

## George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant: Ambivalent Mentality of Colonizer

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### Abstract

Aftermath of Second World War a wave of national independent movement started against British colonialism in the world politics. Different political uprisings and movements broke out in different Asian and African countries. This study scrutinizes Orwell's autobiographical essay Shooting an Elephant along with the theoretical tool of Reader Response theory representing colonial mentality of imperial rule. Orwell fails to comprehend the positive response of Burmese native people despite his anti-colonial view against British Raj in Burma. Reader cannot notice any unbiased perception of Burmese people as he goes through the text. The narrator presents a wrong impression about the Burmese people as he describes them as nasty creatures, people of crowded and scornful faces minimizing their anthropological and separate identities.

**Keywords:** *Colonialism, Imperialism, Reader Response Theory, Mainstream etc.*

### Introduction

The term colonialism and imperialism are Eurocentric creation in cultural studies. The term colonialism refers the strategy of practice of attaining complete or limited control over another state. In other words, it is a control by one power over a reliant region or public. Similarly, the term imperialism refers not only political control but also social, cultural and economic control over another country. It means that it is political as well as economic control over another country; it is a kind of extension of power and domination along with political and economic control of other areas.

Historically, colonialism started from Phoenicians, Greeks, Turks and Arabs. In the modern sense, colonialism started with the 'Age of Discovery' in the initiation of Portuguese. The reference of the conquest of the Canary Islands by the Crown of Castile can be cited as the first example of western settler colonialism in Africa in fifteenth century. The Portuguese and Spanish Empires

were the first global empires because they were the first to stretch across different continents covering vast areas around the globe. Similarly, England, France and the Dutch Republic also established their own overseas empires competing to each other during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In Non-Western Studies, Colonialism and Imperialism have forceful effects in human history for the last four to five hundred years. Colonialism is the practice of western strategy to control over Asian and African countries whereas Imperialism is the western mindset as a theoretical part of colonialism. Even though, many changes appeared in the strategies of imperialists. The ultimate aim of them has remained same to rule and exploit over colonized economically, militarily and even technologically. Consequently, such control of British colonialism surpasses intense discernment along with cultural and rational dominance. Tagging as anti-imperialist, George Orwell is like a person using a mask to cover his imperial strains.

In Literary Theory, Reader Response theory is taken as a tool of interpretation and textual analysis. Reader response theory focuses on the reader's personal experience and understanding of a text. It asserts that meaning of a text is not stable and objective but rather subjective and dependent on the reader's interpretation and response to it.

As per this theory, readers introduce their own experiences, values and beliefs to the text which shape their understanding and response to it. In other words, each reader's interpretation of a text is distinct and can vary depending on factors such as their cultural background, personal experiences and emotional state. This sort of expression is called subjective reader response in Reader response theory. The essay *Shooting an Elephant* can be interpreted from Reader response theory.

As a reaction to colonial rule *Shooting an Elephant* can also be read representing cultural hostility and resistance. Likewise, Babha, a cultural critic (1992) views that the reaction to colonial text "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation" (p.437). The post-colonial lens touches the representations of the non-white races, stereotypes and the western's preconceptions in the mainstream western imperial texts, which is one of the three modes of reading that John Macleod (2000) states "are reading of English literary texts to examine their

modes of representations, assumptions and prejudices that reinforced imperial power relations" (p.23,24).

The job of giving a concrete and systematic definition to colonial text is somehow tough job in academia because " post-colonialism is a heterogeneous and diffuse field, embracing a wide range of practices and discursive formations and cultural strategies" (Ghaforian & Gholi, 2015, p.1361). Therefore, it is not easy to give single definition of post-colonialism due to the "interdisciplinary nature of post-colonial studies" (Loomba, 1998, p. xii).

In the realm of literature, Post-colonial literature is associated with the genre of novel comparatively. This genre of literature deals with both the colonizer and colonized to study how the colonizers represent and justify their colonial rule and how the colonized respond colonizers. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie and Ngugi Wa Thiongo try to aware their natives in their works. They also recover their cultures and respond to the grand narratives of the Westerns differing the Eurocentric view and ignoring the binaries as Wisker (2007) states the postcolonial literature as a reaction to, and a "response against oppressions and constructions of colonization and imperialism" (p.172).

George Orwell, an English novelist, essayist and critic, was born in Bengal, India in 1903. He is from the class of Sahibs in Bengal at the time of British rule over there. He is famous for his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Mainly, he is taken as a writer of Arts and Culture. After receiving University education in England Orwell was assigned as an assistant district superintendent in Burma in the command of the Indian Imperial Police. In 1922, Orwell worked in the Indian Imperial Police as an assistant district superintendent, and then he shifts to Burma until he resigns in 1928 from Imperial Police. (Moya,2001, p.94) In 1927, Orwell went in England on leave and decided not to return in his job in Burma. While recounting his experiences and reactions to imperial rule of England he wrote novel *Burmese Days* and two excellent autobiographical literary works *Shooting an Elephant* and *A Hanging*.

