

## Rudyard Kipling's Poem 'The White Man's Burden': A Post-Colonial Study

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### Abstract:

This paper critically examines Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden" through the lens of postcolonial theory, particularly focusing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and the notion of the "Demonic Other." The poem, written during the United States' occupation of the Philippine Islands, is presented as a call to empire under the guise of humanitarian duty. However, it simultaneously reinforces a racially hierarchical worldview by portraying colonized peoples as inferior, irrational, and in need of Western intervention. Kipling's representation of the colonized as "half-devil and half-child" illustrates the imperial discourse that justifies colonial domination as a civilizing mission. This paper argues that such portrayals are not benign literary tropes but ideological tools that serve to naturalize and moralize imperial expansion. Drawing on the theoretical insights of scholars such as Edward Said, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, the paper identifies how colonial literature constructs the East as the "Other" a static and inferior reflection of the West. Said's critique of Orientalism underscores how literature has historically functioned as an instrument of empire, promoting Western superiority and suppressing the agency of colonized subjects. Kipling's poem is shown to fit into what Ashcroft et al. described as the first phase of postcolonial literature, where Western authors write from a position of imperial authority, masking ideological assumptions behind claims of objectivity and moral responsibility. Through a close reading of key lines from the poem and a discussion of its wider cultural implications, this study reveals how "The White Man's Burden" perpetuates a discourse that dehumanizes the colonized while glorifying colonial power. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing scholarly effort to deconstruct colonial narratives and expose the mechanisms of cultural domination embedded in Western literary traditions.

**Key Words:** Civilizing mission, Colonialism, Cultural domination, Deconstruction. Demonic Other, Imperial discourse, Orientalism, Postcolonial theory, Racial hierarchy, Western superiority.

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) is regarded as a central representative of British colonial literature. His famous poem promotes the concept of Western superiority by portraying Western nations as civilized while framing the rest of the world as uncivilized, thereby presenting imperial domination as a moral obligation. However, the same era also produced numerous poets and writers who used their creative expression to challenge this colonial mindset and establish a more humanistic narrative. Their writings not only serve as protests against colonial oppression but also contain early intellectual foundations of postcolonial critique. This literature emerged as a symbol of intellectual resistance against dominant power structures.

Kipling's renowned poem "The White Man's Burden" represents a powerful political and cultural narrative concealed within literature, which remains central to postcolonial criticism today. While the poem superficially adopts a guise of human compassion and sacrifice, it essentially provides moral justification for Western colonial rule over Eastern societies. Written specifically in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the America's colonial expansion into the Philippines, it aimed to promote imperialist ideology.

The colonial mentality and its civilizational hypocrisy are evident in Kipling's portrayal of the White Man's Burden. He constructs an image where Western nations are depicted as civilized, benevolent, and compassionate, while Eastern and African societies are labeled as ignorant, childlike, savage, and even demonic. This distinction reflects the prejudice and arrogance of colonial rulers, reinforcing their superiority while denying the humanity of subjugated peoples.

The poem asserts that Western nations were sacrificing themselves for the welfare of colonized lands, exemplifying moral hypocrisy. The so-called burden was merely a facade masking exploitation, concealing motives of resource extraction, cultural suppression, and the denial of indigenous freedoms. Western powers presented themselves as agents of progress and civilization, when in reality their actions resulted only in subjugation and plunder.

The imperialist use of literature and postcolonial discourse demonstrates how literature was employed by dominant powers to serve political and ideological agendas. Kipling's style, wrapped in appealing terms like morality, religion, and sacrifice, effectively legitimizes a narrative of dominance. The poem not only justifies colonial expansion but also encourages imperial powers to perceive themselves as fulfilling a sacred mission.

Ashcroft, Gareth, and Helen (1989) divide postcolonial literature into three distinct phases or stages in the introductory section of their book.

"They inevitably privilege the center, emphasizing the "home:" over the native...at a deeper level their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the Imperial discourse within which they are created. Literary works which emerge from this moment can be illustrated by the poems of Rudyard Kipling (1).

The foundational period of colonial discourse was dominated by Western authors who systematically privileged Eurocentric worldviews in their literary productions. These writers positioned Western civilization as inherently superior while systematically marginalizing indigenous populations, ostensibly under the guise of objective scholarship but ultimately serving imperial ideological frameworks. The poetic corpus of Rudyard Kipling exemplifies this tradition with particular clarity.

