

PART II
IMPERIALISM



BURMESE DAYS

Orwell's essay, Rudyard Kipling, shows very clearly his attitude towards imperialism. In this piece, Orwell does not say explicitly how strongly he is against imperialism; it is implied in his condemnation of Kipling. Orwell accused Kipling of being 'a jingo imperialist' and one who is in favour of oppressive colonialism. He also wrote, "He was the prophet of British imperialism in its expansionist phase" and "identified himself with the ruling power and not with the opposition." Orwell's outlook was quite the opposite. He saw imperialism as a money-making concern, not as a kind of charitable evangelizing.

'White man's burden', according to Orwell, is a misleading term. In his essay on Kipling, he suggested that it would be more accurate to refer to the imperialists as the black man's burden.

Orwell accuses Kipling of being too idealistic. How could he understand what was happening if he was not involved? We find this sentiment in The Road to Wigan Pier:

I was in the Indian Police five years, and by the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving with a bitterness which I probably cannot make clear... In order to hate imperialism, you have got to be part of it. 16

Shooting an Elephant, A Hanging and Burmese Days are based on Orwell's experiences of Imperialism in India. Imperialism, as he knew it, seemed to be dying; its end was not far away. Burmese Days stands as a prophecy of its end. What his work reflects, so far as imperialism is concerned, is really based on the existing outlook of the day. In the primary stage, imperialism was aggressive and brought with it absolute tyranny and complete exploitation. In the later stage, it was very much weakened, particularly after the First World War when the tide of nationalism and aspiration for political independence seemed stronger and stronger. Orwell saw this change and described it vividly in Burmese Days. At this stage of imperialism, Orwell still expressed his hatred of it. In The Road to Wigan Pier, he wrote,

When I came home on leave in 1927, I was already half determined to throw up my job, and one sniff of English air decided me. I was not going back to be part of that evil despotism... Innumerable remembered faces, faces of prisoners in the dock, of men waiting in the condemned cells, of subordinates I had bullied and aged peasants I had hit with my fist in moments of rage. 7

Being a policeman made it much worse for Orwell in Burma and he felt that he had an immense guilt to expiate. He served in the Burma police for five years and that was sufficient for him to see how British administration worked under the system of oppression. Many characters in Burmese Days present the decadent and degrading attitude of the

imperialists. Their emptiness and pettiness made Orwell feel that it was almost impossible to work among them. Consequently he decided not to return to Burma after he had gone back to England.

Though he had a strong feeling against the British people there, he did show some sympathy for them. He realized that the Indian climate must be taken into consideration to account somewhat for their deplorable behaviour. In such a ruthless environment, British people became mentally and physically weakened, they congregated in one restricted place, the European Club; this contributed greatly to their isolation from the native population. Orwell pointed out that the British government was partly to blame; British officials sent there were unqualified for the job. This was the great mistake in the administration. He also implied that the British were not wholly responsible for the disorder and poor situation in the colonies. The native population was itself partly to blame. Orwell makes this point through the character of U Po Kyin in Burmese Days. But before discussing that novel it would be worthwhile looking at two shorter pieces which illustrate Orwell's aversion to the situation in Burma.

Shooting an Elephant concerns an incident which took place when Orwell was working in Burma as a sub-divisional police officer. He was told that an elephant was ravaging the local bazaar. It had killed an Indian but no one knew

where the elephant had gone. He went to investigate and eventually found the animal in a paddy field, apparently recovered from its attack of 'must'.⁸ For a few minutes, Orwell hesitated to shoot it. The beast might recover completely if it was allowed to wander for some hours. Besides, the elephant was a very costly animal and valuable as a working beast. However, the pressure of the silent crowd which had gathered behind him finally forced him to shoot the elephant.

This is an interesting incident which shows Orwell's idea of the British official's position in Burma. It presents one aspect of the relationship between the British and the Burmese. Generally, it may be understood that the position of the British people in colonies such as Burma would be an honourable one. They were the representatives of the imperialists whose burden, as was known, was to keep peace and order and to bring forth progress and civilization in the colonies. The rulers, or the imperialists in a traditional sense, had absolute authority and the widest freedom both in the making and implementation of policies. Unfortunately, Orwell learned from killing the beast that the position of the British there was somewhat meaningless. He realized that in reality they had no idea of their own; they were under the influence of the natives. What they did or were going to do was largely motivated by the will of the colonised people. They were not free, because they tried to gain the confidence of the natives. Orwell wrote,

