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Anti-Imperial Discourse and Fallacies of Colonial Ideology in *Burmese Days*

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the representation of colonial practices and ideologies in George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934). The objective of this study is to investigate the frames in which the novel portrays imperialism and colonialism. It highlights the anti-imperial aspects of *Burmese Days* and exposes the atrocities of colonialism in Burma. Moreover, the study focuses on the fallacies of colonial ideology, a hypothesis which is the center of its investigation. It concludes that *Burmese Days* opposes colonialism, its methods, and mentality, yet there are major setbacks to this opposition as evident in the inconsistencies in its anti-imperial discourse, the use of racist language, and the stereotypical representation of the natives.

Keywords: Orwell, colonizer, colonized, British, empire, Burmese.

Introduction

Modern colonialism is a major driving force in the composition of the world we know today. This movement affected a large percentage of the world population. It started in the early modern era and spanned the twentieth century. Throughout this period, several European nations (Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, Netherland, Belgium, Italy, and Germany) had competed and, in some cases, coordinated the colonization and exploitation of massive areas of the world including the Americas, Oceania, Africa, and Asia.

This pursuit was rationalized to earn moral legitimacy. For example, when Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798, he claimed in his Proclamation to the Egyptians that he came to restore their rights and punish their oppressors (Crépeau and Sheppard, 2013, p. 20). However, the campaign on Egypt harvested the souls of thousands on each side. Comparably, advocates of the expansive efforts of colonization strived to earn a benevolent reputation, especially in Europe, which constituted the grounds from which they sailed towards the colonized world.

However, this historical movement revolved around misleading claims and coercive exploitation. This study focuses on the cruelty of colonization as represented in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. Notably, the colonization of Burma was an extension of the British rule over India, which started with the rising influence of the East India Company which monopolized the traffic of goods from the East to England (Lloyd, 2001, p. 6). In the aftermath of the 1857's clash with the Indians, the British government took over and imposed its direct rule over India. The period between 1858 and 1947 had been significantly beneficial to Britain, which exhausted the Indian natural and human resources (Murphy, 2012, p. 50). Thus, India had been widely referred to as the jewel of the British crown.

During the colonial era, politics forced its presence on the daily lives of both the natives and the colonizers. It became central to the very existence of both parties

since it caused an almost irreversible shift in their relative positions. Therefore, the socio-political aspect became fundamental to the analysis of the complicated relationships between the colonizers and the colonized. Inevitably, such analysis must indulge in the complications of colonialism as reflected in the politics, economy, and culture of the oppressed and the oppressor. Hence, the highly hegemonic nature (politically, economically, and culturally) of the history of modern colonialism necessitates a critical framework with a keen eye on the role of the colonial past in creating inescapable intricacies. Postcolonial theory arose as a countermeasure to the authoritarian influence of colonialism.

This research addresses George Orwell's *Burmese Days* ([1934], 2001)[1] through a descriptive-analytic methodology. The work is critically analyzed with emphasis on the treatment of colonial practices and ideologies. Thereafter, the presence of these elements and their possible reasons are assessed with reference to postcolonial literary theory. This work introduces the theme of colonialism in an untraditional manner; whereas the majority of the Western canon emboldens colonialism and embraces its rationalization, this novel treats it with evident criticism.

Discussion

Burmese Days reflects Orwell's humanism and condemns the British colonization of Burma. In this novel, he presents his liberal opinions regarding the exploitation of the Burman people and resources. Burma was fully annexed as a province of British India in 1886, after three wars and the annexing of Lower Burma in 1862. Between these dates and independence in 1948, "the colonial economy depended on the extraction, processing, and exporting rice, timber, and later, oil" (Stockwell, 1998, p. 391). Correspondingly, *Burmese Days* sheds light on how colonialism utilized racism and the socio-cultural boundaries to reinforce its power over the Burmans. The extent to which the colonizers would go to sustain their superiority over the locals is given account in this novel. Orwell criticizes the methods of the British Raj and protests against the intolerance of the British administration of the locals, the Eurocentric attitude of the Anglo-Burmans, and the exclusive atmosphere that colonization has founded in the land of the natives. The novel exposes the corruption of the imperial mentality and the violent nature of colonialists.

