



'To Avoid Looking a Fool' or Repressed Ethnocentrism: A Postcolonial View of George Orwell's shooting *an Elephant*

Author: **Suchismita Sarkar**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Dinabandhu Mahavidyalaya, Bongaon, North 24pgs.

Abstract

It is customary to consider George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant the quintessence of imperialistic impression. More broadly, it demonstrates the adverse impact of it on people who unwittingly become a part of the entire system. In this story the narrator unwillingly kills an elephant under compulsive and unavoidable circumstances and inadvertently emerges as and conforms to the figure of a Sahib who is assigned with the duty to lift up 'the white man's burden'. While performing such inhuman act, he defies his common sense, good judgement, instincts and emotions. But the crucial question still remains that whether he killed the creature only to save his honour, not to be tagged as a fool or his repressed ethnocentrism enkindled his desire to pose as a protector of the native people. This article is an attempt to unravel the causes that worked behind his final decision to kill the elephant.

Keywords: imperialism; sahib; ethnocentrism; the white man's burden

Introduction: George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* is undoubtedly a vivid demonstration of the impact of colonialism and imperialism on both the coloniser and the colonised. The narrator of the story initially poses as a common man who is torn between his dual characteristics of a sensible human being and a typical saviour, posing dummy for the native people. Simultaneously, he felt an intense dislike for the native people for their surly attitude and direct exhibition of abhorrence towards the colonisers and a strong sense of aversion for the tyranny and oppressive ways of the British raj. The narrator describes his experiences during his stay in Burma from his own perspective. He also tries to rationalise his actions, killing an elephant, his abhorrence towards the native congregation, and convinces the reader that he was merely a victim of the unavoidable circumstances. Above all, he provokes the reader to consider him a person who was propelled towards a heinous act by the colonised people only to lift up 'the white man's burden'. But the crucial question is whether he curbed his

instinct, sense of judgement and killed the creature only to save his prestige? Was there no trace of inferiority in his character that may urge him to do something to prove him worthy? Wasn't his act of killing the elephant an external manifestation of repressed ethnocentrism, a latent desire to assume the role of a typical white man?

The answer to these questions lies in the narrator's own narrative. In the story the narrator describes his experiences during his stay in Burma, where he served as a British police officer. He strongly opposes the tyranny and oppression of the British reign in Burma. Even he feels quite sympathetic towards the tortured native people. At the same time he resents the ridicule he receives from the native people. In his opinion imperialism is the source of his misery. He confesses that he is young and ill-educated and bitterly hating this job. The narrator confronts a predicament when a local coolie is killed by a violent elephant and he is entrusted with the duty to handle the situation. He finds the corpse lying on his belly, with arms



crucified and head sharply twisted with an expression of unendurable agony. Forced by the collective will of the local people he undertakes the mission to kill the elephant. While aiming to shoot it appeared to him that may be the creature is no longer dangerous and intends not to kill it. His instinct urged him to think it would be a crime to kill the seemingly pacified creature that preoccupied grandmotherly air. Despite his reluctance, he is impelled to kill it to escape the humiliation of being labelled as a fool. The excruciating agony and death of the elephant has been described in a detailed way. Unable to witness the last agonising moment of the elephant he retires with a heavy heart. The elephant becomes a victim of British imperialism and inadvertently the narrator assumes the role of a typical white man.

Though the narrator tried to present himself as a victim of imperialism, traits of ethnocentrism, a sense of superiority is evident in the mode of expressing disgust towards the local people. The narrator unwittingly made derogatory remarks about the local people like- 'No one had the guts to raise a riot.' It is also true that the anti-European feeling was very harsh as the native people humiliated them in different ways like spitting betel juice over a white lady's dress, or jeering and making embarrassing remarks at them. Though he faced perplexing and upsetting encounters with local people, the deprecatory and underestimating tone of the narrator is inescapably noticed in his words like- 'The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages,' 'the grey, 'cowed faces of the long term convicts', 'it would be the greatest joy to drive a bayonet through the Buddhist priest's guts.' Considering his remarks it is easy to realise that repressed ethnocentrism regulated his mind. From a postcolonial perspective it can be surmised that the narrator's tone obviously evokes a sense of superiority which also justifies the fact that western values, tradition

