The Concept of Imperialism in George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Literature is the spontaneous expression of somebody's thoughts, emotions in written form. Through literature we can envisage different facets of life whether they are political, social or environmental. Imperialism is one of the political notions that are used by different writers in their literary works. George Orwell, the pen name of Eric Arthur Blaire, the author of numerous novels, short stories and essays has been enlisted among the erudite writers of the 20th century literature. Orwell's political writings focus upon popular political concepts of his time. The present study scrutinizes an important political essay 'Shooting an Elephant' by George Orwell in the light of imperialism. This study is qualitative in nature, in the sense that the data will be in the form of words or quotations. In terms of sources of data and how the data is interpreted, the study can also be categorized as a content analysis study. This study will help the theoretical writers to understand how imperialism has been molded in George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant'.

Key Words: Imperialism, Literature, Burma, Colonizers, Elephant.

Introduction

"Literature is a uniquely human activity, born of a man's timeless desire to understand, express and finally share experiences" (Pickering, James and Hoeper, Jeffrey D, 1981). Literature is not an esoteric form of art, rather it is a written expression of human life through a story which is created by the writer not only to amuse but also to convey an educative message to the readers.

Wuntu (2015) has stated that "A literary work which has affective nature is a significant power to touch the deepest sense that can produce perfect consciousness, as it successfully carries out its mission as a form generator of human consciousness." Sabudu (2014) also states that "literature is the reflection of human life whether in the society or in their private life, every phenomenon that found in the society usually reflects in the literary works such as poem, novel, drama or short story." George Orwell's political essay 'Shooting an Elephant' represents the nature of imperialism. Imperialism is a practice to control the people by implementing its colonial policy. It can be viewed in terms of culture and policy when a prodigious country takes control over a small nation and overrides its people.

George Orwell's political writing evolved him into a worldwide figure. What is important about Orwell is that he worked in Indian imperial police in Burma for about five years (1922-1927). As a result, his colonial

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07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 62 30-12-2022 09:55:24

writings have contained deep and perceptive implications on colonies, colonizers and the colonized. The significance of "Shooting the Elephant" lies in how the occurrence portrays the diverse facets of imperialism. In this essay, the evidence of the elephant and the British officer assist to demonstrate that imperialism is a double-edged sword. The "Shooting of an Elephant" exposes that imperialism perpetrates damage on both parties in imperialistic relationships. In his essay 'Shooting an Elephant' Orwell delineates his works as the sub-divisional police officer of Moulmein, a town in the British colony of Burma. The Elephant is the principal emblem of the story. The liberty of the 'Elephant' is restricted like colonized people, and it becomes violently unruly only as a response to being fettered. The British officer, Orwell, acts as a puppet under the institution of imperialism.

Significance of the Study

There is opprobrium about imperialism. George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant' is a perfect example of how the maltreatment of animals is often condoned. There is often an endeavor to make human messages just at the cost of infringement of nature and the animal world. The focus is not only on the killing of the animal but also on divulging the concept of imperialism through this essay. This article presents how imperialism is presented to the readers in the form of a British police officer and the shooting of the elephant.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the concept of imperialism in George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant"
2. To find out the effect of imperialism through analysis of the text 'Shooting an Elephant'

Literature Review

'Shooting an Elephant' goes beyond the mere denigration of British imperialism and colonization; it is actually the loss of freedom for both the colonized and the colonizers.

According to Merriam-Webster's Advanced Leaner's English Dictionary (2016) is 'Imperialism' a policy or practice by which a country increases its power by gaining control over other areas of the world or the effect that a powerful country or group of countries has have in changing or influencing the way people live in other, poorer countries.

According to A.S. Hornby, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2020) defines 'Imperialism' as a system in which one country controls other countries, often after defeating them in a war or the fact of a powerful country increasing its influence over other countries through business, culture etc. Volkan Sari (2020) in his article talks about imperialism focusing on 'Shooting an Elephant'. In his article, he talks about the effects of imperialism in the light of 'Shooting an Elephant'.