Several studies have critically addressed the colonial aspect of *Burmese Days*. However, few of them have chosen to isolate and analyze the anti-colonial aspects of this work, and fewer studies have combined the colonial practices and ideologies in their analysis, whether pro-imperial or anti-imperial, especially since it is a highly controversial work which lends itself to diverge interpretations.

Ralph Crane's article "Reading the Club as Colonial Island in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and George Orwell's *Burmese Days"* (2011) discusses the segregation that the English clubs impose on the natives' societies. It shows the commonalities and differences among the English clubs in *A Passage to India* and *Burmese Days.* The article highlights the figurative significance of the clubs in the authors' representation of cross-cultural interaction. They constitute a separate exclusive culture within the boundaries of the colonized world. Crane refers to this culture as an "island". In *Racism in George Orwell's Burmese Days*, Isam Shihada examines the hegemonic aspect of the British-Burmese relationship as represented in George Orwell's *Burmese Days.* This study analyzes the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized and their destructive effects on each of them. It shows up how Orwell reveals the colonizers' hypocrisy, exploitation of the natives' land, and racism. It also draws on the social boundaries created in the natives' culture as represented in the English club in which one of the natives may enroll if they prove their worthiness. The study concludes that George Orwell's *Burmese Days* offers a sharp critique of the alleged civilizing mission of colonization.

The novel is set in a town called Kyauktada near the jungle in the country that is nowadays called Myanmar. It narrates the story of John Flory, a British timber extractor in Burma. The plot has two main interdependent axes; Flory's relationship with the English community in Kyauktada, and the conflict between Flory and his native friend, Dr Veraswami on the one hand, and U Po Kyin, the Burman Sub Divisional Magistrate, on the other.

Despite being one of the few English people in town, Flory bears a different mindset. He appreciates the natives and their culture whereas his fellow citizens despise them. This results in turmoil between Flory and the English community. In this sense, submission to the imperial conventions, which favor the Europeans against any other group, becomes the source of division. The theme of colonialism goes beyond this and is given an account in the disillusionments Flory expresses, the imperial allegations his compatriots hold, and the interactions between the English and the Burmans that eventually amount to violence.

Flory's approach to the natives mitigates the differentiation which separates the Europeans and the natives in the colonies. His approach constitutes the core of the struggle with his fellow Europeans who perceive the natives as degenerate and less than persons whatsoever position they hold. The novel draws on the potential of correcting the methods of the Empire in the hope of avoiding injustice and violence. In this sense, the novel criticizes the Europeans' condescension toward the natives in the colonies. Nonetheless, it exemplifies and contradicts this condescension in a variety of ways.

Flory's friendship with Dr Veraswami constitutes the main instrument of expressing his anti-imperial convictions although the doctor does not share the same views. The conversations between the two friends are utilized to express Orwell's protests against the injustices of the Empire. In these conversations, Flory unleashes his most collective criticism of the Empire. He reveals his agitation with the role England plays in Burma. He says: "how can you make out that we [the British] are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It's so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the businessman goes through his pockets" (*BD,* p. 38). Flory discourages the myth of the progressive Empire which considers that developing the less fortunate parts of the world is its duty. He breaks down the mechanism in which the exploitation of the colonized people takes place: the law enforcement imposes the Empire's domination and gives way to the tradesmen to rob the resources of the country.

The distinction Flory draws between the benefits of colonization and the false allegations his fellows adopt may be generalized as that he is eager to utilize colonialism, but is less taken into the imperial rhetoric. Yet it is impossible to separate the two. According to Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), colonialism is "almost always a consequence of imperialism" (p. 123). The paradox of Flory, who profits from colonialism, but opposes the very basis upon which it rests, may only be explained in light of what Homi Bhabha calls colonial ambivalence. He explains it as the duality in the attitude of the colonizers who view themselves as the antithesis of their colonial subjects, setting their landscape and culture into a similar opposition. At the same time, these colonizers eccentrically fancy their subjects; their landscape and culture. Bhabha's concept of ambivalence is especially relevant to the analysis of *Burmese Days* for it successfully describes the complicated relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Dr Veraswami is affiliated with the colonial discourse which indicates that it is the natural duty of the highly civilized nations to take control of the less civilized ones and improve them— the white man's burden. Yet despite the conflict of interest this matter poses to Flory, he chooses to refute the imperial allegations.

