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Representation of the other in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*

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Abstract

In *Burmese Days*, George Orwell presents the relationships between the English people and the Indian people in the days of the British colonialism in Burma. As time goes by, the interactions between the English and the Indians result in the othering process as differences rather than the similarities are emphasized by the English. Thus, the Indians are perceived as the other, as the non-white, non-Christian by the English. In this article the perceptions of the other will be studied with regard to George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. Moreover, the Eurocentric perceptions of the East and India will be dealt with closely.

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Introduction

The British presence in India began with the establishment of a few trading centers at Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta (Mahmud, 1988: 183) in the sixteen century (Edwardes, 1994: 15). As time went by India became "the jewel of the British Empire". Thus, India began to attract the attention of the adventurers, especially of the second sons of the wealthy families because of the British inheritance regulations, which dictate that the second sons do not inherit as much as the first sons. Therefore, the second sons end up in becoming either Army officers or officials in the colonies such as in India, Trinidad or Ceylon.

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George Orwell was one of these officers in India and began his career as a member of the Burmese Imperial Police in 1922 and had the chance to learn India's culture. After returning to England in 1927, he began to write his first novel, *Burmese Days* (which was published in 1934) ("George Orwell").

The novel presents a realistic picture of the British colonialism in Burma. At the beginning of the British Raj in India, most of the Indians were content with the English people and the English existence in India. Until the Mutiny of 1857, the English and the Indians were on good terms. However, in 1857, the use of cow and pig fat in rifle cartridges was one of the main causes of the Mutiny and it created such fears among the Indians that Indian religion and culture would be erased by the English culture (Edwardes, 1994: 150). Therefore, some of the Indians rebelled against the British Raj.

Though the Mutiny of 1857 was suppressed and British authority was regained in India, its impact on Anglo-Indian relations continued. From then on, there was mistrust on both sides. Within the context of imperial policies, the British Empire decides to adopt a more strict paternal colonizer's attitude. Similarly, when Orwell began his service in the Imperial Police in 1922, the relations between the British and the Indians were not very well.

At the time, the British claimed that their presence in India was beneficial for the development of the Indian people, who are very backward and who are in need of the British guidance. Thus, they regarded the Indians as the child-like people, who should be taken care of and governed by a superior race, that is by the British people. The superiority complex of the British resulted in the othering process, racism and in the exclusion of the Indians from the white circles (such as the whites-only club in *Burmese Days*). The aim of this article is to analyze the representations of the other in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*.

Throughout the novel, the "us and them" attitude is prevalent and the Indians, being non-white and non-Christian, are perceived as the other. There are clear-cut distinctions and borders between the English and the Indians in *Burmese Days*. At one scene in the novel, Flory, who is the main character in *Burmese Days*, suggests that indigenous people should also be welcomed at the English club. Ellis, another Englishman in the novel, applies the othering process towards the indigenous people and illustrates the typical attitude of the Englishmen, or on a larger scale the Eurocentric attitude towards the indigenous people by expressing the following words to Flory: "You oily swine! You Nigger's Nancy Boy! You crawling, sneaking, bloody bastard! ... Look at him, look at him! Letting us all down for the sake of a pot-bellied nigger! After all we've said to him! When we've only got to hang together and we can keep the stink of garlic out of this club forever. My God, wouldn't it make you spew your guts up...?" (Orwell, 1984: 235). Through his utterance of the words above, Ellis expresses the prevalent racist British belief that the white-men are superior to the indigenous people and that the Indians should not be welcomed at the English club in India. They further should be excluded from the white circles. Thus, they should know their places and boundaries and remain as "the other".

