



George Orwell's Sympathetic Antipathy in the Presentation of Indians: A Postcolonial Revision of A Hanging and Shooting an Elephant

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Abstract: In George Orwell's well-composed nonfictions through which he voices against the very imperial nature of the British Empire, there is a subtle tone of superior English race while describing Indians or people of the subcontinent. The tone of Orwell while giving the physical description of these people often poses questions towards the noble purposes of his writings. One common feature in his works is the author's contrasting feelings about the Orient and Orientals from the white men's perspective. To justify the arguments two of Orwell's Essays *A Hanging* and *Shooting an Elephant* have been chosen. The aim is to revise the two mentioned essays and their common interpretations and at the same time, to unmask the racist approaches hidden beneath the wrapping of kind words. To support the cause, Edward Said's concept of the Orient and the Occident expressed in his *Orientalism* is used as the theoretical ground. Said has explored the idea of an authoritative construction of Orientalism historically by the imperial powers such as French and British empires and in George Orwell's nonfictions, this 'authoritative construction' of Indians has been subtly presented. Thus, using Edward Said's theory as a counter-argument to George Orwell, the paper would make a postcolonial study of the two mentioned nonfictions.

Keywords: *White men's fantasy, Racism, Superior Race, Colonial Image, Imperialism*

Introduction: "Saints should all be judged guilty until they are proved innocent" writes George Orwell in his essay *Reflections on Gandhi* (419) [1]. This notion is very much applicable to George Orwell himself who is generally known as a "secular saint", "the wintry conscience of a generation", "a virtuous man" but who has implicitly exposed himself as a white man trying to be sympathetic to the 'inferior' people of the subcontinent (Meyers 4, 34) [2]. His tenure of 5 years as a British police officer in Burma thrusts upon him the dilemma between professional (serving British Empire) and moral duty (anti-imperialism). His essays express this dilemma through words which are apparently virtuous and kind towards the colonized, but contain colonial white racist ideology. In the essay, *Why I Write* (1946) Orwell states, "I'm not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood" (393) [3]. Quite frankly, this world-view gets exposed especially when Orwell is describing the Burmese people or expressing the emotions with his interior monologues. In the current article, therefore, his apparent 'sainthood' is questioned, and he is proven culpable.

The article is divided into two parts. In the first part, the authors discuss Edward Said's notion of the Orient and the Occidents from *Orientalism*. It is intended to explain "authoritative" construction of the Orient by the

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European/Western white people so that it can be connected to George Orwell's representation of Indians or Burmese locals (Said 3) [4]. The second part offers close readings of the two essays *A Hanging* and *Shooting an Elephant* emphasizing the areas where Orwell becomes sympathetically antipathetic towards the native Burmese. The study is subject to several limitations as it is inclusive of Orwell's two particular essays only. Overall, the idea is again to challenge and revise the common notions about George Orwell's position regarding imperialism and his treatment of the native people. The aim is to focus on how Orwell fosters racism, racial boundaries in spite of being a humanist and an anti-imperialist.

The Orient, The Occident and Cultural Hegemony from Edward Said's Orientalism: Edward Said elucidates the concept of "The Occident" (Self) and "The Orient" (the Other) while criticizing the historical construction of the Orient. 'Orient' and 'Occident' are two "man-made" "geographical entities" that "support and to an extent reflect each other" (Said 5) [4]. But 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' are two ideological concepts. 'The Orient' (which Said identifies as "a European invention") is defined as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1) [4]. In contrast, 'the Occident' is a term given by Edward Said to refer to the very European/Western way of thought that has "created" or, as Said calls it, "Orientalized" 'the Orient' as the exotic other (5) [4]. Said points out that the Orient being "the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies" has helped Europe or the western world in its growth of "material civilization and culture" (1-2) [4]. So, this 'othering' is political because historically, Europe (the Occident) has been benefitted. Now, when the era of colonialism is over, the Orientals are still chained with the "recurring image" of the Orient, are still bearing the stereotypes resulted from the colonial othering (Said 1) [4]. Hence, Said proposes Orientalism as a discourse that bars the Orient to pass as "a free subject of thought or action" and also assures that Orientalism gives a platform to challenge the othering created historically by "a large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial advisors" who have "accepted the basic distinction between East and West" (2-3) [4]. Said presents academic, general and corporate meaning for Orientalism.

