# The Voice of the Imperial in an Anti-Imperialist Tone: George Orwell's *Burmese Days*

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ABSTRACT

First published in 1934, George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, which can be read as an example of both descriptive realism and fictional realism, is considered to be a colonial example of British literature because of its publication date. However, based on the personal experience of the author as an imperial officer in Burma, the novel has an anti-imperialist tone, which can also make it possible to read it through postcolonial eyes. As a result, the novel stands as an example of ambivalence since it has both the colonial and the postcolonial perspective; both the colonizer and the colonized are portrayed with their own flaws, adding to the impact of what can be called "Third Space." This is why the voice of the imperial is heard in an anti-imperialist tone in *Burmese Days*, through which Orwell presents a critique of colonialism with a from-within approach.

Key Words
colonialism, postcolonialism, (anti-)imperialism, George Orwell, *Burmese Days*

George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, which was dated 1934, was his first published novel (Ingle 30). It was written in an attempt to reflect a realistic

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manner, which Roger Fowler described as "descriptive realism" (26) and Michael Levenson as "fictional realism" (59). The novel was based on the author's personal experiences in Burma as a member of the Imperial Police (Quinn 8). The early impressions of Orwell, since he was an outsider to a totally foreign culture with the role of the colonizer, carried an imperial tone, but later he came to realize that he was doing "the dirty work of the empire," (*The Road to Wigan Pier* 136) which caused him to see British colonial rule as hypocrite, the motto of "white man's burden" as a lie, and the idea of colonialism as a corrupting power for both the colonizer and the colonized (Quinn 8). As a result of this transition in the author's mind, the novel can be considered both a colonial and a postcolonial work. It must be evaluated within the colonial context due to the date of publication, while it must be regarded as a postcolonial novel because of its anti-imperialist voice. In fact, in his introductory chapter to George Orwell in *Critical Heritage*, Jeffrey Meyers expresses that "*Burmese Days* reflected the decline of British Imperialism" (2), and this is true to a great extent because the novel portrays the shattered image of the colonizing power with all its ambivalence and last struggles to survive. In this respect, with regard to the decline of British Imperialism, the voice of the imperial can still be heard in the novel in the colonial atmosphere, while the anti-imperialist remarks of the author lead the work to be considered as a postcolonial one.

Since the novel carries quite a lot of details regarding historical facts, in analyzing the novel under colonial cultural studies, the first point that needs to be mentioned is Burmese history under the rule of the British. The British colonial history in Burma (now Myanmar) starts, according to the Canadian Friends of Burma website (CFOB), with the expansionist policies of the British government of the period that took advantage of Burmese inner strives. It is also noted on the website that

> [a]fter three Anglo-Burmese wars over a period of 60 years, the British

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> completed their colonization of the country in 1886, [when] Burma was immediately annexed as a province of British India, and the British began to permeate the ancient Burmese culture with foreign elements. Burmese customs were often weakened by the imposition of British traditions. ("History of Burma")

The weakened customs and the imposition of British traditions noted here are fully exemplified in the corruption of characters in *Burmese Days*. Since such a mixture of customs and traditions, with the original one being gradually replaced by the newcomer culture, would mean an "incomplete assimilation" or "in-betweenness" of most dangerous type, this may be thought as a way that leads to corrupt individuals or governments as can be seen in the novel. Moreover, the novel is mainly marked by the racial strives between the Burmese and the English upon being accepted to the whites club or not, and this reflects the period of the 1920s, when Orwell made his first encounters with the hostile attitudes of the indigenous people as Quinn notes (8). This period also sees "the first protests by Burma's intelligentsia and Buddhist monks [which] were launched against British rule" ("History of Burma"), this might be suggested as what affected Orwell most in writing *Burmese Days*, as well as defining his previously ambivalent stance toward colonialism. As Quinn remarks, he shifted his desire to "drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts" [to] "attempts to understand and appreciate the Burmese, their culture" (79). This change in the attitude of the author based on his personal experiences has its impact as an underlying fact in the novel – the tone is deliberately anti-imperialist, while at times it cannot escape being the voice of the colonizer, which would be much later noted as "Orientalist" by Edward Said. Here, it is worth noting that Said's Orientalism studies how the British and the French colonial powers represent the North African and Middle Eastern lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to John McLeod (39). However, with the colonial powers'