The postcolonial theoretical framework, as developed by Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has subjected these colonial narratives to rigorous deconstruction. Said's conceptualization of Orientalism demonstrates how Western discourse manufactured an image of Eastern societies as inherently backward and uncivilized - a strategic representation designed to legitimize colonial domination. Kipling's seminal work "The White Man's Burden" crystallizes this ideological formation, constructing Eastern populations as intellectually deficient and culturally primitive to naturalize European hegemony.

The linguistic apparatus deployed in Kipling's poetic work transcends mere aesthetic expression, functioning instead as an instrument of epistemic violence. Rhetorical constructions such as "serve your captives' need," "fill the mouth of famine," and particularly the dehumanizing formulation "half-devil and half-child" constitute what Spivak terms "epistemic violence" - discursive strategies that simultaneously erase indigenous subjectivities while naturalizing Western supremacy. These linguistic formulations operate at the level of ideology rather than mere symbolism, systematically degrading native cultures while establishing European moral and political ascendancy as axiomatic.

"The White Man's Burden" occupies a privileged position in postcolonial critique as a paradigmatic example of colonial apologetics. The text's rhetorical strategy of framing imperial domination as moral obligation exemplifies what contemporary scholarship recognizes as the humanitarian alibi of colonial violence. Modern critical analysis identifies the poem as constituting a crucial artifact in the archive of colonial propaganda, demonstrating how literary production was mobilized to manufacture consent for imperial projects while systematically silencing subaltern voices.

Kipling's poetic discourse articulates what postcolonial theory identifies as the fundamental contradiction of colonial ideology - the simultaneous assertion of European cultural superiority and the disavowal of colonial violence. The poem's rhetorical construction of Western powers as benevolent civilizers while representing colonized populations as primitive and childlike exemplifies what Bhabha terms colonial ambivalence - the unstable ideological formation that simultaneously asserts and disavows racial difference.

The poem's exhortation to American imperial expansion into the Philippines demonstrates the global circulation of colonial discourse. Kipling's framing of colonial domination as humanitarian intervention exemplifies what contemporary theorists identify as the white savior complex - the ideological formation that represents colonial violence as civilizing mission. The persistent characterization of native populations as "Other" reveals the racialized foundations of this supposedly universal humanism.

Contemporary postcolonial scholarship reads Kipling's work as demonstrating the intimate connection between aesthetic production and imperial power. The poem's enduring significance lies in its demonstration of how literary texts participate in what Foucault terms regimes of truth discursive formations that produce and naturalize relations of domination. This analysis reveals the necessity of sustained critical engagement with canonical texts to expose their complicities with structures of power.

"To seek another's profit,  
and work another's gain."(2)

"And when your goal is nearest,  
The end for others sought."(3)

Kipling's verses adopt a superficially "philanthropic" tone, yet the language employed to describe the "Other" reveals an underlying imperial arrogance, racial prejudice, and profound contempt for Eastern civilizations. The colonial mindset was rooted in an ideological framework that naturalized white racial superiority while systematically relegating other cultures to inferior status. The concept of the "White Man's Burden" claimed that Western powers were selflessly sacrificing to civilize less developed regions, alleviate hunger, and guide them toward progress. This rhetoric constituted mere pretense; in reality, it

institutionalized racial hierarchy and cultural domination, transforming colonial exploitation into what was framed as a sacred mission.

Colonial powers presented themselves as bearers of "enlightenment" and "knowledge," while their presence actually exacerbated oppression, ignorance, and economic exploitation in occupied territories. Kipling warns America that colonial endeavors will be met not with gratitude but with resentment:

"The blame of those ye better,  
The hate of those ye guard"

As a veteran British imperialist, Kipling assumes the role of colonial mentor to novice American imperialists, advising them to expect no appreciation. Colonized populations, he suggests, will inevitably respond with ingratitude, condemning their supposed benefactors despite their efforts. Furthermore, he asserts that indigenous reactions will lack civilized restraint, instead manifesting as irrational outbursts:

"The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah, slowly!) towards the light:  
'Why brought he us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night?'"

