

RACISM & COLONIALISM IN GEORGE ORWELL'S BURMESE DAYS

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell, who was well known writer of the colonialism after publishing Burmese Days, Here in this play Orwell, tried to show effect of racism on societies. This research paper will focus on colonialism and racism in select play of Burmese Days. It will focus on how the British colonialism of Burma fostered racism, racial boundaries and ethnic divisions. It tries to show how racism was used as a tool by British colonialists to keep the colonizer's identity, sense of superiority over the colonized, maintain racial boundaries and instill feelings of inferiority in order to control the colonized natives. Through this play Orwell tried to show superiority of colonizers on colonized people.

Keywords: *Racism, Colonialism, Racial Boundaries, Exploitation, Hypocrisy and Postcolonial.*

Introduction Objectives

- To study racism through the select work of George Orwell
- To examine writing styles used by George Orwell

The change of the European societies from feudal to industrial is the driving force behind colonizing Asia, Middle East and Africa and the imperial policy of looking for raw materials, opportunities and new markets. In Orwell's Burmese Days, here examine the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and the disastrous impact of British colonialism on both of them. In George Orwell's Burmese Days, my argument is that British colonialists have brought fierce racism, arrogance and brutal force in order to keep the natives in Burma under control. Racism and Representation Racism is a term often used to "describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or 'people' toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes" (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 1).

Racism in George Orwell's Burmese Days in Burmese Days, George Orwell tackles the issue of the superiority of the White British colonizers over the non-white native colonized Burmese and Indians. The British colonizers are represented as extremely self-centered and racist in their attitudes towards the Burmese, while natives are negatively represented as servants, peasants or as Ellis calls them, 'swines' or as Elizabeth refers to them as 'beastly'. The population was about four thousand, including a couple of hundred Indians; a few score Chinese and seven Europeans. There were also two Eurasians named Francis and Samuel, the sons of an American Baptist missionary and a Roman Catholic missionary respectively. Orwell reflects on the life of the English in Kyauktada. Though they have jobs to perform, much of their time is wasted by entertaining themselves in the Club, escaping from the simmering heat, besides hunting or playing tennis. Their two main incessant complaints revolve around the heat and the possible acceptance of natives into their European Club which is only exclusive to them. In Burmese Days, we will find that the social class system is divided into upper class which constitutes the British colonialists, civil officials and merchants and lower class which consists of colonized natives who are poor, downtrodden and exploited.

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Flory's friendship with the native Dr. Veraswami and Verrall's failure to appear at the Club on the evening of his arrival in Kyauktada, are harshly criticized and seen as a violation of the social code of the European club. Those who are eligible to join are expected to abide by the social code of the Club and those who fail to join are considered outcasts. In any town in Burma, the European club is seen as the place where everyone wishes to be part of. However, the exclusive European Club has never admitted a native because the British members feel that they are superior to the natives who are represented as uncivilized, savages and untrustworthy.

Hence, we find Veraswami, a Burmese native; see the European Club as 'a fortress impregnable', which requires a real help from his British friend, Flory, to get him join the Club. For Dr. Veraswami and U Po Kyin, a membership of the Club may confer the status of the white man and promise "a sense of superiority, of a better, more 'elevated' life lived among 'higher' things". For them, it is a matter of prestige which makes them feared and respected by their own people. Joining the Club and mixing with British colonizers will give them power and authority which they can use against their own people in various ways. In other words, the prestige of the European Club is so enormous in Kyauktada that being a member, especially, for a non-white means a ticket to the top of the social class.

Prestige, Mr. Flory, is like a barometer. Every time you are seen to enter my house the mercury rises half a degree." The British colonization of Burma and their racist attitudes towards the natives arguably foster among them racial divisions, cheating, plotting and lying just to try and get past the racial barrier. The rules that allow racial segregation to continue have been contended by Macgregor, the Deputy Commissioner, and a secretary of the club. This change cannot be tolerated by the timber merchants, especially Ellis, who is outraged at the prospect of accepting natives. "I don't like niggers, to put it in one word."¹⁸ When they come to know that there is a proposal to elect one native, Veraswami, to join the Club, Ellis says, He's asking us to break all our rules and take a dear little nigger-boy into this Club. Dear Dr. Veraswami, for instance, Dr. Very-slimy, I call him. That would be a treat, wouldn't it? Christ, to think of it! We've got to hang together and put our foot down on this at once. What do you say, Westfield? Flory? Here, Ellis repeatedly refers degradingly to the natives as 'potbellied niggers', 'breathing garlic' and exhorts his colleagues to stand united against allowing any native to be among them.

