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Performing Empire: Spectacle and Psychological Coercion in Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"

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Abstract

This paper examines George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" by critically analysing colonial authority as performance rather than inherent power. Although the essay is often interpreted as an examination of imperial power structures, this study deviates from that view and presents the British Empire as weak and unstable, dependent on spectacle and psychological coercion. Using Michel Foucault's concept of power as performance and Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial psychology, the analysis shows how authority is shaped through public scrutiny, societal expectations, and the fear of ridicule. The presence of the Burmese crowd forces the narrator to act against his own will, resulting in a loss of personal agency. The narrator's conscience is internally fragmented—on one hand, he does not want to shoot the elephant; on the other, his fear of being laughed at by the Burmese crowd compels him to do so. The slow and painful death of the elephant symbolizes the moral decay, inefficiency, and gradual decline of the British Empire. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that imperial power is dependent, unstable, and sustained through the continuous performance of dominance before the collective gaze of the crowd.

Keywords: Colonial Authority, Spectacle, Psychological Coercion, Imperial Power.

1. Introduction

"Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell, often regarded as an autobiographical essay, is a description of the narrator's experience as a sub-divisional police officer in colonial Burma, with the narrator often identified with Orwell himself. Burma, or the present-day Myanmar, was under the British rule from 1824 to 1948, until its separation from India in 1937, and its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. Eric Arthur Blair, commonly known by his pen name George Orwell, had been stationed as a colonial officer in Moulmein, Burma, from 1922 to 1927 against his will. Orwell was born in modern Bihar in India, moved to England for his schooling, and later returned to India as a British officer. Thus, his relationship with India and imperialism is complex and marked by contradiction. His return to India was a time when the British Empire was on the brink of losing its

authority against the natives' defiance of power. The subjects were gradually raising their voices against colonial authority, not outwardly but through small acts of resistance. However, being inside the system, Orwell was not aware of this political decay of the British dominion.

The empire was advocating power through violence and the cruel treatment of prisoners. He was against this unfair and inhumane conduct of the authority. It affected Orwell deeply, as he was against the subjugation of people - physically, emotionally, and politically. In contrast, his role as a colonial officer created an aura that was contrary to his beliefs. To the locals, he was the object of authority and needed to be teased and mocked to show their non-compliance with power.

The essay highlights Orwell's moral conflict of being caught between his hatred of the empire's tyranny and the Burmese's hostility which made his job as a colonial officer hard and burdensome. In this context, the paper explores the empire's construction of power as represented through Orwell's persona. The paper examines Michel Foucault's (1995) concept of "spectacle" and Frantz Fanon's (1967) concept of "colonial psychology" to study the performance of authority maintained by communal pressure, fear of social humiliation, and situational necessity (Foucault, 1995; Fanon, 1967).

The essay in general is considered to be politically incorrect. According to Avishek Parui (2020), certain sections of the essay are considered to be racist in the present era. The essay, being from a white man's point of view, presents its subject in derogatory terms, which is considered inappropriate. It shows what was politically correct in the past will not stay the same in the present or in the future. For example, terms like "sneering yellow faces", "evil-spirited little beasts", "devilish roar of glee" (Orwell, 1936), used to describe the Asians and their attitude, show Orwell's sense of racial and cultural superiority. Though he claims to be against imperialism, his choice of words to describe Indians say otherwise. It should also be noted that this is a reflective essay, where the older Orwell is recollecting an incident in the past and is reflecting on his younger conflicted self. This raises more ambivalence in the narrator's thoughts and actions – is the narrator really relieved from the past conflict of mind or do the words reflect his continuing sense of superiority despite not being an imperial officer anymore.

This racial dimension complicates the narrator's position further, as it reveals that his critique of imperialism is not free from the very structures of superiority it seeks to question. The narrator's language reflects an internal conflict where resistance to imperial power coexists with traces of ingrained racial hierarchy.

Most readings of "Shooting an Elephant" illustrate the colonial domination and the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. For example, Edward Said (1994) places the essay within the broader framework of colonial discourse, where such narratives help maintain colonial domination (Said, 1994). They become narratives of the ruler that voice out colonial workings and help sustain imperial hegemony. Raymond Williams (1971) suggests that Orwell registers the political unrest of the period and exposes the empire's crisis of principle (Williams, 1971).

Some readings portray the individual's dilemma of being caught between what was right and what had to be done reflected by Orwell's inner struggle. However, these readings expose a psychological study rather than bringing forth the product of imperial conflict.

Other interpretations include the hierarchy of influence surrounding the oppressor and the oppressed. Such readings indict the asymmetry of power by showing power as something to be commanded and not performed or preserved.