I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in that moment that when the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys. 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.'⁹

What Orwell thought of the position of the British people was clearly in line with the situation of the day. British imperialism in the primary stage was aggressive. It started with the conquest of some Burmese provinces in 1824 after which followed the annexation of Pegu and Upper Burma. Some decades after this stage, British imperialism seemed to be much weakened because of its changed attitude. Its purpose then was to maintain the past conquest as long as possible and to apply new, reasonable and justifiable methods of exploitation. This change was necessary in order to keep pace with economic competition in the outside world. In 1917, the British Parliament accepted responsible self-government principles as the ultimate aim for India only. This caused widespread dissatisfaction in Burma. Political agitation and organized boycotts were carried out. In 1923 a new form of government was established, bringing Burma into line with the other provinces of India. In this period, the old method of maintaining peace by force was not possible. The British government resorted to peaceful methods. They had to please the Burmese in local matters as long as the request was not destructive to the British interest. In

the light of historical facts, it is obvious that what Orwell thought about the British position in Burma was true. He was also like the other British people who spent their whole life impressing the natives. Orwell killed the elephant because of the pressure of the mob. He was expected, as a ruler, to do so. He wrote,

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. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.¹⁰

At the beginning of this piece, Orwell mentioned his hatred of imperialism and also the faults of the natives. He wrote, "All I know 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."¹¹

A Hanging another anecdote based on his Burma days and, incidentally, an excellent piece of prose, shows how Orwell was temperamentally unsuited to the kind of work he had to do. The incident described is the hanging of a Hindu prisoner. We follow the prisoner and his guards from the cell to the primitive gallows a few hundred yards away. The whole piece concentrates on conveying the sense of a healthy life being brought to an end.

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide... All the organs of his body were working--bowels digesting food, skin

renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all
toiling away in solemn foolery.¹²

Orwell is not concerned with the guilt of the prisoner; he does not question it; the piece is not about injustice, it is about capital punishment. It ends with a description of the sudden sense of relief after the hanging and the nervous jokes of the prison warders and the police officer.

A Hanging shows that having to witness such incidents imposed too great a strain on Orwell's sensitivity. He was deeply touched at the sight of the prisoner who was going to be hanged. No matter how justifiable such acts might be in the circumstances, he could only think of them ultimately as destructive. This helps to explain the seriousness of his commitment to life, his opposition to any kind of cold-blooded violence.

The piece ends with a description of Orwell's walk back to the prison with the prison warders and the jailers. Their sudden relief from awful tension expressed through their nervous laughter and forced boisterous reminiscences about the prisoner is brilliantly expressed. A Hanging, though in one sense a clever piece of reporting, shows that Orwell, had the circumstances of his life been different, might have developed into an excellent writer of fiction.

In the essay Why I write, Orwell comments,

I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound. And in fact my first completed novel, Burmese Days, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book.¹³

From the quotation, it may be assumed that Orwell posed as a novelist whose duty is to entertain the readers through plot and characterisation and by beautifully-written descriptive passages. In fact, a reading of the book gives a different impression. Burmese Days certainly has an unhappy ending and detailed description. However, one hardly thinks of it as a sequence of purple passages; it is primarily a condemnation of the imperialists in Burma.

The opening page of the novel begins with the description of U Po Kyin, Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Kyauktada in Upper Burma. The magistrate, once a minor official of the town, has risen by corrupt means to a high position. Being a magistrate, he has gained wealth and distinction and desires membership of the European club. He has competition in this affair from an Indian doctor, Dr. Veraswami. With his accomplices, the magistrate plans the downfall of the doctor; his plan is based on anonymous letters which suggest that the doctor holds anti-British opinions. The European Club is the only place where the British people come to meet one another for entertainment and companionship. The people who frequent the place are Mr. Ellis, Mr. Lackersteen and

his wife, Mr. Flory and Mr. Maxwell. Mr. Flory, the main character is an English timber merchant and a close friend of Dr. Veraswami. He falls in love with Elizabeth, the niece of Mr. Lackersteen fresh, from England. His love affair founders because of the difference in their outlooks. Their relationship deteriorates further when U Po Kyin attacks Flory by openly accusing him of keeping a Burmese mistress. Elizabeth rejects Flory and in the end marries Mr. McGregor, the Commissioner of Police. The book ends with the suicide of Flory and the death of U Po Kyin.

