

An Analysis of the Tendency of Orientalism in “Shooting an Elephant”

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Abstract

Edward Said in his markedly innovative work *Orientalism* illustrates a prevalent Western tradition of prejudice against the Eastern world. There is an arbitrary and fictitious line between the Occident and the Orient in which the former has the privilege of defining and reconstructing the latter based on its stereotype and preconception. Orientalism is the source of the false cultural representations with which the Occident perceives the Orient. This thesis adopts Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* to explain how the narrator exposes his tendency of Orientalism in the short story “Shooting an Elephant” through the analysis of the narrator's perception of the Burmese, his view of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as well as his duplicity. Although he has got a clear understanding of the evil imperialist colonial rule, as a westerner, the narrator has strong tendency of Orientalism.

Keywords: postcolonialism, orientalism, “shooting an elephant”

1. Introduction

“Shooting an Elephant” is an essay published in 1936 by George Orwell based on his experiences as a policeman in colonial Burma. George Orwell was one of the most prominent writers of the twentieth century, famous for his novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). He was born in Bengal, into the class of sahibs. He spent his youth in India. After returning to England, he received his education at Eton in England. From 1922 to 1927 he worked in Burma as an Indian imperial policeman. Through his autobiographical work about his experiences in colonial Burma, Orwell exposed and criticized the human inclination to oppress others politically, economically, and physically. Most of his works are concerned about social and political issues, such as the plight of the poor and the ills of British colonialism.

Based on Orwell's experience in the Indian Imperial Police (1922-1927), “Shooting an Elephant” is set in Moulmein, in Lower Burma. It is a narrative essay about the narrator's time as a police officer for the British rule in colonial Burma, employing the first-person point of view to successfully make the story sound real and natural. As a sub-divisional police officer, the narrator is hated and insulted by the local Burmese. This situation provokes the narrator to delve into an inner conflict. On the one hand, he despises the British Empire's mistreatment of the locals, considering the rule of British Empire to be evil. On the other hand, he resents the locals because they mock and insult him.

As the narrator himself admits, an incident gives him insight into the nature of imperialism. He is told by the local police station that an elephant went mad, threatening the locals and causing havoc. He asks the natives about where the elephant had gone, but their answers are different. The narrator comments that this is “the case in the East” (Orwell, 1970). Going towards the elephant he finds a dead labor around the corner lying in the mud, being a victim of the elephant's cruelty. With the rifle, he walks to the field, and a large group from the neighborhood follows him to see the elephant shot. He has no intention to shoot the elephant as he sees the giant elephant peacefully grazing and it is an expensive working machine. Looking at the assembled crowd, he realizes that they expect him to shoot the elephant. The narrator thinks he has to shoot the elephant and act like a sahib, or else he will be humiliated and laughed at by the locals. The narrator finally pulls the trigger and fires five times. The elephant's owner is angry, but, as a Burmese, can't revolt. Older British agree with Orwell's action, but younger colonists think it is inappropriate to kill an elephant because elephants are more valuable than coolies. However, the narrator confesses that he kills the elephant to avoid being labeled as a fool.

Throughout the essay the narrator explicitly discusses the nature of British imperialism, particularly as a police officer who both represents and internalizes imperialism. He opens with brutality of British colonialism in Burma, and discusses his disgust at the influence of British empire on Burma. He says that he's on the side of the "Burman," yet he also hates Burmese people for the way they perceive him. He is trapped in internal conflict as he tries to preserve the image of the indestructible empire, going against his personal inclination to kill an elephant, while he resents and despises the colonized people of Burma. We can see this disgust and contempt in his explicit description, for example, the Burmese rudely spitting betel juice over European women's dress, crafty Burmese people in football field, and several thousands of young Buddhist priests lazily idling away. In narrator's eyes, the local Burmese are pathetic, rude, unreasonable, insidious, lazy, uncivilized and even barbaric.

