

Role of Psychological Barriers in George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"

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ABSTRACT

Eric Arthur Blaire, who wrote under the pseudonym George Orwell, was an essayist, novelist, and the most celebrated critic who addressed the hottest issues of his time including imperialism, fascism, and communism. In the story *Shooting an Elephant*, though he himself represents the British Empire, he shows the true mentality of the imperial forces, practicing the same sort of tyranny that existed in world history over the last few decades. The researcher, in light of Edward Said's theory of imperialism and Peter M. Lewinsohn's theory of mental and clinical disorders, attempted to disclose the role of psychological barriers and the ever-changing circumstances in leading the protagonist to react in a way that finally made him hate his job. Under the mounting pressure of the crowd, and due to the pressing urge of the natives, Orwell, to safeguard the honour and prestige of the Empire and, in addition to it, to avoid looking a fool, pulls the trigger and does away with the elephant.

Keywords: Imperialism, Stressors, Disposition, Hatred, Conflicts, Oppression, Injustice, Psychological Barriers.

Introduction

Writing is an "art" that has manifold layers of meanings, and sometimes it becomes totally difficult to understand what the writer wants to say. The metaphorical use of words, sarcastic statements, and hundreds of literary devices add to this difficulty. Thus, it becomes really hard, especially for a lay reader, to understand what actually is being said. Therefore, a reader has to be well aware of all these stylistic impositions on some technical grounds. George Orwell did apply the same writing techniques in most of his masterpieces including the essay *Shooting an Elephant*, in which he shows his disposition and hatred against his fellow men through the use of puns and ironic statements. That has been the reason nobody has ever tried to unfold those layers of meanings, in which he seems to be doing his catharsis, in order to understand whether Orwell committed a big blunder or did he act just to meet the expectations of the emotionally charged mob of the natives. Orwell was strictly against social injustice, totalitarianism, oppression, and imperialism. Some of his masterpieces such as *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *The Road to Wigan Pier* deal with the themes stated above.

As Stevens (2014) says, "A word, after a word, stringing together finally becomes a power." The writer, in the true sense, is one who shows the right picture of his time despite threats and strong opposition. Orwell has done the same just to make the world see the very other side of the picture of the politics of his time. Orwell, in his autobiographical novel *Shooting an Elephant*, states how the prisoners were forcefully thronged into stinky cages and even beaten with bamboo sticks.

In the essay *Shooting an Elephant*, George Orwell shows how the misuse of power and authority made him think twice whether power and authority are there to make savages a civilized population or to seize the available natural resources and treat people as animals. Orwell himself was working as a Subdivisional Police Officer in the colonized state of Burma. Being the representative of the ruling elites, he shares every minute detail of his experience with his readers. Burma was a British colony at that time where the forces of imperialism were working under the very pretext of "White man's burden." The natives were well aware of this fact; thus, they would spit at women, jeer at the

police officers, and just generally make a nuisances of themselves.

In the next section, the researcher will talk about all those factors that proved a stumbling block, a barrier in his way to act and re-act consciously, especially all the inner-conflicts that made him take such a decision will be discussed in full detail. This essay seems very simple at the superficial level, but layers of meaning tell something more.

Hypothesis

Shooting an innocent elephant, especially when its attack of 'mast' was gone leads Orwell to feel ashamed. Furthermore, his inner conflicts and sense of guilt compel him to quit his job and start writing against all those atrocities he's been witnessing at close quarters.

In this study, inner-conflicts and the outer conflicts that made Orwell confused will be discussed in full detail.

Research Methodology

The present research will be qualitative in its nature. The researcher will provide a critical analysis of the text in which the writer gets down with feelings of strange guilt. In the following study the role of psychological behaviour, as well as the inner and outer conflicts will be discussed in full details in the light of Edward Said's theory of Imperialism (1985) and Peter M. Lewinsohn's Mental and Clinical Disorders (1970) theory.