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expanding their forces throughout Far Eastern lands, it is possible to extend the use of the term Orientalism through the experiences of the colonizer and the colonized in these places, too. On the whole, what is meant by Orientalism is the collective perception and representation of the colonized lands by the West. Hence, being based on the experiences of a Westerner in a colonized land, *Burmese Days* can be regarded as an example of an Orientalist approach despite the anti-imperial elements in it. To be more precise, a summary of Said's views on the stereotypes of the Orient can be applied to the novel in order to show both the subtle and clear appearances of the Orientalist voice. According to Said, "Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient" (96), which means that "the Orient is timeless" (McLeod 44). In other words, Orientalism approaches the colonized lands as the representations of backwardness while the West is thought to be the center of civilization and progress. In this regard, the typewriter symbol in the very early pages of Orwell's novel could be taken as the pictogram of an Orientalist approach. This is because the typewriter leaves the whole sheet with the mark of ink, implying the backwardness of the colonized land: the colonized are not even able to use the technology and "civilization" brought about by the West properly. When Ba Sein hands the paper to U Po Kyin, it is impossible to ignore Orwell's description which reads:

> He produced a copy of a bilingual paper called the Burmese Patriot. It was a miserable eight-page rag, villainously printed on paper as bad as blotting paper, and composed partly of news stolen from the Rangoon Gazette, partly of weak Nationalist heroics. On the last page the type had slipped and left the entire sheet jet black, as though in mourning for the smallness of the paper's circulation. (10)

As can be seen in the quotation, the Orientalist tone of Orwell can be observed in the details woven through the text. As a matter of fact, the

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binaries created by Orientalism, as McLeod points out (40), can be detected in what Orwell subtly delivers as a message: the nationalistic movements in Burma can only work as bad copies of their Western counterparts, so while the Occident is good, the Orient is bad. Similarly, as stated above, the carefulness and success of the Westerners in publishing papers and circulating ideas cannot be seen in the Burmese.

Another point that needs to be taken into consideration while analyzing Orwell's style in describing the atmosphere in Burma is that the political and moral corruption in this colonized land coincides with what Said points out as "the Oriental is degenerate" (qtd. in McLeod 46). According to McLeod, such fixed traits as "cowardliness, laziness, untrustworthiness, fickleness, laxity, violence and lust" are considered to be as part of the characteristics that are to be seen in the colonized people, and "Oriental peoples were often considered as possessing a tenuous moral sense and the readiness to indulge themselves in the more dubious aspects of human behavior" (46). Almost all the characters in Orwell's novel fit into these categories, and hence, go hand in hand with an Orientalist approach. On the other hand, it is not possible to claim that Orwell's was a totally Orientalist view because in the novel it is observed that it is the colonization process that brought about corruption and degeneration to Burmese society. In other words, these pejorative terms cannot be taken as inherent qualities of these people, but it is the fault of the Western expansion that caused acculturation and assimilation, as a result of which corruption came into the fore.

Although *Burmese Days* is thought to be fiction, it carries biographical elements, as most of the other works of Orwell do, as can be seen in what Quinn clarifies and what has been argued so far. For instance, while Orwell creates "a mythical town" in *Burmese Days*, as R. G. Marsden refers to the town of Orwell in a completely different context (93) and as later J. Hamilton Wylie writes upon that (723), Quinn suggests that the fictional town of Kyauktada was modeled upon the town of Katha,

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which was “Orwell’s last posting before returning to England” (79). Moreover, the epigraph of the novel, which reads “This desert inaccessible / Under the shade of melancholy boughs,” quoted from William Shakespeare’s *As You Like it*, may be considered as suggestive of Orwell’s feeling of loneliness in Burma, although he was known to have relatives there. As part of the Imperial Police, Orwell was twice a foreigner, first as an Englishman, and second as a policeman. This doubled the effect of his loneliness and the desert image in the two lines given adds quite a lot to the feeling of being “in the middle of nowhere.”