From his definitions, it can be summarized that Said concentrates Orientalism "as a style of thought" that is shaped upon "an ontological and epistemological distinction" in the above-mentioned binary and specifies that the Occident ideology has historically identified the Orient through "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (2-3) [4]. The discourse of Orientalism constructs and dominates Orientals in the process of "knowing" them (Said 54) [4]. Said also observes that "European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (3) [4]. In plain words, the concept of the Orient has historically been constructed by the colonizing empires (French, British and later American) and categorized as a "web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology" (27) [4]. These colonial European 'scholars' have constructed ideas such as "Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality" and "domesticated" indefinite "Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdom"(4) [4]. These ideas are made from the Westerner's perspective and the Western views of the Orient are not necessarily based on what really exists in Oriental lands. They result from the West's assumptions: "Orientalism turns out to be an invention designed by those who presume to rule. On the whole, what is meant by orientalism is the collective perception and representation of the colonized lands by the West" (Donmez 8) [5].

To explain the made-up intellectual supremacy of the Occident over the Orient, Edward Said borrowed the concept of Hegemony from Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci explains Hegemony "as a form of control exercised by a dominant class, in the Marxist sense, a group controlling the means of production" and points out the power structure between the political society (the dominant class) and the civil society (the dominated class) where

along with domination, there is ‘direction’ or ‘consent’ for the practice of power hierarchy (15) [6]. Said similarly exerts that “[t]he relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony”(5) [4]. Mentioning how Gramsci has differentiated the civil society and the political society and how the latter dominates the former, Said explains that culture “is to be found operating within civil society” and therefore goes through domination or “consent”(7) [4]. Thus, giving consent to domination refers to the ‘internalization’ of hegemonic reality much like Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) where certain institutions “generate ideologies” and people as “individuals and (as groups) internalize and act in accordance with” (Mambrol) [7]. Therefore, any culture can experience hegemony and unfortunately between the Occident and the Orient, the former historically has got the upper hand. As a result of this hegemonic overpowering and “positional superiority” of the Occident, the Orient has become “nothing more than a structure full of lies and myths”, “an airy European Fantasy”, a whim of westerners (6-7) [4]. The notion of East/West is arbitrary and has no basis in reality; it is useful for people who make this distinction because it allows them to make easy comparisons between people and use differences to justify self-aggrandizement and imperialism. The important thing is to “dignify simple conquest with an idea to turn the appetite for more geographical space into a theory about the special relationship between geography on the one hand and civilized or uncivilized on the other” (Said 216) [4]. The Orient does not exist for its own sake in the discourse of Orientalism. Rather, it exists to be set apart from the Occident and made to feel inferior. In Orientalism, East and West are positioned through the construction of an unequal dichotomy: “The West occupies a superior rank while the Orient is its ‘other’, fixed eternally in a subservient position. This makes the relations between them asymmetrical” (McLeod 39) [8]. In his famous essay *The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature*, Abdul Jan Mohamed notes that the ‘Other’ is presumed as the Self’s shadow and this “epistemic violence” constructs the “colonial subjects” as the ‘Other’(24) [9]. Their existence is shaped by the European masters. Suffice to say that the colonized (Orientals) continue to carry the “fantasy” of their former colonial masters (the Occident). However, Said thinks that Orientalism “is a historical, cultural and political truth” (27-28) [4]. This truth can be better understood by learning how European culture (the Occident) has adopted the policy of “cultural domination” to enrich itself (Said 25) [4]. Today, when Orientals are still being judged by the standard of the Occident, it seems the civilized and orderly (the Occident) are continuing their rightful rule over the savage and exotic other (the Orient). Therefore, the intended difference is still following colonial legacy. Said wants to follow Raymond Williams’ theory of “unlearning” of “the inherent dominative mode” (28) [4]. The idea is to get rid of the given meanings and thereby eliminating both the concepts of ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’ altogether. Only this can pave the way to establish new discourses which are not biased by racial or colonial standard.