Here, Kipling frames anti-colonial resistance as proof of native irrationality and intellectual deficiency, implying that these populations preferred their subjugation. This exemplifies the worst of imperial logic, which interprets resistance as ingratitude and freedom as an unasked-for gift. The poem's paternalistic language reduces complex societies to childlike dependents, justifying perpetual domination under the guise of benevolent guidance.

Kipling's rhetoric exemplifies what postcolonial theorists identify as the fundamental contradiction of colonial ideology the simultaneous assertion of European altruism and the systematic denial of native agency. By representing colonial violence as tutelage and resistance as backwardness, the poem participates in what modern scholarship recognizes as the epistemic erasure of colonized subjectivities. This analysis reveals how literary texts could function as instruments of imperial propaganda, naturalizing domination through carefully constructed humanitarian narratives. Contemporary critical approaches must continue to expose these ideological mechanisms, demonstrating how colonial discourse manufactured consent for exploitation while silencing dissenting voices.

"And reap his old reward  
the blame of these ye better,  
the hate of those ye guard"(5)

"The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah, slowly!) towards the light:  
'Why brought ye us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night?'"(6)

The so-called "burden" was in fact a carefully disguised form of exploitation. Beneath its surface lay intentions far from noble—such as monopolizing raw materials, relying on inexpensive local labor, dismantling native industries, and ridiculing indigenous cultures. Colonial regimes extracted vast wealth from occupied lands, redirecting it toward their own economic prosperity, while the colonized territories remained engulfed in deprivation and underdevelopment. The very right to self-rule was denied, and native populations were systematically excluded from political agency. Far from being an act of benevolence, colonialism was a calculated enterprise of resource extraction and subjugation, masked behind the rhetoric of progress and civility.

The colonial mindset extended beyond political and economic domains into the cultural and psychological realms. It marginalized native languages, belief systems, and customs, branding them as inferior and seeking their erasure. Western education, languages, and value systems were imposed with the aim of reshaping the intellectual and cultural identity of the colonized, fostering a deep-rooted inferiority complex that disrupted indigenous self-perception. This psychological dislocation still resonates across many postcolonial societies today.

Cultural domination was not confined to language or religion; it infiltrated every facet of life from attire and daily routines to art and even the patterns of thought. Over time, local elites began to adopt the manners and norms of the colonizers, widening the divide between themselves and the ordinary populace. The colonized, consequently, found themselves alienated within their own homeland, made foreign by a system designed to suppress their native being.

Prominent postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Frantz Fanon have strongly critiqued this colonial worldview. Said, in his landmark study "Orientalism", demonstrates how the West constructed a stereotyped and subordinate image of the East, not merely out of ignorance but as a deliberate mechanism of control. This portrayal, deeply

embedded in Western discourse, rationalized imperial dominance by depicting the East as exotic, irrational, and in need of governance.

Said's (1991) analysis of "Orientalism" unveils how colonial powers used intellectual narratives to maintain authority, using cultural representations as instruments of domination. His work remains foundational in understanding the ideological dimensions of empire and the lingering impacts of colonial attitudes.

"A very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists..., have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels... concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind", destiny, and so on."(6)

A significant number of poets, novelists, and literary figures have recognized and engaged with the fundamental divide between the East and the West, shaping their poetry, epics, and fiction around this very dichotomy. Within their works, the customs, mindset, destiny, and other dimensions of Eastern societies are depicted through a particular lens often shaped by inherited cultural and ideological assumptions.

According to Edward Said, Western writers and intellectuals came to view this division between East and West not as a constructed perspective, but as a natural and inevitable reality. As a result, this belief subtly influenced their broader worldviews, including their notions of human equality and universal rights. The world, in their imagination, became split into two distinct realms: the self and the other.

Explaining Said's critical position, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her own writings, emphasizes that this binary view allowed colonial discourse to flourish unchecked. It enabled the West to define itself as rational, progressive, and superior, while casting the East as static, mystical, and subordinate. In doing so, colonial ambitions were given moral justification under the guise of civilizing missions.

"Their view of the "Other" world- "orientalism" is inevitably colored by their own cultural, political and religious backgrounds, leading them to depict those unlike themselves as inferior and objectionable – for example, as lazy , deceitful and irrational "(7). The Western perceptions of the East have always been shaped consciously or unconsciously by their own cultural, political, and religious backgrounds. As a result, those who differ from them are often viewed as inferior, irrational, or untrustworthy. Stereotypes such as laziness, cunning, and illogical behavior are projected onto Eastern societies, not as isolated prejudices but as systemic attitudes rooted in centuries of colonial discourse.

