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Unsettling Landscapes: Landscape and the Entelechies of the Alienating Gaze in Kipling's *The City of Dreadful Night*

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Abstract

This paper examines and analyzes Kipling's representation of colonial Calcutta in his travel sketch, *The City of Dreadful Night*. It explores the role of the European gaze at length seeking to uncover the ways in which it became complicit in delineating not only the colonial space but also the (hitherto more secure) notion of Englishness. In order to do so, this paper exploits Freud's play on the concepts of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, shining a light on how the colonial space, in Kipling's imperial narrative, functioned as a covert force in the formulation of identities.

[**Keywords:** Kipling, Landscape, Colonial space, Gaze, Alienation, Desire]

Vision seems to adapt itself to its object like the images that one has of a town when one contemplates it from the height of a tower; hearing is analogous to a view taken from outside and on the same level as the town; touch, finally, relates to (the understanding of) whoever comes in contact with a town from close up by wandering through its streets. (Leibniz 1668)¹

In Kipling's rendering of the colonial city of Calcutta in *The City of the Dreadful Night*², the entelechies of the urban colonial space can be grasped through a careful consideration of the senses—primarily, the visual, the aural, the haptic and the olfactory—and the interplay among them. In the specific context of his travel sketches on colonial Calcutta, this sentence is both the locus of his desire as well

as its occasion. But before one can delve any deeper into the vectors of such longing, it is imperative to remind oneself that Kipling's narrative on Calcutta distils the essence of European alienation and the primordial desire for home. Calcutta, for Kipling, both *is* and *is not* home and it is this very contradiction that enables one to see desire as an embodiment of two opposed ideas: first, as an entity that one must resist or escape from in order to preserve one's integrity and second, as an entity symbolizing the human longing (at the moment of desiring, that is) for an ideal state, object or outcome.

Interestingly, the traveller/narrator of *The City* presents desire as both promise (albeit, elusive) of fulfillment as well as absence or lack—an idea that replicates the essential dichotomy between longing (for the 'object' that one lacks at the moment of desiring) and evasion (of the seductive yet, admittedly sinister world of taboos etc.). However, the desiring Subject is not essentially aware of this

¹ G. W. Leibniz (October 1668). Letter to Jacob Thomasins, quoted by Vidler. (2001). 81.

² All the references to the text (hereafter referred to as *The City*) are taken from the Alex Grosset 1899 edition of the book.

basic dissonance characterizing the nature of his desire(s) but is, nonetheless, structured through the object(s) of his longing(s). It is on account of this very inevitability that it is useful to apprehend the traveller/narrator of *The City* (and concomitantly, the narrative he produces) as the function of his desire(s) for the Orient as well as for all that it (the Orient) lacks. While the European's desire for the Orient (the promise of adventure, discovery, power etc.) can be easily explained, his longing for what the Orient lacks warrants a more conscientious speculation. In this particular instance, what the Orient lacks and the traveller/narrator desires can be summed up (not too imprecisely, so to speak) as "some portion of [my] heritage" (Kipling 7). It is no doubt an abstract idea but, also one that reasonably embodies the European's anxiety, his longing for the *heimlich* in the midst of an alien world and the ultimate unattainability of his desire(s). For although "Calcutta holds out false hopes of some return" (Kipling 6), the materiality of the claustrophobia it invokes automatically cancels the immaterial reprieve afforded by an illusionistic idea of 'homecoming'. The desire for the *heimlich* London within the *unheimlich* domain of colonial Calcutta culminates into the febrile crescendo of the (ironically self-fashioned) "backwoodsman" and "barbarian": "'Why, *this* is London! *This* is the docks. *This* is Imperial. *This* is worth coming across India to see!' Then a distinctly wicked idea takes possession of the mind: "What a divine—what a heavenly place to loot!"' (Kipling 8; emphases added). While Calcutta in its being the specular reflection of Dickensian London excites the desiring Subject (the traveller/narrator of *The City*) into asserting the malleability of forms and models (London, in this instance, is the model not only of Calcutta but also of all metropolises), it is also the locus of the European's desire to appropriate the *Other* for himself ("What a heavenly place to loot!" (Kipling 8)). However, this should not be confused with anti-desire or the desire to annihilate or destroy; on the contrary, it traces

the trajectory of colonial desire to a longing that manifests itself as (latent) power of the Occident over the Orient.

