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The Naulahka: A Story of Cultural Representation

Eve Papa¹

Abstract: This article addresses the issues of cultural theory and representation that arise in Rudyard Kipling and Wolcott Balestier's 1892 novel The Naulahka: A Story of West and East. Kipling and Balestier's novel highlights cultural differences between America and India, and in doing so raises controversial points on acceptance and understanding (or lack thereof). Framed through the theme of service travel, the novel's characters navigate a new life riddled with culture shock in an attempt to find their own version of cultural compassion. Additionally, this article will reference the cultural theories of Stuart Hall to help understand representation of Indians in the text. In particular, Hall's encoding/decoding model argues for the subjectivity of cultural understanding in that interpretation of representation varies between individuals; therefore, the intentions of the authors might not be as clear as they seem. Thus the following questions arise: Does The Naulahka serve as an educational, informative discourse on the topic of cultural representation? Or is it just plain offensive?

Key words: Naulahka, East/West, novel, culture, representation, Rudyard Kipling, Wolcott Balestier, Stuart Hall, encoder, decoder, message, communication, conflict, understanding, acceptance, metaphor, language, social issues, semiotics.

Since Rudyard Kipling and Wolcott Balestier's 1892 publication of *The Naulahka: A Story of West and East*, much has changed in the way of Indian representation and acceptance by the Western world. Kipling and Balestier's novel highlights the cultural differences between the Eastern and Western parts of the world but does so in a controversial manner; subsequently, the novel addresses larger issues of acceptance and understanding. To break down the presence and meaning of representation in the book, the cultural theories of Stuart Hall can serve as a helpful reference. An analysis of *The Naulahka* through Hall's encoding/decoding model argues for the subjectivity of cultural understanding in that interpretation of representation varies between each and every human being. In raising questions on cultural interpretations, the novel also brings to light multiple social issues.

The Naulahka features a main character, Kate Sherriff, whose quest for personal enlightenment takes shape in the form of service travel. As she journeys to India to fulfill her "calling" of serving as a nurse for underprivileged Indian women, a complex image of the Westerner as superior arises. While depicted as a hero, she also serves as a pure, perfect character who is making many sacrifices to travel east. While in India, she is depicted as

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bringing light to the otherwise dark world of Indian women; she, as an American, is the cure to their ailments. In a conversation with her boyfriend, Nicholas Tarvin, Kate describes her motives as the following: “It’s for that I’ve come... Because they are *not* like us... If they were clever, if they were wise, what could we do for them? It is because they are lost, stumbling, foolish creatures that they need us” (107). The language Kate uses to describe her patients and her reasons for making such a voyage to India stereotypes her patients and categorizes them in a demeaning fashion. As these descriptions are used early in the novel, readers are put in a position to wonder about the reasons behind Kipling and Balestier’s choice to create the character of Kate. Do they wish to depict a selfless woman who genuinely wishes to improve global health? Or do they wish to depict the Westerner as the “cure?”

An important discussion additionally rises with the actions of Tarvin himself. Although the novel’s opening may indicate that the story is about Kate and her journey towards service, Tarvin’s character quickly arrives to steal the show. On his search for the possibly mythical Naulahka necklace, he pushes his way into the picture as the main character and displays greedy motives. After hearing that Kate is leaving for India (and after her refusal to stay back in the States with him), Tarvin decides to follow her. The reason for this is not only because he wants to watch over her and “protect” her, but also because his search for the necklace will make or break the future of his beloved hometown of Topaz, Colorado. Tarvin is a recently elected congressman in Topaz, and he has been given the promise by the Three C’s Railroad Company that if he can bring back the Naulahka for the wife of the company’s president, then a railway will be installed in Topaz. And further, Tarvin will be the most cherished and successful man in his small-but-proud Western town.

