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GEORGE ORWELL'S DIRE RACISM: RE-CONSIDERING SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT AGAINST BENIGN STUDIES

Md. Shamim Mondol*

Abstract: This paper aims at reconsidering George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* through an analysis of the essay to show his racism at the toughest height despite the fact of the benign analysis of all these years to show and prove Orwell as a sympathizer and a person torn apart thus suppressing or eschewing or neglecting the reality overtly expressed throughout the essay. The essay though has some balance striking sugar coated expressions is full of adverse comment, naked bitterness, shameful partiality, and overtly built up logic to rationalize the inhuman and beastly tasks of the imperialists. It is the objective of the paper to shift the post colonial aping type of discourse to impartially and logically analyze the essay to unveil the pseudo sympathizer and his real intentions towards the colonized.

Key Words: Orwell, imperialist, racism, justify, responsibility

George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* is a commonly studied and analyzed essay in which the general line of discussion is to consider the sympathy of the writer for the Burmese and portrayal of the imperialists with some negative images. The irony and satire used by the writer speak a lot for this mode of discussion. But as the essay as well as the writer has its historical background, it should be studied with reference to all those factors to bring out the real motives of the writer and the writing. And this can be different from what is generally thought about the writer, specially about this writing. So before focusing on the analysis of the story, it would be better to deal with some facts related to the essay.

Shooting an Elephant is an essay by George Orwell, written and first published in the literary magazine *New Writing* in the autumn of 1936 just before one year of Burma becoming a sepaarte, self governing province of India. This time period is extremely important as it says a lot about Orwell's knowledge of the existing condition of the then Burma.

The writing is commonly regarded as a metaphor for British imperialism, and Orwell's view is that "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom

that he destroys." It was republished several times, including in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (1950) just after his death. Though it is sometimes treated as a short story for the supposedly fictional elements, it is an essay considered by the writer himself and the editors afterwards. This is again another factor that puts Orwell in the test where he by no means can stand as benevolent person burning inside for the native's miseries and hatred for the imperialists.

About the incident's authenticity, there are doubts and disagreements, but there are supporting information too. In *George Orwell: A Life*, Bernard Crick cast doubt on the idea that Orwell himself actually shot an elephant. Peter Davison, the editor of Orwell's Complete Works, includes an interview with George Stuart, a contemporary of Orwell in Burma, who said that Orwell was transferred to Kathar as punishment for shooting an elephant. However the experience of this type was not rare in those hilly areas of Burma. So it is quite clear that Orwell had this type of experiences either as an active partner or a passive observer.

George Orwell's birth, education, service in the police department and his leaving the job for the sake of becoming a writer and his time in Paris in 1928 are other factors that tell a lot of his being well informed of the native's physical torture and mental agony resulting in hatred, their expectation and efforts and struggles for independence, mercenary obstinacy of the imperialists in continuing their iron hold through all possible inhuman and beastly policies right from 1857 throughout denying the native's freedom despite the fact of the White's claim to be the civilized and the pretence not to understand the simple and absolute solution of the problem by quitting India.

Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on 25 June 1903 in eastern India 17 years after Burma had been conquered through thick and thin of three Anglo-Burmese wars, 18 years after the establishment of the All India Congress and 3 years before the establishment of the All India Muslim League.

He was educated in England and then joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, then a British colony, held the post of an Assistant Superintendent in the British Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927. It can be remembered that in 1920s, the non-cooperation movement was at the height

Britain succeeded in conquering Burma over a period of 62 years (1823–1886). During this time, three Anglo-Burmese wars took place and then only Burma could be incorporated into Indian Empire. It was administered as a province of India until 1937. In 1937, it became a separate, self-governing colony, attaining its independence on January 4, 1948. So here the British could not sting their poisonous teeth in the administrative side easily as was possible in some parts of Indian subcontinent and even after their success in plundering freedom could last less than a century. This speaks profusely as a

* Sr. Lecturer, Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

proof of the guts of the Burman people which with usual western cunningness Orwell underestimated or perverted to tarnish the image of a fighting nation.

All these epoch making historical events clearly show that the people of India had already started their organized struggle for independence and more over it provides the evidence that the people of Burma were altogether fighters and they hardly give in before tough fight and challenges the light of which has been shadowed and besmeared by Orwell thoroughly.

George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* has been discussed and analyzed as a document of the oppressions of the colonialist, the bitterness of the local, their relationship with the imperialist and some lines with sweet coated expressions are quoted individually independence of the relatedness with the preceding and following lines to support these lines of discourse. But if it is seen from close quarter and analyzed, if the words used to describe the English and the natives are focused, if the writer's motive to build logic to legalize and justify the tasks of the imperialist, if his narrative of the native, their condition and evaluation is analyzed, it will be crystallized clear that it was his only aim and in line with the white man's task to underestimate and stigmatize the native and show the white as basically blessed, god-sent. The scholarly discussions often go with the lines that he was on behalf of the native but could do nothing for his assigned duty while it is again a faulty evaluation giving him a generous benefit of doubt.