As indicated earlier, Kipling's representation of colonial Calcutta derives, to a great extent, from his sensory experience of colonial space. Like the royal palace in Italo Calvino's "A King Listens" (*Under the Jaguar Sun* 2009 [1983]) which is "all whorls, lobes: [it is] a great ear" (Calvino 38), the colonial metropolis of Calcutta for Kipling is a sprawling sensory map—a vast network of sensory signals concretizing emotion, affect and memory. He repeatedly makes reference to the great "Calcutta stink" which he variously describes as the "essence of corruption" (9) and "the clammy odour of blue slime" (9)—notably fusing the haptic, olfactory and the visual. That the experience of the colonial space (and the subsequent representation of the same in writing) is informed by sensory perception in *The City* need hardly be over-emphasized, given its conspicuousness. Rather, it is the deployment of sensory perception to convey a sense of anxious alienation from the notion of home or the *heimlich in* and *through* language that is likely to strike one as particularly intriguing. The speaking Subject of Kipling's narrative—a stand-in for the European colonial—is alienated in ways more than one, for he not only typifies the Self in exile condemned to dwell "in the outer darkness of the Mofussil" (Kipling 5) but also problematizes the gaze of the European surveying the colony in a more or less unambiguous acknowledgement of the blurring boundary between the familiar and the foreign. At the heart of Kipling's representation of colonial India lies this central paradox: India is both familiar as well as foreign; both home as well as abroad; both *heimlich* as well as its terrifying *Other*. It might be noted that the relation between the (German) words *heimlich* meaning familiar, homely, tame etc. and *unheimlich* (the prefix un- indicating inversion) meaning unfamiliar, strange, uncanny etc. is not free from

ambiguity; they *do* and *do not*—well, at the same time—seem to suggest the same conventional relationship as that shared by two unequivocally antithetical terms. As Freud writes, “*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, ‘the unhomely’) is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, ‘the homely’)” (Freud 134). He further goes on to state:

Unheimlich is clearly the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimich*, *vertraut*, and it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar. But of course the converse is not true: not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening....Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny (Freud 124-25).

In his study of the uncanny, Freud seems to align with Ernst Jentsch—who equated the uncanny with intellectual uncertainty—in supposing that the environment and one’s orientation (or the absence of it) to it determined the likelihood of his experiencing the uncanny or the *unheimlich*. It is precisely this idea that informs the current analysis of Kipling’s representation of the colonial metropolis of Calcutta. The relation with or orientation to one’s environment is further complicated with the consideration that we cannot (and perhaps *ought* not to) produce a fixed category to make amends for the (intellectual) uncertainty that Jentsch alludes to. What is familiar to the one at *home* is always unfamiliar to the one outside—the *stranger*. This proposition, understandably, introduces greater complexities—especially if the position of the subject with respect to his environment is uncertain or fraught with ambiguity. Freud’s analysis of the two German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* yields two distinct sets of results. The first set (predictably) defines the word *heimlich* as belonging to the home, familiar, domestic,

hospitable etc. and the word *unheimlich* as its direct negative, meaning strange, unfamiliar, eerie etc. However, the second semantic set defines the word *heimlich* as secretive (from the German word *das Geheimnis* meaning secret), privy, clandestine and that which is concealed or hidden from sight. On the other hand, the word *unheimlich*, according to the second set can be taken to mean—albeit, less formulaically—familiar, revealed etc. Thus, Freud’s thesis that the *unheimlich* (or the uncanny) is actually and counter-intuitively something familiar and repressed that recurs, follows directly from the less conventional implication of the word (as derived from the second set).

Kipling begins his sketch of colonial Calcutta with the following intriguing observation: “We have left India behind us at Howrah Station, and now we enter foreign parts. *No, not wholly foreign. Say rather too familiar*” (Kipling 5; emphases added). Similarly, colonial Calcutta, in Kipling’s narrative, morphs alternately into an entity that is now desirable and now odious. The alienation of the European which (in this particular instance) stems from the incompatibility between his knowledge of his own identity and his substratal incomprehension of his immediate environment struggles to resolve itself in his desire for home. Concomitantly, Calcutta is projected as London or, to put it more sensibly, metropolitan London is projected onto colonial Calcutta. The effect that such a superimposition produces can only be beguiling as the “whited sepulchre” blends into “a great wilderness of packed houses—just such mysterious, conspiring tenements as Dickens would have loved” (Kipling 59). The allusion to Dickens—very much the one whose construction of nineteenth century-London in his fictional works was characterized by a measured combination of solidity and the disillusionments of modernity—is hardly accidental, especially if one considers the fact that Dickens’ portrayal