The work criticizes the praise of the achievements of the Empire in the colonized world as these achievements are not charity; they are meant to facilitate the exploitation of the colonies. Similarly, Flory continues to attack the disguised imperial intentions. Eventually, he states, "There's an everlasting sense of being a sneak and a liar that torments us and drives us to justify ourselves night and day" (*BD*, p. 37). In other words, Flory vilifies the theft of the colonies in the name of uplifting them.

Flory is aware of the potential consequences of maintaining the colonial policies in Burma. He understands the cultural implications of the British hegemonic rule; "In fact, before we've finished, we'll have wrecked the whole Burmese national culture. But we're not civilizing them, we're only rubbing our dirt on to them" (*BD*, p. 40). The British predominant existence in Burma will inevitably subdue the local culture-shifting its position into a subordinate one. According to Richard Price, "in the new imperial history, power is treated largely as a cultural artefact" (2006, p. 607). Therefore, the culture of Burma is irreversibly affected by the culture of the colonizer which revolves around power. U Po Kyin is a good example of the dynamics of power; it allows such a mischievous official to rise to the position of a Deputy Assistant Commissioner. Another example is Dr Veraswami who denounces his own culture and accepts the superiority of the European colonizers. Under colonial rule, only the natives who succumb to colonial hegemony can prosper or obtain the post of a high official in colonized Burma.

Flory is influenced by his assumption that Elizabeth will share his enthusiasm for the natives and their culture. However, Elizabeth is only interested in Flory when he scares a buffalo away, hunts birds and leopards, or takes charge of a large group of rioting locals. When they visit the bazaar, the only comforting aspect to her is the arrangement of a shop which resembles the British shops; "the European look of Li Yeik's shop-front—it was piled with Lancashire-made cotton shirts and almost incredibly cheap German clocks—comforted her somewhat after the barbarity of the bazaar" (*BD,* p. 131). Elizabeth's comfort when looking at the shop relates to the concept of colonial mimicry. To an English colonialist, a Chinese shop with a European front is more appealing than the authentic experience in the bazaar. The reason for this preference is that the Eurocentric mentality of Elizabeth

favors the Eastern subject who shows a resemblance to the colonizer. However, Elizabeth still patronizes Ly Yeik and his people. According to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, "Despite the 'imitation' and 'mimicry' with which colonized peoples cope with the imperial presence, the relationship becomes one of constant, if implicit, contestation and opposition" (Bill Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 9). Therefore, the limitations that colonial mimicry forces upon the colonial subjects are given account in *Burmese Days*. By bringing such a significant notion into the spotlight, the criticism this work offers to the imperial mindset is hereby stressed.

Elizabeth's mentality and behaviour are a microcosm of the other Europeans in the novel. Except for Flory, the Anglo-Burmans share the typical prejudices of the Empire and support colonial violence in Burma, to varying extents. The European club where these people gather is an exclusive elitist club. The narrator explains, "In any town in India, the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain" (*BD,* p. 14). The exclusivity of the European club and the powerful position which is associated with the Anglo-Burmans contribute to the cultural elimination of the Burmans in their land.

The moral standing of the Anglo-Burmans repels Flory, who impugns his citizens and their club. He refers to the clubs as, "Kipling-haunted little [c]lubs" (*BD,* p. 69). Rudyard Kipling is one of the most prominent advocates of imperialism. Generally, his works celebrate the British domination over the less civilized races. Flory's discontentment with his citizens comprises the ideological basis of their attitude as represented in Kipling, the perpetrator of the white man's burden bubble. It is worth mentioning that *Burmese Days* refer to the English clubs in British India as European clubs, although the only European nationality they include is the English. Their generalization into European clubs may stand for their racist nature. In addition, defining the clubs with their European nature suggests that imperialism is a European device. These clubs constitute a European elitist centre inside the colonized world according to Ralph Crane, who states that "while Forster and Orwell both carefully construct the Club as cut off from its Indian environment the stereotypical myth of an isolated island), they do so only to show that the very idea of a colonial edifice, complete within itself, is doomed to collapse" (2011, p. 20).

During the colonial era, small numbers of Europeans took control of millions of people in the colonies. Technology and weaponry were the tools for subjugating the population of the colonized world. This situation consolidates the imperial power. However, abusing the natives is a method of sustaining this authority over them. According to Anthony Stewart in *George Orwell, Doubleness and the Value of Decency* (2003),

> Not only do these societies operate despite the criticisms of their individual citizens, as was the case in *Burmese Days* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, they actively dictate the behaviour of their citizens and severely punish even the slightest divergence from the extremely narrow precepts they set out. (p. 97).

