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From People To Props: Treatment Of The Natives In George Orwell's "Shooting An Elephant"

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ABSTRACT:

The paper aims to discuss the minor, prop like position of the indigenous people in the literature created by the British authors. Through a post colonial reading of the essay "Shooting an Elephant" by British writer George Orwell, this paper aims to study how the natives of Burma are being distanced from their own voice and represented wholly from the perspective of British narrator to shape his thoughts and justify his actions.

KEY WORDS: Natives, Colonization, Objects

INTRODUCTION:

The treatment of native people in colonial English literature is frequently characterized by a combination of exoticism, dehumanization, and disdain. These texts, which were usually written by European missionaries, administrators, settlers, and explorers, represent the dominant imperial ideals of the era. Native Americans were commonly depicted as "savages" or "uncivilized," frequently devoid of moral or intellectual complexity, and in need of European dominance or direction. By using this representation, colonial expansion and the enslavement of native populations were justified in the name of a "civilizing mission." The purported primitivism of indigenous practices, religions, and social structures was stressed in a number of writings, including missionary journals and travelogues. In pieces like *The White Man's Burden*, authors like Rudyard Kipling saw colonization as a noble obligation and portrayed indigenous people as the helpless objects of Western kindness. Native characters, even when they did appear in literature or reportage, were rarely given agency or a voice; instead, European ideas and colonial objectives dictated their identities.

Many travel and literary novels portray indigenous as background characters or mute onlookers who hardly ever take action or voice opposition. They frequently lack interiority and nuanced motivations, operating as symbolic figures instead—either as silent victims of their own ignorance or as appreciative receivers of British "civilization." African characters in works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, are mainly wordless and remain shadowy beings whose passivity highlights the European protagonist's purported moral and psychological turmoil. This representation furthered the imperial narrative of the "white man's burden," which portrayed the empire as a kind entity that assisted those who were unable to assist themselves. By portraying indigenous people as passive, British authors subtly denied them agency, turning them from active participants with their own voices, desires, and histories to objects in the imperial endeavor. While most of the English writers and critiques have said in support of the colonialism or against its bad impact on the natives, George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant" talks about the pressure, a white

man had to carry in a colonized nation as a ruler. George Watson, in his essay “Thoughts on a Dead Elephant”, has largely explained how colonization has always been a curse not only to the colonized, but to the colonizers also. In the essay, he has mentioned, “Empire enslaves the conqueror, rather than the conquered.” (Watson)

Eric Arthur Blair was an English author, journalist, critic, essayist, and novelist who wrote under the pen name George Orwell. His literature stands out for its clear prose, social critique, opposition to authoritarian communism and fascism, and advocacy for democratic socialism (among other totalitarian ideologies). Orwell’s best famous works are his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945), despite the fact that he also wrote poetry, fiction, polemical journalism, and literary criticism. His essays on politics, literature, language, and culture are as highly regarded by critics as his nonfiction works, such as “Homage to Catalonia” (1938), which describes his experiences as a soldier for the Republican faction during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), and “The Road to Wigan Pier” (1937), which details his experiences of working-class life in the industrial north of England.

In his essay “Shooting an Elephant”, the narrator talks about his past experience as a police officer, while he has been called to shoot a mad elephant. In the essay he describes how the narrator’s thoughts are being influenced by the natives. The narrator of the essay claims to discuss the effect of colonialism, while actually giving importance to his inner conflicts and moral dilemmas. As explained in the article, “Landscape and the Mask of Self in George Orwell’s ‘Shooting an Elephant’”, “Orwell’s ‘Shooting an Elephant’ addresses more so concerns of self and humanity than simply the exploitive and oppressive elements of colonialism.” (Tyner) Though, such a huge responsibility has been associated with the natives, they have not given any specific voice to represent what they actually think, rather being used as props are used in a theatre; silent and voiceless, objects for shaping what the characters want the audience to know.