The Encyclopedia Britannica (2010) defines the essay as 'an analytic, interpretative, or critical literary composition usually much shorter and less systematic and formal than a dissertation or thesis and usually dealing with its subject from a limited and often personal point of view'.

Elliot ([1957] 2002:340) stated "The strength of 'Shooting an Elephant' is more than literary; it is moral too. The essay is in part a confession of the author's weakness and wrong-doing and the ring of the prose is

07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 63 30-12-2022 09:55:24

absolutely true; it is also that high kind of confession in which the writer sees his deed as being at once his own, typical of the class to which he belongs, and human beyond person and class, so that both the low deed and the seeing of it are made the reader's own as well."

Williams (1984:39) stated in his article "Orwell, through the recount of the 'incident', identifies the exact moment he realizes the true nature of imperialism and at the same time, the discernment of a literary and social role which would lead to his rejection of all forms of oppression and characterize all his future writing: 'Writing the act of awareness and rejection he would not, probably, have been a writer at all".

Howe ([1969] 2002: 352) stated that "Shooting an Elephant depicts the epiphany, the absolute revelation that imperialism and all forms of political oppression, divest man's freedom of action and thought, 'For the first time, his characteristic fusion of personal and public themes is realized, and the essay as a form-vibrant, tight packed, nervous becomes a token of his meaning".

Dasture, P. & Aniruddha, J.S. (2016) in their article state that Orwell "intends to bring to the fore the importance of the elephants in Burmese society, with the imperial threat looming large over the political horizon. Where the elephant represents a symbol of the oppression of the Burmese society, its death is a parallel of how the British Empire struggled to suppress the natives."

Montgomery, Katherin (2013) in her article discusses "how the British built their empire and the effects their policies had on the African colonies in the light of this essay".

This article tries to discover the opprobrium of imperialism as portrayed by George Orwell in his essay 'Shooting an Elephant' with a correlation of incident of the British police officer and shooting the elephant.

Data Analysis

Reading 'Shooting an Elephant' as a postcolonial text, where Orwell as a writer portrays colonized people and colonizers as his subject matter and throughout the essay criticizes imperialism .

George Orwell (1903-1950) was born in Motihari, India, in 1903, and attended school in England. He went to Burma as an assistant superintendent of the Indian Imperial police after failing to win a scholarship to university. He spent five years in Burma (1922-27) after which he left the police service embittered due to British treatment of the native Burmese: "I spent five years in an unsuitable profession, and then I underwent poverty and the sense of failure. This increased my natural hatred of authority and made me for the first time fully aware of the existence of the working classes, and the job in Burma had given me some understanding of the nature of imperialism" (Orwell [1946]1984:25).

Orwell is a prolific writer in the essay genre not for his variation of the non-fictional prose but also his treatment of various political, social, cultural commitment related topics. In addition, his personal consternations are scattered throughout his diary. Orwell in 'Shooting an Elephant' tries to do the same where he organizes his experiences in an essay to achieve a literary effect.

Raymond Williams points out, 'The distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' is not a matter of whether the experience happened to the writer, a distinction between 'real' and 'imaginary'. The distinction that matters is always one of range and consciousness. Written human experience of an unspecialized and primary kind must always be recognized as literature. Particular forms, and the origins of the material, are secondary

07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 64 30-12-2022 09:55:24

questions. Orwell began to write literature, in the full sense, when he found this 'non-fictional' form; that is, when he found a form capable of realizing his experience directly' (1984:49).

'Shooting an Elephant' can be viewed as a work that results from personal experience. It is the way that Orwell tries to depict his experiences through his artistic knowledge of language. He uses suspicion and rationalities to expose the basic realities of everyday political and social life in order to share his notion of the world.

Orwell uses the essay mode as a vehicle of self-discovery, to understand the concept of imperialism, which leads him to leave the imperial police and change his perception of political ideas as a writer. He had experienced imperialism during his staying in Burma and his observation of England was from a perspective of 'eyes full of his experience of imperialism'.