This paper diverges from the previous studies by looking at the colonial power as something that is performed and is conditioned by spectacle and psychological pressure. This suggests that the imperial power is inherently fragile and dependent, and survives through collective expectation of spectators. This approach shifts the focus from imperial power as domination to imperial power as performance.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual analysis, focusing on close reading of select passages from "Shooting an Elephant." It incorporates Michel Foucault's idea of power as spectacle and Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial psychology to explore how authority is formed and sustained.

Foucault suggests that power is not something one simply possesses; rather, it has to be constantly enacted and made visible. This becomes especially relevant in Orwell's essay, where the presence of the crowd plays a crucial role, turning authority into something that must be performed before an audience.

Fanon's work, on the other hand, helps in understanding the psychological tension experienced by both the colonizer and the colonized. It shows how individuals begin to internalize roles imposed by the colonial system, often leading to conflict and a loss of personal agency.

When considered together, these perspectives make it possible to read power not just as a political structure, but as something lived and experienced. In this sense, authority appears less stable and more dependent—shaped by both external expectations and internal pressures.

In doing so, the study moves from theoretical concepts to textual interpretation by closely examining key moments in the essay—particularly the crowd's presence, the narrator's hesitation, and the act of shooting—to show how abstract ideas of spectacle and colonial psychology operate within the narrative. This approach allows the analysis to remain grounded in the text while engaging with broader theoretical concerns.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The crowd and the fragility of authority

From the very beginning, Orwell's narrator makes it clear that the Burmese people hated him for being a European. He had never felt he held any important position in his life or his life had any impact on other people until then, as he understood he was finally important enough for people to hate him. This sense of significance, however, emerged in a negative form, because of the position he held in the society as an Imperial officer. Although this power was supposed to give him immunity from any form of native resistance, the natives had their own way of killing his spirit like tripping him on a football field or hooting insults when they were at a safe distance.

The incident that manifested the real impact of imperialism was tiny but changed his entire perspective of the actual working relationship between the ruler and the ruled. When he was informed that a tame elephant had gone "musth" (Orwell, 1936), he was unsure what he could do, but he set out to examine the situation. He describes Indians in dismissive terms, suggesting that they are poorly informed - he mentions that it was usual for Indians to not have a sense of direction. He tries to display his superiority, although the situation might be reversed moving forward.

He presents the Burmese people as helpless in the situation as they do not have any means to defend themselves in the current situation. The confusion raised by the natives made him give up on the situation considering the tale to be a cooked-up story. Circumstances changed when he finally witnessed a mangled dead body of a coolie trampled by the elephant.

The narrator sends for an elephant rifle, for it to be used just in case of an emergency. He had no intention of shooting the elephant even before seeing it. Once he saw that the elephant looked harmless and the 'must' was wearing off he had completely given up on the idea of using the rifle, even to just frighten the animal. Nonetheless, the situation demanded something else.

A huge crowd had blindly followed the imperial officer with a rifle, in hopes of witnessing an entertaining show. It would have been the same with the English crowd too. But with them, Orwell would not have had to display his authority against his will. Even before reaching the spot where the elephant was grazing the paddy field, he was anxious about the growing crowd. The increasing mass made him nervous and embarrassed about carrying a rifle which he had not intended to use till then. His original objective was only to look out for the elephant without letting it cause any further damage, until the mahout returned.

Situation changed as the crowd kept growing, blocking the roads. Even though personally they did not like him, his authoritative performance of killing an elephant excited the crowd. In their eyes, he became a performer: "They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick" (Orwell, 1936). The expectant gaze of thousands made it apparent to him that he had to kill the elephant – not because he wanted to but because he was expected to: "I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly" (Orwell, 1936). Every aspect of his was closely watched by the people. This creates a strong psychological pressure, gradually shaping the narrator's decisions from individual judgment into a response conditioned by collective expectation. At that moment, his authority did not merely depend on him, but on his acceptance of the onlookers' expectations. He is no longer fully in control as an agent of authority. Instead, the expectations of the crowd begin to shape his actions, as though he is a puppet influenced by their watchful gaze. In this reversal, the colonizer appears to possess authority, yet is ultimately directed by the expectations of the colonized. This suggests that authority in the colonial context does not flow in a single direction but is shaped through a complex interaction between the observer and the observed.