"Orientalism" is a way of imagining, emphasizing, exaggerating and distorting differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often regards Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and sometimes dangerous. Edward W. Said (1979:1) defined it as the acceptance in the West of "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on." The West constructed the East as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or "rescue". This thesis mainly adopts Edward Said's theory of Orientalism as the theoretical basis to explore the narrator's tendency of Orientalism in the representation of the relationship between him and the local Burmese as well as the event of shooting an elephant. Through an analysis of narrator's perception of the Burmese, narrator's view of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and the narrator's duplicity, the thesis will expose narrator's tendency of Orientalism. From narrator's point of view, the Occident is crafty, lazy, deceitful, uncivilized and inferior and that rescuing the East from its primitive and miserable conditions is the Western assumed duty.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonialism studies the relations of cultural discourse rights between the metropolitan states and the colonies after the colonial period, focusing on racism, cultural identity and cultural hegemony. In the post-colonial period, direct military and economic aggression disappeared. Instead, Western values and ideologies were propagated and infiltrated through cultural thought, academic education and media communication. Therefore, there are hidden colonization in the cultural, intellectual and spiritual fields. Cultural colonization makes colonized people absorb western values, lifestyles and ways of thinking, which is a kind of invisible effect. Therefore, the essence of post-colonialism is to oppose the Eurocentrism and cultural hegemony imposed on developing countries by Western developed capitalist countries.

The aim of this theory is to reveal the colonial relationship between East and West from a cultural perspective. Lois Tyson puts forward the Postcolonial criticism in his book: "postcolonial criticism is both a subject matter and a theoretical framework. As a subject matter, it analyzes literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination..." (2006: 418). As a result, postcolonial criticism is widely used to analyze power relationships between the colonized countries and the colonizers in literary works, and to explore how the colonizers persuaded the colonized people to accept Western culture as superior to their own native culture.

2.2 Orientalism

With the publication of *Orientalism* by Edward Said, Orientalism has become an important part of post-colonialism. It is a cultural study from political, social and ideological aspects which focuses on cultural imperialism of the West hegemony upon the Orient. It refutes the prevailing Eurocentric universalism. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains the meaning of "Orientalism" in three aspects, namely, an academic research, a way of thinking and a right discourse mode. In terms of academic study, Orientalism includes various aspects of academic research concerning of the Orient. Secondly, a more general meaning of Orientalism claims that Orientalism is a style of thought on account of a distinctive cognition between the Occident and the Orient (Said, 1979). This distinction became the basis of many literary works describing the Orient. Thirdly, Said defines Orientalism in a historical and material perspective. It refers to "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979:3). It is this definition that matters to Said and at the same time coincides with postcolonial values which aim to reveal the dominating power of the West imperialism over the East (Zhang, 2013).

The book *A reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* gave a clear introduction to Edward Said's third definition of Orientalism, which mentioned that Orientalism is "the long-term images, stereotypes and general

ideology about 'the orient' as the 'other', constructed by generations of Western scholars, which produce myths about the laziness, deceit, and irrationality of Orientals, as well as their reproduction and rebuttal in current debates on the Arab-Islamic world and its exchanges, particularly, with the United States" (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2012: 223). Orientalism is the discourse and imagination of the West about the East. It is a set of practices in the forms of power and knowledge through which the Western culture used to produce a region known as the Orient (Klages, 2009: 154). It has existed since ancient times.

According to Edward Said, the orient in Orientalism is the orient in Westerner's eyes, constructed by biased imagination of Westerners in their favor. The constructed orient isn't in fact, real orient, but orient produced by the West with misunderstanding, prejudice and stereotypes. The orient is considered to be backward, barbaric, uncivilized, impoverished and filthy. Westerner's sense of superiority and prejudice to the Orient cause the discrimination of the Orientals so that the view that the east is inferior to the west is rooted in Westerner's minds. The Orientals are termed as "the other" by westerners who call themselves as the Self with subjectivity, considered to be barbaric, ignorant, lazy, deceitful, evil, cunning and unreasonable. The Orientalism is actually a kind of Eurocentrism. Based on Said, the purpose of rebuilding the Orient and Oriental is to achieve cultural colonization and impose western ideology and culture on the East. Westerners claim that they have duty to assist the east become civilized and orderly. This thesis will analyze the essay "Shooting an Elephant" from the perspective of Orientalism to find the narrator's tendency of orientalism.