Orwell's attitude to the British administration is never in question. The conversations between Flory and Dr. Veraswami are a good illustration of this attitude. Flory, who obviously speaks for Orwell, tries to explain:

...the lie that we are here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them. I suppose it's a natural enough lie. But it corrupts us in the ways you can't imagine... how can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It's so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the business man goes through his pockets. Do you suppose my firm, for instance, could get its timber contracts if the country were n't in the hands of the British? 14

In fact, such statements might well have been uttered by native political leaders in many colonized countries after the First and the Second World War; they are the expressions of nationalism and an aspiration for political independence. In the case of Orwell, it is not nationalism nor political independence but his hatred of injustice and

oppression that becomes the driving force. In his world, it seems to him that there is always injustice, hardship, class difference and competition. Evidence of his detestation of these ills, therefore, abounds in most of his work.

Orwell exposes his hatred of imperialism not only through the sentiments of Flory but also through satirical characterisation of figures such as Mrs. Lackersteen, Mr. Ellis, Elizabeth, Mr. Verrall, Mr. McGregor, Mr. Westfield and Mr. Maxwell. These characters are constructed around particular distasteful qualities by which they are very easily recognized whenever they appear in any part of the book. They are obsessed by their own superiority, by race discrimination and by discontent with living in Burma where everything is alien to them.

Mr. Ellis, the local manager of a timber firm, is the outstanding figure through which the life and ideas of the British people there in Burma are openly revealed and exaggerated. Ellis is too conventional and too prejudiced to be convincing. From the start to the end, he speaks like a villainous oppressor. At the club, he says.

Good God! What are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we are n't going to rule, why the devil don't we clear out? Here we are; supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who 've been slaves since the beginning of history...15

Ellis is the typical imperialist who does not like to see any change for the better in the colonies. He is frus-

trated by the democratic outlook that has appeared in Burma. The Burmans try to act on equal terms with him even in the use of the English language. When the servant of the club tells him in good English that the ice cannot easily be kept cool, Ellis shouts at him in sudden rage, "Don't talk like that, damn you-I find it difficult! Have you swallowed a dictionary? Please, master, can't keeping ice very cool-that's how you ought to talk..."¹⁶

Mcgregor, Deputy-Commissioner of the district and Westfield, the district superintendent of police are two other characters portraying oppressors in Burma. Interrogation authorised by them are unjust. Proof that a native is an offender is always easily established, "He have been flogged with bamboo. He is an old offender. Therefore he stole the ring!"¹⁷ When a white man, Mr. Maxwell is killed, the British do not try to arrest the real offender in the case. Any native will do, guilty or no. Prisoners do not even get a fair ration of food. The sub-inspector is fat and the constable's wife makes a profit on the prisoner's food.

Maxwell and Lackersteen are less distinctive characters, representing the loneliness and hopelessness of living in Burma. Lackersteen is always drunk at the club, sitting in the chair, groaning in a resigned way. Maxwell, a forest officer, is very young for the post he holds. He is also weak; he lacks responsibility and is always too influenced

by others and by environment. These two characters are embodiments of the failure of British imperialism. The idea behind these characters is that it is useless to rule an alien people in a strange environment. It was hard work for British officials in Burma. They carried out their assignment without definite purpose and after some time, they deteriorated mentally and physically, like Maxwell and Lackersteen. The faults did not lie in them but in the British administration itself.

Verrall, a military policeman, is a caricature. The satirical portrait is inserted into the novel, just to make fun of the British police force in India. Verrall despises everything in the world except polo players and horses. He despises even his subordinates for he looks upon them as no better than coolies. His contempt is summed up in the comment, "His various contempts would take a long time to catalogue in detail."¹⁸ His official performance and personal behaviour are summed up as follows; "Up and down India, wherever he was stationed, he left behind him a trail of insulted people, neglected duties and unpaid bills."¹⁹ The portrayal of this young military police officer is the most exaggerated of all. As well as being a criticism of imperial administration, it reflects Orwell's disgust with the British class system of which Verrall is a typical product.

Elizabeth, a young English orphan girl is another caricature. Her whole code of living is summed up in one simple belief; "the Good is synonymous with the expensive,

the elegant, the aristocratic and the Bad is the cheap, the low, the shabby, the laborious."²⁰ The life she experienced before her father's bankruptcy and death and her mother's move to Paris have given her a strong sense of class difference. Through Elizabeth, Orwell projects his bitter hatred of meaningless class distinction. She despises everything Burmese, the physical appearance of the people, their customs and way of life. What she hates are not only the Burmese and their trappings but also any sign from Flory that he sides with the natives. When Flory takes her to see a native dance one day, she watches the dance with revulsion. She thinks that it is not right for her to sit among the coloured people who smell of garlic and sweat. She considers every thing about the dance to be hideous and uncivilized. In a shop at the market, she looks at a Chinese woman's feet with disgust and says, "... They are so horrible I can hardly look at them. Those people must be absolute savages!"²¹ It is clear from such scenes that Orwell was haunted by class division in England and oppression abroad.