Orwell in his celebrated essay *Shooting an Elephant* starts ejecting venoms of racism by undermining the feelings, emotions, expressions and protests of the historically proved fighting people of Burma in the very beginning where he says, "I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter." It was the time of Independence War and it was the hatred for and protest against the occupant forces of British imperialism that got expressed in the anti European feelings and logically there could be no alternative to these outlets. But to Orwell, the native's feelings were aimless and petty. Here the conscious effort of the writer is to undermine the mindset of the natives that elevate the so-called civilized. And it is a thorough game of the writer as Ngugi wa thiong'o says, "We, the present generation, must distance ourselves from the false and bloody logic of development theory handed to us by imperialism: the claim that the cleanliness of one person must depend on pouring dirt onto others;" (Ngugi 57)

Just in the next line, Orwell goes even further to depict the natives as savage, uncivilized. "No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress." Again another intention is clear from it is that the

native are coward and had no gut to raise their voices against the imperialists agents. The writer intentionally brought a woman in the scene to attract sympathy towards the oppressor, not the oppressed. The implication towards culture can never be ignored and such negative implication about the English is surprisingly completely absent in the whole essay. But history provides evidence of their guts in struggle against these plunderers.

The description of the physical conditions of the Burmese is always derogatory and never even with the slip of pen, this pseudo-sympathizer could see the prowess of the natives. "When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter." Here the Burmese are nimble, the referee is unjust and the audience's laughter is hideous.

This can be found in *Heart of Darkness* as quoted by Chinua Achebe in *An Image of Africa*, "We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there... there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were.... No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it... this suspicion of their not being inhuman."

The Burmese are mentioned frequently as yellow faces and the faces are not soothing, they are 'sneering'. "The sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me." Even the word hoot can hardly be taken positively which along with others also means the cry of owls.

It should be kept in mind that except the extremist and fanatic as there are in every religion, the Buddhists are strict followers of the teachings of Buddha whose prime quest was for "Anirban". But this does not mean that they will never protest the plunderers. Here the writer says, "The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all." The men of non-violent natures are worst and we have no mention of the Christian priests who automatically gets upper hand as Ngugi has said. Then their preachers are angels spreading peace on the part of the loafers. The writer does not stop here. Later he says, "I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts." Even after this type expression of criminal intention, many people are still benign enough to consider this blind product of imperialism as sympathetic towards the native. This is another charisma of imperialism.

"There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans." The very common tendency of the colonialists is to portray the colonized as inactive, lazy and practitioners of negative attitude. The scenario was just the same in case of their considerations about the

Africans. This obviously shows the imperialists to just the opposite. The attitude was boosted and supported by the philosophers.

As Hegel says in *Philosophy of History* "The Negroes indulge, therefore, that perfect *contempt* for humanity, which in its bearing on Justice and Morality is the fundamental characteristic of the race. They have moreover no knowledge of the immortality of the soul, although spectres are supposed to appear. The undervaluing of humanity among them reaches an incredible degree of intensity. Tyranny is regarded as no wrong, and cannibalism *is* looked upon as quite customary and proper." (Hegel 113)

Same thing happened with Conrad who realizes in *Heart of Darkness* "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us... who could tell?" Though this was for the African and entirely for the African, it was constantly practiced by the colonizers all round the world.

A conscious man of so-called higher intelligence as Orwell was supposed to understand every thing quite clearly as every thing was a matter of grabbing other's territory depriving the natives of their birth right of freedom. The native had the right to loathe the loafers. The solution is easy and that is their departure. But to Orwell, "All this was perplexing and upsetting." This is quite deceitful for all these events and consequences were understandable to even an ordinary man. But that is not touched rather he is seen dreaming an empire everlasting and undoubtedly better than the probable new independent countries. His standpoint can easily be exemplified from the lines, "I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. ...I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples"

After all these curses for the natives and convictions in the imperialists comes the balance striking stick of the diplomatic writer which blinds the complacent readers and they are seen to melt under the writer's affection (or affectation ?) "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." Imperialism is bad but the solution is readymade and that is his leaving the job. Here he has no suggestion for the imperialists to quit what they usurped.

The ultimate evidence of duplicity is "Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British." But he is never seen to be on part of the natives let alone love, and he continues only laughing at every thing of the natives. He hardly sees any positive qualities in the native.

Another part of hypocritical hyperbole is "In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been bogged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt."