thoughts and literature are often guilty of repressive ethnocentrism. The quintessence of the fact is Rudyard Kipling's poem '*The White Man's Burden :The United States and Philippine Island*, published in McClure's in 1889. It is a propaganda for white people who are solely to be entrusted with the responsibility to uplift the native people socially and culturally. The poem expressed European ethnocentrism in an awkwardly explicit way. If we consider the idea from a postcolonial perspective, under the guise of homogenising, national stability, and federalism the coloniser perpetuate the oppression of the marginalised. Besides the coloniser is aware of his 'double illegitimacy' because the foreigner creates a place of his own and takes away the place of the inhabitant. He legitimates this usurpation by substituting local laws with his own. It is not quite unnatural that the narrator's mind indulged such notions or may be his mind nurtured the concept in a repressed state. In case of repression an individual psychologically attempts to repel desires or impulses by excluding it from the conscious and subduing it in the unconscious. Albert Memmi, in his nonfiction work *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, vindicates the fact that all racism and xenophobia consists of delusions about oneself including absurd and unjust aggression towards others. This is applicable for both the coloniser and colonised. This gulf between the colonizer and the colonized emphasises those issues that keep them separate. By exploiting these differences, the coloniser finds justification for rejecting his subject. Orwell's narrator may be sympathetic towards the tortured colonized people, but always keeps a safe distance from them because of his repressed ethnocentrism.

The post colonial discourse concentrates on the colonialism develops a certain fundamental oppressive structures in class, gender and caste.



The pivotal concept of 'to write history from the below' argues that apart from the colonial technique one should attempt to retrieve history that has been silenced or erased by both colonial and nationalist powers. Apart from that colonialism has its impact on both the colonised and the coloniser who share a complex relationship as well as suffering psychological crisis. Octave Mannoni emphasises in his *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* that 'a predestined colonial' and the European who comes out to the colony suffers from a 'psychologically inferior personality' and the native 'psychologically dependent one.' In order to get rid of this inferiority complex the European lords it over the native. The native suffers from dependency complex. The white man exploits it and casts himself in the paternalistic role of the parent and master and becomes the protector/provider of the child native. Feelings of hostility arise when the bond of dependency is broken. The motive for which despotic government acts is this father child relationship. The narrator assumes the role of a father, a protector and earns their respect, captures their attention as he describes-'as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but the magical rifle in my hands.....I was momentarily worth watching'. The only thing he was worried about was the disruption of the bond of dependency that may incur their hostility as according to him-'my whole life, every white man's life in the east was one long struggle for not to be laughed at.'

A conflict between his dual self starts at this point when the narrator says-'I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of the yellow faces behind...a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib.' But his another sensitive human part urged him to follow his instinct, common sense of judgement and not to kill the elephant. Eventually he succumbed to the demand of the

local people and killed the creature. What was the actual cause of his final transformation into a sahib from a sensible human being? The two options that he had was first to save the 'great machinery of nature', second to kill it and save himself from humiliation. Under every human consideration saving the creature's life was far more important than saving one's prestige. What would have happened if he listened to his instinct and saved the creature? People would have laughed at him, consider him a fool as they used to do. But eventually he would have been saved a creature's life which is a noble work and would have saved himself from the prick of conscience. His personality may not achieve the elevated state of a saviour, but he would have been a more sensible human being. Whatever the compulsions have been, his decision to pose as a typical sahib was a personal one. He decided not to act as a sensible human being, but to lift up 'the white man's burden'. Repressed ethnocentrism is obviously the factor which was working in his mind. The desire to prove himself a worthy leader or master, as Octave Mannoni expatiated in his analysis, being a coloniser and having an inferior feeling, the desire to become the protector was latent in the narrator's mind under the translucent cover of urgency of the situation. His response to the situation and his final decision elucidates his ethnocentric mentality which he tried to cover up under the guise of the imperialistic urge he mentioned. He is more akin to an ethnocentric white man than that of a victim of imperialism.

WORK CITED:

- [1] Ryan, Helga Gayer, Collier, Peter, *Literary Theory Today* Cornwell University Press, 1990



- [2] Mannoni, Octave, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, (Ann Arbor Paperbacks)
- [3] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnocentrism>
- [4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_a_n_Elephant
- [5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_repression
- [6] Seldan Raman, Widdowson Peter, Brooker, Peter, *A Reader's Guide To Contemporary Literary Theory*, fifth edition.
- [7] Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant", *The Literature Network*, accessed December 17, 2014
- [8] Memmi, Albert, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Beacon Press, 1965 [ISBN 9780807003015](#); revised edition: Routledge, 2013 [ISBN 9781134030828](#)
- [9] "The White Man's Burden". *McClure's Magazine* 12 (Feb. 1899)