3. Orientalism Revealed in "Shooting an Elephant"

Orientalism establishes the concept of the Orientals which are completely different from the Occidentals in essence. Said revealed Eurocentrism in his book Orientalism published in 1987. The Occidentals take their superiority for granted. The West has always looked at the East in a novel and biased way. The Orient is Orientalized because it was invented by Westerners who were out of touch with reality (Xie, 2020). Orient is created in a hegemonic process that deprived it of its real identity and voice. Balfour and many Orientalists argued that "the Oriental is irrational, depraved, childlike and different; and the European is rational, virtuous, mature and normal" (Said, 1979: 40). The Orientals are considered to be unreliable, rude, lazy, uncivilized, impoverished and deceitful by the Occidentals. In the short story "Shooting an Elephant", the narrator's depiction of the local Burmese reflects his tendency of orientalism, which is worth in-depth study.

3.1 The Narrator's Perception of the Burmese

The narrator, as a sub-divisional police officer from the United Kingdom in charge of the town, is obviously resented by the colonized Burmese. From narrator's perspective, the Burmese have no courage to revolt, but to secretly and insidiously make trouble for White people. According to the narrator, "If a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress... This happened more than once" (Orwell, 1970). From the diction of the narrator, it can be seen that the narrator hates the Burmese who behave badly and they are described as rude, coarse, insidious and crafty. To be specific, the word "probably" shows uncertainty, which means the narrator hasn't witnessed that the Burmese spit juice over white women. However, he believes that the Burmese indiscriminately have a grudge against all European, regardless of whether they have done harm to them. In other words, he considers the local Burmese to be irrational and unreasonable.

Besides, there are description about Buddhist priests, which shows narrator's stereotype and prejudice to the Burmese. "The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. 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" (Orwell, 1970). On the basis of narrator's depiction, there are several thousands of young Buddhist priests in town who idle away their time, just standing on street corner and laughing at Europeans. It leaves readers with the impression that young Buddhist are lazy and incompetent, without ambition and enterprising spirit. At the same time, particular attention should be paid to the use of words. For example, the phrase "seem to" shows narrator's uncertainty. He guesses that Buddhist priests have nothing to do, but they actually have their responsibilities. The Burmese believe in Buddhism. As a result, the image of lazy and incompetent Buddhist priests is rooted in narrator's mind, which gradually spread among the Occidentals.

Ghaforian and Gholi (2015) claim that the narrator is guilty of essentialism and sweeping generalizations, as he stated that "we began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East" (Orwell, 1970). The narrator complains about that he can't get definite information in the town of Burma, implying that the Burmese are dishonest, deceitful and unreliable. This event takes place in a town of Burma, but narrator thinks that it's always the same case in Orient. The phrase "as usual" suggests that this lack of clarity and directness is innate and customary in the Orientals.

The adverb “invariably” reinforces this view. This labeling is not limited to this example. The stereotype that “the Orientals as inveterate liars” (Said, 1979: 39) is confirmed when narrator says that information about where elephant has gone is a pile of lies. Therefore, in narrator’s opinion, people in the east are always dishonest and unreliable, which is narrator’s prejudice.

It has been mentioned many times in the text that narrator is reluctant to kill elephants, but the Burmese are excited to see shooting the elephant, for instance, “they had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant” “The people expected it of me.” “I had no intention of shooting the elephant.” “But I did not want to shoot the elephant” (Orwell, 1970). There is a great deal of space in the text describing the narrator’s inner struggle, which leaves the reader with the impression that it is the local Burmese who force the narrator to shoot against his will. Through this stark contrast, it’s obvious that in reader’s eyes, the local Burmese are merciless, violent and uncivilized, while the narrator is sympathetic. The image of cruel Orientals is unknowingly constructed, which is exactly in accordance with westerners’ imagination of the Orientals. However, the following issues should be taken into consideration. On the one hand, the elephant trampling a coolie to death should be punished. On the other hand, the real reason for narrator to kill the elephant is to avoid to be laughed, and maintain British rule in Burma.

