

## Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant": Reflections on Imperialism and Neoimperialism

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***Abstract:** Imperialism has been the most powerful force in world history over last four or five centuries. The world has moved from the colonial to post-colonial era or neoimperialism. Throughout the period, the imperialists have changed their grounds and strategies in imperialistic rules. But the ultimate objective has remained the same- to rule and exploit the natives with their multifaceted dominance-technological, economic and military. Through dominance with these, they have been, to a great extent, successful in establishing their racial and cultural superiority. George Orwell is popularly known to be an anti-imperialist writer. This paper, I believe, will lead us to an almost different conclusion. Here, we discover the inevitable dilemma in a disguised imperialist. We discover the seeds of imperialism under the mask of anti-imperialism. In this regard, it studies his revealing short story "Shooting an Elephant". It also humbly approaches to refute Barry Hindess' arguments supporting neoimperialism.*

Imperialism is a state of mind, fuelled by the arrogance of superiority that could be adopted by any nation irrespective of its geographical location in the world.<sup>1</sup> Evidence of the existence of empires dates back to the dawn of written history in Egypt and in Mesopotamia, where local leaders extended their realms by conquering other states and holding them, when possible, in a state of subjection and semi subjection. Imperialism was reborn in the west with the emergence of modern nation-state and the age of exploration and discovery. It is to this type of empire building that the term imperialism is quite often restricted. To Michael Parenti, " By imperialism, I mean the process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials and markets of another people."<sup>2</sup> In the years since world war II , territorial imperialism is no longer the prevailing mode. Rather than, being directly colonized by the imperial power, weaker countries have been granted the trappings of sovereignty, while western finance capital retains control of the lion's share of their profitable resources. This relationship has gone under various names: "Informal empire", "Colonialism without colonies", "Neocolonialism", and "Neoimperialism".

It is his political writings (Burmese Days, Shooting an Elephant, A Hanging, Animal Farm, 1984 etc) that turned Orwell from a minor English figure into a world figure.<sup>3</sup> Orwell himself goes on to say that, were it not for his strong political views, he might never have fulfilled himself as a writer.<sup>4</sup> What is important about Orwell is that he served Indian imperial police in Burma for about five years (1922-1927). Therefore his colonial writings must have contained intense and insightful implications on colony, colonizers and the colonized. The importance in shooting the elephant lies in how the incident depicts the different aspects of imperialism. In this essay, the elephant and the British officer help to prove that imperialism is a double –edge sword. The shooting of the elephant is the incident that reveals that imperialism inflicts damage on both parties in

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imperialistic relationships. The British officer, Orwell displays many aspects of being the absurd puppet under the institution of imperialism.

The elephant along with the two thousand Burmese plays an even more depressing role when compared to the police officer. The elephant represents the “stricken, shrunken; immensely old” countries that have been invaded and conquered by imperialism, while the Burmese represent its helpless people. The once great and powerful elephant is reduced to “senility” by the bullets just as imperial countries with superior technology dominate the countries like India. The “great beast” meaning both the elephant and the countries it represents, becomes “powerless to move and yet powerless to die” under the hands of the white man.

Orwell has been left with Hamlet’s dilemma “to shoot or not to shoot” the Elephant. The “tiny incident” has provided Orwell “a better glimpse of the real nature of imperialism—the real motives for which despotic governments act.” When he killed the animal he joined ranks with the imperialists as he was acting unnaturally to appease the natives. 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.<sup>5</sup> The British felt that they had control over the Burmans but rather the Burmans unwittingly had control over the British. This raises an important question- if a good man can be corrupted and destroyed by imperialism, then what could it do to others who are not so principled?<sup>6</sup>

There are two Orwells in the story.<sup>7</sup> Each Orwell has his own perspective of events. The young police officer who undertakes his own journey to meet and shoot the rampaging elephant sees things without the distance that the older author does. This older author

Orwell recalls the event after years of pondering it ,of being haunted by it. The attitude expressed by the writing Orwell is one the shooting Orwell could not have known, since the event was too close in time to realize it in broader perspective. What the older Orwell is trying to do is to mend his own feelings of guilt by trying to create circumstances that will allow him to live with himself. But he fails. As he looks back at the young Orwell and presents rather matter-of-fact circumstances of the day he shot an elephant, he realizes so many things the young man could not have known, or could not have seen. He realizes larger issues. Mainly, it sheds critical light on the complex issue of imperialism. Because irreconcilable conflicting perspectives are considered to debate on imperialism.