As an extension of the fear and hatred against the other, there is a tendency among the English to associate the Indians with bad and evil things. As a consequence of these racial tendencies and prejudices, the Indians become the scapegoats at the hands of the English people. For instance, in one scene in *Burmese Days* a British officer is killed and immediately an Indian is accused of, despite not having enough evidence, murder. General McGregor, the British officer, says to his fellow British officers that "[t]hese may not be the natives who murdered the man, but they'll do... We need a nigger, any nigger, and these are just as good as any. They will most definitely be found guilty and executed for the crime" (Orwell, 1984: 242). This passage is very remarkable to show the extent of the othering process and racism and these events remind us *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in which a black man is accused raping of a white girl, though he is innocent. These events pave the way for revolts and protests. Having been exposed to injustice for too long and for many times, the Indians begin to protest that they are not represented fairly "in the British courts" and therefore, the Indians try to solve their problems in their own ways. They begin riots to get what they deserve or achieve justice. For example, Ellis, an Englishman, causes an Indian boy to become blind. Upon this event, some Indians come together in order to punish Ellis themselves and to protest the injustice done to the Indians at the courts. They go to Ellis's house and seeing Flory with him there, they say, "Mr. Flory! Ah, Mr. Flory... Please, return yourself to the building... We have no problem with you. You are a good man and we do not wish to harm you. However, we do require that you deliver Ellit to us. He has struck one of the boys in the face and blinded him. You had better be quick, min gyi (sir). We know that there is no justice for us here in the courts, so we must punish Ellit ourselves" (Orwell, 1984: 247). Ironically, in their own homeland, Indians are judged with the English laws and consequently, the Indians are deprived of their human rights and justice.

Before the events narrated above, for a period of time, the Indians were unable to see the evil and corruption beyond the white mask. There were some Indians, who perceived the British as friends and tended to take side with the British. The best expression to explain this situation/or the colonization of India with the consent of some Indians by the English may be “it takes two to tango”. These issues are also illustrated in detail in Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Throughout the novel, many of the Indians try to impress the British by adopting British manners and eventually become themselves mimic men.

This situation may stem from the fact that Indians are exposed to British culture and education for so long that they internalize the British values without questioning. Moreover, as it is also pointed out by Memmi and Fanon in their books, Indians have been brainwashed and “made to believe that a person of white skin is superior to one of dark skin”. Therefore, Indians have a tendency to believe that the British are the best in their all deeds and beliefs.

With this respect, in *Burmese Days*, the discussion between Dr. Veraswami, an Indian doctor, and Flory, an Englishman, is remarkable. Dr. Veraswami takes a pro-British stance and expresses that “My friend, it is pathetic to me to hear you talk so. It is truly pathetic... You are forgetting the Oriental character. How is it possible to have developed us, with our apathy and superstition? At least you have brought to us law and order... Consider that there are also other achievements of your countrymen. They constructed roads, they irrigate deserts, they conquer famines, they build schools, they set up hospitals, they combat plague, cholera, leprosy, smallpox, venereal disease... Your people are truly the better... Behold the degeneracy of the East without the Europeans!” (Orwell, 1984: 42). Dr. Veraswami is such an admirer of the British that he feels gratitude to the British colonizers. He does not see the evil behind the white mask, whereas Flory, despite being an English, explains that the English are in India for the sake of Money and wealth, to exploit the land/India, not for the sake of humanitarian values.

Under the light of all the examples given so far, it can be suggested that Orwell in *Burmese Days* reflects the events in Burma towards the end of British Imperialism realistically and the power-struggle between the English people and the Burmese people is conveyed to the reader through the metaphor of the English club in Burma. Orwell defines the English club as “the seat of English power” (Bose, 1990: 61). Furthermore, in the novel, the willingness of Dr. Veraswami’s to be a member of this club and his refusal by the British officers in Burma illustrates that they could not have a compromise due to “the othering process”. The white men do not want to see the black man, Veraswami in the club, though he is well-educated and a doctor. Furthermore, Ellis looks down upon the Indian universities and does not see Veraswami as a real doctor since he “has done two years at an Indian so-called university”(Orwell, 1984: 24). The colour of his skin is seen as a barrier for the membership to the club. Though, he is an admirer of the British culture and though he imitates the Englishman, he is excluded from the white-men’s circle. He neither belongs to the English, nor to the Burmese culture and he starts living in a social-limbo and he feels displaced in his own country. He does not question the British existence in Burma, on the contrary, he supports it and he believes in the superiority of the Englishmen blindly. Orwell’s description of him is like a caricature and this may be taken as a critique of the indigenous people, who accept colonialism and who try to rise in the social-strata by co-operating with the British.