Frantz Fanon, in "The Wretched of the Earth", delves deeply into the psychological consequences of colonial domination. He reveals how colonial systems leave behind profound mental scars on the psyche of the oppressed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", brings forth the issue of representation and voice among marginalized populations those silenced by dominant colonial narratives. She questions whether these subaltern voices can ever truly be heard within structures that were never designed to recognize them.

The work of these critical thinkers demonstrates that "The White Man's Burden" is not merely a poem but a literary tool crafted to conceal the brutal realities of imperialism under the pretense of moral duty. Today, the poem is widely regarded as emblematic of imperial propaganda and racial superiority an enduring reminder of the abuse of power and the violation of human dignity. Rudyard Kipling composed "The White Man's Burden" in 1899, coinciding with the United States' occupation of the Philippines. The poem was meant as an exhortation, encouraging America to extend its colonial influence under the guise of offering help. Kipling portrayed imperial endeavors as a moral obligation of the West a burden to bring civilization, order, and progress to the so-called "uncivilized" East. Yet; within the poem, the depiction of native populations is steeped in condescension, mirroring the colonial mindset.

Edward Said, in his groundbreaking theory of "Orientalism", exposed the intellectual infrastructure of such thinking. According to him, Orientalism is not a neutral academic discipline but a strategic construction by the West to dominate and define the East as backward, irrational, and barbaric. Through this division, the West casts itself as the self-rational and enlightened while reducing the East to the other, thereby legitimizing conquest and control.

Literature, often seen as a space of imagination and creativity, was also deployed as an effective instrument in the service of empire. Critics such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have identified three phases in postcolonial literature. In the initial phase, Western authors upheld colonial hierarchies by portraying the West as superior and the East as subordinate. What appeared as objective narrative, they argue, was often a subtle reinforcement of imperial ideologies.

Kipling's poem is a representative example of such writing. As Lecky notes, Kipling's poetry carried political intent. Its influence deepened when addressed to Western audiences, turning it into a persuasive ideological appeal. Not only did it become part of political machinery, but it also reassured imperial powers that their interference was a moral and civilizing mission.

Kipling consistently refers to colonized peoples as the "other" depicting them as captives, slaves, and primitive nations in desperate need of Western enlightenment. He insists that the West's role is to uplift and reform these nations, even as he describes them as "half-devil and half-child," devoid of reason and prone to idleness, paganism, and resistance to progress. In his portrayal, these societies are idol-worshippers steeped in sloth, with their aspirations doomed to failure. Kipling exhorts Western nations to rescue them from hunger, famine, and disease, presenting these acts as noble service. However, he warns that these efforts will not be met with gratitude, but rather with scorn, hatred, and resistance:

"The people ye serve shall hate you,  
The people ye guard shall scorn..."

This contradiction lies at the heart of what Edward Said identified as the ideological structure of imperialism. Said argued that the West manipulated literature and intellectual traditions to construct narratives that rendered the East weak and dependent. According to him, this depiction was not a reflection of reality, but a projection of Western anxieties and desires. Scholar N. B. Doob also affirms that the Western conception of the East is largely influenced by its own civilizational background, which leads it to perceive Eastern societies as irrational, lethargic, and deceitful. Kipling's poem encapsulates all of these perceptions. He portrays the East as the "demonic other" a dangerous, uncivilized, and unreliable entity. The East, in his vision, exists only to challenge and undermine Western efforts.

Albert Memmi critiques this attitude, observing that the colonized is often described as dishonest and lazy in order to justify colonial dominance. Kipling even imagines that once liberated, the colonized will express regret and complain that they should have been left in their original condition. To him, these people are drawn not to light, but to darkness. This poem, then, unravels the deep psychology of colonial thought. It is a prime example of how literature was transformed into a civilizing narrative, designed to veil conquest and domination behind ideals of justice, humanity, and civilization. Postcolonial criticism aims precisely to expose these concealed narratives those which, under the guise of artistic beauty, normalized imperial oppression.

