

## George Orwell's *Burmese Days*: Imperialism as a Degenerative Force

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### Abstract

*George Orwell's feelings on imperialism are complicated, on the one hand, he is keenly aware of its deleterious affects on both the colonizers and the colonized and through the words of Flory is able to articulate the hypocritical and specious behaviour and beliefs of the Europeans who stake their claim in the East. On the other hand, Orwell does not seem able to move fully past an imperial world view and conceive of the natives as fully fledged human beings. His depiction of them veers close to caricature and cipher. As a part of the imperial system once, Orwell has a modicum of sympathy for the English trapped in it, and provides some excuses for them.*

**Keywords:** Ethics of imperialism, tragedy of Flory, corrosive and damaging effects of imperialism.

In order to understand how imperialism affects the characters in the novel it is first necessary to understand how Orwell views and presents imperial culture. Although there are many good examples that reveal Orwell's thoughts on imperialism, some of the most poignant come from the beginning of the novel. For example, after Dr. Verswami (a native doctor and friend) questions Flory on why he called the British presence in Burma a lie, Flory responds by saying,

Why, of course, the lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of robbing them. I suppose it's natural lie enough. But it corrupts us, it corrupts us in ways you can't imagine. There's an everlasting sense of being a sneak and a liar that torments us and drives us to justify ourselves night and day. It's at the bottom of half our beastliness to the natives. We Anglo-Indians could be almost bearable if we'd only admit that we're thieves and go on thieving without any humbug.<sup>1</sup>

This quote shows that Flory, unlike his fellow Anglo-Indians, acknowledges and feels guilt for the injustices carried out by the British in the name of empire. More striking, however, is how he talks about the British presence in Burma as something that corrupts and torments the white officers. According to Flory, it is the fact that the actions of the British Empire are covered up by civilizing rhetoric that corrupts the Anglo-Indians, and not necessarily the actions themselves. Because they are corrupt, the officers are tormented into an endless justification of their actions. When read this way, it can then be said that under the guise of the civilizing mission – the white man's burden – Orwell views the Europeans as slaves to the imperial ideology.

More of Orwell's thoughts about imperialism are revealed soon after, when Flory expresses his opinion on the real reason for the British presence in Burma. He explains to the doctor that 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 weren't in the hands of the British? Or the other timber firms, or the oil companies, or the miners and planters and traders? How could the Rice Ring go on skinning the unfortunate peasant if it hadn't the Government it? The British Empire is simply a device for giving trade monopolies to the English...<sup>2</sup>

Again, Flory talks about the facade of imperialism, only this time he talks about why exactly the British are lying through its civilizing rhetoric. In Flory's eyes, the British are in Burma for one purpose: to provide business interests with more avenues trade. In other words, the entire idea of empire is merely a tool that is used to justify and cover up the extraction of resources from the colonies by British businessmen. In this sense, both the British imperial officers and the natives are simply tools of empire, neither one making truly independent decisions. because this system benefits no one in the colony itself, it is easy to see how and why the guilt of empire was difficult for Flory to handle.

Another example demonstrating Orwell's presentation and judgement of imperialism in the novel comes from the end of an argument between Flory and Dr. Verswami. After the doctor claims that the British have brought to Burma more than banks and prisons, Flory states, "Of course I don't deny that we modernise this country in certain ways. We can't help doing so. In fact, before we've finished we'll have wrecked the whole Burmese national culture. But we're not civilising them, we're only rubbing our dirt on them."<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, Flory admits that the British presence in Burma has, indeed, modernised the county. On the other hand, Flory does not see modernisation as a good thing because it is destroying the indigenous Burmese culture. In his opinion, the British are bringing nothing more valuable to the Burmese than what already exists in their culture. The British merely have the resources to impose rhetoric of civilization and superiority onto the indigenous population. Again, Orwell raises questions of guilt and moral responsibility through his protagonist. What the British are imposing is not better than what the Burmese already have, how can one justify the actions of empire? Further, if the British are conscious of that fact that what they are imposing is not better than what the Burmese already have, why are imperial officers imposing it? From this, it can then be said that the imperial officer, in Orwell's interpretation, is not a free individual because he is not able to make logical or ethical decisions.