In order to bring new discourses, Edward said explains that teachers, writers, researchers, anthropologists, sociologists, historians and philologists must bring writers from the past who have shaped the East from colonial perspective under scrutiny. He goes on to revise some of the big names such as Aeschylus, Victor Hugo, Dante Alighieri, Karl Marx, William Shakespeare, Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens and many others who used to – as Ghaforian and Gholi put it - “demonstrate the colonial image in their work” and help to give “credibility” to the cultural hegemony created over the Orientals (1362) [10]. Hence, it becomes a responsibility for the Orientalist researchers to “unlearn” the long-established false supremacy by evaluating authors possessing colonial mentality. The current paper re-reads George Orwell in the manner Edward Said has reassessed many writers. It shows how Orwell follows the so-called Orientalist stereotypes, entertains white man’s fantasy and uses the colonial image.

A Hanging: A Critical Revision : The essay *A Hanging* narrates the execution of capital punishment of a prisoner in a Burmese jail. Though it is debated, the story seems autobiographical since Orwell served in Burma as a policeman from 1922 to 1927 and he must have seen many executions. However, he as an officer is not numb to the human emotions involved in the task. The essay provides a number of ironies that questions the policy of capital punishment. Overall, the essay speaks against this “wrong doing” of “cutting a life short when it is in full tide” (8) [11]. But behind all these cries of kindness, there are some aspects which should be remarked where Orwell is more a white man belonging to the superior race. The following exemplifies and explains this observation.

While describing “the condemned cells” in the very first paragraph, Orwell compares them with “small animal cages” (9) [11]. In this comparison, apparently, the notion of sympathy towards the prisoners is evoked as it suggests people inside them are being treated as animals. But when he describes that in some of the cells “brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars”, the matter gets otherwise (7) [11]. He has already mentioned earlier that the prisoners are treated like animals and now readers get to know that these “animals” are those “brown silent men” (7) [11]. “Brown” stands for the race of the prisoners and in their description, for Orwell, first comes the skin color or race, then comes their nature with the adjective “silent” (7) [11]. It is obviously understood that these people are quiet because they are “due to be hanged within the next week or two” and any prisoner who is to be hanged soon, irrespective of color may have a mute appearance, which is not at all surprising (7) [11]. The word “silent” might have a connotation (7) [11]. Perhaps, Orwell tries to suggest that the Easterners are without any ‘voice’ in a colonial atmosphere and with this their lowly status is focused again. What this proves is that Orwell being a white man notices the color of the locals even when he is sympathizing with their condition. His sympathetic antipathy gets prominence here. It reflects one of the observations of Edward Said in *Orientalism* when he talks about “a European or American studying the Orient” always “comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second” (11) [4]. George Orwell is also “studying” the prisoners and through his method of study, he identifies and at the same time isolates the prisoners racially from European colonizing standard. To him, therefore, the men in the cells are “brown” Burmese first, then poor ‘individuals’ who are going to be executed (7) [11]. Another significant point which must be noted is that Orwell has not mentioned the presence of white prisoners. The case might be that in a jail of a colony, there would not be any white prisoners. All the prisoners who are to be hanged are therefore from the same race and color. So, what is the point of mentioning the prisoner’s color? If they have had prisoners possessing different body colors, it might have had slightest of logic to identify them by their color. These prisoners might have done serious crimes for which they are soon to be executed but the biggest ‘crime’ they seem to have committed is that they have been ‘born brown’ and thus, have become a ‘prisoner forever’ in the eyes of the white men, and in this essay to a white writer, George Orwell.