As Michel Foucault argues, power needs to be visible for people to believe and follow it (Foucault, 1995). According to Foucault, power is not something rulers inherently possess; it must be repeatedly performed before an audience in order to be sustained. When there is a lack of performance of power, the authority weakens and the empire crumbles (Foucault, 1995). In Orwell's essay, the narrator has to shoot the elephant and display his authority as the crowd has gathered to witness his performance. If he leaves home without using his rifle, the crowd would ridicule him and the British Empire which he represents. To establish the colonial dominance, he has to move ahead with the shooting of the elephant even if it is not required at the moment. So, his authority comes less from real control and more from how convincingly he performs power before an observing audience. Power, in this context, is sustained through the presence and belief of an audience, without which it loses its legitimacy. If there is no audience to witness the performance, there is no power to display. The empire is built upon the colonized people's belief in it. If the performance fails, the system as a whole collapses.

3.2 Fear, Masculinity, and "Not looking a fool"

The entire colonial system and the colonizers are bound by masculinity and image. The imperial façade does not depend only on the power exerted on the natives. Rather, the colonizers' constant urge to appear strong, confident, independent, courageous, and emotionally stable is drawn from the image that was created in the minds of the natives. If he fails to appear so, and, on the contrary, appears weak and vulnerable, the dominion would not stand anymore. These attributes are associated with masculinity. Thus, authority is displayed through performative manliness.

In the essay, the narrator does not really feel brave and confident. The moment he feels the crowd following him, he becomes anxious. The growing crowd makes him realize he has to display strength and confidence; he cannot appear weak in front of the natives. Not just his, but the image of the entire empire depends on the physical qualities that he puts forward: "A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things" (Orwell, 1936).

If he fails to perform these masculine attributes, his fear would come alive – the natives will not hesitate to laugh at and ridicule the narrator and the empire he represents. That will lead to the downfall

of the dominant image created in the minds of the natives. It is not just the fear of the narrator, but the fear of the colonizers in general: "And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at" (Orwell, 1936). The moment he hesitates, is the moment he would look like a fool – a fool who had carried a rifle, but walks away without displaying his masculinity. His hesitations would be equated to weakness, something which he cannot afford to have as an imperial officer, a ruler.

The important aspect to be noted here is that the narrator is not inherently masculine in the patriarchal sense. He is afraid and hesitant, yet he has to perform masculinity to keep up the empire's image. He does not experience genuine authority, yet he is compelled to project an image of confidence and decisiveness that aligns with imperial expectations. In the end, his fear of public humiliation outweighs his moral hesitation. What matters more to him is maintaining his image rather than acting on what he believes is right. Authority here is not exercised through strength, but through the constant avoidance of perceived weakness. What emerges here is a form of authority built less on actual power and more on the fear of losing face, making it inherently unstable and dependent on public perception. There is a transition from fear of being attacked by a huge animal to the fear of being humiliated by the huge crowd which shows that bodily harm causes less fear compared to the weight of the collective gaze. He keeps on repeating that he would shoot the elephant only if it tried to attack him or the people nearby. At the same time, he is sure that he has to shoot the animal as he must not look like a frightened fool in front of the natives:

> The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do (Orwell, 1936).

What becomes clear here is that the colonial structure is sustained by maintaining its image of superiority to the natives. Masculinity operates as a performative tool through which colonial authority sustains its image of dominance and control. The colonial representative is cornered by the subjects and has to give in to their expectations in order to uphold his authority. This performance is not only directed at the colonized but also reinforces a shared identity among the colonizers themselves, where maintaining authority becomes essential to sustaining their collective image of dominance.

3.3 Split Self: Conscience vs Empire

The narrator, as an individual, does not have the freedom to do what he wishes for. Internally, his will is divided into two: first, he does not want to harm the elephant because he realizes that the animal no longer poses a threat: "I did not want to shoot the elephant" (Orwell, 1936), second, his possession of a rifle creates a public expectation of violence that he feels compelled to fulfil: "I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle" (Orwell, 1936). This internal conflict gradually leads to a loss of agency, as personal conscience is overridden by the demands of imperial performance. His personal desire is overcome by the public pressure imposed upon him. As an imperial agent, it is his duty to uphold the qualities that favour the empire. Failing to do so would result in the failure of the empire for which he would be held responsible as a representative officer. Thus, the individual identity is overcome by the imperial identity. This moment highlights how imperial systems do not merely control actions but reshape individual consciousness, forcing subjects to act against their own ethical instincts.

At this moment, the narrator realises that imperialism costs not just the freedom of the natives but also the individuality and agency of the imperial officers: "When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys" (Orwell, 1936). Sacrificing his own will, the narrator shoots the elephant. It is evident that he holds a powerful position in society as a colonial officer, but he does not hold the real power. His apparent authority is paradoxically dependent on the expectations of the

Burmese crowd, whose gaze ultimately dictates his actions. In this moment, the narrator's individual identity is subsumed by the imposed role of the colonial officer. His identity is no longer entirely his own; instead, it is shaped by the demands of imperial authority.

