



Research Paper

At Crossroads: Identity Crisis In The Movie *Mowgli: The Legend Of The Jungle*

Christina Romeo

ABSTRACT: Films have become a semi-textual genre with its increasing visual and academic content. It is no longer solely an entertainment media. Films tell and re-tell the familiar stories in a new light. One such attempt is Andrew Clement Serkis' *Mowgli: The Legend of the Jungle* which premiered on Netflix on 2018. The director in the movie rediscovers Rudyard Kipling's masterpiece into a boy torn between opposite worlds: the human and the animal. The paper is a study on the identity crisis faced by the central character Mowgli in the movie *Mowgli: The Legend of the Jungle*.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Mowgli, Film Studies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this twenty-first century, there is no other art form like a movie that influenced the people. It is impossible to neglect film as a semi-textual genre exerting influence on literature. *Mowgli: The Legend of the Jungle* is a film directed by Andrew Clement Serkis who is an English actor and film director. In *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle*, his adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's beloved story collection *The Jungle Book*, director and co-star Serkis throws in too many new elements and, in the process, derails the plot's familiarity and some of its charms. As in many other versions of Kipling's tale, Mowgli is an orphaned boy. The film is a darker, bloodier take on the familiar Mowgli's story. Giving a twist to the classic *The Jungle Book* by going beyond and exploring the darker side, filmmaker Andy Serkis says it was very important for him to make *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle* closely linked to the Indian culture.

Mowgli has always been an interesting character. A young boy, orphaned as an infant, raised by wolves, who ends up killing the tiger who killed his parents. Along the way, he has to wrestle with the fact that he is a human in the animal jungle. It becomes clear, early on, that he does not belong and is often ostracized for being a "man cub." Aside from social adversity, he also has to deal with animals who are bigger, stronger, and faster than him. The more he tries to emulate other animals, the harder his journey becomes.

In many ways, Mowgli is a refugee, a child escaping death who finds a home and love in a much unexpected world. But there are those who never allow him to forget that he is an 'outsider' who can never really belong. Stephen King in his book, *On Writing*, talks about the inner and outer struggle of the character. In order to write a good, complex, dynamic character, that character needs to suffer, and overcome, inner conflict and outer conflict. In the case of Mowgli, he must deal with the inner conflict of discovering and embracing who he is, a human, while overcoming the external conflict of surviving this monstrous tiger who is determined to kill him.

The Jungle Book concludes with a battle between Mowgli and Shere Khan. At the beginning of the battle, Mowgli wanted to fight with the wolves. Nisha, Mowgli's adopted wolf mother, stopped him from joining the wolves and told him to fight like a man. Then Mowgli took his first steps into accepting he was a man by running to the forest fire. Mowgli defeated Shere Khan in the burning forest by acting like a human with cunning ingenuity, while the Shere Khan fell to his fiery death. In one swoop, Mowgli overcame his internal conflict, accepting his identity as a human, and his external conflict, killing the tiger who wanted to kill him. But the movie makes it much difficult and thus realistic. It is impossible to throw away one's identity without mental suffering. It is that crisis that the movie focuses on rather than the story.

In the movie, *Mowgli: The Legend of the Jungle*, one can divide Mowgli's identity crisis into three parts. First and the most obvious one is Mowgli's confusion about his own identity. The second one is his love as well as hate towards human identity and finally the last one is Mowgli; the man and the wolf where he accepts both his identities.

When Mowgli grows up and begins to develop a sense of self, he finds himself having an outsider feeling: Is he a wolf? Or is he a man-cub? This question of Mowgli raises many other questions like should our identity stem from where our family comes from? Or should it come from the place in which we were raised? Is this issue as binary as it sounds? One can see the confused Mowgli about his identity when he asks Bagheera,

MOWGLI. Bagheera, why am I different?

BAGHEERA. You are special, little brother.

Bagheera is not revealing the truth that Mowgli is a man-cub because he knows the entire past of Mowgli that how he came to this jungle and what happened to his parents. This causes an increase in Mowgli's crisis as his questions are not answered. Actually, Bagheera is trying to protect him from the man-eater tiger Shere-Khan. One understands why Bagheera is covering the truth from Mowgli from the dialogues of Bagheera when Mowgli was in the cage.

When Baloo give hard training to Mowgli he questions about the need for these types of training? When the rest of the students have a particular routine and for him a different one. And it's natural to question them. These types of questions of Mowgli are some of the confusions about his identity in his mind. Without Bagheera, everyone in the wolf pack wished Mowgli to be here in the jungle. Everyone saw a future of jungle in Mowgli. One understands this hope put in Mowgli from Akela's words. His words goes like this "The jungle is changing. Man is taking more of it, and the boy may just be our only hope of survival."

So Akela orders Baloo to give hard training to Mowgli to fit him in as a wolf. But Bagheera understands before "The Running" that the jungle is no longer safe to Mowgli and he personally says to Mowgli when they both looking at the village that he must go to the village because he is a human as Shere Khan has no courage to enter the Man's village.

BAGHEERA. I've seen the way you look at the village. Mowgli, you are one of them.

BAGHEERA. [to Mowgli] The jungle is no longer safe for you. You must stay in the village. You will be alright, little brother.