After describing these poor “brown” men in the condemned cells, the protagonist of the story who is to be executed on that morning is described again in a very sympathetic tone (7) [11]. Amidst all these details, the crime committed by the prisoner is eclipsed. But then again the description of the first appearance of the prisoner reads,

He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes. He had a thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man on the films. (7) [11]

In this vivid description, this time Orwell starts with a word that categorizes the prisoner by his ‘religion’. The successive mentioning of race and religion is creating the identity of the prisoner as if these two are the central things to be known about any prisoner. Then comes the physical description: “a puny wisp of a man, with liquid eyes” (7) [11]. This is very natural for a prisoner to be weak because of the mental state and quite obviously the

man is afraid which explains the liquid eyes. What is to be noted here is that Orwell could have described this physical stature first rather than the abstract concepts such as religion and race. But for a regular racist white man, while describing someone from Orient, those two are more important rather than personality, morality, or ethics of that person. The next line which describes the moustache of the prisoner gives rise to a more sensitive issue. It is very obvious that Orwell is making fun of the size of the moustache as it is unfitting for his small body and making the prisoner an object of jeering. This man is going to be hanged very soon and Orwell seems to be one of the officers involved in the execution. But cracking a joke (though not verbally) on a 'brown Hindu' man seems to be regular for a white man. This sort of comment humiliates the person who is near death and makes Orwell not very different from the racist white supremacists.

Immediately after a few paragraphs when the prisoner is about "forty yards to the gallows", Orwell notifies the "bare brown back of the prisoner" marching "quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees" (8) [11]. In the alliterative phrase, "bare brown back" Orwell again identifies the prisoner's race as if the readers must visualize him through his color (8) [11]. Then Orwell gives a very unnecessary and illogical cultural generalization - which Said has pointed out as "cultural stereotypes" - through the phrase "the Indian who never straightens his knees"(Said 27) (Orwell 8) [4]. Here, by the Indians, Orwell is not only suggesting the six tall warders who are escorting the prisoner to the gallows but also making an overall comment on the nature of Indians who have long been following the orders of their colonizers. So, through this remark, Orwell unknowingly exposes the racist mentality of a white man. This entertains the sheer colonial concept that the Indians being colonized subjects are not expected to walk unbendingly in front of their white rulers.

The culmination of the central message appears in the next paragraph where George Orwell passionately sympathizes with the condition of the prisoner and questions the rationality of killing "a healthy, conscious man" in the name of performing the capital punishment (8) [11]. He makes a provocative and proficient job to position himself against this task of punishment. Orwell exaggerates the sympathetic tone through the description of the prisoner's organ system to express that the prisoner is just another man like them and "in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone- one mind less, one world less" (8) [11]. But hasn't Orwell so far isolated the prisoner as a race inferior to the white police officers? However, "the stereotype imperialist" rationalizes the isolation and oppression of the natives by a "firm conviction that he is superior in all respects" (Slater 30) [12]. That is why it seems very much ironic when suddenly he is considering the prisoner as "one of us" (8) [11]. It also sounds self-contradictory when he writes that they, including the prisoner, are "seeing, hearing, feeling understanding the same world"(8) [11]. It is unfortunate but by isolating the "brown Hindu" prisoner repeatedly through his race and religion, Orwell has already proved that it is never the same world and white men's world is far superior to that of the natives (8) [11].