Background of the Theory

The great Arab-American critic and historian Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (1978) has got a metaphorical reference and a Biblical worth for those readers who try to explore the post-colonial world and the history of imperialism. The above-stated work deals with the themes of imperialism, racism, and especially colonialism. Furthermore, this work deals with the false suppositions and a number of series of assumptions that Europeans take Arabs as dishonest, uncivilized, and savage nation. Edward Said claims that Orientalism is created through the very lens of domination of civilization, culture, US, and Others. Edward Said himself was a Palestinian Arab; he strictly rejects these false notions and simply claims that "One counts other by the means of what he is not". The Europeans have created binary oppositions among the educated and uneducated, civilized and uncivilized,

rational and irrational, developed and undeveloped, and especially savaged and polished ones. Finally, while talking about these binary oppositions, he says that it is a very sleek line that just has been created to give Europeans a reason to invade any country, or any state to turn it into pieces.

Peter M. Lewinsohn (1970) argued that 'Depression' is caused due to the following two major factors first, "Stressors present in the environment" and the second is the lack of "Personal Skills". He further explains that these Stress factors make a person too weak to receive positive reinforcement. Their personal skills get damaged. They feel that they are in a very difficult position, thus they lose their confidence, eventually, their decision-making power vanishes and they are left with no option. According to this theory, one gets positive reinforcement only when the subject indulges himself in pleasure giving as well as rewarding activities. Peter concludes that it is a psychological ailment and calls it a 'clinical disorder'.

Research Questions

This research study will attempt to answer the following research questions

- What sort of circumstances compelled an SDPO to quit his Imperial Services soon after doing away with that "mast elephant"?
- Major Psychological barriers that obligated Orwell to undergo a complete personality change?

Limitation and Delimitation of the study

This research study will deal with the following arguments:

How inner and outer conflicts altogether forced a man of intellect to go through such a condition that made him cut a sorry figure as this incident left a long-lasting impression on his life, especially on his personality traits.

This work is unique in the sense that no attempt has been made yet to talk about all those factors that not only made Orwell shoot that 'mast elephant' but also undergo a complete personality transition. Previous studies were conducted under the theme of 'Post-Colonial Theory' only. In this study, the researcher has tried to mark and unleash all those compelling factors that made Orwell to take his gun and shoot a valued working piece of machinery.

Objectives

In this research study, the researcher will trace-out

- Feelings of guilt in the light of ever-changing circumstances.
- Unwarranted, uncanny, and unchecked power practices that made Orwell re-state his roles.
- Psychological barriers that made Orwell take a faulty decision.

Future Outcomes

The research study will

- Pave the way for the new researches.
- Will open new horizons using a multi-thematic approach while discussing a single subject of the study.
- Inspire new researchers to explore new paths, streams, and footprints in research.

Literature Review

Oguz and Ayla (2016) conclude that the realization of identification has become the main subject in the field of literature no matter whether it is colonial or post-colonial. In a colonized society, the very concept of the loss of identification is often taken with some ambiguities. Both the colonized and the colonizers try to discover and re-discover their roles. In this defining and re-defining process, they both try to merge one's identity into the identity of the other. It is a tension between the dominated and the dominating ones: which is the acknowledgment of newly discovered identities. The very dark side of the present essay is that George Orwell himself seems going through an identity crisis. At one time he is seen standing firmly alongside his Empire, on the other, he seems admitting his inner guilt and regrets on his stay over there. Huge cultural differences among the exotic rulers and the Colonized people never let any sort of negotiation succeed. An element of the riot has always been there. With a confused state of mind, Orwell kept on doing his duty to save the Empire's prestige though with little confidence and with much fear.

(Parenti, 1999) argued that Imperialism is an act of carving up whole continents while oppressing indigenous peoples and obliterating entire civilizations. Thus it becomes in-betweenness in Orwell's strategy of action, in his thoughts, and in his feelings. Therefore, his conflict is evident in which role of cultural differences is dominant,

and in its end result: social, political injustice and inequality keep rising. Finally, after killing the elephant, Orwell starts getting his inner voice. He finds that he is guilty of killing that elephant. He repents of his doing, decides that he does not fit in this mask, and resigns from his services.

(Ghaforian, A&Gholi, A.,2015) maintain that Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, talks about a very sleek and slender line drawn by the Europeans. He rejects all the false notions of binary opposition that gave birth to "US and Others, Orient and Occident". George Orwell himself works there as a police officer, despite all his absurd feelings, he never thinks of quitting his job at some early stage. Orwell seems confused which way to go when he says "all I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the Empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible". Orwell says that his job was being made impossible by those brutes. According to psychology, it is human nature that when a man doesn't find his way out, he tries to console himself under different pretexts just to prove himself right. Orwell kept doing the same, sometimes he shows all his sympathies with the poor natives but, most of the time his loyalties turn towards the Empire, in this way, the downtrodden natives are called"—evil-spirited little beasts".