To Noam Chomsky,<sup>8</sup> Orwell is an honest author in speaking truth and exposing lies. Orwell’s presentation of colonial Burma, the internal sufferings of a sensitive colonial officer and explicit and implicit hatred towards the natives by the colonizers are, in fact, the honest and authentic picture of Burma under imperialism.

The plight of an imperial officer is pervasive throughout the story. Here Orwell has introduced us to that idea of humiliation, of how the imperialists, strive everyday to avoid being laughed at. His whole life, Orwell, tells us, “every white man’s life in the east was one long struggle not to be laughed at.” Orwell wants to convince himself. But he is hardly successful. He tries to justify the shooting of the elephant on the pretext that it had killed a coolie: “and afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant.” It is a confession of a moral guilt.<sup>9</sup> It is the rumination of a man possessed and haunted. His final confession comes in the last line of the story: “I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.” Orwell admits to enjoy

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the death of an innocent man. And that is monstrous. He could deceive others but he could not deceive himself. The elephant's long agonizing death is representative of how long the memory of his actions has lasted and the pain that he has had to endure because of his action. This evil deed, thus, haunts the author past the time of the incident. And it is a guilt, which is large and difficult to kill.<sup>10</sup>

Orwell's imperialistic eye could not discover anything positive in Burmese people. The readers get a very bad impression of the Burmans because they are portrayed as nothing but nasty creatures through every thing they do.<sup>11</sup> They have "sneering faces" and "cowed faces". This is not a pleasant image that builds up of them. Their actions are even worse. They spit at women, jeer at the police officers, and just generally make themselves nuisances. This makes the Burmans a very unsavory set of characters for whom the readers get a distaste, even though they sympathize for their poverty. The opposite picture we get in the same story. The Europeans are the ruling class in Burma. They consider themselves to be superior in everyway simply because they are Europeans, educated and are in charge of running the Empire. The dialogue at the end of the essay is most telling about them. Among the ruling class, there is a difference in opinion between whether the death of a coolie was worth the price of an elephant.

The people of colonized country show that imperialism has taken from them the confidence to defend their country. Instead of organizing to drive out imperialists, these people "spit betel juice" on white women to release their anger, and instead of saving an elephant that a fellow Burmese owned, they have decided to take its meat. The people who are suppressed by imperialism become hateful and selfish in their struggle to survive.<sup>12</sup> Together with the officer; the Burmese and the elephant portray an institution that is only capable of harm. The shooting of the elephant is wrong just as imposing imperialism is wrong. People know that imperialism is destructive, just as Orwell knows he "ought not to shoot" the elephant. The flaws in imperialism begin to emerge when the elephant dies for the selfish reason.

Unlike, Soyinka who wrote about colonialism from African point of view Orwell like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* presents the moral dilemmas of the imperialist. His service in colonized Burma burdened him with a sense of guilt about British colonialism as well as a need to make some personal expiation for it. *Shooting an Elephant* chronicles an incident in which Orwell confronts a moral dilemma and abandons his morals to escape the mocking of the native Burmans. He repeatedly shoots and kills an elephant which had ravaged a bazaar and scared many Burmans even though it was not necessary to kill it. Orwell's moral conflict stems from his position as the despised imperialist in a colonized country.

Orwell endured overwhelming bitterness and hatred of the natives because of his British heritage "the meeting faces of young man that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me got badly on my nerves." Orwell sums up his feelings of guilt coupled with his reaction against being hated "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." Although part of him saw the British Raj as tyrannical "with another part I thought the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts." Orwell rationalizes his feelings saying, "feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism." Barry Hindess truly comments that such feelings reflect no particular commitment to the liberal value of freedom.<sup>13</sup> He supports the racial superiority of the author and explains it from that point of view. Thus, it is very normal to him that as

an officer of the imperial power the author finds himself with a problem responding to the approval and disapproval of those who are beneath him.

Orwell abandons his morals and kills the elephant to garner the approval of the Burmese. Orwell speaks of himself when he says, "it is the condition of rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the natives." And so in every crisis he has got to do what the natives expect of him. He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it. Orwell's story portrays him as suffocating under a mask, which he wears.