The next instance where Orwell's description comes into scrutiny is the occasion when all wait for the final signal of the superintendent and the prisoner with the fixed nose on his neck "like the tolling of a bell" cries out on his god, "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!" and being "five yards away" from the gallows "[e]veryone had changed colour" (9) [11]. Though by 'everyone' Orwell means both the white officers and the Indian warders, in the next line he writes, "The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering" (9) [11]. Experiencing such an action in person can be excruciatingly harrowing and even in that intense moment Orwell throws another corporeal joke regarding the Indians: the "brown" men being afraid look like "grey bad coffee" (9) [11]. The word "grey" is a variant of the word "brown" and is suggestive of humiliation; it is just another way of marking them as inferior (9) [11]. Overall, the impression is that these people are hungry, poor, ugly and loathsome but Europeans have a 'kind' heart to civilize them through colonization; though some of the 'good hearts' among them like George Orwell have immense 'sympathy' for those ugly

creatures and the occasional traces of cruelty on the white men's part can very well be justified as "in order to rule the barbarians, you have to become one" (Meyers 58) [13].

Many critics have tried to justify the observations made by George Orwell which is very much surprising. For example, Stephen Miller while reviewing the biographies of George Orwell comes to a thesis that "he was disgusted by many ordinary sights and smells but this is a trivial observation" (597) [14]. Here Miller is providing similar colonial expression with this phrase which suggests the life of poor Burmese people. The current paper also contends the idea that Orwell's way of seeing the colonized world is just "trivial observation" (Miller 597) [14]. It is affirmative that a European white man may make trivial jokes on brown faces, may ignore the religious beliefs of those people or may become disgusted to see the way the natives live but for those who are being represented through jokes, ignorance and feeling of disgust, it is not trivial.

Another common saying about George Orwell which stands in contradiction is that he is "an Englishman" battling the exile or the man of rebellion or responsibility (Rodden 197) [15]. It is undoubtedly correct that George Orwell shows anti-imperialistic philosophy in his writings. But in the end, he serves the empire possessing the same mentality of superior race; Alex Zwerdling states in this regard: "he had not always been on the side of the victim" (134) [16]. By being a part of the British Imperial Police, he seems to accept the legitimacy of imperialism. He is never completely disconnected with his roots though he randomly tries to show his attachment with the natives. Orwell's writings are tainted with colors of racism as Said argues, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric" (204) [4]. However, Orwell is not a rebel. He has acted as he should have as an officer employed by the British Empire. He faces the conflict between servitude and sympathy; and he prefers servitude showing a bit of common sympathy for those who meet capital punishment.

Shooting an Elephant: A Critical Reading: Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* examines the questions of hegemonic identity in colonial conditions; it gives an interesting glimpse into the idea of identity in colonial space. The Orwell persona in the essay hates imperialism but he equally hates the Burmese people. He has got to see the "dirty works of Empire at close quarters" and theoretically he "was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British" (15) [17]. But he resents the Burmese people as well just as the Burmese people hate him or any other agent of the British Raj. Orwell very tactfully applies the process of 'othering' the natives by being sympathetic to their pathetic condition. He gives an insidious view on imperialism in these two essays and shows how he becomes an imperial machine. By becoming the instrument of powerful machinery, he receives severe hatred from the Burmese people. His mention of being spectacularly insulted on a football field speaks of such dark hatred. The Burmese people trip him, laugh at him on the field and this becomes immensely humiliating. Orwell says: the humiliation "got badly on my nerves"(15) [17]. The white men in the East put all their efforts in not being laughed at, as that would bring utmost disgrace to the British Raj. Out of fear of humiliation, Orwell feels compelled to uphold an authoritative front. This particular complex inner conflict becomes the pivotal point in the essay. Orwell tries to be sympathetic towards the colonized but certain sections of the essay are profoundly racist. The following locates and analyzes the sections.

Orwell feels the collective aversion being a white amidst the "yellow faces" (15) [17]. Here too the color of the people gets his attention first as in *A Hanging*. He identifies the natives with their colour of the skin. This racism is embedded in his writings; the description suggests that the feeling of abhorrence for people from the Orient is an instinct in Orwell.