"I felt I had to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants. It was the first time that I had ever been really aware of the working class, and to begin with it was only because they supplied an analogy. They were the symbolic victims of injustice, playing the same part in England as the Burmese played in Burma". (Orwell [1937] 1983: 247)

The setting of the essay 'Shooting an Elephant' is in Moulmein, a town in southern Burma during the colonial period in the 1920s, when the country was a province of India. Orwell tries to assert his views on British imperialism and the social effects of imperialism on a colonized land. The essay defines the imperialism from three points of views. Firstly, Orwell depicts the social plight of the Burmese from a British officer's point of view; secondly, he points out the British officers' attitude towards the Burmese and foregrounds his repellent view for British imperialism; finally, he reveals the horrible effects of imperialism on both the colonized and the colonizers.

The essay was written after nine years of his leaving the Indian police. Orwell, in his writing puts into the narrator's words and ideas the concepts, feelings and attitude of a young officer who loses his freedom during his service period. The duality in the essay underlines the motif of the effects of imperialism. Orwell's subsequent position against imperialism constitutes the structure of the text and context which established the relationships between all the protagonists. It is when the protagonist understands that he should shoot the elephant that he realizes that he has to do it even if he does not want to.

The essay is outlined through two aspects of the experience; the experience of a young police officer, who takes up a journey to meet and shoot the elephant gone wild, and another of an older Orwell, who harks back to the event after years of observation. Orwell, as he looks back at the young Orwell, comprehends issues his younger self could not have known or seen. Through these two perspectives, experience becomes self-discovery 'the key point is the persona, the 'outside observer' that is Orwell. An essential link between the two parts is indeed this character; 'inside' and then 'outside' 'the experience' (Williams 1984:51).

Orwell's nine years of experience in Burma and as a protagonist narrating the experience, gives him the dual role which allows him to give the reader a complete picture of imperialism. The 'young' and 'older' roles interact with each other, and information comes from both sources. Orwell, the narrator, introduces the setting with the opening remark "I was hated by large numbers of people- the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me"(ibid:266). Orwell points out that he was hated for

07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 65 30-12-2022 09:55:24

his power that he was sub-divisional police officer and contextualized in the relationship between colonizers and colonized. The attitude of Orwell, the protagonist of the essay, is immediately made clear in the prelude:

"For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically and secretly, of course I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters" (Orwell [1936] 1984:266).

The young Orwell felt 'oppressed' with an intolerable sense of guilt' (ibid). He had observed the exploitive actions and reactions of the British Empire and, as a servant of the colonial regime, he absolutely bemoaned his role. It is thought-provoking to note that the older Orwell justifies the younger as he 'could get nothing into perspective' (ibid) not only because of his age but also because he was 'ill-educated' (ibid) and that he had to sort out his problems 'in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East' (ibid). Ensnared between hatred of the empire he served and rage against the Burmese, he posited, "with one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in Saccula Saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate people" (ibid).

He scorns the Burmese as they loathe and that perturbs him as their foreign oppressor; but he understands their hatred and tormenting, as he even takes their side privately. But the older Orwell understands the political insinuation in the umbrage of the Burmese: the colonized react to colonization utilizing the only means they have, and this can only be of a violent phenomenon because it is the only 'language' the colonizers speak.

Employing the first-person narration, interweaving essayistic considerations and reflections, the reader is immediately drawn into the setting and comprehends the nature of imperialism, the effects on the colonized but at the same time the effect of colonization on the colonizers. Orwell continues to give the account of the episode of the shooting of elephant, "which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism the real motives for which despotic governments act"(ibid.).