Rudyard Kipling stands as one of the chief voices of imperial ideology at the close of the nineteenth and the dawn of the twentieth century. "The White Man's Burden" granted moral legitimacy to colonial powers. Yet, alongside Kipling, there emerged other poets and writers who rejected the imperial claim and centered their work on themes of freedom, dignity, and truth. These works reveal the early contours of postcolonial critique. One such figure was "Wilfred Owen", who, unlike Kipling, used his poetry to confront the horrors of imperial warfare. His poem \*Dulce et Decorum Est\* strips away the illusion of imperial glory and presents the grim and gruesome realities of war. Through his verses, Owen offered not only resistance to the imperial project but also a powerful counter-narrative grounded in human suffering and ethical protest:

"Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge."(8)

Rabindranath Tagore, in his poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, envisions a society governed by freedom, truth, and the pursuit of knowledge a land where the human spirit is unshackled and the mind aspires towards higher ideals without fear or constraint:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls..."(9)

Thomas Hardy's poem *Drummer Hodge* tells the poignant story of an unknown soldier who is buried in a foreign land, far from his homeland, with no identity or recognition his grave marked only by the stars of a sky unfamiliar to him:

"They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest  
Uncoffined just as found:  
His landmark is a kopje-crest  
That breaks the veldt around;  
And foreign constellations west  
Each night above his mound.  
Young Hodge the Drummer never knew  
Fresh from his Wessex home  
The meaning of the broad Karoo,  
The Bush, the dusty loam,  
And why uprose to nightly view  
Strange stars amid the gloam."(10)



In his novel "Heart of Darkness", Joseph Conrad exposes the moral darkness that lies at the heart of colonial ambitions. One of his most well-known quotations captures the deep contradictions and hypocrisies of imperial domination:

"The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."(11).

This passage affirms Edward Said's argument that colonial systems sought to portray non-Western nations as uncivilized and backward, thereby presenting Western dominance as a natural and justified order. These literary works whether in poetry or prose stand in stark contrast to Kipling's imperial vision. They present an alternative world shaped by freedom, truth, and intellectual autonomy. Embedded within them is a strong postcolonial consciousness that continues to resonate in contemporary critical discourse.

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) is widely regarded as a representative and proponent of British imperial literature. His poem "The White Man's Burden" reflects a distinctly colonial worldview in which Western nations are portrayed as morally superior, while Eastern societies are depicted as "savage" and "uncivilized." However, during Kipling's own era, there were numerous poets, writers, and thinkers who challenged this imperial narrative. Through their creative resistance, they forged a counter-discourse grounded in humanity and ethical awareness. The postcolonial sensibility present in their writings remains central to critical studies today.

In this context, the works of Wilfred Owen, Rabindranath Tagore, Thomas Hardy, and Joseph Conrad deserve particular attention. From the perspective of Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978) and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity", the writings of these authors can be understood as powerful counter-narratives that confront and subvert the imperial discourse.

Wilfred Owen, drawing from the harrowing realities of World War I, made the brutal truths of warfare the focal point of his poetry. His poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" dismantles the romanticized image of war and exposes its horrific violence. Contrary to the glorification of imperial heroism, Owen offers a bitter truth that patriotic sacrifice often masks the inhuman cost of war. Through the lens of Bhabha's notion of "ambivalence", Owen's poetry undermines the internal coherence of imperial ideology by exposing its contradictions from within.

Rabindranath Tagore's "Where the Mind is Without Fear" presents a transcendent vision of intellectual freedom, enlightenment, and national dignity. He imagines a world where humanity prevails over division, and reason guides progress. Tagore's intellectual stance aligns closely with Edward Said's critique of how the West deliberately fashioned the East as the "Other." In response, Tagore reclaims and redefines this "otherness," offering a new model of identity rooted in self-realization and cultural pride. Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge" serves as a quiet yet poignant elegy for the forgotten soldiers of imperial wars. The poem captures the loneliness of a young soldier buried in a distant land, his identity lost in the unfamiliar terrain a symbolic critique of the dehumanizing nature of colonial warfare. Together, these authors articulate a powerful resistance against colonial domination. Their writings form the foundational threads of postcolonial critique, challenging the myth of imperial grandeur that Kipling so fervently upheld. In contrast to Kipling's vision, these poets and novelists offer a literature that upholds freedom, truth, and human dignity, crafting a counter-narrative that still informs postcolonial thought today.

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