*Shooting an Elephant* is taken as one of Orwell's noticeable essays as well as narrative ones. It is well to study this autobiographical essay in the light of the Anglo-Burmese relative when Orwell worked in Burma police in 1922. There was hostile political situation in Burma from 1919-1930

which resulted into worse relation between Burmese and British ruler. Socially, relations were good in the beginning days and even the relations resulted in marriages between the English officials, traders and native people. Nevertheless, situation changed when Burma turned into a mere province of India rather than a separate colony with its own identity.

Ultimately, after several uprisings, this confrontational situation resulted into clash with the police. Orwell begins his work during these uneasy conditions, and then it has affected him that appears apparently in his works. (De Lange, 2007, p.9,10). Even though Orwell quits from British police in Burma, his writings reflect his misleading and contradictory self-image about British Imperialism. Orwell fails to address the identity of native people's aspirations. In the colonial writings of Orwell, we can explore a subjective truth that favours imperialism. Another feature that Ashcroft et al. (1989) mentions regarding post-colonial writing is "The silencing and marginalization of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre." (p.5,6).

Working as an assistant district superintendent officer in Burma Orwell was called to deal with the adverse situation of killing an Indian labourer caused by the elephant. As soon as he got the information about the event caused by the elephant he reached the place, found the elephant which was calm grazing peacefully. Because of the pressure of Burmese people, he could not stop him from shooting the elephant and left the spot in no time. But it was reported that the elephant died after half an hour painfully. The killing of elephant symbolizes inhuman behaviour of British empire ignoring everything in the colonized country. On the other hand, killing of elephant is a symbolic end of British empire.

## **Methodology**

The result of colonialism has been studied on the perception of colonizer applying reader response theory in Orwell's essay *Shooting an Elephant*. This research article has been prepared on the basis of qualitative model. For this, secondary sources have been used including different books, views of critics and internet source.

## **Analysis**

Orwell's autobiographical essay *Shooting an Elephant* written in 1936 is regarded as a text exploring the themes of imperialism, dual identity, captivity and authority. In the essay, the police officer is in dilemma while killing the elephant in Burma. On the one hand, his moral forces him to observe the situation and report about it. On the other hand, he has to maintain the command of the authority carrying the rifle among the crowd of natives. "Imperialism is the ideology that recommends, further, and justifies colonial rule" (Nayar,2008, p.5). In the light of all the above stated issues, *Shooting an Elephant* can be studied. In the beginning lines of essay, one can find anti-imperialist feelings towards the whites and how they are hated by many native people in Burma as the first motive and the isolation of the white men in the East. While isolating Burmese characters the description of Europeans can be observed. The aroma of supremacy can be smelt as they are educated representing ruling system in Burma. Meyers (2002) states that *Shooting an Elephant* is a confessional piece, autobiographical, and he adds "it is the result of intense psychological soul searching, showing Orwell mastering the experience and conquering his failure, shame, and guilt"(p. 69). Yet Taylor (2003) is less confident about the fact that Orwell is the policeman involved in the shooting. Even though, the story is true, Orwell becomes doubtful and pronounces *Shooting an Elephant* as a symbolic picture. Supporters of imperialism acknowledge that white men's burden is heavy, and there is an assumption or, let us say, a kind of justification, that it is not the economic gain that the imperial rule strives for but serves the great civilization. (Ingle,2006, p.38).

As a narrator of *Shooting an Elephant* Orwell serves as a police officer in Burma who is hated and outraged by the native people of Burma. The narrator is confined between his disgust and hatred of the empire and his hatred of the Burmese as he mentioned them as "evil-spirited little beasts" (Orwell,1968, p.23). The narrator suffers from both native people and British Empire. Likewise, he also states that this kind of dichotomy of feeling is accustomed among Anglo-Indians. All the thoughts including the thought of leaving his job arises into his mind but he does not mention or show it because he thinks that the British Raj is "unbreakable Tyranny" (p.23). The narrator of the essay admits that one incident occurs and give him a distinct image into the spirit of imperialism.

As a police officer Orwell takes the option of shooting the elephant because he wants to prove him like a sahib before the native people who have protested in the street waiting him to address the situation after the elephant killed Indian coolie. In this crucial situation, the narrator is confined

between the pressure of the Burmese people and the British Empire. At this moment, he understands "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's domination in the East" (p.25). Here, the narrator has to sacrifice his freedom of choice and has to convert him as a conventional sahib. He has no more his personal and rational conviction but he becomes a puppet in the hands of the British Raj to impress the native people and not to be laughed at.