After this conversation his confusion about his own identity increases. He argues with Bagheera that "I am not a man but I am a wolf." At last Bagheera demand a promise from Mowgli if he fails in "The Running" then he must go to the village. When Mowgli meets the Hyena that time it rhetorically say about the 'wolf life' of the 'human' Mowgli. As the hyena says to him with uncharacteristic depth, "I wake up and believe I'm a

tiger, but I will always be a hyena". This dialogue, given even though by a minor character, has a profound effect in the film as it literally throws light into the true birth identity of Mowgli. It can even be seen as Mowgli's own indirect cry about his identity. Mowgli becomes very upset after this incident with the hyena. His mind is distracted with a question "where I want to belong in the jungle or in the village and who am I? A wolf or a man?". He goes to the cave and talk with his wolf mother Nisha,

MOWGLI. All I've ever wanted is to belong.

NISHA. You will always be my son, Mowgli. Nothing can ever change that.

His disturbed mind became calm when he talked to Nisha. Anyway, Mowgli likes to be here in the jungle. Here, Mowgli wants to conform to his identity as a wolf as it gives meaning to him.

But when Mowgli has failed in "The Running" and Shere Khan made problems inside the wolf pack, Mowgli is forced to go to Man's village. The animals think that it is a place where he truly belongs. But for Mowgli it's an ordeal to find his identity; the one where he is not confused. He enters the village with a burning branch because the humans are like aliens to him. The hunter Lockwood beats on his head and he goes unconscious. When Mowgli open his eyes he is in a cage. The cage is an important symbol as it signifies Mowgli's inner barrier to conform to the identity of a human. Even though he is in the village, he doesn't belong there. He is human physically but mentally and culturally he still belongs to jungle. Mowgli was very much angry on the first day but in the day morning when he wakes up he sees that the door of the cage was open. The opening of the cage shows Mowgli's opening up to his new identity.

Mowgli comes out of the cage but did not try to escape from the village. He observes the village silently. The Hunter understands that Mowgli is a feral child so he starts to teach human manners to him. For example how to use a knife, to take bath, to wear clothes ...etc. Then we can see the changing in the character of Mowgli and his changing attitude towards Man's village. He quickly becomes friendly with the village. He starts playing and enjoying with other boys. We can see Mowgli's emotional attachment with the hunter when he hugs the hunter just after giving the knife to Mowgli. Dialogues of Mowgli with his Wolf Brother (when he came to see Mowgli) are also strong evidence to prove the Mowgli is conforming to his new found identity.

WOLF BROTHER. Shere khan is taken over. We have to leave home

MOWGLI. It's not my problem anymore

WOLF BROTHER. The pack need you, you have to come back

MOWGLI. This is my home now

These things also help us to understand the loving nature of Mowgli towards his original human identity. His sudden love for humans develop from the answers that he got for his questions. All the questions that he had in mind when he was in jungle got answered as he came to the village. He could identify with the people and that provided him with a sense of belonging which he never got in the jungle. But this calm did not last long.

In the night after the holi celebrations, Mowgli enters Hunter's quarters and sees Bhoot's head on a spike on display. Another distinctive element of the movie is the introduction of the new character Bhoot. Bhoot and Mowgli are best friends but are both regarded as "freaks" by some members of the wolf pack. After a disastrous wolf run, Mowgli lashes out at Bhoot, telling at him that he isn't special and that he "came out wrong". Hurt, Bhoot leaves without saying another word to Mowgli. We don't see Bhoot again until Mowgli enters Hunter's quarters and sees Bhoot's head on a spike on display. Mowgli sees his friend and cries. It is

heavily implied that the Hunter kills Bhoot to add to his personal collection of animals. This makes Mowgli hate the hunter and the village. In the pain of his best friend Bhoot's demise, Mowgli thinks about the Wolf Brothers words and he understand that he must go to the jungle to protect jungle. Bhoot was a character similar to Mowgli in the jungle. He too was an outsider and Mowgli too identified with his feelings at times. The demise of his friend makes his animal identity to resurface as he again faces a crisis in understanding the actions of humans. He then goes back to the jungle by putting away the relations with the Humans and Man's village. Mowgli understands that he can't be a Man.

What now one sees is a dilemma in Mowgli where Mowgli can't accept his human origin and he can't forget the friends, family in the jungle. He finds himself in the crossroads. Mowgli comes to the Akela and the remaining wolf pack to say about the killing of Shere Khan but Akela doesn't give permission to kill the Shere Khan due to the sacred jungle laws. Reply to the Akela's dialogue shows the failure of Mowgli in finding his original identity.

AKELA. When you were a cub, I looked you in the eyes and I saw no fear. I believed that one day you would bring peace to the jungle. But you have become a man now, Mowgli.

MOWGLI. I'm not a man. But neither am I a wolf. Which of you will follow me?

In the last part, Mowgli comes to the conclusion that he is not a man. But neither a wolf. But this identity problem will not become an obstacle to his goal to kill the Shere khan. The movie ends with the dialogue of Kaa: "[narrates] with the tiger and the hunter now gone, the future shimmered from darkness into light. Mowgli, man, and wolf, both and neither had given the jungle a voice. And for as long as he stood to watch, it would speak a lasting peace"

It is here that one truly understands the dialogue by the prophetic character Kaa "Not quite a wolf, not quite a man, or neither, or both,". Mowgli accepts both his identities. He becomes a man-wolf when he willingly abandons the village and walks into the jungle. Mowgli's most valuable lesson was that he shouldn't neglect either part of his being. He is always going to be human, however at the same time, nothing can change that he was brought up as a wolf.

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