of London can alternatively be read as an elaborate treatise on alienation stimulated by the metropolis. In his book, *Dickens and the Unreal City* (2008), Karl Ashley Smith writes: “At his most insightful, Dickens makes the character’s experience of urban disorientation and alienation, which his prose style so skilfully replicates, part of a process that enforces revelation of real identities and relationships” (Smith 220). Similarly, Kipling’s portrayal of colonial Calcutta unleashes the metaphor of space in order to both reveal and emphasize the (European) Self in exile from the securities of home and the wholesomeness of the Anglo culture. Calcutta, in Kipling’s prose, is variously depicted as dangerous, diseased, corrupted, ghastly, evil and a wilderness lacking order—a space which is, in every imaginable way, the exact opposite of Imperial London and all the virtues it typified. While, for Kipling, the colonial metropolis of Calcutta evokes memories of Dickensian London, the familiarity of ‘home’ induced by the ‘white’ town teeming with fellow countrymen in frockcoats and top hats quickly blends into a sense of unease stimulated by urban squalor. Galvanized by dirt and filth, Kipling’s neurosis in the context of colonial Calcutta typifies (albeit, counter-intuitively) the return of the repressed confirming the blurring lines between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*.

The relationship between the European narrator and his surrounding environment is further complicated by the following analogy which he uses to describe his experience of dwelling in the colonial city: “it is remarkably like sleeping with a corpse” (Kipling 13). The semantic violence unleashed by the word “corpse” is particularly noteworthy in this context since it not only conjures memories of violence associated with Europe’s Imperial Project in the East but also signals the fallibility inherent in the European’s (absurd) desire for domesticating his intractable *Other*. The desire for an ideal English State or, in other words, the replication of imperial

London in colonial Calcutta is therefore doomed from its very inception. Kipling’s linguistic fashioning of the indigenous people as “natives” (as opposed to the more neutral ‘indigenous’ or ‘autochthonous’) as pointed out by Low (153) reasserts the socio-political divide between the English in India and its indigenous, subjugated population. The segregation is immediately apparent in the layout of the colonial city with its distinct white town and native quarters—in the orderly decorousness of (white) Chowringhee and the “foul wattle-and-dab huts” and “rabbit-warrens” of the native settlement. Interestingly, Kipling’s representation of the highly precarious native quarters with their flammable tenements, evoke the “Subura” of ancient Rome which may, with some credence, be considered as the precursor of the modern slum housing the impoverished and the disreputable. Consequently, it is not too difficult to comprehend how the unsettling landscape of the colonial city might have been instrumental in alienating the European traveller/narrator and in bringing to light his anxiety pertaining to his own Englishness.

In the current context, the traditional understanding of landscape as an aesthetic appreciation of the environment is complicated, given the character of the gaze that formulates it. For instance, the recurrent images of disease, pestilence, filth, pollution and abjectness that punctuate Kipling’s imperial narrative, imbue the landscape of colonial Calcutta with a dreariness which is not only characteristic of the actual locale as experienced by the traveller/narrator, but is also reflective of the specific position—that of the panoptic (European) solar eye—he writes from. The use of landscape in *The City* often generates an acutely dystopic effect further complicating the traditional understanding of the concept. The imbrication of objectified environments and the gaze of the observer echoes Lawrence Buell’s conceptualization of landscape as an embodiment of the holistic

comprehension of the gaze. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*³ (2005), Buell writes:

Landscape typically refers to rural rather than urban contexts and typically implies certain amplitude of vista and degree of arrangement, whether the referent is an artifact or an actual locale. But what is called landscape may be messy or chaotic rather than orderly, foreshortened as well as panoramic, urban as well as exurban. In all cases, *landscape implies the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point*. (Buell 142-43; emphasis added)

Thus, according to Buell, the conceptualization of environment as landscape not only entails variability but also the gaze (of the observer) delineating it. In fact, this is also how Kipling seems to narrativize space and its embodiments in his imperial narrative—by faithfully recording the varied environments (or landscapes) through which he traverses on the one hand, and endowing them (by means of his gaze) with meaning, on the other. Buell's formulation of landscape as “the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point” is particularly useful in the analysis of the relationship between the European traveller/narrator and the colonial space he traverses *in* and *through*. Buell's gaze is a function of its latency—the comprehension of the gaze from its vantage point being, at least partially, informed by the workings of an inner world which is reasonably complicit in producing the ‘reality’ as the observer sees/experiences it. Admittedly, the European does carry an ‘inner world’ within himself and, as Kipling evinces in the course of *The City*, it is this inner world which has to constantly negotiate with the external environment (the indigenous or native landscape, that is)

³ See Buell (2005), especially pp 142-43 for an insightful analysis of this.

reformulating and reconstructing it in the process.