Fanon (1963) points out that the natives are represented as inferior, and the white man comes to stand in for the father, that the native cannot think, decide, and therefore the white man has to take responsibility and act, while the natives have to follow and obey the rules drawn by the white.

Said argues how a literary text, for example, functioned to show the unworthiness of the natives, and on the contrary, the superiority of the European, and how their knowledge justifies and necessitates the European presence as the strong, rational, protector, and masculine. (Nayar, 2008, p.4)

As Orwell in this essay appears to be oppressed and oppressor, we can find the elephant as well may symbolize several things, the elephant can be seen as a symbol of the oppressed and the oppressor, he loses his choice of life when he kills the coolie, kills a cow, destroys a bamboo hut. (De Lange, 2007, p.15). Here, the death of elephant symbolizes the end of the British empire. Orwell's feeling the pain of not being able to handle the authority, but what happens actually that the whites act as what the natives want, wear masks, and not be laughed at. (p.12).

Recently, when American soldiers attacked in Iraq and Afghanistan they began to doubt about the pointlessness of the war and their presence over there. The juxtaposition is that Americans were there as the native people could not rule themselves democratically. Rather, Americans were there to help natives of Iraq and Afghanistan respectively but result is not what was expected. Later, there is nothing besides reaction from Americans. Same case happened in Burma by British empire.

The feeling of superiority emerges as a reaction to the pressure of the natives in the colonized land. Sense of freedom is questioned when an individual interferes the freedom of another individual. Orwell loses freedom, freedom of choice, while he is a part of such an imperialist, oppressing system, so in oppressing others, he becomes oppressed as well. (p.14). In the essay, the event of killing elephant displays eternal trial by the colonizers to validate their conduct. Orwell is glad that

the killing of the coolie gives him the right to kill the elephant. (p.14). Orwell charges the Burmese people as the cause of shooting the elephant. Edward Said views that the Orient is seen as a bin, and all the clinches are damped in it. (Said,1978).

In *Shooting an Elephant*, we can observe two Orwell: the police officer and the author. The former one tries to impress the natives wearing a mask of British Imperialism and the later is haunted by the reminiscences of the years he passes in Burma. Despite the British control over economics they cannot control over locals' dislike and derision. It is all about the burden of white men in the form of victims, captive of imperial products, isolated and agonized colonial corrupted officers that Orwell mentions about throughout the essay. The narrator represents the natives from the imperialists' eyes disregarding and misjudging the natives' perception.

The narrator presents himself as a reliable voice of British empire whose views have been made and verified his racial supremacy. Ultimately, Orwell is expressing his story without any consideration for the ruled Burmese people. Throughout the text, the textual domination is actually imperialist's suffering which can be manifested as a kind of Orientalism which Edward Said talks about "a Western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". (Said. 1978.p.10).

In the view of critics Orwell can be taken as an author of contradict opinions and those contradictions originate from Orwell's prediction of ideas oppose reality. This happens because what is considered to be honest does not necessarily accurate, a close reading of Orwell's works shows that Orwell defends contradicted or opposite things on different occasions "Orwell had no firm aesthetic or ideological foundations" that he is contradictory: he preaches one thing, he does another (Lazaro, 2001, p.17).

The ambiguities of Orwell's thoughts are really what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls ambivalence, which separates the boundaries between the colonizing Self and the colonized Other. Orwell is extremely "Hamletish" in the sense of puzzling sympathy, seeing both sides of several questions. (Meyers,2002, p.323). In spite of Orwell's disagreement on imperialistic rule, we can find his story tells the decent woe of an imperial officer to draw the reader's concern. "No one can embrace Orwell's works who hope for foe ease...they do not even provide mystic vision" (p.303).

## Conclusion

As a literary text *Shooting an Elephant* represents the troubling nature of imperialism and the effects of its consequences both on the colonizer and the colonized but the ambivalent mentality of colonizer is dominant in the essay. Serving as a colonial officer wearing a mask of anti-imperialist Orwell does not succeed to get any positive response of Burmese native people. Readers cannot have unbiased feeling upon Burmese people as they go through Orwell's description of Burmese people. Orwell presents wrong impression about Burmese people; he presents them as horrible people, crowded and scornful appearances, minimizing their human and distinct identities. In spite of Orwell's attack on imperial rule, we can easily indicate the ethical distress of an imperial officer to get the reader's compassion. However, Orwell's seems to be an anti-imperialist but he does not indicate any options of imperial rule. Indifferent response against imperial rule, projection of ambivalent mentality without any clear standpoint, anticolonial voice against British Raj and hating imperial rule cannot liberate the miseries Burmese native people. The narrator is not interested to reduce the pain and suffering of the natives even by any formal oral and written remarks of his own publicly. The narrator is presented as a reliable imperial voice whose view has proved his racial supremacy. Ultimately, Orwell presents his story without any kindness for the colonized native Burmese people.



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