (Kipling 24), and Mowgli act on this principle, having never killed or eaten any cattle young or old.

Thirdly, the *Law of the Jungle* lays down the principle of fairness and justice. When Mowgli was young, he was protected by Akela, the wolf leader, and other wolves. Mowgli "had good conscience that comes from paying debts" (Kipling 343), so when the Red Dogs invaded the jungle where Wolf Pack live, Mowgli tries his best to organize the wolves, managing to defeat the ferocious Red Dogs and guard their homes so as to repay Akela and other wolves. Meanwhile the *Law of the Jungle* advocates the principle of justice, i.e., good will be rewarded and evil punished. The typical evil doer in the jungle is Shere Khan, a lame tiger, who always breaks the law of the jungle. Consequently, he was killed by Mowgli for his offences against human beings and violating *The Law of the Jungle*, which demonstrates the ethical value of justice.

Lastly, *The Law of the Jungle* establishes the principle of harmonious coexistence. "Live and let live" is an important ethical principle that people need to follow for the sake of harmonious living. *The Law of the Jungle* "forbids every beast to eat Man" (Kipling 14), for eating man means "arrival of white men on

elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gongs and rockets and torches” (Kipling 15). In order to avoid being killed by human beings, the beast should avoid killing them. Otherwise they will invite numerous revenges. The principle of forbidding beast to kill men is to protect the beasts themselves, so that both men and beasts can live harmoniously around the village. Avoiding destructing and being destructed is the necessary principle that we should follow for a maintainable and peaceful existence.

Different from the popular interpretation of the law of the jungle as the law of cruel survival struggle, The Law of the Jungle in Kipling’s stories is similar to the moral norms and behavior codes in human society, which lays down the obligation and duty of its members. I hold that Kipling demonstrates an idealist society in which most of the members live peacefully together, and The Law of the Jungle is the necessary law that is used to keep a harmonious social order. The Law of the Jungle is the important factor that helps Mowgli to socialize, so that he can live harmoniously with others. Reading and appreciating Mowgli’s coming-of-age process is very insightful to child readers, who learn that it is necessary to abide by the ethical principles and norms in reading pleasure.

The image of Mowgli is educational to child readers. His transformation from a wolf in the jungle to a member of human society is allegoric in that it symbolizes the children’s socialization from a natural being to a social being, that is, a process when children acquire ethical norms and develop ethical awareness so that they can live harmoniously with others in human society. Mowgli’s initiation story is ethically educational to child readers in that they help child reader to understand that the essential difference between animal and human lies not in the physical appearance, but in the ethical awareness that is unique to human beings.

Notes

1. The Board of the Modern Library, a division of Random House, published its selections of “The 100 Best English-Language Novels of the 20th Century” in 1998, and Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) is listed No 78 in the list. See the list at <http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-novels>.
2. See John Bayley. “The King’s Trumpeter.” 16 Oct. 2015 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2002/07/18/the-kings-trumpeter>, 2015-10-23>.
3. See Bemice M. Murphy. “Rudyard Kipling--A Brief Biography”. 25 Aug, 2015 < <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/india/kipling-bio.htm>, 2015-8-25>.
4. See the detailed definition of “the law of the jungle” in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. See the Presentation Speech delivered by C.D. af Wirsén: "Award Ceremony Speech". 11 May, 2016 <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1907/press.html>.

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