Kate and Tarvin’s interactions with each other and with the people around them can be viewed through the lens of Hall’s cultural works. As a pioneer in the discipline of cultural studies, Hall provides a solid foundation for assessing any and all things representation. Cultural studies are, essentially, the scholarly research and debate on what culture is, how it affects us, and how we perceive it. In his 1997 article “The Work of Representation,” Hall takes his extensive knowledge on the subject and uses it to break cultural representation down to its bare bones. Though much of Hall’s theoretical work focuses on representation in the media, his ideas can just as easily be applied to literary texts. Hall begins this complex discussion by providing a couple of varied definitions of the term “representation”: “Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people...Representation is the production of meaning through language” (Hall 15-16).

Hall then follows with a layout of various approaches to cultural representation. He breaks cultural representation into three categories of theory: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. Reflective representation argues that language reflects the truth; the meaning

already exists, and the words on a page are merely conveying that meaning. Intentional representation, on the other hand, is a depiction that is purposely produced by its creator to convey a specific message or belief. Rather than mirroring what already exists, intentional representation argues that language is used to create meaning. The third category of cultural representation, in comparison to the reflective and intentional approaches, carries a bit more of a substantive discussion. Constructionist representation, Hall maintains, involves an understanding of semiotics.

At its core, semiotics is the recognition that there is a difference between real concepts and the words and images that we use to describe them. The real concepts are “signified,” and the words and images used for description are the “signifiers.” A semiotic approach to cultural representation, therefore, relies heavily on the use and comprehension of language; this by default requires an understanding of “polysemy.” A signifier can have more than one meaning; that is, different people can potentially interpret signs differently. Hall explains polysemy’s relevance to cultural representation through “conceptual maps.” Every individual on Earth operates with a slightly different “conceptual map,” or background knowledge with which people interpret the world around them. While everyone’s conceptual map is different, those within the same culture will find that theirs share many similarities:

That is indeed what it means when we say we ‘belong to the same culture.’ Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why ‘culture’ is sometimes defined in terms of ‘shared meanings or conceptual maps.’ (see du Gay, Hall et al., 1997 cited in Hall 18)

People of a shared culture can most closely relate to each other because of their similar backgrounds. These similar backgrounds are the cause for how a conceptual map is developed, and thus, those with similar backgrounds will share similar maps.

With the understanding of cultural representation categories and their implications of personal interpretation, we can jump a bit back in time to Hall’s 1973 paper “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” and 1980 paper “Encoding/Decoding.” These works highlight his original theory on the encoding/decoding model of understanding television programming and interpretation, and they argue for the concept of an active viewer. The encoding/decoding model stems from the semiotic approach to cultural representation, in that it emphasizes again a relationship between the signifier and the signified. In this case, Hall breaks up television discourse into three components: the encoder, the discourse, and the decoder.

In this model, the “encoders” are television writers and producers, the “programme” is what is displayed on the screen, and the “decoders” are the viewers. The encoders select what sort of message or narrative they wish to portray in their work; their conceptual maps

heavily influence this. From there, the decoders view the work and interpret it in alignment with their own conceptual maps, and make a conscious decision on what to think of the material. It is also important to note that a relationship exists between the decoders and the encoders, in that in order for cultural representation and understanding to be ever-changing—and for everyone to be aware—a discussion on difference in conceptual maps must occur. In viewing television as such, Hall argues that its viewers are actively engaged and constantly interpreting (even if they are not aware that this is occurring). This thought challenges traditional idea that television viewers are passive and not capable of absorbing any cultural narratives; rather, they simply move on with their lives, no differently, when they step away from the television (or as it is sometimes called, “idiot box”). Ultimately, when looking at Hall’s encoding/decoding model and theories on representation, one must understand that there is always a message, whether obvious or subtle, conscious or unconscious, that travels through the medium.

While it was written in the context of television and mass media, the beautiful thing about Hall’s encoding/decoding model is that it can just as easily be applied to literature and other forms of communication. In this case, Hall’s theories can be applied to *The Naulahka* quite well, in that they can help us understand the contrast between depictions of West and East. The novel highlights cultural representation on a few different levels: through use of language, social issues, and metaphor.