The elephant story itself is an allegory and the elephant symbolizes the effects of the devastating power of imperialism on the colonized territories. The elephant represents British imperialism both as an economic and political power. Orwell's awareness of the suppression of imperialism is similar to the elephant's frenzy state which cannot be controlled. Imperialism having the same deportment has reached a state in which it cannot be controlled, and it plunders the resources and creates a horrible situation to the countries and populations it encounters. Orwell, in order to understand imperialism, has to see what imperialism was inflicting onto the colonized people. The elephant had ravaged the bazars, symbolizing the catastrophic effects of British colonialism on Burmese people. Imperialism, by imposing its own culture, systems of belief, and forms of government, absorbs the colonized countries and thus creates a hegemonic control and concurrently destroys their institutions and cultures. This is emphasized as Orwell gets nearer to the elephant, "It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van, and when the driver jumped out and looked to his heels, and turned the van over and inflicted violence upon it" (ibid: 267).

The climax of the essay is highlighted by shooting the elephant and the protagonists' feelings of ending imperialism, but Orwell is still young and has difficulty in understanding the full implications of his future actions. His decision

07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 66 30-12-2022 09:55:24

to shoot the animal is not without anguish, "As soon as I saw the elephant, I knew with perfect certainty that I ought to shoot him, (ibid: 268), "one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided" (ibid: 269).

"Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him" (ibid). "The people expected it of me, and I had got to do it" (ibid). "But I did not want to shoot the elephant" (ibid.), considerations which culminate in the decision being taken, "I had got to shoot the elephant" (ibid).

The act of shooting the elephant was done against the young Orwell's will and moral make up. He could not act according to his freewill, but chose to do 'the right thing,' simply to avoid looking a 'fool,' continuing to work as a British officer, and acting as a tool of imperialism and also doing his duty as a colonial policeman.

The shooting of the elephant is a dramatic travesty where Orwell, the narrator, acts as an actor of a play written by imperialism and the people watching him are none other than the audience, "The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed throats" (ibid: 271).

The travesty is referred to in the use of metaphors, "Here was I, the white man with his gun, seemingly the leading actor of the piece, but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind," (ibid: 269). "They were watching me as they would watch a conjuror about to perform a trick," (ibid.) the replications become an inner dialogue between the older and younger Orwell, "He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib," (ibid.) "A sahib has got to act like a sahib,", (ibid.) " He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it."(ibid.). "He has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things" (ibid.). It is in this moment that the younger Orwell realizes that his will is not his own, "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; I could feel their two thousand wills press me forward, irresistibly" (ibid). He is completely conscious of what is expected of him, a police officer, the authority, representing British rule.

The elephant ratifies the death both of the British Empire and the imperial project as a civilizing mission. Depicting imperialism, it finds itself from its situation and in that moment. The narrator, Orwell states that he, the younger Orwell, "did not even know that the British Empire is dying" (ibid: 266); after shooting the elephant Orwell, both the protagonist and narrator, became conscious of the fact that imperialism is in fact dying, "powerless to move and yet powerless to die" (ibid: 272), due to the role it imposes on those it controls but the death of an empire will take time as in the allegory of the dying elephant and its fall will not be without political and economic consequences worldwide.

He had not wanted to be laughed at, and he knew he was playing out a role not levied by the crowd but by imperialism itself; his uneasiness was the result of his realization of his loss of freedom and paradoxically, through this simple proclamation Orwell, through the essay, unveils an appeal to end the colonial situation since this molds both the colonized and colonizers.

Conclusion

Orwell used the essay genre as a vehicle for social criticisms and political analyses because of its springiness, its conciseness, and its potential in covering diverse topics. It also allowed him to shape events by developing them into literary processes through which he spoke his mind and investigated the world of his time.

07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 67 30-12-2022 09:55:24

Orwell, through the recount of the 'incident,' identifies the exact moment he realizes the true nature of imperialism and, at the same time, the discernment of a literary and social role which would lead to his rejection of all forms of oppression and characterize all his future writing. As an anti-imperialist writer, Orwell promoted the understanding of the evils of imperialism through the essay 'Shooting an Elephant,' where he pointed out that imperialism destroyed both the conqueror and conquered.

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07-IJTET23Jan07_p62-68.indd 68 30-12-2022 09:55:24