For Ellis, it is outrageous to treat the natives who are represented as 'black swine', 'slaves' as equals rather than ruling them like masters in the only way they really understand. Hence, we find him scold and berate angrily Flory, Maxwell, and Westfield for their relationships with natives. "You all seem to like the dirty black brutes. Christ, I don't know what's come over us all. I really don't." Ellis goes on emphasizing the racist rules of the European Club which shouldn't be violated under any cost, Do what you like outside the Club. But, by God, it's a different matter when you talk of bringing niggers in here. Not only does a Black man feel that the white man is superior to him, but also the white man does not consider him as an equal who belongs to the same species of man. On the other side, Macgregor feels stiffened at the word 'nigger', which is disapproved in India. "Is it quite playing the game", he said stiffly, "to call these people niggers a term they very naturally resent when they are obviously nothing of the kind? In fact, he thinks of the natives as "the most charming people alive. It always pained him to see them want only insulted."

For Ellis, maintaining the prestige and superiority of the British Empire will save it from seditions and national movements calling for revolt, independence and freedom (For more information on the nationalist movements in Burma, see, Smith, 1991). This is a critical moment, and we want every bit of prestige we can get. Here, we find that members of the British colonial club are frustrated and aggressive during the interwar period feeling that they are on the verge of quitting India and Burma. However, when it comes to Flory, a timber merchant, we find him critical of the English rulerule of Burma that he is continually pressurized and suffocated by its racist that prevents colonizers from mixing with the natives. He is unable to bear hearing the constant racist conversation going on in the Club. Flory wonders what kind of civilization we have and boast of, a civilization which is based on drinking and degrading the natives humiliatingly. He criticizes the moral pretensions of the British in the colonies who seem to be solely interested in "boozing and womanizing, in stark contrast to their claims to are a highly civilized people setting an example to backward nations". Flory can be seen as Orwell's mouthpiece in his criticized British system presence and its tool of racism in Burma.

Flory elaborates on the lie the colonizers live in Burma: to educate, civilize, better the conditions of poor natives. But these are false excuses to rob, exploit the raw resources of the country, make money and send it back home to keep the British Empire going. Flory's critical comments of the British Empire shock Veraswami who suffers from inferiority complex and thinks of the English colonizers as superior people to him and his people. He is an example of educated native serving as a 'conduit' for the British.

Flory goes on to expose the hypocrisy of British colonization rendering a counter narrative to what is falsely claimed by Veraswami. The British colonizers have destroyed the Burmese national culture, industry and any attempt to make it on their own. We find Flory conclude his argument that, “only Eastern races that have developed at all quickly are the independent ones. I won’t instance Japan, but take the case of Siam.” For Flory, the colonizers build prisons and call it progress and the progress for them is equal to destroying forests, villages, and pagodas. In spite of Flory’s harsh criticism of English rule and its oppressive and racist tools, he is unable to confront his colleagues at the European Club concerning the question of admitting his friend, Veraswami into the Club. Ellis is not only ashamed of his violence, but also urges his friends to fight labeling the Burmese as “sneaking, mangy little rats and ‘the incestuous children of pigs.’”

Orwell depicts the pathetic quality of Ellis and every white man’s life in the East which is a constant struggle not to be sneered, jeered and laughed at. On another occasion, when Elizabeth and Flory visit the bazaar, we see her shocked to notice all performance. She feels insecure to be close among “that smelly native crowd” and she watches the dance with a mixture of amazement and horror. Its grotesque, it’s even ugly, with a sort of willful ugliness.

This is seen through referring to the Eastern people and their civilization which was and is still the same without change. This may conform to Edward Said’s view that the West considers the East and people living there as less than human, degenerate and unsophisticated people. Finally, after the death of Flory, we find Elizabeth eventually marry Macgregor, and live joyfully in his country, fulfilling her destiny of becoming a ‘burra memsahib’.

Conclusion

To conclude, in *Burmese Days*, George Orwell provides the basis for the the British rule. He exposes the deception of the British colonialists and the lie of the White Man’s burden and its moral hypocrisy. The effect of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized is exposed through Orwell’s characters Ellis, Westfield, Elizabeth, Veraswami and U Po Kyin. Orwell showed the role of the European Club in maintaining racial superiority of the colonizers. Finally, one concludes that Orwell offers hypocrisy, the real objective of which is despotism with theft as its final object.”

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