

The Underlying Tones of George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant

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Before becoming an acclaimed author, George Orwell (1936) was stationed as a sub-divisional police officer in Moulmein, Burma, which was under British control from 1824-1948. In *Shooting an Elephant*, he recounts a story from his duty and how he was faced with the choice to either conform to what the crowd wanted and kill an escaped elephant, or do what he believed was morally right and let it live. Ultimately, he chose the former, going against his morals, claiming it was due to the communal pressure he felt to not appear foolish. His disregard for his own ethics is a continual theme Orwell struggles with, as he claims to be anti-imperialist and side with the Burmese despite his work as an officer for the largest colonizing force in history, Great Britain. His proclaimed sense of allyship is not enough to keep him from criticizing and downplaying the Burmese's anti-European feelings, which he fails to see are a result not of pettiness, but the socioeconomic differences that now exist due to European control of Burma. Furthermore, he uses belittling demeaning language to characterize the Burmese as devilish using racially offensive terms, defrauding his image as the sympathetic colonizer worthy of empathy. He offers an enlightening perspective on the nature of imperialism and its ill-effects, yet fails to consider it from any viewpoint outside his own, as the European in a position of power. Orwell's self-victimization of himself and "the white man" in imperialism is a blatant example of Eurocentrism and faulty colonialist ideology.

Orwell establishes himself as morally superior to the Burmese (the colonized) while still remaining sympathetic for them, propagating the idea of a "white savior". Othering, the way Orwell does with the Burmese, has a long history in imperialism and is often used to excuse dehumanizing crimes and actions. The colonizer sees himself as civilized, advanced, and ethical,

while the colonized is degraded and considered uneducated, ill-mannered, savage, and generally inferior. As Lois Tyson (2006) explained, “because their technology was more highly advanced, the colonizers believed that their whole culture was more highly advanced, and they ignored or swept aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the peoples they subjugated”. (p. 419). There was no global worldview, there was only the European way of seeing and doing things; any culture or person who stood outside of that was underdeveloped and in need of assistance. There stepped in the colonizer. Orwell claims to be above these thoughts, rejecting imperialism as an “evil thing” (p. 296), yet he presents himself in the story as just this: the white man ready to save the Burmese, who “had no weapons and were quite helpless”. (p. 297).

This helplessness assigned to the Burmese due to colonialist ideology has long-lasting devastating effects for the subjugated, who find their futures dictated by governments who see them as incapable of independence. In 1945, colonial public servant J.S. Furnivall (1945) examined the “Blue-Print for Burma” created by British Parliament and the plausibility of its implementation and success. Throughout his analysis, Furnivall persistently asserts that the Burmese are not prepared for increased autonomy, insisting they need continued British aid to accomplish this. He goes as far to say that most Burmese do not “understand the implications of independence or know anything of the modern world”. (p. 158). Furnivall fails to consider how Britain contributed to this state of dependency as well as completely neglecting the existence of Burma prior to colonization. He treats the colony and its people as primitive, and the presence of the colonizer as a necessity for their well-being, like a parent tending to a young child. Thus, Furnivall-- like Orwell --further propagates the idea of imperialism as beneficial to the colonized.

Beyond the heroism he denotes to himself-- whether consciously or not --Orwell demonizes the Burmese, the people he insists to be on the side of. His repeated use of descriptions for them as yellow faced, sneering, devilish, and “evil-spirited little beasts” (p. 296) stem from a long history of racially insensitive and inaccurate caricatures of people of color, and remain highly problematic to this day. Apart from this, Orwell repeatedly emphasizes negative traits. He minimizes their anti-European rhetoric as aimless, petty, and bitter, and speaks with a connotation suggestive of moral superiority when he asserts the Burmese wanted the elephant killed (while also making it abundantly clear to the reader that he does not agree with this). What Orwell failed to understand are the underlying socioeconomic truths that contribute to these “aimless” feelings. The Burmese are a subjugated people, now under British rule, with little if any power. They live impoverished and weaponless, unable-- not, as Orwell asserts, unwilling --to rise up against their oppressors. The Burmese who, in this story, clamor toward an elephant’s corpse for meat to sell and live in bamboo huts, are not oppressed because they allow it, nor are they bitter because of the presence of a young white officer; they are victims of a system of colonization that aims to keep them down. As Tyson emphasized, “Who has time to become politically active, or even politically aware, when one is struggling just to stay alive and feed one’s children?” (p. 56). Orwell cannot claim to have a morality the Burmese lack, because Orwell does not live in the circumstances of the Burmese. It is easy for a colonizer to cry for justice for the elephant when the colonizer is not depending on it to eat that night. Even with Orwell’s self-defined morality, he does shoot the elephant in the end, which is “comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery”. (p. 298). Not only were Orwell’s motives for killing the animal based on the shallow desire to maintain his reputation, but in shooting the

elephant he knowingly sacrificed another's source of sustenance. When the owner, rightfully enraged, discovered his livelihood shot to death by a white man, he was powerless to seek retribution. Regardless of the choice made, in a system of such intense class and racial differences defined by the status of "colonized" and "colonizer," the poor and working-class natives will always suffer.

Despite this reality that the subjugated experience the brunt of hardships in imperialism, Orwell decides to contemplate from a white-based view and make himself out to be a victim of this cruel system. Through this Eurocentric perspective-- which bases all experiences on European experience or standards --Orwell concluded that "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys...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". (p. 299). He compares the white man's fear of being ridiculed by the colonized to a loss of freedom, similar to that individuals experience when left economically downtrodden or enslaved, as often happens in imperialism. The self-victimization may seem absurd and highly flawed in logic (as any hardship endured by a colonizer could have been avoided whereas the colonized have no say in their status) but such Eurocentrist values can cause even the slightest forms of retribution to appear as an assault on a white person's self. Is a crowd of Burmese people laughing at an officer comparable to "the wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who have been flogged with bamboos" (Orwell, p. 296)? To the colonizer, who sees himself as the center of the world, yes. Complete economic control and political power is not enough, the colonizer must also feel respected and dignified, so as to maintain the frail sense of dominion

they desperately crave. Any action then, regardless of cruelty, is validated by this unquenchable desire for the appearance of authority.

The undercurrents of these socioeconomic and imperialist ideas manage to prevail even in a text claiming to reject such notions. Orwell's privileged ignorance and inability to accurately observe the truth about colonial control demonstrates the disconnect from the lower-classes he has as an upper-class, in power, white colonizer. Eurocentrism maintains its strong influence as a central mode of thinking for many who consider the European form of thought and life to be the standard. Ultimately, the issue was never whether or not Orwell shot the elephant, but why; he shot it to maintain his power over the economically oppressed and keep his title as a "winner" in the designated market and colonial systems.

References

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