It is an undeniable fact that English men are there to exploit the land of the indigenous people and their sources. Thus, in the novel, Orwell draws a parallel between the usurpation of the Burmese land and the Burmese women. Even Flory, the most tolerant and friendly character towards the Burmese people, does not hesitate to abuse Burmese women sexually. He has a mistress called “Ma Hla May” and he treats her very harshly. He has sexual intercourse with her, and gives her money and then wants her to go out. It is like a take-and-give relationship, there is no feeling and emotion in their relationship. Just as they do to Burma, the white man/Flory uses her for the satisfaction of his desires and needs. And perceiving her “as something disposable”, he leaves her eventually. In other words, she has no identity and no value in the eye of the Britishmen. From time to time, he does not avoid to use violence against her, he pushes her and hurts her (Orwell, 1984: 52-53). Flory/The British Empire gets rid of Ma Hla May/India, when she becomes a financial burden.

On the other hand, Ma Hla May is not very innocent and tries to get advantage of this relationship. She tries to get as much money as possible from this relationship, just like Dr. Veraswami thinks that India takes the advantage of Britain through the building of railways. Moreover, seeing herself as a white-man’s wife, she feels proud. Her attitude may be parallel to the attitude of U Po Kyin, who tries to benefit from the colonial system in the novel. Orwell points out that, “to fight on the side of the British, to become a parasite upon them, had been his [U Po

Kyin's] ruling ambition, even as a child" (Orwell, 1984: 6). Though Ma Hla May and U Po Kyin try to exploit the colonizer, actually they are the exploited ones. They only deceive themselves by thinking that they could abuse the colonizer in return.

Parallel to the exploitation of India by the White-men, throughout the novel, women are exploited by the men and seen as "inferior", regardless of their colour and their social statue, "[a] woman ranks at about the same level as a rat or a frog" (Orwell, 1984: 7). For instance, a white woman called Elizabeth is exploited sexually by white men, first by her boss in France, later by her own uncle, Mr. Lackersteen in Burma. Therefore, in a patriarchal society it is made clear that a woman has no other choice except marrying to a rich man. Only, Flory puts her "on a pedestal" and seems to appreciate her, but he cannot understand her and wants her to think in the same way as he does. He wants to colonize her by persuading her, not by force. He tries to conquer not only the white female body, but also her mind through persuasion. As an extension of this attitude, white "women cannot vote in the club" (Orwell, 1984: 219) in *Burmese Days*. In the novel, it is stated that Elizabeth's mother is an artist and is a supporter of Women's Suffrage Movement as the so called "civilized" white men oppress the white women. At this point, women suffragists may be likened to the Burmese nationalists, who try to gain their independence from the Oppressors. That is, women/Burmese nationalists are against the men/the British Empire. Relying on the dominance of WASP(M) people - which means White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (and in parantheses a hidden Male) - and the oppression of the indigenous people, it can be suggested that the oppressed/the other - non-White, non-Christian, non-Male that is Female - begins to look for justice in the novel.