Colonialism, as is stated in *Orientalism*, is the root of all evils. Orwell says duplicity is one of the dominant features of 'British Raaj'. On the one, hand they try their best to save the prestige of their Estate that is why they themselves become a cause of disturbance by treating the natives in a way a beast is treated; on the other hand, they try to show that they do have a soft corner for the oppressed ones. Orwell was born in India. He served for five years in the Indian Police where he experienced what were the basic requirements and responsibilities of being a 'SAHIB'. Here, in this story, Orwell gives his full share to protect his honour. To fit this mask, he does humiliate the natives. He kicks them hard, locks those grey, cow-faced natives in stinking cages which was the part of the book on which he swore his oath.

(Sumbul, 2014) argues that Eric Arthur Blaire with his pen name George Orwell is the author of a number of short stories, essays, novels, and poems. His literary work made him touch the sky; he finally succeeds in making his mark in the list of top anti-imperial writers of the 20th century. While he was in Burma, he witnessed critical disputes working there as a sub-divisional police officer. Different interpretations of the elephant could be taken by keeping the world's cultures in proper consideration. In this essay, the elephant is a symbol of an invaded nation deprived

of their fundamental rights. Their fate is in the hands of their rulers. In his famous political essay *'Shooting an Elephant'*, George Orwell skillfully narrates the colonial invasion and domination of England over Burma. Orwell, being the chief of police there, is informed that an elephant has got itself free, it has started playing monkey with the things i.e. ravaged the bazaar, turned the fruit-carts upside down, destroyed dozen of huts, simple, it has created havoc everywhere. Being the custodian of the prestige of the Empire he takes this responsibility on his shoulders and calls for the gun from one of his friends. The loss created by the mad elephant and the pressure being raised by the uncontrollable crowd, moreover, to save the honor of the Empire all this conjointly made him kill that elephant. Soon he's told that the public is divided in their opinion all the older men were in the support his action while the youth population found this decision an act of cowardice, they started to chant against this decision. Orwell finds shelter in the following pretext "That it was all for the Burms, that was all for the Burms".

Data Analysis

In the following section, a very short synopsis is presented; raised questions are addressed in the light of the above-discussed methodologies, and an attempt will be made to trace out all those factors that conjointly compelled him to take such a mighty decision.

In the current essay, the narrator himself is the central character, who is working as a Sub-divisional Police Officer in the colonized state of Burma. At that time anti-European, anti-foreign establishment feelings were mounting. Though the natives were not having enough power to turn over this enforced, imposed rule, but, inwardly they kept on acting in a way that gave a very strong message to those foreign invaders. This was to show that the natives desperately want their freedom, their liberty, and their fundamental rights back. That's why they did not let any single chance go wasted to show their hatred.

Orwell touches his toe when he talks about how bitterly he was mimed, clapped, laughed at, and even passed hideous sentences whenever he was out for a round. He also justifiably says that this was due to that bitter treatment given to those natives by the so-called imperial forces. It is good to see how Orwell establishes his stance in the light of ongoing events: leading to brutality, cruelty, and oppression. This essay throws light on the growing disposition and the opposition of the writer. Orwell started to hate the way they were treating innocent natives. They

were forced to live a life that was not their own. He says in this essay "In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters". This does not end here, as a matter of fact, on many occasions he himself seems using his un-ending powers conferred upon him by his 'British Raj'. Furthermore, he states "All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible (Orwell, 1935). It's clear that Orwell was going through a severe personality disorder

'I was hated by the large numbers of people.' It was all due to the maltreatment which was one of the main reasons, why he was facing opposition and hatred from the natives. Moreover, Orwell never made his stance clear whether he was with or against the natives. That's why sometimes he hates the presence of the "British Raaj" there in Burma and sometimes he gives his complete share to save the staked honor of the *British Empire*.

Soon he is informed about the havocs played by the 'mast elephant'. It becomes an alarming situation when he is told that an elephant is on its heels, the bazaar has been turned to the piles of rubbish. Everything is on sixes and sevens. Now, the writ of the Empire needed to be restored. The public was to be shown how 'a sahib' acts on such occasions. Thus to make his flag higher, he calls up all his courage and decides to go and witness the grievances himself. In order to deal with this crucial situation he takes a gun with him. It was not because he was just about to shoot that elephant, but, it was all just for the sake of protection not only from that monster but also from the jostling crowd as well as the following line goes

"I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary— and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing....".