Flory, the hero of the novel, is an interesting figure and unquestionably a mouthpiece for Orwell. He represents decency, Orwell's favourite virtue. Decency is the code of behaviour which respects the feelings and personalities of others. Whatever he says or does in any circumstances, is in conformity with this virtue. It seems that Flory is the only right man for maintaining British domination in Burma.

He understands the natives and their environment. If British officials like Flory were stationed there, British imperialism would have lasted longer. The author speaks through this character all the time about the differences between the East and the West. The relation between Flory and Elizabeth, though it starts with the romantic incident, later comes under the strain of the author's message. Anything Flory says or the way he says it always provokes in her a deep disagreement. At the sight of the Burmese, Elizabeth comments:

How revoltingly ugly these people are, are n't they?
 Are they? I always think they 're rather charming looking, the Burmese. They have such splendid bodies!
 Look at that fellow's shoulders-like a bronze statue...²²

When the girl expresses her hatred of coloured skin, Flory explains, "But you know, one gets used to the brown skin in time. In fact they say I believe it's true-that after a few years in these countries a brown skin seems more natural than a white one..."²³ He defends everything that is disagreeable to Elizabeth in Burma.

U Po Kyin, sub-divisional magistrate and Dr. Veraswami, the cringing doctor of the district, are the only characters representing the non-British. The magistrate has a notorious past. He has risen from a government clerk to a magistrate through his cunning and dishonest ways. His present is as abominable as his past. In court procedure, "...His practice, a much safer one, was to take bribes from both sides, and then decide the case on strictly legal grounds."²⁴ He also earns some revenue from unlawful taxation. There is no ques-

tion about his colossal wealth. The author wrote,

He was proud of his fatness, because he saw the accumulated flesh as the symbol of his greatness. He who had once been obscure and hungry was now fat, rich and feared. He was swollen with the bodies of his enemies; a thought from which he extracted something very near poetry.²⁵

U Po Kyin is a satirical character. Orwell was appalled by the degree of corruption practised by Burmese officials. The magistrate's revolting physical appearance is used to emphasize the disgusting venal greed of the man. U Po Kyin is also there to remind us that the natives, working for the British, were not by any means blameless. It must be remembered too that U Po Kyin is the man ultimately responsible for the downfall of the hero.

Dr. Veraswami, an Indian doctor, plays a very small part in the unfolding of events. He is put into the novel partly as an opportunity to introduce discussions on imperialism into the text. Orwell often uses a character to state in discussion with another character his own views. However, it is only fair to add that sometimes he allows the opposition to make a valid point. When Flory attacks imperialism in Burma, the Indian doctor speaks in its favour,

My friend, my friend, you are forgetting the Oriental character. How is it possible to have developed us without apathy and superstition? At least you have brought us law and order, the unswerving British justice and the Pax Britannica... Consider Burma in the days of Thibaw, with dirt and torture and ignorance, and then look around you. Look merely out of this veranda, look at that hospital, and over to the right at that school and that police station. Look at the whole uprush of modern progress!²⁶

It is somewhat difficult to determine the real feeling in the book. Although Orwell obviously expressed through Flory his opposition to British domination in Burma, the work does not give us the impression that he wholly disapproves of British imperialism. The inclusion of U Po Kyin, the completely corrupted magistrate, shows that there will not necessarily be an end of oppression with the departure of the British. His exaggerated characterisation of English officials may indicate his hatred of them but he shows sympathy too. He sympathized with them to some extent because he knew from his own experience that work in such a country was not an easy task.