Language is crucial when conveying any cultural message. In *The Naulahka*, Kipling and Balestier’s choice in language is something that will stick out to just about any modern-day reader. The words they use to describe Indian people include (to name a few): children, simple, creatures, things, and Orientals. For example, when Kate explains to Tarvin her motives for journeying to India. She says: “‘It’s for that I’ve come...Because they are *not* like us...If they were clever, if they were wise, what could we do for them? It is because they are lost, stumbling, foolish creatures that they need us” (107). Although much has changed in the way of cultural representation since the 1800s, the time period is not enough of an explanation as to the demeaning language we see here. If any reader is to be offended by the text, it is understandable because this miscommunication has to do with conceptual maps. There is much possibility here for there to be a difference in the encoders’ message and the decoder’s interpretation, and this is because everyone interprets language at least a bit differently. Moreover, the particular use of language in the novel brings up questions regarding the purpose of Kate’s character and her work in India.

Kate and Tarvin’s interactions with each other and with the people and setting around them indicate a larger metaphor pertaining to culture. Kate and Tarvin both express personal reasons for traveling to India—different, but personal. Tarvin’s motives are much more apparent: he wants Kate and he wants the necklace. Kate’s motives are a bit more hidden: she wants to help people so that she can receive emotional fulfillment. These goals

expressed by the characters can be compared, in a sense, to a search for common cultural ground. Throughout the novel, there are moments in which cultural understanding seems possible, and moments in which it does not. An example is reflected in the following passage, which describes Kate's disappointment when her patients abandon her hospital and her care:

She had told Mrs. Estes so much of her hopes for the future, had dwelt so lovingly on all that she meant to teach these helpless creatures, had so constantly conferred with her about the help she had fancied herself to be daily bringing to them, that to own that her work had fallen to this ruin was unspeakably bitter. (285)

Here we see Kate experience sadness and even a bit of anger at the idea that the patients are not interested in complying with her goal of emotional fulfillment. This reflects not only personal interests with regard to Kate's goals, but also a larger idea that Kate is working hard to understand the people around her. She may be in the earlier stages of cultural understanding, but she is at least starting the process.

At times in the novel, both Kate and Tarvin's goals seem impossible, which translates into an impossibility of finding cultural understanding. In the end, however, Kate and Tarvin both give up their respective dreams in order to benefit the people and situations around them. This final decision to do a larger work of good reflects, to a degree, their final finding of cultural understanding before departing back to Topaz. However much the language and situations of the novel may at times seem ignorant, the message is ultimately hopeful in looking towards cultural progress. This is especially true of how the book concludes.

The language and metaphor expressed in the novel give way to larger social issues that Kate and Tarvin face. As we have seen, both characters' reasons for wanting to travel to India display greed to a certain extent. Kate's motives, in particular, involve deeper questions about the motives for service work. Kate claims that she wants to travel to India to help women, but the reason she wants to do so is for personal, emotional fulfillment. However, Kate never addresses whether this is the right reason for wanting to participate in global service. Additionally, she also never considers as to whether the women in India *want* her help. The following passage describes a situation in which some ill women do not wish to be treated by Kate: "There were many women...who refused her ministrations completely. They were not ill, they said, and the touch of the white woman meant pollution" (116-117). Although Kate wishes to treat all of these sick women, not all of them necessarily want her help. This, therefore, brings up a larger social issue of service work. Do people in areas that receive service work want the help? What are the criteria of determining whether service work in a particular area is a beneficial idea? And further, as we see in Kate's situation, is emotional fulfillment a legitimate reason for doing service?

The Naulahka does not provide answers to these heavy questions, but rather it contributes to the conversation. Kipling and Balestier provide language, metaphors, and

situations that allow readers to ponder, discuss, and evaluate real-life issues and events. As Kate Sherriff journeys to India to fulfill her “calling” of serving as a nurse for underprivileged Indian women, a complex image of the Westerner as superior arises. Opinions of Kate vary among the people of Rhatore, as some see her as a hero at times (“white fairy”), and others see her as pollution to their city. But regardless of how the women of India view her, Kate prefers to view herself as a pure, wholehearted American who is bringing light to the otherwise dark world of Indian women. She sees herself, more so than her medicine, as the cure to their ailments.

Change is impossible without new experiences, conversation, and debate. And in that sense, Kate and Tarvin’s travels to a foreign land were the first steps in a much larger and more important journey.

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