On the other hand, paradoxically white women try to oppress black women. For example, Elizabeth finds "black women and her kinship with them" disgusting and sees them as "creatures with black faces" (Orwell, 1984: 113). This illustrates that there is not "sisterhood among the white and black women" and their colour is more important than their sex as a common denominator. Burmese women are put into some clichés by the English women and are likened to "boys" (Orwell, 1984: 84) with no curves in their bodies and described as "coarse-looking" (Orwell, 1984: 113) and as "small-footed" (Orwell, 1984: 123) and with "vegetable baskets on their heads" (Orwell, 1984: 119-120). Moreover, Burmese women have a tendency to imitate the white women and sometimes U Po Kyin's wife dreams herself in "high-heeled shoes and in silk stockings" (Orwell, 1984: 136) and this Anglicised image makes her very happy in the novel. In other words, they become mimic-women. Furthermore, Flory cannot remember Burmese women's faces (Orwell, 1984: 186) and their not having any faces reveals that in the eyes of Flory, they do not have an identity. Likewise, Verrall, a policeman, perceives (both black and white) women as "distractors and they take men away from polo and so on" (Orwell, 1984: 193). In addition to them, Mr. Lackersteen abuses both white and black women (Orwell, 1984: 201). In the novel, Elizabeth's shooting birds and tigers may be taken as a reaction to these abuses of the women by the men. As she cannot control men, unconsciously she tries to control animals. That is, since she cannot take her revenge from the white-men, she becomes cruel towards the animals. The oppressed/Elizabeth becomes the oppressor for the animals and for the black servants. In the novel, it is emphasized that Burmese servants prefer man-sahib, no a woman sahib, since the English women are more cruel towards them. Therefore, servants also make "the othering process" and say "they [English women] are not even human, they are a different race" (Orwell, 1984: 112). And a white woman becomes superior to a man, only if the man is black. As it is mentioned before, the main determinant of one's social position is one's skin-colour rather than one's sex. Then, if you are a colonized black woman, your burden is tribled.

Thus, the situation of the black women is worse than the situation of the white women. This becomes very striking in the scene when "Ma Hla May kisses Flory's shoes" (Orwell, 1984: 147). Flory is the Man/Master/Colonizer and Ma Hla May is the Woman/Servant/Colonized and therefore she is suppressed three-times.

One may justify Ma Hla May's situation, but in fact when a Burmese woman gets married her situation does not change much. For instance, Ma Kin, U po Kyin's wife always "stands behind her husband and serves him" (Orwell, 1984: 13). Similarly, Doctor's wife hides herself whenever Flory comes to their house like it is done in the *haremlik-selamlık* tradition in the Ottoman Empire and this shows that women are isolated and they do not take active parts in social life.

Yet, in *Burmese Days*, women are not the only ones, who are perceived as the inferior and "the other", the indigenous people of Burma whether they are men or women face the same problems. In the novel, the Englishman's negative stereotyping of the Burmese may attract a keen-eyed reader's attention. First of all, Burmese

people are “lazy, dirty and smell garlic”. They are not considered as human-beings, for example Mrs. Lackersteen says, our servant “loved us like a dog” (Orwell, 1984: 28). They can love like an animal, not like a human being. An extension of this belief is that they do not have intellectual capacity and they “understand only violence” (Orwell, 1984: 107) like animals. And the British officers in Burma believe that only through the use of violence, one can make them work, not through persuasion.

Orwell himself unconsciously believes that all Burmese magistrates are dishonest and cunning and this belief comes to the surface, when he uses the following words for U Po Kyin, “he is a fair sample of a Burmese magistrate” (Orwell, 1984: 43). At the beginning of the novel, we are informed that he takes “bribes” (Orwell, 1984: 6) and abuses his power at work. Parallel to this, Eurasian overseers are seen as “inefficient in work” and therefore, it is stated that in Flory’s absence, “everything went to pieces at the factory” (Orwell, 1984: 110). In addition to these, the early comers to Burma advise to the new comers not to trust to the indigenous people. The warning “[d]o not trust to Indians” (Orwell, 1984: 179) is repeated many times by the English in the novel.

Apart from these, the indigenous people are “supposed to be poor” and if someone has more wealth than the British expect him/her to have, then s/he is accused of being a thief in the novel. “How can a black have an Emerald Ring?” (Orwell, 1984: 71) says a British man and then accuses a Burmese man of being a thief.