Orwell stands with the rifle in his hands "first grasped the hollowness the futility of the white man's dominion" in the east. Orwell's fear of mockery represents the fears of imperialists of a loss of control. While the British could control the economics and politics of their colonies they could not control the mockery and disdain of the natives. The moment when he faced the elephant, Orwell says, "the sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled and reduced to a grinning corpse." Orwell tells a story of moral suffering. His story evokes pathos for the politically powerful imperialist who suffers from his own tyranny: "When a white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys." But Orwell fails to say how the freedom could be restored. The destruction of colonialism will restore to the white man that freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Orwell's anti-imperialism hardly shows any sign of anti-patriotism. For instance, Orwell was able to hold to anti-imperialism alongside a eulogizing of the English at times. This, precisely, was because he believed they could administer an empire befitting the colonized more reasonably than any new colonizer: "I did not know that the British empire is dying, still less I did know that it is still a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it." Here the magnitude of the contradictions is made apparent. The contradictions are of hatred for the Raj and also a sense that for all its failings it is still better than anything to which imperial nations might aspire. This is a sentiment that links directly into that sense of service, duty and responsibility, which the authorities were so keen to emphasize. This sentiment viewed the continuation of British rule (as opposed to anyone else's) was the surest way of maintaining the liberty of colonial subject. In other words, the established regime was viewed, as a great deal better than those that would supplant it. Definitely Orwell recognizes the superiority of the imperial forces. Eventually, the natives appear to be inferiors who need to be colonized and ruled. So, Orwell could not overcome the limitations of his political context accepting the natives as equal human beings.

The critics have reasons to believe that Orwell's resignation from the British Imperial Police in Burma was the result of his hatred of British imperialism in India: "I was in the Indian police for five years, and by the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving...I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience."<sup>15</sup> But his colonial writings show his self-image to be an anti-imperialist to be misleading.<sup>16</sup> Those critics who view Orwell as primarily anti imperialist overlook the fact that he writes not from the perspective of the Burmese but from that of the English, the ruler, in India. He is unable to respect Burmese aspirations and deal adequately and genuinely with native life and society; rather he concerns himself chiefly with the exploration of a subjective truth that has significance only for the imperialist. What is of central importance in Orwell is an English or Western interpretation of the imperial situation which de-emphasizes the Burmese perspective and the detrimental effects of the British Raj on Burmese economy and culture but stresses the ironic plight of the

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imperialist; he is a victim of imperialism, a captive of its by-products, of isolation and moral corruption, and of its code of behaviour.

We find a graphic picture of agony of a British police officer in the story. It has been described throughout from his own perspective. Under the pressure of "two thousand wills" he feels compelled to commit the "murder" only to uphold his image of being a "shahib": "A shahib has got to act like shahib, he has to appear resolute, to know his own mind to do definite things...." At the cost of his personal likes and dislikes he becomes slave to his imperialistic ethos. One-sided and questionable Imperialistic justification ranks the writer to be of a superior race. And it determines his code of conduct. We see him undergoing a lot of painful indecisions and hesitations. But finally he has to succumb to the demand of imperial order, which cannot be justified by morality and neutrality. Thus, there is the picture of an imperial officer being suffocated under the unnatural and unjustified mask of imperialism. He becomes terribly alienated and hopelessly entangled. We get the first-hand account of tortures and troubles suffered by a colonial officer. But in no way, the story gives us a scope to consider and observe the condition of the natives. Though Orwell has defined the imperialistic system to be an "oppressive one", he is hardly concerned to narrate the aspects of the oppressed natives. He was left with "bad conscience" but it only sees the plight and predicament of the imperialists. It has not been good enough to locate pains and pangs of the natives.

Orwell's 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.<sup>17</sup> Here, Orwell represents the Self, whose predicament under imperial rule has been given the supreme importance. And Orwell's narration of the story undermines and marginalizes the other, the Object. Orwell's disregard of Burmese reality is also noticeable in his incapacity to portray Burma as a society of real human beings, who are grotesquely evil and preposterously innocent to merit any attention. In this way the imperialists depict the characters of the natives in their own way where the perspective of the natives is marginalized or totally ignored.