This can be understood in terms of what is often called colonial psychology, where both sides—the colonizer and the colonized—gradually begin to take on roles imposed by the system. As Frantz Fanon (1967) discusses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, these roles are not natural but are formed within the conditions of colonial rule (Fanon, 1967). In a similar way, Albert Memmi (1991), in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, shows how imperialism affects both groups, though not in the same way (Memmi, 1991). The colonizer, for instance, feels the need to constantly assert authority and maintain an image of superiority, even when it goes against personal inclination, while the colonized are slowly pushed into accepting a subordinate position. Qualities like fear, resentment, and hatred can be found on both sides. These roles are not inherent but are constructed and reinforced by the colonial framework (Memmi, 1991).

The narrator of "Shooting an Elephant" reflects this psychological coercion that made him overcome his individual will to fulfil the spectators' expectations. He admits that he hates imperialism that treats the prisoners in a brutal manner and wants to get out of it if possible. But he also admits that he hates the Burmese people who taunt him and make his life difficult under various circumstances. This psychological conflict is created by the imperial framework. Similarly, he does not want to shoot the elephant yet shoots it to display his authority and the crowd demands it. Here, he gets rid of his individual will to fulfil his role as a colonial officer.

Hence, the colonial system controls both the colonizer and the colonized not just through economic and political power but also through internal psychological compulsion.

3.4 The Elephant's Death and the Slow Violence of Empire

The final section of the essay "Shooting an Elephant" explains the consequences of the narrator's action. The narrator finally shoots the elephant. After the third shot, the elephant collapses to the ground, but does not die. It suffers through deep laboured breathing. Despite multiple shots, the elephant does not show any movements but is still alive. This moment exposes the limits of imperial authority, revealing the narrator's inability to enact the decisive control expected of him. He is expected to be decisive and to know how to kill the elephant instantly; such decisiveness would have confirmed his power and authority. But his inability to kill the elephant quickly points to his inadequacy. The act does not happen in a clean or decisive way; instead, it drags on, becoming slow and disorderly. In doing so, it begins to weaken the image of controlled and efficient authority that he is expected to maintain. What seems like an act of power gradually turns into something uncertain and ineffective. The longer it takes, the more it exposes the gap between the appearance of control and the reality behind it.

As the narrator himself suggests, there was no real need to kill the elephant at that point, since it had already calmed down. Yet the violence continues, resulting in a slow and painful death. This prolonged suffering reflects the nature of imperial violence itself—excessive, drawn out, and often morally unsettling— "the wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been Bogged with bamboos…" (Orwell, 1936). It is gruesome and unnecessary as there are other ways through which the empire asserts its superiority.

By the end, the narrator does not even stay back to complete what he had started. He could not successfully kill the elephant even after shooting it multiple times. Unable to complete his task, he leaves. He could not bear to see the great animal lying lifeless yet sentient on the ground. It is apparent that he does not retain control over the consequences of his actions.

Finally, the elephant may be read as a symbol of the empire that gave rise to the whole scenario. Like the elephant, the empire was once strong and majestic. It had destroyed the lives of several people and cost the livelihood of many citizens. However, towards the end, it was gradually losing its power and its decline was not something glorious but rather slow and unstable. The elephant's slow death can be read as a sign of imperial decline—gradual, unstable, and far from dignified. At the same time, this "slow violence" extends beyond the elephant itself, reflecting the prolonged psychological and physical suffering imposed on the Burmese people, who remain largely silent yet deeply affected within the narrative.

In the end, the scene no longer presents violence as a display of authority, but rather as something that exposes its failure.

4. Conclusion

"Shooting an Elephant" is not simply about the violence of the colonizer over the colonized; it moves beyond that. What the essay gradually reveals is that colonial authority is neither inherent nor stable, but something fragile, sustained through continuous performance. That performance, however, depends on the presence of the colonized as spectators—without them, the entire structure begins to lose its force.

In this situation, the narrator is no longer able to act according to his own will. Instead, he is compelled to meet the expectations of the crowd, even when it goes against his judgment, because failing to do so would expose him to ridicule.

What becomes clear, then, is that colonial power operates less through direct force and more through the need to maintain its image before others. This reliance on perception reveals how unstable the system really is, as its authority depends on being constantly seen and believed.

In this sense, Orwell's essay not only critiques imperialism but also points toward later theoretical discussions on power and performance. It suggests that systems of domination are sustained not just through force, but through the ongoing negotiation of perception and belief. The instability within this process ultimately hints that imperial authority carries within it the possibility of its own collapse. Thus, the essay ultimately reveals imperial authority not as a structure of control, but as a fragile performance sustained by perception.

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