Orwell's judgement of imperialism as a degenerative force is best represented through James Flory, who is driven by his feelings of guilt and moral responsibility to a tragic end. In this sense, Flory can be seen as a tragic hero; it is his strong ethical consciousness that is the cause of his deterioration and, ultimately, his death by suicide. One way the deterioration takes place is through the relationship he has with Dr. Verswami. As previously mentioned, Flory is unlike the other Europeans with regard to his views of empire and the guilt he feels as a result. But the disparity is widened by the friendship between the two men because it is the cause of much discussion and conflict within the local European Club.<sup>4</sup> For example, when it is suggested that a spot in the club should be given to a native resident of the city in which it resides, every member makes a negative comment on the matter except Flory. This doesn't go unnoticed, and once Flory leaves the discussion, Westfield (the District Superintendent of Police) says, "He's a bit *too* Bolshie for my taste. I can't bear a fellow who pals up with the natives. I should wonder if he's got a lick of the tarbrush himself."<sup>5</sup>

Flory's feeling become clear on the matter in the next scene when he speaks to the doctor about visiting his house. He says, "Such a glorious holiday from them... from my beloved fellow Empire-builders. British prestige, the white man's burden, the pukka sahib *sans peur et sans reproche* – you know. Such a relief to be out of the stink of it for a little while."<sup>6</sup> The fact that this scene takes place at the doctor's house has the effect of making the views of Flory and the other European men very distinct.

Yet, even though Flory is known to be friendly with Verswame and other indigenous Burmese, he does not challenge or question the opinions of the Europeans when they insult the doctor or other natives. Instead, Flory's opinions remain hidden- at times, even from Verswami – because of the corruption of empire. For instance, after the doctor questions Flory's views on empire because he only expresses them in private, Flory responds by saying, "Sorry, doctor; I don't go in for proclaiming from the housetops. I haven't the guts. I 'counsel ignoble ease', like old Belial in *Paradise Lost*. It's safer. You've got to be a pukka sahib or die, in this country. In fifteen years, I've never talked honestly to anyone except you. My talks here are a safety valve; a little black Mass on the sly, if you understand me."<sup>7</sup> Although Flory disagrees with the racist views of the other members of the Club, he claims that he is kept from expressing them because of the nature of empire. The tragedy of this is that his moral conscience becomes nothing but a burden because he cannot act on it.

However, what Flory tells the doctor is only part of the tragedy. The next part of it is revealed when the argument graduates to the possibility of Verswami being elected into the club. After the doctor explains how being elected to the club would help escape attacks from U Po Kyin, the narrator claims "[Flory] knew that in all probability, if he had the courage to face a few a few rows with Ellis, he could secure Dr. Verswami's election to the Club."<sup>8</sup> This quote reveals that acting on moral responsibility is not completely out of Flory's hands. If he had the courage, not only could he challenge the other pukka sahibs' views of the natives – and their views of empire – but he could also help his only friend to avoid scandal and hardship by electing him to the club.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Flory is not forced to be silent solely by circumstances that are out of his control, but by a fear of being further distinguished apart from the rest of the Europeans. This leaves him with a sense of guilt that remains with him and tortures him throughout the novel. In short, it is the imperial ideology that keeps Flory crippled from acting on his morals, making his tragic flaw the ethics that also make him a hero.

Unfortunately, when Flory does decide to speak up for the doctor, it is too late to be of any help. When the times comes for the election of a native to be made, U Po Kyin's plan to ruin Verwami has already had detrimental effects on his reputation among the Europeans. Furthermore, Flory's decision is driven less by moral responsibility than it is by convenience. For example, after realizing that the election was essentially in his power to decide, Flory stands up in order to nominate the doctor. The narrator describes his thoughts in the following sentences:

But oh, what a bore, what a nuisance it was! What an infernal uproar there would be! How he wished he had never given the doctor that promise! No matter, he had given it, and he could not break it. So short a time ago he would have broken it, en on pukka sahib, how easily! But not now. he had got to see this thing through. He turned himself sidelong so that his birthmark was away from the others. Already he could feel his voice going flat and guilty.<sup>10</sup>

At this point in the novel, Flory has deteriorated significantly since the beginning of the story. His relationship with Elizabeth (a young European woman whom he has been courting) is almost surely over, which makes him self-pitying and desperate. From this quote, it is clear that Flory nominates the doctor only because he sees that has nothing to lose. The promise he made to the doctor is more of a burden to him now than anything else, but in his current situation, his relationship with the doctor is the only thing he has left. Therefore, even though he feels guilty about breaking away from the other pukka sahibs, he chooses to speak up and nominate the doctor. Unfortunately, Flory acts too late, for U Po Kyin's plans to ruin the doctor and Flory have already been set into motion. Herenin lies the tragedy: it is only when Flory's fate has been determined by circumstances of empire that he has enough courage to speak out against it.