As an oppressive system, imperialism maintains itself through a set of practices and ideologies. The devotion of the Anglo-Burmans sustains colonial violence and colonial discourse. This causes an immediate antagonism between the colonial institution and any voice of opposition, whether from inside or outside the European club.

The Anglo-Burmans form a class in Kyauktada, and they strive with all their power to preserve the exclusivity of their class. For a corrupt manipulative system to survive, it requires its members to defend it ideologically and practically. The European club members do live up to the task. Ideologically, they highly value and believe in the imperial justifications for colonizing Burma. They believe that their presence benefits the Burmans who cannot govern themselves. Besides, they believe that they are a superior race that is burdened with elevating the less civilized parts of the world.

In addition, the novel exhibits a shocking thirst for violence amongst its Anglo-Burman characters. The attitude of Westfield, who discloses that "eleven years of it, not counting the War, and [I] never killed a man. Depressing", adds to the commentary of the novel on the imperial manners (*BD,* p. 115). Since Westfield, the Superintendent of the Police, represents authority, the imperial authority in Burma is criticized for its eagerness for excessive violence. Another example of excessive colonial violence is Macgregor's orders when the natives riot over an incident in which Ellis blinds a schoolboy by beating him with a cane on his eye. MacGregor issues his orders to the military police: "aim low! No firing over their heads. Shoot to kill. In the guts for choice" (*BD,* p. 261). However, Flory alters the orders when he relays them to the army by asking them to shoot over the natives' heads. In this context, the work highlights the cruelty of colonialism when it comes to killing the natives. Besides, the narrative reveals: "Eight hundred people, possibly, are

murdered every year in Burma, they matter nothing, but the murder of *a white man* is a monstrosity" (*BD,* pp. 247-248). Thus, colonial injustice and violence are exemplified in *Burmese Days*. In colonized Burma, the lives of the natives do not measure against the colonizers'.

The Anglo-Burmans are shown to be excessively violent. They emphasize the significance of racial distinction and division. Not only do they alienate themselves from the natives, but also they exclude the Eurasians, descendants of European fathers and Burmese mothers, from the English institutions and clubs. Moreover, they stand by each other as in the case of Maxwell's death. Although Maxwell was killed by the relatives of a local man he murdered, none of the Anglo-Burmans acknowledges Maxwell's guilt; they commonly agree that he must be avenged to preserve the supremacy of the whites. The Anglo-Burman community in Kyauktada shares a dreadful disregard for the natives' lives.

Orwell delivers his criticism of imperialism through Flory's remarks, the Anglo-Burmans' attitude, and the inclusion of colonial violence. Nevertheless, the theme of colonialism is highly problematic, especially when it is conveyed through Orwell's Western lens. Therefore, the socio-political nature of the work burdens the narrative with several paradoxes that include the highly criticized problem of representation. An assessment of Orwell's representation shall take the following lines quoted from *Burmese Days* into consideration, "Now, at fifty-six, he [U Po Kyin] was a Sub-divisional Magistrate, and he would probably be promoted still further and made an acting Deputy Commissioner, with Englishmen as his equals and even his subordinates" (*BD,* p. 2). The representation in the novel is not single-sided. In a context that discusses representation and postcolonialism, H. L. Gates (1991) writes:

> You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonized, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialism. In agency, so it seems, begins responsibility. (p. 462)

The anti-imperial discourse in this work is multi-angular; it is transmitted through Flory's opinions, the exposition of colonial injustices, and the display of colonial excessive violence. Therefore, it can be established that both representation and anti-imperialism are not static devices; they vary, fluctuate, and overlap. Besides, *Burmese Days* significantly deviates from the early literary traditions in its representation of the natives.