The novel opens with the introduction of an assimilated character, U Po Kyin, sub-divisional Magistrate of Kyauktada and follows in two sets of actions: one depicts the political atmosphere and dishonesty in such matters, while the other continues to tell the story of the relationship between Flory, a British merchant whose birthmark on his face distinguishes him from his British counterparts, and Elizabeth, the daughter of a distinguished family of upper class background. The character U Po Kyin becomes the epitome of corruption because he ironically gains fame through his so-called fairness due to the fact that he does not discriminate between the sides while receiving bribes. In this, Orwell reflects the debasing side of colonialism and his anti-imperialist tone strikes the reader. U Po Kyin’s relationship with his wife, Ma Kin, can be also read in colonial terms. His humiliating and underestimating attitude toward women is naturalized in the religious belief that he holds on to, according to which reincarnation as a woman is associated with what is the worst, even on a lower degree than that of animals. This naturalization of behavior through the religious context is what makes Orwell’s novel colonialist. However, the author does so in the way that Fowler calls “descriptive realism,” so this could also be regarded as a postcolonial discourse in its own right. Orwell may have simply wanted to reflect U Po Kyin’s own corrupted interpretation of his religious belief. This is further maintained and supported by the idea that he still believes the possibility of a comfortable reincarnation

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with the pagoda he earns despite his acts of lechery, adultery and bribery. Orwell's criticism of the colonial powers and the corruption they cause is further noticed when Ma Kin attempts to evaluate U Po Kyin's sinister plan to overthrow Dr. Veraswami and join the whites' club by taking the only available place reserved for a non-white, stating that

> But, Ko Po Kyin, where is the need for all this scheming and intriguing? I heard you talking with Ko Ba Sein on the veranda. You are planning some evil against Dr Veraswami. Why do you wish to harm that Indian doctor? He is a good man. (16)

U Po Kyin simply rejects what she says and disregards her comments on a sexist basis:

> What do you know of these official matters, woman? The doctor stands in my way. In the first place he refuses to take bribes, which makes it difficult for the rest of us. And besides – well, there is something else which you would never have the brains to understand. (16-7)

This conversation goes on with U Po Kyin's verbal violence increasing its magnitude. Like a military officer who commands his soldiers to do what he says, U Po Kyin orders his wife to go back to her own business and not to interfere with "men's work" (17-8). This is also significant in terms of Burmese history, which has been dominated by military forces even after its independence from the rule of the British. Hence, the female image represents the land, while the manly attributions are linked to governing powers. What's more, the representation of the visitor girl who claims to be pregnant with U Po Kyin's baby is also symbolic in this sense because she is ironically given as unimportant. U Po Kyin does not even accept her as a guest and without listening to her complaint, he just orders his secretary to get rid of her. While Ma Kin becomes the voice of and the nameless girl represents the interrupted side of the

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innocent and the colonized, U Po Kyin represents the corrupt and the colonial speaker. In this sense, the novel can be thought from an Orientalist perspective in Said's terms because the colonized is female and the colonizer is male. In addition, this reminds one of how Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questions whether the subaltern is able to speak or not. For Spivak, academic research is a colonial process because knowledge is a way of exporting culture, which means that it is the Westerners' tool for encapsulating the world of knowing, and thus, academic world is shaped only by the Westerners' sustenance and maintenance of knowledge; in this regard, due to the colonizer's hegemony on vocabulary and language, and thus, the transmission of information, what is regarded as the subaltern cannot voice his/her original thoughts (66-111). As for *Burmese Days*, the subaltern cannot speak in this novel either, and even when "she" does so, she is suppressed. The nameless girl, hence, can be read as the subaltern that is silenced. This dichotomy continues in the depiction of Flory's relationship with the Burmese woman Ma Hla May and the English "lady" Elizabeth. In this, Flory becomes the symbol of hypocritical colonizer because he permits Ma Hla May to come to tea, but she cannot wear her sandals "in her master's presence" (*Burmese Days* 51). It is clear in the novel that Ma Hla May was taught to be a slave since Flory "had bought [Ma Hla May] from her parents two years ago, for three hundred rupees" (52) but "Flory's embraces meant nothing to her" (53). On the other hand, Orwell seems to need to show that "even slaves had pride" as Loraine Saunders comments (107), which can be seen as still discriminative, and this can be taken as a feature that makes the novel the voice of the colonizer in a tender tone. Optimistically speaking, however, this might be also read as a premature step toward a postcolonial discourse:

> Flory's embraces meant nothing to her ... yet she was bitterly hurt when he neglected them. Sometimes she had even put love philtres (sic) in his food. It was the idle concubine's life that she loved, and

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> the visits to her village dressed in all her finery, when she could boast of her position as a *bo-kadaw* – a white man's wife; for she had persuaded everyone, herself included, that she was Flory's legal wife. (53)

While this depiction is of utmost importance in terms of the argument on whether the work should be read in a colonial or postcolonial sense, the sentence that reads "she had persuaded everyone, herself included" is also open to debate with regard to its suggestiveness about hypocrisy. Therefore, through Ma Hla May, Orwell guarantees his objectivity because not only the colonizer but also the colonized is given as the epitomes of hypocrisy in the novel. In fact, while the racial hatred between the English and the Burmese stands as a minor theme, especially through the character of Ellis, another merchant and a member of the club like Flory, the main theme is definitely the duplicity of the empire and its branches as far as they can expand. This can be further explained when Orwell has Ellis think of "a bitter, restless loathing as of something evil and unclean" whenever he encounters a sense of proximity between the English and the Burmese (24), because for Ellis "any hint of friendly feeling towards (sic) an Oriental seemed to him a horrible perversity" (24). For Flory's case, however, this consistency is not valid. By the end of the novel he cannot cope with the guilt of not supporting his friend, Dr. Veraswami, and kills himself. The same duplicity is seen in the character of Elizabeth, too, because she prefers another man over Flory for financial reasons and for the sake of her reputation. Moreover, the death of Flo, Flory's loyal dog, shows how women are considered to be even lower than animals in this atmosphere of dishonesty: before Flory kills himself, the dog also dies, but Elizabeth cannot show the same loyalty as Flo. Hence, it is possible to claim that it was not only in the eyes of the Burmese characters that women are degraded. The same applies as well to the case of the British, and this can be also

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read in both Said's and Spivak's terms. Mainly, however, this is the hypocritical side of society. Therefore, it can be suggested that Orwell, through Flory, shows how destructive hypocrisy can be, and hence, criticizes colonial powers in a harsh manner. Anthony Stewart explains the character of Flory as follows:

> [. . .] what makes Flory a character who appears at times despicable is his hypocrisy, his willingness to tout high moral and political standards in private conversations with Veraswami or with Elizabeth, but then to act in complete opposition to these standards when they are put to the test, in the small but very public world of the European Club. As a result, he appears anything but decent and seems to deserve his ultimate fate in the novel. (44)

Indeed, while Flory is the only person to support Dr. Veraswami against the plot, he voted for not approving of non-whites in the club hypocritically. When the time comes to do so, he cannot find the strength in himself to stand up and speak against the rest of the club to fight for his friend. This is similar to what Orwell says in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, referring to the socialists, and reminding one of Flory's duplicitous behaviors: "while theoretically pining for a classless society" they, in reality, "cling like glue to their miserable fragments of social prestige" (162). In fact, how even small matters in governmental businesses affect personal life can be seen in Flory's role in settling down a minor revolt that threatened the expatriates' club. This is mainly because the imperial power is felt at every level of life and this is what Orwell criticizes in *Burmese Days*.

In conclusion, the themes of racial and social repression, hatred, and empire, along with its "failure" as Levenson states (59), as well as "mendacity, treachery," and mainly "hypocrisy," as Stephen Ingle says (31), are what are in question in *Burmese Days*, which is, according to Ingle, "a story without heroes" (31). While written in the colonial era, George Orwell's first novel, therefore, stands as a significant outline

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of postcolonial remarks, suggesting perfectly the author's anti-imperialist thoughts while fluctuating between the minds of the colonizer and the colonized. As Laraine Fergenson quotes Lord Atson's dictum "power tends to corrupt" (607) as appropriate to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, one cannot ignore how suitable it is to *Burmese Days*. In his attempt to be as realistic as possible with the impact of his literary age, Orwell did not follow Flory and became "decent," since, after all, as Paul Thomas paraphrases George Kateb's words: "Orwell was always more interested in abolishing extreme suffering than in imagining total felicity" (422) and this is what he showed in his first novel.

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