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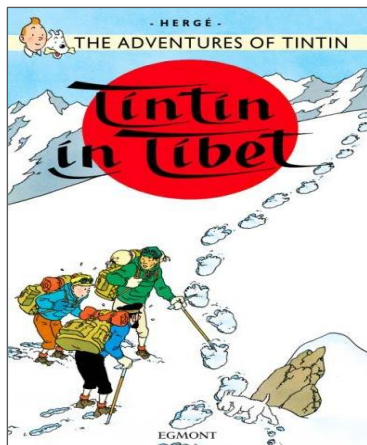
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**A STORY OF ENIGMA: RE-READING OF *TINTIN IN TIBET***

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**LINK:** <https://santiniketansahityapath.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Asmita-Som.pdf>



Iconographical presentation of Tintin's face shaped like O, with only 2 dots for eyes.



CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGY IN TINTIN IN TIBET

**Abstract:** Children's literature, especially Tintin series is swaying the global market with its unprecedented popularity. Tintin in Tibet is conspicuously unique in the whole series of the adventures of Tintin. Fashioning as a travelogue and a quest narrative, this text repletes with visual/textural discourse which I would intend to analyse in my paper. My study will also attempt to address the dichotomy between the presence and absence, real and unreal, belief and uncertainty, light and darkness, hope and despair, sight, and insight, lost and found in the story.

**KEY WORDS:** Textual and visual discourse, imagery and symbols, quest motif, Eurocentricism, Christian ideology.

Children's literature continues to be a big business and shows no signs of waning its commercial success. Among them, the Tintin series is swaying the whole market across the world with its unprecedented popularity. *Tintin in Tibet* published in 1960 is conspicuously unique in the whole series of the adventures of Tintin. Tintinologists refer to the book as intensely personal work. This book depicts a journey of Tintin of unending faith accompanied by unending trouble. Fashioning as a travelogue and a quest narrative, this text repletes with visual/textual discourse which I would intend to analyse. In the context of Hergé's representation of immaculate whiteness in *Tintin in Tibet*, my study also intends to address the dichotomy between the presence and absence, real and unreal, belief and uncertainty, light and darkness, hope and despair, sight, and insight, lost and found in the story.

*Tintin in Tibet*, written and drawn by Hergé, is the twentieth title in the comic book series *The Adventures of Tintin*. This book happens to be Hergé's personal favourite. *Tintin in Tibet* is different from the other stories of the series in that the characters are reduced to a minimal here. Some important characters like Thomson and Thompson, Calculus barely or did not feature in it. This is the only story in Tintin oeuvre where Tintin is not pitted against any criminal or antagonist. Rather nature serves as an antagonist in it. This book is purely a story of unconditional love and friendship, of unflinching faith that binds the characters together across racial and man – animal divides.

Tintin's iconic representation is to be noted first. The purpose of the creation of Tintin is to make the audience identify strongly with Tintin who would seamlessly appeal to all young people. His face is shaped like 'O' and Hergé reduced his face to just two dots and two lines. Tintin's familial and educational history are also vague. Even the name Tintin is a mystery in that we cannot know whether it is his first name or surname. The name Tintin also signifies nothing indicating his cipherous nature. Tintin lives in white man's land where there is no room for female characters. In the text the triangles in the form of the stark mountains, temple, monastery, Qutub Minar etc are abundant, and these obviously denote phallic symbols.

As the story unfurls Tintin is found to be under constant agony and anguish to rescue his Chinese friend Chang (introduced in *The Blue Lotus*), as he had a vivid dream that Chang is terribly hurt and calling for help from the ruins of a plane crash in Himalayas. Believing his dream as a telepathic vision Tintin sets out for Kathmandu in Nepal Via New Delhi, with his small troop of Snowy and sceptical Captain Haddock. The whole composition is bathed in white accentuating the majesty and purity of the surroundings. Tintin decides to risk everything for nothing. Hergé equips Tintin with nothing but faith, and few friends in a setting of exotic beauty, blizzards in high altitude, monasteries, endless stretches of snow suggesting the absence of complex human inhibitions. The presence of ubiquitous snow in the story

serves as a screen to reveal as well as to hide certain ideas that Tintin must combat to succeed. At the time of writing this story Herge was suffering from traumatic nightmares and personal conflict over whether he should divorce his wife Germaine Remi, for a younger woman with whom he has fallen in love, Fanny Vlamincq. Afraid of walking out of a stable marriage and perturbed by the question of morality, Herge suffered from recurrent snow laden nightmares in which he was shaken by “the beauty and cruelty of white” (Thompson 170). He decided to consult a Swiss psychoanalyst Franz Ricklin who stressed on “the quest for purity”. It is to this effect that Herge selects a land of peace, tranquillity, solitude and serenity, away from the contours of Post War Europe. Harry Thompson also points out that the overwhelming whiteness of the book suggests an intense cathartic effect of the creation. On the other hand, Tom McCarthy identifies Tintin’s quest for Chang parallels his personal quest, his own battle against fear and guilt adding that “this is the moira of Herge's own white mythology”. The snow laden mountains therefore symbolise the guilt, isolation, anguish, desire for purity that become manifest in his nightmares. Through his writing, Herge would exorcise his white demon that he felt had possessed him so long. Besides its symbolic value, the colour white in this comic book serves as “negative space” on the page. This dual concept of presence and absence is carefully woven in the trope of the quest narrative in *Tintin in Tibet*.