In addition, narrator’s depiction of the natives is not an appealing one. He always employs offensive terms to refer to the local Burmese. The narrator uses the pejorative word “coolie” four times for referring to the Burmans. Subconsciously, he considers that the local Burmese are inferior and humble. What’s more, it can be noticed that the narrator has used the word “beast” for two times. “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 friction of the great beast’s foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit” (Orwell, 1970). As we can see, the “little beasts” refers to the Burmese, while the “great beast” refers to the mad elephant. This alludes to the mental makeup of narrator in colonial India, one which holds even a pack animal in higher esteem than the humans he governs. He besmirches the Orientals as savage and wicked, like a beast.

The image of the local Burmese is represented by the narrator, while this representation is not based on the real Burmese but the narrator’s imagination and prejudice. From the perspective of Orientalism, the westerners have a stereotypical image of the Orientals. As a foil, the Burmese are described as devious, crafty, lazy, irrational and evil to display the superiority of the Occidentals. The oriental image exists in westerners’ mind for a long time. It is hard to change the image of the backward and ignorant Orientals. As a Westerner the narrator is inevitably influenced by Eurocentrism.

3.2 Narrator’s View of the Relation Between the Colonizer and the Colonized

The narrator, as a white colonizer, is hated by the colonized Burmese for a long time but he, in the event of shooting the elephant, is regarded to be important. “In Moulmein, in lower Burma, 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” (Orwell, 1970). The narrator states that many people tell him the information about elephant’s doings, and Burmese sub-inspector and Indian constables wait for him to deal with the matter. According to Orientalism put forward by Edward Said, Westerners consider their colonization of the Orient is valid and it is their duty to civilize the uncivilized world. From the description of narrator, it seems that the narrator is the only one who is able to properly handle this event. It is clear that Burma needs to be managed by the colonists and even depend on the management of British Empire, which precisely conforms to Westerners’ expectation. It offers a reasonable interpretation to the Occidentals’ hegemonic control in the colony.

Besides, elephant as a common and typical animal in India, Myanmar and other eastern countries, its image is in line with the mysterious imagination of the Westerners about the east. The elephant stands for the Oriental world with long history and vast land (Li, 2016). The Western imperial colonists declare that since the east is backward, destitute and turbulent, the colonizers have to transform and rule the east. The Elephants go on a rampage, destroying towns and it should be shoot. The unsettled East also needs the help from the colonizers to become orderly. The colonizers attempt to enslave and swallow the East materially and spiritually. Worse still, they beautify this cruel occupation and exploitation to the maximum extent.

The narrator describes his inner struggle about shooting the elephant in detail, such as “A white man mustn’t be frightened in front of “natives” and “if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do” (Orwell, 1970). These examples are the depiction about narrator’s mental activities that as white sahib, he must avoid to be laughed at. The narrator tries to act resolutely with strong will, instead of being weak and cowardly. Since the narrator come to the colony as an officer to dominate the colonized, he has subconsciously considered himself superior to the Burmese and the native Burmese inferior to the white

colonizer. The narrator through the image of the Self to opposite the Burmese image, thereby putting the colonized Burmese in the other position. Accordingly, the colonized Burmese and western colonists are not in an equal relationship.

“Self” and “Other” is a pair of concepts to depicts the relationship between the colonist and the colonized in post-colonialism. These concepts are connected with the unequal relationship between them. Europeans think themselves superior to other nationalities. In their opinion, people in the colony have no power, self-identity and ability. The natives are born naturally as a slave in the westerners’ minds. Said considers this binary opposition is the root of the separation of the diffident culture. The orientalist think that the Occidentals stand for civilization, while the Orientals are savage. These uncivilized and barbarous Orientals need the management and dominance of the Occidentals, which offer reasonable interpretation to the Occidentals’ hegemonic control in the colony. In this short story the narrator subconsciously regards Moulmein as a backward place where he needs to manage and monitor the Burmese, dealing with those intractable problems.