Beyond the downfall of Flory, the idea of imperialism as a degenerative force is demonstrated through Orwell's representation of empire as a parasite that, in the end, benefits neither the Europeans nor the Burmese. In essence, this is what Orwell sees as corrosive and damaging at the heart of imperial culture. For instance, during a comparison between the freedom of men in England and Burma, the narrator writes,

Everyone is freeing England; we sell our souls in public and buy them back in private, among our friends. But even friendship can hardly exist when every man is a cog in the wheels of despotism. Free speech is unthinkable. All other kinds of freedom are permitted. You are free to be a drunkard, an idler, a coward, a backbiter, a fornicator; but you are not free to think for yourself. Your opinion on every subject of any conceivable importance is dictated for you by the pukka sahibs' code.<sup>11</sup>

This quote clearly shows that even the Europeans in Burma do not benefit from empire. In fact, participating in empire-building is more detrimental than anything else; for, in taking away the freedom of the Burmese, the British are giving up their freedom as well. And in giving up freedom, the British are simultaneously giving up power. Therefore, one reason Orwell sees imperial culture as corrosive and damaging is that it is detrimental even to the men who are given the task to carrying out the business of empire.

Another example of empire's universally detrimental effect comes from a poignant scene in which Elizabeth sees Eurasians for the first time. Both confused and appalled by what she sees, Elizabeth asks Flory questions regarding the condition of the Eurasians in Burma. In response to a question about their options for work, Flory's says, "The Europeans won't touch them with a stick, and they're cut off from entering the lower-grade Government services. There's nothing they can do except cadge, unless they chuck all pretension to being Europeans. And really you can't expect the poor devils to do that. Their drop of white blood is the sole asset they've got."<sup>12</sup> Caught at the peripheries of both the British and the Burmese, the Eurasians are social outcasts. They are the ultimate symbols of Empire because even though they possess assets of both groups, they benefit from neither. The little prestige the Eurasians get from being half European is offset by the fact that they live as beggars. In short, the Eurasians-whose very existence owes itself to empire-signify another group that is negatively affected by the realities of imperial culture.

The indigenous Burmese are the final group that Orwell claims do not benefit from Empire. Of all the characters in the novel, none faces the consequences of empire more than Dr. Verswami does. For instance, when the narrator is describing the results of Flory's death, he writes, "The first and most important of them was that Dr. Verswami was ruined, even as he had foreseen. The glory of being a

white man's friend-the one thing that saved him before-had vanished. Flory's standing with the other Europeans had never been good, it is true; but he was after all a white man, and his friendship conferred a certain prestige. Once he was dead, the doctor's ruin was assured."<sup>13</sup> Due to the nature of imperial culture, Verswami's status in the community was reliant on his friendship with Flory. As Flory's standing changed within the club, so did the doctor's chance of being nominated to it. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the physical death of Flory also marks the symbolic death of Verswami. If empire is detrimental to the empire-builders themselves, then can one not expect it to be detrimental to the natives as well? The case of Verswami is important because it is representative of the fact that, like all other groups under the influence of imperial culture, the indigenous Burmese cannot benefit from empire.

Of course, there is one exception that proves the imperial rule: U Po Kyin. Of all the characters in the novel, British or native, U Po Kyin is the only one that benefits from imperial from imperial culture. For instance, after his plan is realized and Flory commits suicide, U Po Kyin is elected to the club. He is even promoted and given a medal from the Indian Government soon after. However, when looked at more closely, the case of U Po Kyin is less optimistic. Undeniably, U Po Kyin does gain prestige and membership into the club, but if his gains are merely imperial gains, then they are superficial at best. In other words, because his gains only mean something within the realm of imperial culture, it cannot be said without question that U Po Kyin benefits from empire.

How imperialism is judged and portrayed in *Burmese Days* is hard to deny. In the eyes of Orwell, imperialism is detrimental because it impairs the freedom of the British and indigenous Burmese alike, causing society – and the individuals within in it– to suffer. The novel's themes of guilt and moral responsibility that are embodied in Flory's character are a direct result of Orwell's own experiences as an imperial officer in Burma. For this reason, it should not come as a surprise that *Burmese Days* many truths about the imperial experience of British India in the 1930s. In fact, Orwell's intimate understanding and presentation of empire shows that even a novel can be a valuable tool to the historian of imperialism.

## NOTES

1. George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, Harper & Brothers, United Kingdom 1934, p. 39.
2. Ibid., p. 40.
3. Ibid., p. 42.
4. In the book, the European Club is the ultimate symbol of empire and prestige. The local club to which is Flory is a member is composed only of white men.
5. Ibid., p. 34.
6. Ibid., p. 37.
7. Ibid., p. 43.
8. Ibid., p. 47.
9. Pukka Sahib is a synonym for Anglo-Indian 10. Ibid., pp. 234-235.
11. Ibid., p. 69. 12. Ibid., p. 122. 13. Ibid., p. 283.