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## **Death of Imperialism in George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant'**

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**Abstract:**

*Generally known for his politically concerned literary pieces, Eric Arthur Blaire, who uses the pen name George Orwell during his short-lived literary career, is the author of various novels, short stories, essays and a small number of poems; placing him among the luminaries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Orwell's political writings shed light upon popular political issues of his time, ranging from colonialism and imperialism to authoritarian regimes and socialism. Besides his artistic career, Orwell has always been subject to critical dispute upon his commissions as a police officer in the British colony of Burma, during which he conceived the ideas for his critical essay, "Shooting an Elephant".*

*The aim of this article is to discuss Orwell's political essay "Shooting an Elephant" in the light of post-colonial literary criticism, emphasizing the possible interpretations that the elephant in the narrative allegorically stands for imperialism and the reactions of the officer, who gives voice to Orwell's own critical stance towards British colonial rule over the Burmese, reinforce the self-depreciating nature of colonialism on a much broader universal scale. Consequently, the present study concludes that Orwell's experiences in the British colony foreshadows the forthcoming end of British imperialism, not only in Burma, but in other colonies throughout the world as well.*

**Key words:** *colonialism, imperialism, elephant, master-slave, collapse, self-depreciation*

The British rule in Burma as a colony lasted over sixty years in which there took place many disputes between the sides and led to the separation of the latter from the British in 1886 and total independence in 1948. The British preserved their activism in the territory for much more, covering the time period in which a famous anti-imperialist British writer of fiction, George Orwell, worked as a police officer around the area. The colonial domination of England over Burma was narrated by Orwell in his famous essay "Shooting an Elephant", one of his various political essays reflecting his anti-capitalist viewpoint. The narrator in the essay is usually thought to be Orwell himself, as he worked in Burma as a British officer for a couple of years. It is widely known that Orwell spent some time in the place as a police officer, similar to that of the narrator, but "the degree to which his account is autobiographical is disputed, with no conclusive evidence to prove it to be fact or fiction" (Crick, 1981:1). On the surface level, the essay centers on the inner conflict of a white European police officer in Burma regarding the killing of an elephant which raided the bazaar and caused material damage. It is not known whether Orwell himself had such an incident with an elephant, but the vividness of the descriptions strengthen such a claim. On a deeper level of understanding, the incident of shooting the elephant metaphorically represents the macrocosm of British imperialism and colonialism over the east. Imperialism, here, refers to "a state of mind, fuelled by the arrogance of superiority that could be adopted by any nation irrespective of its geographical location in the world" (Chy, 2006:55). In this respect, the essay gets a much more critical depth displaying the stance of the author against British colonialism and imperialism.

As a short synopsis of what the author tells in the essay, before unveiling the metaphorical meaning, it is necessary to mention that the story takes place in Moulmein, Lower Burma, which was one of the British colonies and later annexed into British India. The narrator, who is working in the colony as a police officer, is asked to take care of a stray elephant which ravages a bazaar; and the narrator gets this incident as a responsibility on his own shoulders as a matter of 'White Man's Burden'. With the tension created by the thousands following him, believing he is going to shoot the elephant, the officer feels that it is now obligatory to kill the animal in order not to harm British reputation as the superior hand in the imperial business. As Taylor puts it, "he shot it, because the huge crowd expected him to and he had 'to impress' the natives" (Taylor and Cumming, 1993). The narration turns into an interior monologue of the author as he dives deeper into his conscience and dilemmas in killing the elephant, revealing the whole colonial nature of the feeling of guilt and responsibility.