3.3 *The Narrator’s Duplicity*

It can be seen that the narrator suffers from duplicity all the time on the basis of his statement. In this short story, the narrator reveals the imperial intention of Britain at the beginning and condemns its behavior. He admits the cruelty and evil of the imperialist colonial rule, and regards the colonists as despicable oppressors, which oppresses the narrator “with an intolerable sense of guilt” (Orwell, 1970). Consequently, he “was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British” (Orwell, 1970). He intends to resign from his position as sub-divisional police officer as soon as possible. However, the narrator does not take substantive action, and his idea of resignation did not put into practice. As a part of the whole huge colonial system, he still continues to act as the executor of the imperialist colonial rule. In the event of shooting the elephant, although he has no intention to kill the elephant, he still fires off it for avoiding being laughed at by the natives. Refusing to kill the elephant will be interpreted by the natives as “a sign of weakness” which will endanger the sahibs’ control over them (Quinn, 2009: 9). The narrator ultimately gives up his own individuality and freedom, against his will, choosing to save the face of the imperialist colonists and to maintain the imperialist rule. He is still the representative of the British Empire.

The narrator’s duplicity is again reflected in his resentment and sympathy. “With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts” (Orwell, 1970). On the one hand, he has sympathy for those “wretched prisoners” (Orwell, 1970). On the other hand, he extremely resents tyranny of the Empire, clearly seeing their dirty work. He sympathizes with the oppressed, the victim, and hates the oppressor, the superior, and the perpetrator; but how can a man hate and sympathize with the oppressed and the oppressor at the same time (Stansky & Abrahams, 1972: 201).

As he rejoices at the coolie’s death, another duplicity is exposed. He describes the death of the coolie as follows: “he was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side...” (Orwell, 1970). The narrator expresses his deep sympathy for the coolie with vivid description. Nevertheless, he is glad in the end that the coolie has been dead, for his death has proved sufficiently the danger of the elephant, which apparently gives him an excuse to escape from legal punishment. Furthermore, the reaction of Europeans to the death of coolie shows their superiority and racism. They feel sorry for the elephant, not the coolie, “because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie” (Orwell, 1970). The narrator’s duplicity is unwittingly exposed, which exactly gives us insights into his tendency of orientalism.

4. Discussion

Based on Edward Said’s Orientalism, the thesis mainly explores the narrator’s tendency of Orientalism in the light of the analysis of following three aspects: the narrator’s perception of the Burmese, narrator’s view of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as well as the narrator’s duplicity. It can be concluded that although he criticizes the evil and cruelty of British Empire and recognizes the evil nature of imperialism, as a representative of white colonizer Westerner, his ideology is inevitably influenced by imperialism and western cultural hegemony. He inevitably has the tendency of Orientalism. Orientalism has its deep root in the West.

The local Burmese is described as unreliable, rude, lazy, uncivilized and deceitful by the narrator on account of his tendency of Orientalism. The western culture hegemony is rooted in his mind which leads to the distortion and misunderstanding of the Burma and the Burmese. He refuses to know the real Orient for his inherent superiority of the westerners, just examining the natives with stereotypes and prejudice. Subconsciously, the narrator believes that the irrational and backward Burmese need to be managed and ruled by western colonists,

which provides a reasonable explanation for westerners' hegemonic control in the colonies. Even if he has realized the evil of imperialist colonial rule, in the event of shooting an elephant, he still makes up his mind to kill the elephant, helping to assert the dominance of British Empire.

Orientalism provides a perspective to eliminate people's misunderstanding and distortion of the East constructed by the West. We should pay attention to the cultural hegemony in Western works and objectively look at the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Only by eliminating the unequal relationship between the East and the West can we promote the common development of different cultures.

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