He sees the dirty work of the Empire remembers dirty work of Empire and inhuman condition of the natives and feels a sense of guilt. Readers get wet for the miserable condition described in the essay. The writer appears to be the man well wisher next-door. But he hardly waits to elevate the White.

"But problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East."

They are responsible persons shouldering responsibilities of the East.

Here Aime Caesaire's quotation from M. Caillois in *Discourse in Colonialism* can be handy.

"For me, the question of the equality of races, peoples, or cultures has meaning only if we are talking about an equality in law, not an equality in fact. In the same way, men who are blind, maimed, sick, feeble-minded, ignorant, or poor (one could hardly be nicer to the non-Occidentals) are not respectively equal, in the material sense of the word, to those who are strong, clear-sighted, whole, healthy, intelligent, cultured, or rich. The latter have greater capacities which, by the way, do not give them more rights but only more duties... Similarly, whether for biological or historical reasons, there exist at present differences in level, power, and value among the various cultures. These differences entail an inequality in fact. They in no way justify an inequality of rights in favor of the so-called superior peoples, as racism would have it. Rather, they confer upon them additional tasks and an increased responsibility." (Caesaire 73)

Then the gentleman's knowledge is, "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." The Burmese are 'evil-spirited little beasts' and they made his job impossible. Just after expressing his hatred for the empire, he clarified the fact that it was not his 'stuck' position that makes his job impossible, rather it was the 'evil-spirited little beasts' who were trying to do so. It is nothing but a work of a colonial broker.

The writer continues to unveil himself through his treatment of the natives, his comment about them and his conscious effort to acquit himself and the white of the charges that can be brought against them for their cruelty and inhuman nature. The incident of shooting an elephant is "enlightening" to him. And he got a "real nature of imperialism – the real motives for which despotic governments act." He goes further again to form a logic to show the helplessness of the imperialists in the hand of the native which for some time provides us a satisfaction of superiority over the them and we instantly feel

gratitude to the writer for showing them as 'puppet' in the hands of the natives. The obvious reason behind it is to push the natives as real criminals where they are just clean as he says in his *Burmese Days* while talking about the accusation of corruption against a Burmese, "no British officer will ever believe anything against his own men." (*Burmese Days* 2)

To him the Burmese are all the time 'quite helpless against' weapons only when it is the time for supporting the English in all of their nasty works, then it is quite different. The writer gives a list of the damages done by the elephant where the people's assets co-exist with a 'rubbish van'. Here the 'great beast' had already destroyed 'bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock' and with this it had 'inflicted violences upon' a 'municipal rubbish van'.

The writer does not forget to tell us the about the wretched conditions of the Burmese along with 'labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts'. The ugliest blow of the writer comes when he does not confine himself to the Burmese only. He goes further to make a comment on the East. "That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes." To him the people of the East are simply incapable of expressing the fact or possessing the truth. So what happened is that the police man in charge of the locality after years of experiences supposed every thing to be vague despite the people's evidence on part of the facts. Then the sympathizer tells us that he was sure that the 'whole story was a pack of lies'.

He sees the dead body of a man. But he goes to a long length to give us the information that 'he was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked.' The writer as a devotee of the colonialists' religion around the world injects the Christian values in the dead body 'with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side.' This is the only inclusion of the religion in the essay whereas Buddhist priests were the 'worst of all'.

The dead man's skin had been stripped 'from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit.' The elephant is a 'great beast' to him. The reason is not that he was all for the animals and living beings. Rather he himself makes it clear, "It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery." The British came to Indian sub-continent mainly for business purpose. Their bent of mind never changed. The main consideration about the elephant is to look at it as 'a huge and costly piece of machinery'.

But he justified the killing of the elephant because of the realization of the 'two thousand wills pressing' him 'forward, irresistibly.' And then his realization is, "I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – 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. ...I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys." This clarifies his point that a white becomes a tyrant; it is not his wish which in turn shows him a real human against the savage of the East. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his 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 because a 'sahib has got to act like a sahib'. He persistently shows the logic as can be seen again, '...every white man's life in the East was one long struggle not to be laughed at.'

He 'heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd.' To him it was 'dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die' but his reaction after seeing the dead body was just the opposite, it was repulsive to him. The writer finds it important to give us the information about how the 'Burmans were bringing dash and baskets even before' he left, and then he passes the information that they (the Burman) had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon." After building the logic after logic, finally he ensures the legal support for his killing the elephant and then the coolie becomes worthy.

The essay all through is a well thought one and the story of shooting an elephant is not merely an incident, rather the writer finds it quite useful to present the White in an elevated position and undermine the natives. This is done with usual cunningness of the imperialist who went round the world as simple businessmen and grabbed other's property and even independence with a hypocritical show of the civilized sense of responsibility. Shooting an Elephant is thus a document of racism of the writer George Orwell.

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