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 had been Bugged with bamboos-all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. (*A Hanging* (15) [17])

His way of describing the natives using expressions like “wretched prisoners” “stinking cages”, “cowed faces”, “scarred buttocks” - unveils his racist attitude (15) [17]. Orwell unknowingly speaks of the natives as a pathetically inferior race. Said states in this regard: “Dogmatic and stereotyped views and long-held beliefs about the Orient and Orientals allow the Self to treat the Orient as an exotic place, eccentric entity, as their own province; and Orientals as “not quite as human as ‘we’ are”(108) [4]. The Orient is deemed as passive, silent and inferior that should be ruled by their white masters though Orwell says he has this “intolerable sense of guilt” for carrying out the task of civilizing them (15) [17]. He apparently seems to feel bad for these people but the innate feeling of hatred is always there. This is common in several contemporary writers from the West as Ghaforian and Gholi point out, “This ambivalence is a common characteristic of colonial writers such as Kipling and Forster”(1363) [10]. They feel that they have tender feelings for the colonized but the deep-rooted sense of belonging makes them nothing less than cruel agents of the empire. So, the first section of the essay gives a claustrophobic image of imperialism and unhealthy human existence. Orwell, like many writers, does not glamorize imperialism; he does not resent it completely either. He is somewhere in between.

After setting out a map of the dirty work of the empire, Orwell moves on to discuss a particular event of shooting an elephant which he identifies as “enlightening” (16) [17]. This is not a major event in itself but it becomes a symbolic trigger, an existential trigger for him to understand the deeper structures of imperialism. He gets a perverse image of power. Once he gets the news of an elephant ravaging the bazaar, he sets out to kill the elephant with “an old .44 Winchester” which is indeed too small to kill an elephant (16) [17]. But he feels that might be useful in “*terrorem*” (16) [17]. This is symbolic. The whites in the East are always ready to frighten the natives away, to shoo them by causing fear. They tend to tame the anarchy created by the colonized in the colonial space by frightening them. On his arrival in the scene, he gets to know about the havoc created by the elephant. But he fails to get “any definite information” about it (16) [17]. None of the natives gives him the exact detail. Here too Orwell candidly gives a racial generalization, We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. (16) [17]

The phrase “as usual” indicates that this lack of straightforwardness is customary and innate in the Easterners (16) [17]. The adverb “invariably” reinforces this idea (16) [17]. This labeling is not restricted to this example. The Easterners do not have a sense of direction as well; Orwell mentions, “Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours’ journey away,” (16) [17]. The narrator never fails to show that the natives are eternally fixed in a subservient position in every possible way. However, the stereotypes of “the Orientals as inveterate liars” are confirmed when Orwell says that the information about the elephant’s place was a pack of lies (Said 39) [4]. As a result, “Easterners are not liable and reliable” (Ghaforian and Gholi 1366) [10]. Orwell’s act of identifying these natives as ignorant makes him a white racist. He wants the readers to visualize people from the Orient as irrational, impulsive, only capable of creating chaos and confusion. They are far behind the enlightened West and that is why they are regarded as “primitive” and “backwards” in Said’s *Orientalism* (McLeod 41) [8]. They are essentially no different now than they had been in previous time: Said states, “Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient” (96) [4]. They are changeless and static, far away from the progress of Western history. Being a part of the Orient, “Orwell’s imperialistic eye could not discover anything positive in Burmese People” (Alam 57) [18]. The next instance in the essay, however, throws some light on the happenings when he hears “a loud scandalized cry” of a woman (16) [17]. The woman tries to shoo away “naked children” (16) [17]. The physical description here is again stereotypically imperialist. The poor and barbarous condition of the Burmese people is unnecessarily emphasized by the narrator. Keeping intact his imperialistic attitude, Orwell continues to

make such harsh comments on the natives when he finds the empirical evidence, the dead body of a “black Dravidian coolie” (16) [17]. The skin reflection characterizes the dead Indian as in the case of the prisoners in *A Hanging*. However, he tries to describe the coolie’s death sympathetically as follows:

He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. (17) [17]

He has an elaborate observation on the dead coolie and his carefully chosen words in the description try to give the readers the impression that Orwell is sympathizing with the poor coolie who has undergone “unendurable agony” and is innocent like a “rabbit” (17) [17]. The description is coated with his inherent colonial conscience and the words “grinning” and “devilish” make the description a perverse parody of the solemnity of death (17) [17]. Nevertheless, at the end he is happy as the death of the coolie legally puts him in the right: “It gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant” (19) [17]. Hence, duplicity, which is not rare in Orwell, is revealed. Another tangible dual perspective is traceable when the narrator prefers the British Empire to other empires as he mentions in the essay, “I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it” (15) [17]. His love for the empire always makes its way in his composition. Meanwhile, some Burmese tell him about the elephant’s whereabouts and he sends his orderly to borrow an “elephant rifle” (17) [17]. As he marches forward, “the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me” (17) [17]. The huge crowd flocks behind Orwell as if they are awaiting a magical act. Orwell leads them with a sense of pride. A white man with an “elephant rifle” is supposedly able to do some kind of magic, superhuman thing (17) [17]. Here, the superiority of the white men comes into focus. And it must have a grand and spectacular effect. The large audience pushes the story towards its climax and forces the narrator to take an instant decision as Alam states, “Orwell has been left with Hamlet’s dilemma to shoot or not to shoot the elephant” (56) [18]. The narrator admits that he had “no intention of shooting the elephant” (17) [17]. Ghaforian and Gholi put it as, “Moreover, he was a working elephant, a piece of property. More than two thousand yellow faces have blocked the road and expected him to behave as a Sahib, and to kill the elephant” (1364) [10].

It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. (17) [17]

It is the crowd that puts the narrator in a deadly dilemma. The fact of the Burmese deciding what the narrator, a white man must do, creates the irony of master becoming slave to fulfill his racial and imperial obligations. He has to do what the natives expect him to do. It is a discursive demand. He is not concerned about his “own skin”, his biological body; instead he is concerned about the ideological body around him which obviously promotes the supremacy of the white man and the supremacy cannot be compromised (18) [17]. Orwell confronts a moral dilemma and pushes his morals aside to escape the mocking of the Burmans. The shooter as Quinn maintains is “a prisoner of his image”, an image upon which the whole expertise of the white men in the East rely: “not to be laughed at” (307) [19] (Orwell 18) [17]. For a moment, he feels that he is “momentarily worth watching” with the “magical rifle” in his hands and with the rifle in his hands, that he “first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man’s dominion in the East” (17) [17]. His sympathy for the natives is overshadowed as he feels it is the crowd who is in control of that situation and he is a mere puppet. But the interesting thing is, even in such a crucial point he does not fail to address the natives as “watchful yellow faces” (18) [17]. His feeling of resentment is there amidst all the turmoil but his individuality is paralysed like any other white man in the east.

Hence, he finally decides to shoot the elephant. After a lengthy fight with his conscience, he pulls the trigger and hears the “devilish roar of glee” from the crowd (19) [17]. Orwell finds something evil in the large crowd and the word “devilish” is suggestive of it (19) [17]. The rhetoric is very racist. The narrator tries to accuse the “devilish” natives of compelling him to commit the ‘evil’ act (19) [17]. The death is sustained in excruciating detail. The scene is described in clear, unaffected prose. The killing turns out not to be easy at all. It takes many bullets to kill the elephant.