When he reaches the spot, he gets confused to see a huge and uncontrollable crowd raising their voices, clapping, enchanting, and signaling towards him. Orwell psychologically gets pissed that he states as

'I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people...'

He is briefed there about the loss of a hut of bamboos, valuable possessions of the public in the market, and a cow along with the dead body of an Indian coolie. He

finds himself in a fix. All these stressors fell on his nerves and his decision-making power gets vanished, he leaves himself in the pity of the ever-increasing crowd. He totally forgets what he has decided earlier. He finds himself in front of the outnumbered active mob. Although he tries to call his senses back but soon gives up, realizing the need of the hour and the demand of the public that was to slaughter that beast at any cost. Orwell stops a little, takes a deep breath, and thinks that the elephant is a costly piece of machinery that should not be killed any-way round. He catches up with the fear....

“The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on, and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill.”

Time proves him nothing more than a puppet in the hands of the natives, in order to meet the expectations and to save his honour, his prestige, he becomes ready to shoot that elephant

“And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it”

He gets the gun, loads it, lays down on the ground to take a better aim, tries to control his nerves, and finally pulls the trigger. He shoots again and again until the elephant falls on the ground like a lifeless mammoth and becomes cold.

In the last section of the essay different opinions of the masses are shown. The final statement tells something more than “I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool”. It was just a pretext that Orwell takes to console and later to tell the public that he never wanted to shoot that elephant.

Orwell disliked all the things that were going against the fundamental rights of the natives in Burma yet he never denounced categorically during the course of his services that such atrocities, oppressions, and tyrannies should be stopped. Why was this going on with him? The shortest answer would be that it was due to his inner conflicts as well as outer conflicts that hampered his way to reach a clear destination throughout his services.

As the very first line of the essay goes in which he seems saying that something has just got to the nerves of the natives due to this they strongly disliked and hated him. It was just because of his actions that were making his stature weak in the eyes of the natives. He was well aware

of the fact that as long as he's there as a representative of the Empire, he will constantly be ignored, laughed at, clapped at his back, harassed, and hated

“As a police officer, I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so”.

Sitting on the fence, he was unable to draw a clear line between his ever-arousing sympathies for the oppressed nation and the role assigned to him by the British Empire.

Lastly, the role of circumstances can never be put aside. Moreover, cultural differences were also there helping more in this restlessness as (Abbas, N.) concludes “Due to the cultural imperialism Europeans were bitterly hated by the natives that they don't miss any chance to tease them” (2020). It would not be wrong to say that the ever-changing circumstances were also one of the main causes of his failure in making a decision, and then sticking to it steadfastly. These circumstances were changing so quickly that Orwell's perception kept changing all the time.

Conclusion

An endless debate has been there regarding Orwell's role in the current essay. In previous studies, many researchers concluded that it was due to the circumstances and cultural differences that forced him to take such decision. In this study, the researcher has proved this was not only due to the ever-changing circumstance and cultural differences, but also psychological barriers kept on changing his understanding regarding the role of his duty and his responsibilities. Orwell was born in India, his father also served in the Royal Forces for the Empire. Orwell proves to be a soft-hearted man, gentle in his outlook and innocent in his spirits. Under the influence of increasing circumstantial pressure, pressing urge of the outnumbered mob, and due to the psychological barriers, he merges himself into the self of the others, takes his gun out, lays down on the ground to make a perfect aim and shoots bullet after bullet. Orwell takes a sigh of relief that it was only coolie's death that gave him sufficient pretext legally. The final and concluding line of the present essay says a lot when he says

“I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.”

Competing Interest Statement

I have read and approved the manuscript and take full responsibility for its contents. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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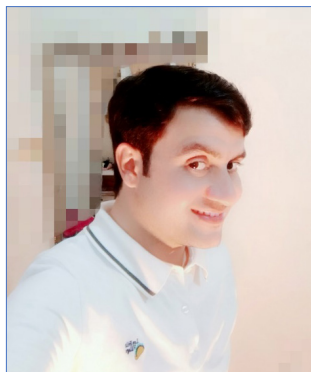
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