In addition to these, the Burmese people are depicted as “superstitious” and irrational. In the novel, it is stated that the Burmese do not grease the axles of the bullock-carts because they believe that “the screaming keeps away evil spirits” (Orwell, 1984: 56). Furthermore, they are assumed to “drink urine and menstrual blood” (Orwell, 1984: 138) to cope with illnesses. And when an earthquake happens, the Burmese believe that Nga Yin, a giant is shaking himself (Orwell, 1984: 171-2).

What is remarkable is that throughout the novel, the Englishmen insult black people and especially Ellis calls them as “the incestuous children of pigs” (Orwell, 1984: 230). They are also defined as “a row of yellow, malicious faces” (Orwell, 1984: 229). Paradoxically, Burmese people themselves begin to believe in these images that even they themselves begin to perceive themselves through the negative images made by the white men. Doctor believes that “one European can do an Oriental more good than that of a thousand of his fellow countrymen” and as if to prove this belief, Orwell makes him enter to the club with the help of Flory. In other words, in *Burmese Days*, Burmese people are depicted in such a way that “they cannot do anything without the help of the Englishmen”. And as they do not have any value as human beings, “every year, eight hundred Burmese are murdered and they are seen as nothing, but when a white man dies, it is taken as a massacre” (Orwell, 1984: 215). Thus, the Burmese do not deserve to sit in the same rows with the English people as they are inferior and as they are something to be avoided and consequently, Oriental Christians sit at the back rows in Church. Furthermore, it is pointed out in *Burmese Days* that Mandalay is famous for five main products all beginning with P. These five Ps are; Pagodas, Pariahs, Pigs, Priests and Prostitutes. It is clear that Pigs, Pariahs and Prostitutes are used to add to the negative stereotyping of Burma and Burmese people.

In the novel, the Englishman’s positive representation of the Burmese people can also be found, though it is very rare. To exemplify, at one point in the novel, they are shown as “more humanistic than the English people” and this is expressed by Flory in the following words: “They [do not] let anyone to starve” (Orwell, 1984: 116). Apart from the negative and positive images of the Burmese people, there are some depictions of them which are neither positive nor negative. For example, like Edward Said does in *Orientalism*, Orwell in *Burmese Days* emphasizes the exotic nature of the colonies and the East. He depicts Burmese dancers and through Flory’s expressions tries to persuade both Elizabeth and the reader that they are unique: “[T]his was the Orient, scents of coco-nut oil and sandalwood, cinnamon and turmeric, floated across the water on the hot, swimming air” (Orwell, 1984: 92).

Furthermore, Orwell deconstructs the image of the black man as something horrible and something to fear by depicting a black baby who begins “making water on the floor” (Orwell, 1984: 125), when he sees white-faces around him. It can be argued that in this instance, Orwell shows that “man is man” and suggests that as white man has doubts and fears about the black man, it is the same for the black man. As this baby has not been exposed to the British way of thinking and education, his reaction is very natural. Thus, Orwell juxtaposes the baby’s natural behaviour and the Burmese adults’ learned/or rather imposed and artificial behaviour (which results in the Deification of the English people) towards the British people. The Burmese men’s idealization of the British people or the deification of the British people by the Burmese people attracts our attention and it is an imposed and learned

behaviour. For example, Flory's servant calls him as "the Holy One", yet he cannot see the fact that Flory came to Burma as he was one of the typical hopeless Englishman who "cannot find a job in England" (Orwell, 1984: 62) and tried his chance in a colony as Albert Memmi expresses in *the Colonizer and the Colonized*. Likewise, Elizabeth came to Burma to find a husband in the Indian-marriage market, "when a girl's failed everywhere else she tries India, where every man's pining for the sight of a white woman" (Orwell, 1984: 104-5) says Mrs. Lackersteen in *Burmese Days*. Moreover, Englishmen wear white clothes, which show that they do no manual jobs and which shows their social-status. This whiteness may also be taken as a symbol of purity, which goes hand in hand with the act of deification. Moreover, they are fat, which show richness and healthiness. In other words, mostly they are given positive attributes.