DISCUSSION:

English author George Orwell’s essay “Shooting an Elephant” was included in the literary journal *New Writing* in 1936. According to the article, the English narrator—possibly Orwell himself—was asked to shoot an agitated elephant while serving as a police officer in Burma. The elephant’s slow and agonizing death adds to his suffering, and because the locals expect him to do the job, he does it against his better judgment. The article interprets colonialism in general and Orwell’s idea that “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” as figuratively depicted. Orwell, an anti-imperialist author, promoted the idea that imperialism destroyed both the conqueror and the oppressed. Orwell states unequivocally that he disapproved of the British Empire, writing, “I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing.... I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British.” (Orwell) According to the narrator, the conquered’s decision governs his actions and the conqueror is not the controller.

The Burmese people, according to Orwell, are oppressed by a system that deprives them of their autonomy and sovereignty as a result of imperialism. They are seldom depicted with any uniqueness or complexity, nevertheless, in spite of their subjugated condition. Instead of being portrayed as unique people with distinct voices or viewpoints, they are frequently reduced to a mob that yells, jeers, and puts societal pressure on the narrator. As a colonial officer, Orwell maintains power over them despite feeling confused and despised, illustrating the subjection and control that characterize the British Empire’s treatment of them. The local man’s death after being stomped by the elephant is addressed in passing even in the elephant event, with greater focus on Orwell’s moral quandary than on the victim’s life or humanity. Subtly reinforcing colonial perceptions of the natives as illogical or violent, the mob that arrives to see the shooting is shown as eager for entertainment.

In the essay, Orwell’s moral dilemma and ultimate choice to shoot the elephant are discreetly and implicitly attributed to the locals. Orwell portrays the native Burmese people as a source of personal suffering even if he acknowledges that imperialism is an oppressive and unfair system. He explains how they publicly ridicule, jeer, and abuse him, making his work as a colonial officer challenging and degrading. This animosity intensifies into a feeling of pressure, particularly when he is in front of a sizable crowd that is counting on him to take decisive action. Orwell is driven to shoot the elephant in the essay, as described, not because it is required, but rather because he is afraid of appearing weak or stupid in front of the audience. He essentially shifts some of the guilt for his actions onto the indigenous when he writes, “I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind.” (Orwell) Orwell suggests that he is forced into a part he does not wish to play by the quiet pressure of the audience by portraying himself as a victim of their

expectations. The paradoxes of colonial ideology are reflected in this subtle blaming: Orwell conveys irritation and dread for the people the empire oppresses, even as he denounces the cruelty of the empire. Instead of taking full responsibility for his choice, he throws some of the blame on the indigenous people, making them appear to have participated in the exercise of imperial authority despite their continued helplessness within the broader colonial structure.

While such a huge responsibility is placed on the natives, they are not given any prominent role and voice to represent what they actually think about the whole event. They are portrayed as mere objects who are, like the props in a theatre, used to help the readers look into the mind of the narrator. Both literally and figuratively, the indigenous Burmese people are mainly denied a voice in George Orwell's essay. The essay is told exclusively from Orwell's point of view as a British colonial officer in Burma; the Burmese characters are never given the opportunity to explain themselves or have their feelings and thoughts put into words. Rather than being distinct people, the locals are depicted as a mob or a crowd. Instead of being shown as individuals with agency or inner lives, they are mainly characterized in terms of how they make Orwell feel—resented, pressured, or watched. This silence is a reflection of colonialism's intrinsic power disparity. Orwell acknowledges the wrongs of imperialism and shows compassion for the colonized people, yet his story perpetuates the identical silencing it criticizes. The Burmese are never involved in the decision-making process; instead, they are observers and tools of pressure in the main moral conundrum—whether to shoot the elephant. The article is dominated by Orwell's psychological turmoil, which renders the locals inconsequential even when an event occurs within their community. Thus, while criticizing imperialism, "Shooting an Elephant" also implements one of its main strategies: the erasing of the voice of the colonized.

CONCLUSION:

Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" describes the dilemma of a British police officer in a colonized nation, while giving insights into the past experience of the author as a police officer in Burma. Through the thoughts of the narrator, he has described how colonization adversely affects not only the colonized, but the colonizers also. It also provides the readers with the mindset of British people towards the natives, placing them in a minor position where, though they are being held responsible for the psychological turmoil of the narrator, are not given their own voice, rather being presented as mere objects.

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