Besides you could forgive the Europeans a great deal of their bitterness. Living and working among Orientals would try the patience of a saint. And all of them, the officials particularly, knew what it was to be baited and insulted.²⁷

Some of the characters in this novel are well drawn; they are something like people we might meet. His five year service there would help him very much in choosing the people and place them in his work. Mr. McGregor, Mr. Westfield, Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Lackersteen are convincing persons; they are ordinary persons whose virtues are not too strong and vices are not too excessive. Other characters such as Mr. Ellis, Mr. Verrall, Elizabeth and U Po Kyin are less convincing. These characters in the British group are constructed around one single and outstanding idea: pride of being born a white man, and in the case of U Po Kyin in the native

group, the greed for money and desire for social distinction. It may not be unreasonable to believe that such characters did exist in Burma under British rule. The idea of being an imperialist did affect to such an extent some British people who lived among the natives. They were haunted by The White Man's Burden, Rule Britannia and Kipling's novels. If these characters are exaggerated, they are much less so than those in other novels of Orwell. U Po Kyin may seem too unpleasant to be a magistrate. It is, however, likely that Burma in those days had a magistrate like U Po Kyin. Before Burma fell to the British Forces, she had enough internal unrest and struggle for power. Corruption was a fact of life and there is no reason why it should have disappeared under British rule.

Flory, the main character, only comes to life occasionally. He strikes us, particularly in his discussions with Veraswami and his argument with Ellis, as a spokesman rather than as a real person. Like a protagonist from a second rate novel in the Hardy tradition, he seems to be wounded by fate. The ugly birthmark on one side of his face prevents him from establishing a necessary share of social confidence. The scar affects all his personal relationships and is more than a little responsible for his failure with Elizabeth. Unfortunately, this failure, even taking his bad luck and physical drawbacks into consideration, often seems like weakness. We are aware from the beginning that he is too good for Elizabeth

in any case. Had he stood up for his convictions about Burma when she challenged them, had he made some effort to rebuke her for her fatuous narrow-mindedness, he might have been more sympathetic. But he never makes a stand; when she objects, he creeps, cringing into his shell. His suicide at the end is a pathetic, ineffectual surrender to his inherent weakness.

The character of Flory is also a victim of Orwell's weakness in plot construction. At certain points, the plot relies on absurd coincidence and the novel reads like a parody of Victorian melodrama. Take, for instance the first meeting between Flory and Elizabeth. The heroine, on her first day in exotic, hostile environment of the mysterious East is trapped and terrified by an angry tiger. The hero happens, (Oh, happy coincidence!) to be near at the time, and the first dramatic encounter between them takes place. Then at the end of the book when at last Flory is on the very point of proposing to Elizabeth, (it is difficult to understand why he had not done so earlier), an earthquake takes place and the vital question cannot be asked. Surely Orwell cannot expect us to take such incidents seriously.

The source of weakness and of plot construction in Burmese Days is the same; it is the strength and nature of Orwell's commitment. He badly wanted to make public his feelings about the British gross mismanagement of Burmese affairs and about the unfortunate spill-over of British class distinction into the colonies. The expression of these

feelings comes first for Orwell; the method of expression is secondary. It is difficult to see why he did not restrict himself to the writing of documentary and autobiographical essays. The autobiographical essay as we have seen from Such, Such were the Joys, Shooting an Elephant and A Hanging was a perfect medium for his purpose and one which he managed with great skill. It is a pity he had to burden himself with tasks of plot and character development, skills which did not come easily to him. Perhaps if Orwell had felt deeply committed to individuals instead of groups he would have made a great novelist. Had he lived, he may have fulfilled the promise of Burmese Days. For it cannot be denied that the novel has its moments. As always, he shows an exact perceptive sense of place and the atmosphere of tropical Burma is skillfully evoked:

The heat was growing worse and worse. April was nearly over, but there was no hope of rain for another three weeks, five weeks it might be. Even the lovely transient dawns were spoiled by the thought of the long, blinding hours to come, when one's head would ache and the glare would penetrate through every covering and glue up one's eyelids with restless sleep.²⁸

On one of their walks down the bazaar road, Elizabeth and Flory pass by an ancient pagoda, and there is a good description of nature struggling to subdue the remains of an ancient civilization:

By the roadside, just before you got to the jail, the fragments of a stone pagoda were littered, cracked and overthrown by the strong roots of a peepul tree. The angry carved faces of demons looked up from the glass where they had fallen. Nearby, another peepul tree had twined itself round a palm, uprooting it and bending it backwards in a wrestle that had lasted a decade.²⁹

When we balance the faults with the virtues of the novel, there is little to choose between them. Burmese Days is on the verge of being a successful novel; had Orwell developed steadily from this point of achievement, he would have been a much better novelist than he was. But his sense of decency and his commitment were too strong. When he became an ardent socialist, his future as an artist was inevitably compromised. From then on the political point had to come first.