The novel has been widely criticized for its reductive representation of the Burmans. Elleke Boehmer states in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*: "despite the attempt at counter-narrative, however, Orwell does not ultimately diverge significantly from a colonialist semiotic" (2005, p. 154). Thus, Orwell has been criticized for adopting the traditional views in his representations of the Europeans and the natives; the Europeans as saviors as in the case of Flory, who intervenes and saves the Empire during the riot, and the natives as a ridiculous nation that is incapable of producing national heroes. Besides, several critics interpret Orwell's representation of women in *Burmese Days* in terms of a colonial masculinity worldview. Among these critics is Urmila Seshagiri (2001) whose essay, *Misogyny and Anti-Imperialism in George Orwell's Burmese Days*, elaborates on the victimization of Elizabeth and Ma Hla May before it concludes that: "The sympathy meted out to the Empire's men does not touch Empire's abject women; the feminine condition of economic dependency becomes a cause rather than an effect of imperial banality" (p. 119). Moreover, Anthony Stewart comments on the attitudes of Flory and Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) in light of their duality. He writes:

> The individual's resistance exposes itself in substantive ways as mere duplicity, falling well short of the men's lofty pronouncements. John Flory is not above exploiting Burmese women and his special status as a European man when such exploitation suits him. (2003, p. 38).

Furthermore, Stewart's book develops the duality to encompass the attitude of Orwell himself as the British author turns into an advocate of his nation's power during World War II, thus betraying his opposition to violence (p. 18). This is not the only instance in which Orwell shifts positions. Although he elaborately criticizes Kipling and his concepts, he ends up praising Kipling in a tribute he writes on the occasion of the latter's death: "For my own part I worshipped Kipling at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty, despised him at twenty-five and now again rather admire him" (as cited in Quinn, 2003, p. 304).

The novel does not attempt to present Flory as a model. He is the vehicle for Orwell's criticism of Empire, but this does not necessarily mean that Flory replicates every aspect of Orwell's thought. An analytical study of Flory's situation reveals that he is confined by his race and position to think in a certain way. As evident

in his conversations with Veraswami and his aspirations to find a girl who does not intellectually belong to the Memsahib code, Flory constitutes a departure from the imperial conventional point of view. Nevertheless, this departure is not fully achieved. Flory still corresponds to some of the imperial conventions regarding one's self-perception and relationship with the others, especially women and the natives. Yet a notable moral rejection of imperial ideology and misconduct exists within the ambivalent attitudes of Flory. Therefore, it is arguable that even the downside of Flory can signify the weakness in the countermeasures of imperial fallacies and malpractices.

In *Why I write* (1946), Orwell accounts for his motives and intentions in writing on such a problematic topic as politics. He lists four reasons as the motives of any writer; sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. In this essay, Orwell discusses his biography and affiliations. In addition, he introduces the moral of his writing, "when I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention" (p. 315). Orwell's essay adds to the interpretation which perceives *Burmese Days* as an anti-imperial work that stands as a moral statement against the misconducts of the Empire. Yet Orwell was not able to be completely neutral and could not detach from the European conventions of representing the "other" as apparent in several passages of the novel.

Conclusion

The novel constitutes an exposition of the moral corruption of the Empire. It lists and negates several imperial concepts such as positional superiority and the white man's burden. It fully details the logical and moral fallacies of colonial discourse. The disillusionments Flory expresses and the racist attitudes of the Anglo-Burmans contribute to the intellectual opposition this work poses to imperialism. It illustrates the vicious manner of European colonialism by depicting colonial violence. This attack on the colonial pretensions and practices constitutes the essence of the anti-imperial tone in *Burmese Days*.

The novel accounts for the theme of colonialism in an outspoken manner. It delivers its critique of the Empire, mainly through Flory's remarks which condemn the imperial ideology and the oppressive manner of colonialism. Besides, the Anglo-Burman community represents imperialism and demonstrates its ideological and practical failures. The novel expresses an uncompromising assessment of colonial violence; it is addressed as both a historical fact and an ongoing practice of the Empire. *Burmese Days* assigns itself as an anti-imperial work by exposing the fallacies of the Empire, the corruption of its agents, and the extent to which its violence adds up. However, there are two main setbacks to this approach; the models of representation employed in the work, and the inconsistency in Flory's opposition to the Empire. These two factors constitute the core of Orwell's paradox; the inability to fully abolish the colonial rhetoric in his endeavor to expose its fallacy. This research demonstrates the implications of the above-mentioned setbacks. They pose a limitation to the sympathy *Burmese Days* attempts to employ in its treatment of the natives, but they do not fully overshadow it. Eventually, *Burmese Days*, with its acknowledgeable weaknesses, attempts to deliver a counter-discourse against the injustices of the Empire.

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Notes

1. *Burmese Days* was published in 1934. The copy quoted in the article was published by Penguin, 2001. References to this edition in the article use the abbreviation *BD.*

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