His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. (19) [17]

The slow death of the elephant can possibly mean the gradual annihilation of the agency; it is “an allegory of imperialism” (Meyers 28) [2]. The death of the elephant symbolizes the death of the empire. There seems to be some kind of empathy between Orwell and the elephant at this point. He feels pain in this agonizing death of the elephant. The graphic description reflects Orwell’s imperialistic attitude carefully wrapped up in his sympathetic thoughts. The villagers watch in awe as if it is a piece of entertainment and after its death, they scavenge for its meat. This is also a point that the narrator does not want the readers to overlook; the cannibalistic nature of the Burmans. A raw image of the Burmans is portrayed as he says they wait to take the elephant’s meat. They are in poverty but this act portrays them as an unsavory set of characters. Orwell’s imperialistic eyes fail to find anything positive in the natives and by negatively presenting the natives, he is unconsciously strengthening his own culture as Said speaks, “European culture gained strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3) [4]. However, the natives in the essay have become hateful and selfish in their struggle to survive like all other people who are suppressed by imperialism. The same happens in *A Hanging*. In the end, the natives and the Europeans laugh and enjoy a drink together a hundred yards from where the prisoner lay dead. They have fun like a burden is off their shoulders. The narrator states,

It seemed quite a homely, jolly scene, after the hanging. An enormous relief had come upon us now that the job was done ... I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing. Even the superintendent grinned in a tolerant way. (*A Hanging* 10) [11]

They appear to be completely selfish and are insensitive to the happening around them just as the maddening crowd in *Shooting an Elephant*. The narrators’ demeanor becomes awkwardly relieved in both the essays. But the irony is obvious. Orwell is actually enduring the burden of guilt and the apparent cheerfulness is camouflaging the burden. However, deaths become an entertaining event in both the scenes. Towards the end of the essay, again the question of agency appears when the narrator says, “The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing” (19) [17]. He knows that the owner cannot do anything; he is helpless as he is an Indian and anyone from the east is helpless. Perhaps, he tries to sympathize with the owner but he ends up being a typical white man serving in the east. The end of the essay meets a debate on whether or not the killing of the elephant is ethical. The division of thoughts between the young and the old Europeans reveals a sinister idea of commodification that works in a colonial space. The last line gives the best glimpse to the hollowness of white men’s supremacy: “I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool” (19) [17]. Hence, the shooting or to be more specific, the killing of the elephant turns out to be a face-saving act; an act where Orwell wins the natives over by killing his conscience.

Conclusion: George Orwell is one of the few writers who, being part of colonial power, chose to show sympathy for the colonized. But unfortunately, that could not free him from the charge of possessing white supremacist mentality. Orwell sees imperialism as a double curse landing on both the oppressors and the oppressed. In both the essays, the narrator suffers from duplicity, torn between resentment and sympathy but this position is highly questionable. He sympathizes with “the oppressed, the underdog, the victim and resents the oppressor, the top dog, the victimizer; but how might one simultaneously resent and sympathize with the oppressed – and even the oppressor” (Stansky and Abrahams 201) [20]. *A Hanging* and *Shooting an Elephant* mark out several such duplicities and doubled perspectives. Orwell sticks to his Western norms; he cannot deny it and neither can he ornament it; he seems to be half in love with what he is rebelling against. His attitude to imperialism is explainable in terms of the existentialist dichotomies of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’, the former being the essential, the other the inessential, the irrelevant (Alam 5) [18]. However, Orwell’s stories of suffering in the essays evoke pathos for the colonized. The apparent sympathy he shows for the oppressed in his essays often hides his colonialist mentality. We get the impression that in spite of being a part of all the evil proceedings he has a guilty feeling deep within. But an intense study may unmask him and his actual ideals. He is in every way a devoted and loyal agent of the British Raj who upholds the empire’s ideals. His anti-imperialistic thoughts are quite prominent in both his essays but he is also unable to respect the Orient’s aspirations and deal adequately and genuinely with their lives. This essay unwraps the vicious racist side in George Orwell which is almost missing in the writings of his critics. It carefully discloses the voice of the imperial in an anti-imperialist tone in the two essays through which Orwell presents a critique of colonialism with an ambivalent approach.

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