We are struck by the humanistic values of Tintin depicted in the whole series of adventure, but as Jean- Marie Apostolides identifies, these humanistic values have a strong basis of Christianity and Herge’s boy scout ideology. In a scene where Snowy has a vision of an angel guardian imagined in the shape of a dog warning him not to drink alcohol and another dog portrayed satanic angel tempts him to commit the vice, is a clear example of Christian morality concerning vice versus virtue.

Though Herge decided to remain strictly apolitical in this story, he cannot spare his racial bias while presenting the relationship between Western civilization and Oriental culture. In doing this, Herge even retreats from the tenets of popular culture. Being a comics book, which is part of popular culture, it should challenge the canonical, create space for homogeneity, abolish hierarchy, but in gazing from a Euro-centric perspective it moves away from modernism to culturally and politically stereotyping the Other. The Orient has always been a land of exotica, antiquity, mystery, haunting memories and landscapes and remarkable experiences. Colonial ideology is evident in an episode where the Indian market in Delhi, a non-Western space, is described with its sound and colour, crowd and chaos, where a holy cow seems to have blocked a road. Indian men are depicted as turbaned, a stereotyped representation of Indian culture. There are monks who can levitate and predict the future. It is point to be noted that the rumours about alleged monstrosity of Yeti are

perpetuated by illiterate superstitious native Nepali sherpas. In stark contrast to this, Captain Haddock represents Western rationalism and scepticism. That is why Herge's Yeti is a product of both the discourse of rationalism and humanism fashioned after Christian ideology of love, affection and duty. Above all, it retains the story of a white traveller (Tintin), emissary of knowledge and light, rescues his Asian friend Chang amidst exotic adventure. But in this story Tintin, the saviour himself is in need of salvation.

Herge's world is too complex, multifarious, multivalent, ambiguous, too riddled to be mapped in clear dichotomous terms. The matter of real and unreal becomes so baffling and convoluted that it gives way to a host of questions: Is Tintin's telepathic vision real about Chang? Does Yeti exist or is it a big hoax? Is Tibetan mysticism real or a bit of mumbo jumbo?

The landscape of 'whiteness' dominates over the entire comic strip. It is linked with lost/found, presence/absence of the fictive Chang who went missing in the ill-fated plane crash and revealed by the dreams/vision encountered by Tintin who is immediately roused to action to find him. The oscillation and vacillation between real and unreal further drives the narrative of the text. Tintin's optimism and Captain Haddock's firm unbelief are juxtaposed against one another as the story unfolds. The conflict between hope and despair is suggested by Tintin's dream with obvious telepathic reference as he cries out "Chang" at hotel Sommer's dinner room while playing chess with the Captain. As he explains, Chang is "half buried in snow....It was all so terribly real!" Later, learning about the plane crash the next day, Tintin exhorts that Chang is not dead since he had "seen" him a day before to which Captain tries to reason with him by saying "but that was just a dream you had...it was not real".

The duality of real and imaginary is entrenched /deeply embedded in the episode in which Captain Haddock repudiates to believe in Blessed Lightning's apparent levitation and his subsequent vision as he comments "surely you don't believe in that flying saucer?" In response, the Grand Abbot reverts: "you must know, noble stranger, that many things occur here in Tibet which seem unbelievable to you men of the West." Tibet becomes a new site where new horizons of meaning are opened up, which are previously hidden just like the crevice in which Tintin falls into, the cave in which Chang is kept by the Yeti. This cave signifies a void, a big space full of nothing. On the other hand, the superiority and logocentricism of the west is challenged by the mysticism of the orient. The story ends with the realization of Tintin who ultimately understands the real meaning of his personal quest.

The presence of Yeti in the story creates another dimension. The Yeti leaves its footprints all over the story, both literally and symbolically. The Yeti-mania was a popular feature of the 1950s and it seems that Herge was only trying to cater to the popular taste,

yet what is significant here is that the yeti attains corporeality on the page, despite having no real-life referent—just like Tibet that has no corporeal recognition as a distinct nation or even mysticism which has no acknowledgement from the scientific community. It is only a matter of perception, not conception. The perception varies just as the Yeti had a variety of names attached to it. It is also similar to the different associations and connotations regarding Yeti's footprints in the snow from which it attains its status. The Great Abbot explains, "It is the name given here to the abominable snowman. In Nepal they call it the Yeti, here it is the migou". Though Herge creates an aura of cruelty, brutality, and fear centring around the figure of Yeti, at the end of the story this aura is replaced with a loving and caring figure of yeti. This representation of Yeti is very significant. It would seem that Herge had indeed come a long way from his depiction of the massacre of animals in *Tintin in Congo* and in this way, he tries to purge himself from subsequent guilt. The yeti is not killed or captured at the end of the story, rather the story ends with a mild sense of pathos, melancholy and forlorn as the Yeti looks at the march of humanity returning to their places.

Thus, Herge creates this book as an open text or writerly text, inviting audiences and critics for their valuable interpretations.

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