The essay takes a political stance, however, from the very opening lines referring to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In a self-conscious and self-critical attitude, the narrator admits that he "was hated by large numbers of people" (2003:1), due to his position as an outsider coming and re-ordering the pre-established norms and laws in the Burmese society. However, the approach of the narrator to the situation is of an opposition against the colonial-imperial rule of his own nation, and the essay functions as a post-colonial text, using the Western language, forms and voice against itself. The scene is described,

first, with an emphasis on the reaction of the native people against the imperial power in their lands, touching upon the incidents like spitting juice over a European lady's dress or baiting the police officer whenever possible. The opposition the officer faces seems justified by himself as he openly confesses that, for him, "imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner [he] chucked up [his] job and got out of it the better" (1). The narrator's own views regarding the imperial rule of the British over Burmese people is no different from the colonized perspective. He simply looks like having empathized with the native people and gained admiration towards them, as he shares the consciousness of their common cause saying "I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British" (1). The colonial enterprise of the British over the land, the dirty work as the narrator puts it, gives him "an intolerable sense of guilt" (1), meaning imperialism has nothing to be supported ideologically. This sense of guilt might be taken as a metaphor for the general situation on earth; and the narrator may be standing for all colonial enterprises of British who must feel the guilt. In spite of all these critical statements of the narrator against imperialism, the reason why he is still an employer of it in this far edge of the world must be questioned on this very point. As Runciman argues, "by enforcing the strict British rule, he is forfeiting his freedom while concurrently oppressing the Burmese" (2010:182-3). Paradoxically, the narrator's views concerning imperialism contradicts his own position in the place, and the incident involving the elephant marks the ultimate truth beneath the surface level, that colonialism creates a master-slave relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, which turns upside down after some time and makes the colonized dependent on the colonizer for its own survival. The standpoint of the narrator in the elephant incident exemplifies that kind of relationship between the two sides. Thus, the colonial activities of the imperial power seem to be functioning against its own nature, which can be proved by making references to Orwell's political essay "Shooting an Elephant" and focusing on the argument that the elephant in the essay stands for Britain in its actions and inevitable fate.

The perspective of the narrator towards colonialism and imperialism having been established, it is significant to begin the argument with a glance at the Burmese society and the elephant case. Before being a part of the Anglo-Indian rule, the Burmese lands were occupied by the British for a few decades, leaving its traces even after the rule with the police force and other cultural stamps. The narrator himself represents these stamps with his highly realistic descriptions of the environment and the attitudes of the natives. The elephant incident is the key motive in the essay which displays the colonial consciousness and lack of conscience in the microcosm of the narrator's choices. The elephant itself is an important figure in Burmese culture as "ordinary domesticated elephants have been part of Burmese life for centuries: [and] the rare and revered white elephant is believed in Buddhist legend to be a symbol of purity and power" (Larkin, 2004:221). The use of an animal which is recognized mostly with its physical strength and might can be read as a clear indication of the mighty stature of England as a world power in the colonial era. The fact that the "Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it" (2) leaves no doubt for the possibility of such a reading, as the colonized Burmese had no technological and financial means to resist the British forces or they were left in such a position that they were deprived of the power to defend themselves against such a giant. This way of depiction of the elephant gives the reader some clues regarding the nature of elephant's actions as reflections of imperial domination. The elephant is seen ravaging the marketplaces, creating terror, destroying houses, killing men and animals, raiding the sources of income and devouring the stock, just as the imperialist Britain devastated the native lands of the colonized without facing a reaction. Thus, this perspective gives the essay a highly metaphorical essence, as it "gives [the reader] an insight into the nature of man in modern society, of man in groups, of the leader and the led, of authoritarianism and power, and, most important, of the dilemma of the man who tries to be his free and true self in a system that asks him to be an automaton" (Keskinen, 1966:670). The sudden and inescapable aggression of the elephant clearly represents the violent nature of colonization leaving a ruin behind. The death of an Indian worker in the elephant attack resembles the colonial activity, as the animal "had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth" (3).