In his reading of Conrad, Edward Said discovers a criticism of imperialism but Conrad's criticism ironically fails to locate any alternative to the imperial world order and reproduces the imperial world order of his time. Said's contrapuntal reading of novelists like Dickens, Conrad and Kipling exposes the varying patterns of superiority western culture has constructed for itself in relation to its understanding and knowledge of the east. However, in studying the history of imperialism and its culture, Said moves beyond the literary texts, relying on History to draw some of his most powerful conclusions:<sup>18</sup>

I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure. Culture and aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience ...As I discovered in writing *Orientalism*, you cannot grasp historical experience by lists or catalogues and, no matter how much you provide by way of coverage, some books, articles, authors and ideas are going to be left out. (Introduction, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxiv-xxv)<sup>19</sup>

"I had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every English man in the East"- is the comment made by Orwell Who like Conrad is evidently indifferent to discover an alternative to remove the sufferings of the natives. Orwell proves himself

to be a true Western who has been shaped to believe in his racial superiority. Thus, this becomes a story of how a man can become corrupted by his national and social pride, which makes him believe that he is better than other people.

Orwell's lack of sympathy for the colonized is evident. Understandably, Burma as a country, a nation, a history, a culture, does not really exist. The imperialist's moral suffering predominates. This kind of textual domination may be seen as a form of "Orientalism", which in the words of Said, is "a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Orientalism, 3).<sup>20</sup> The inevitable paradox is that Orwell was fated to be an imperialist.

While refusing "liberal commitment to freedom" in *Shooting an Elephant*, Barry Hindess has observed that substantial portions of humanity consists of individuals who are not-or not yet capable of acting in a suitably autonomous fashion.<sup>21</sup> With this view he gets a division of the world into settings in which individuals can normally be trusted to conduct themselves as autonomous rational agents and other settings in which they cannot be trusted to behave in this fashion. So, not surprisingly, Hindess tries to justify the imperial rule over the second group of people who could not or cannot conduct themselves. Perhaps, this type of mentality gives reasons to make pre-emptive attacks on countries like Iraq. Even, Hindess discovers supportive examples from the west to strengthen his view of authoritarian or imperial rule. He clarifies some points. Throughout the nineteenth century all Western states restricted the freedom of important sections of their own populations and the more powerful among these states forcibly imposed their rule on substantial populations outside their territorial borders. Western states now no longer practice direct imperial rule. Rather they have chosen some indirect methods to continue their imperialistic rule.

Hindess has not commented on how far this imperialistic rule is democratic or how far this type of rule is supported by the natives living in those territories. Apart from other observations, I will only bring in consideration his ominous support to indirect imperial rule or neoimperialism. He feels satisfied to say that the new indirect methods of neoimperialism are operational to improve and advance the less advanced territories. He remarks:

Finally, of course, the world has changed dramatically since Orwell wrote his memoir ...The great liberal project of improvement, operating now under the label of development, is still pursued by Western states but it has to work through a remote set of indirect means, relying, in effect, on diplomacy, national and international aid programs that assist, advise and constrain the conduct of post colonial states, international financial institutions and also, of course, the market.<sup>22</sup>

Imperialism, we know, has always preferred its own interest. So, we have reasons to doubt Hindess' ungrounded or evil-grounded complacency. Our doubts can be justified by the following extract:

Historically U. S. capitalist interests have been less interested in acquiring more colonies than in acquiring more wealth, preferring to make off with the treasure of other nations without bothering to own and administer the nations themselves. Under neoimperialism, the flag stays home, while the dollar goes everywhere—frequently assisted by the sword.<sup>23</sup>

Hindess like Orwell could not go beyond the western context in supporting neoimperialism. The peoples of native countries now painfully realize the curses of

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colonized rule. But under neoimperialism, they have been thrown from frying pan to the burning fire. Despite the awareness, peoples of these countries often suffer unwillingly and helplessly under neoimperialism:

After years of colonialism, the Third World country finds it extremely difficult to extricate itself from the unequal relationship with its former colonizer and impossible to depart from the global capitalist sphere. Those countries that try to make a break are subjected to punishing economic and military treatment, by one or other major power, nowadays usually the United States.<sup>24</sup>

### Note:

\*All quotations of the text Shooting an Elephant have been taken from The Norton Anthology. English Literature, Sixth edition, Vol. 2, 1993, Ed. M. H. Abrams. P2228-2233.

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