However, the European gaze—as evident from *The City*—is not just directed at the urban landscape but also at the (native) bodies occupying it. The body, as it might be said, is the principal site of convergence of social and political anxieties that are often expressed through disturbing images of the corporeal form. Consider the following observation: “Natives sleep and lie about all over the place, and whole quarters are just so many rabbit-warrens” (Kipling 55). Not only does such a description of the metropolitan landscape evoke a sense of claustrophobia with the overwhelming presence of bodies littered all over, but also—more disturbingly—blur the distinction between man and beast (men living in “rabbit-warrens” are rhetorically dehumanized). To observe the colonial body—so seeable, that it seems to naturally warrant a universal invisibility—is, at least superficially, meaningless because the cultural codes that it represents remain, to a great extent, incommunicable to its observer. Through the colonizer's lingering and insistent gaze, the colonial body is transformed into a field of meaninglessness and anonymity; it is reduced to an object that functions within the Orientalist narrative as a mere prop to support and uphold the colonizer's intellectual fecundity.

The relationship of the colonial body with the foreign or the *Other* is, strictly speaking, dialogic which is evident not in the hubristic ‘I’ of the Western eye—the purveyor of epistemologies—but in the latter's incapacity to proactively effect a closure, to be indifferent to *Otherness* and to remain uninvolved on the whole.⁴ And, so flows the awkward desire to flee:

⁴ See Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism*. London, USA and Canada: Routledge, 1990. 17. Holquist writes: “In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will

Let us escape from the lines of open doors, the flaring lamps within, the glimpses of the tawdry toilet-tables adorned with little plaster dogs, glass balls from Christmas-trees, and—for religion must not be despised though women be fallen—pictures of the saints and statuettes of the Virgin. (Kipling 55)

This particular instance refers to a certain Mrs. D___, a Eurasian woman, “the widow of a soldier of the Queen.” Her presence in a colony of prostitutes is particularly disquieting as she—unlike the debased (but native) figures of Dainty Iniquity and Fat Vice—is after all a Eurasian “fallen” from grace, a figure that threatens to dissolve the neat demarcation between the colonizer and the colonized.⁵ The inopportune consequence of such brazen dissolution of racial difference is subsequently summarized by the narrator in the following words:

[T]he secret of the insolence of Calcutta is made plain. Small wonder the natives fail to respect the Sahib, seeing what they see and knowing what they know. In the good old days, the honorable the directors deported him or her who misbehaved grossly, and the white man preserved his *izzat*, He may have been a ruffian, but he was a ruffian on a large scale. He did not sink in the presence of the people. The natives are quite right to take the wall of the Sahib who has been at great pains to prove that he is of the same flesh and blood. (Kipling 74-75)

In Kipling’s *The City*, the urban landscape of colonial Calcutta is represented not merely as the source of anxiety (for the colonizer) but also as the site of negotiation between the speaking (and the desiring) Subject and the *Other*. Kipling’s representation of colonial

Calcutta and the colonial space in general has much to do with the complex and beguiling trajectories of the European gaze. This paper implicates the European gaze in the revision and reformulation of both colonial subjectivity as well as the colonizer’s notion about his own Englishness. In doing so, it proposes that the mythification of the colony followed from a corresponding desire (in the European colonizer) for naturalizing the ‘alien’ or the ‘foreign’ into the organized grammar of colonial/English discourse.

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endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism consciousness is otherness.

⁵ This is yet another instance of the *heimlich* dissolving into the *unheimlich*.

Satarupa Sinha Roy has recently submitted her Ph.D. thesis entitled, *A Civilization Decoded: Naipaul's Use of the Travelogue in the Indian Context* for evaluation at the University of Calcutta. Her area of specialization is 'Travel Writing and Modern Fiction.' She earned her B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Literature from the University of Calcutta.