Ironically enough, the case is reported in the essay to the anti-imperialist narrator to stop the elephant, in other words, to prove the protectiveness of the imperial 'mother' country. Though the narrator denies the intentions of shooting the elephant, he has to wear the mask of the protector and act as he is expected to by the native people. The way he approaches the beast, reveals how he thinks according to the imperialist ideology, evaluating the life of the elephant with regard to its monetary value: "I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery" (3). At this very point, the case of shooting the elephant has more than a moral meaning for him, turning into a duty for the protection of the reputation of the empire though the danger has passed. It is obvious that the idea of 'white man's burden' has become a burden itself on the shoulders of the empire, because the establishment of a master-slave relationship requires the enslavement of the master to the slave at the end. As the colonizer gets more and more dependent on the service of the colonized, the colonial ideology refutes itself. Having realized this predicament, the narrator grasps "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East" (4). This seems to be the general case in the employment of the imperial rule, as the imperial power is aware that the rule it imposes on the subordinate people is immoral and unjustifiable; however, the rule has turned into an obligation that it has to follow in order to survive. The Empire, the narrator in this case, has to prove its power and capability of defending its subjects by killing the elephant, as "once leaders are laughed at, their authority is gone. He was protecting not just his own skin but the whole mystique of white domination" (Crick, 1981:1). As clearly seen in this example, what underpins colonialism is the feeling of superiority and its continuity at all costs. What the narrator tries to achieve, in this respect, is to meet the expectations of the natives, and he is obviously self-conscious in this process:

Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives," and so in every crisis he has got to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to

shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things (4).

This extract apparently defines the core of colonial enterprises ever taken place on earth, leading to dissociation of empires and freedom from oppression. Before the establishment of freedom, the oppressor must impose its power on the weak in most of the cases. In this occasion, the killing of the elephant, that is the collapse of the empire, must be conducted from within the system. Even the imperial officer plays a key role in this collapse, pulling the trigger to strike the beast down. Paradoxically, the imperial power uses a “magical rifle” (4) in this business, the same tool as the one it used to take control of the subordinate and make the masses hover around it. The technological and industrial development of Britain appears to be the veiled meaning behind that statement, a magical tool to conjure some artificial supply and demand relationship leading to a master-slave morality.

The only alternative left to the officer to pursue is to shoot the elephant in the end; the elephant has apparently reached the threshold of its doings, lost its efficiency as a source of power and to be shot as a matter of course. However, this business is again to be done out of pure obligation, as the white man is not to be mocked in front of the natives. The first duty of a white European officer is to glorify whiteness and Britishness, in this case, and not to have them dishonoured by the subjects. For the anti-imperialist officer, though still under the influence of the western thinking, it seems a disgrace to be killed like the Indian man run over by the elephant. Furthermore, the cloud of feelings he goes through can no longer be reduced to personal fear or demonstrating himself; rather:

as the crisis ticks away, a terrible sense of isolation gathers in the midst of that tumult, lifts off, and extends beyond the town to all of the empire to all that goes by that name territorially as well as conceptually. It is precisely this unforeseen and somewhat abrupt development that deflects what might have shaped up as fear from its object and turns it into an anxiety addressed to nothing in particular no elephant, no yellow face which Orwell so intensely dislikes, not even the dilemma of having to destroy the animal he would rather leave alone Guha, 1997:488).

The ultimate fate of the elephant is of course to be resembled to the dissociation of the empire, with the crowd of people waiting to get their share from the dead elephant. The elephant has done no good to them when alive, like the empire ravaging their lands; but the thing will be of high value when it is dead and the meat will be looted in the end by its actual owners. The fact that such a powerful and gigantic empire cannot be easily killed is reminded to the reader once more, with the struggle of the narrator with the bullets and his complicated feelings passing through his mind. The empire gets stricken, shrinks, paralysed, in the narrator’s own words, with “an enormous senility” (5) settling upon its shoulders, and it collapses for the last time like the elephant. The narrator’s feelings and remarks after he shoots the elephants leave no room for doubt that the elephant stands for the great British empire: “the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead (...) He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further” (6). The empire is obviously dying for some time, but in the other half of the globe, England was still standing there, alive, still powerful. It was only the sun on the empire that was descending for some time, and the remains of it were being stripped out of its body by the native people of the colonized lands.

The ending paragraph of the essay supports such an interpretation of the empire-elephant relationship, with the endless discussions over the fall of the elephant. The metaphor the narrator uses to describe the elephant underlines the justification of this claim: “a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it” (6). The owner, England in this case, has been out of control and the empire has gone off the rails for some time; and the European opinion has been divided over the incident as the narrator puts it. That the empire is killed with its own hands is an interesting fact, as England began losing its position as a world power when the break came from within.

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