On the other hand, the Burmese men's negative stereotyping of the British people is very rare and is made collaboratively. For example, British Empire is depicted as "an aged female patient of the doctors" (Orwell, 1984: 35) towards the end of Imperialism (which reminds us the saying *hasta adam* (an aged male patient) for the Ottoman Empire). It is interesting that the English people and imperialism are not depicted negatively by the Burmese, but by Flory and by the narrator, which may be taken as a self-criticism made by Orwell. We are informed that even clergymen, who are supposed to practise religious doctrines, sleep with Burmese girls and have mulatto children (Orwell, 1984: 117). Besides these, clerks become false-witnesses in the trials and all this information and self-criticism are given through the mouthpiece of Flory.

In addition to these, English officers in Burma are racists and therefore, they admire Germans (Orwell, 1984: 228) and Hitler very much. Interestingly enough, English women are more racists than men and can easily apply the othering process. Sometimes, they may become more cruel to cope with the fear of rape by a black-man. Mrs. Lackersteen unconsciously exaggerates this fear and she begins to see Burmese nationalism as a kind of rape as well: "To her mind the word sedition, Nationalism, rebellion, Home Rule, conveyed one thing and one only, and that was a picture of herself being raped by a procession of jet-black coolies with rolling white eyeballs" (Orwell, 1984: 131). Then not surprisingly, most of the English in Burma do not like "the missionaries" (Orwell, 1984: 26) who teach equality. Contrary to the missionaries, Englishmen in Burma are mostly the believers of violence. For example, Maxwell, an Englishman in the novel, shoots a Burmese and then, the relatives of the Indian boy kill Maxwell in return. Another example of violence is seen when Ellis blinds a Burmese boy, which later causes to the "Villagers' Revolt" (Orwell, 1984: 233) in order to have justice in courts (Orwell, 1984: 234). To suppress this revolt, Mr. Macgregor gives permission to the use of weapons. However, Flory makes sure that the police "fire over the crowds's head instead of straight at them" (Orwell, 1984: 244) and saves the Indians' lives. Yet, Nationalists are punished severely, for instance the editor of the Burmese Patriot had been put on trial for sedition and then went on "hunger strike", and two rioters (Orwell, 1984:106) died. Though, the use of violence against the indigenous people is forbidden by the British government, it is practised by the British officers in Burma. They disapproved these laws and call these humanitarian-laws as "kid-glove laws" and instead, they suggest to apply "the way of Turkish flogging" (Orwell, 1984: 107) to the indigenous people.

In *Burmese Days*, Flory's ideas seem to oscillate between two opposites. This may be taken as an inner-conflict. He sometimes sees Englishmen as heroes as they endure hot weather and illnesses in Burma. And he even says, "living and working among the Orientals would try the temper of a saint" (Orwell, 1984: 14). On the other hand, he declares that Englishmen are "despots" and Burmese men are more humane than the so called civilized Englishmen. And only after considering all the events in the novel, we can see clearly his stance and we deduce that he is a humanist and an Anti-Imperialist. To exemplify, he includes his servant Ko Sla in his will. And this shows Flory's good feelings towards the Burmese people. Moreover, in his biography it is stated that "Orwell himself was not happy to be a policeman in Burma" (Orwell, 1984: 166). Thus, in the novel Flory may represent Orwell's own ideas.

In addition to these, in *Burmese Days*, only Flory confesses that contrary to the common assumption Britain brings civilization to the colonies, in fact they destroy the unique culture of the colonies. For example, the development of Indian shipbuilding and Indian Muslims were prevented by the British Empire. Moreover, they do not give the important jobs to the Indians to make sure that the Burmese people will not become powerful and be a threat for the English in the future. Flory underlines the fact that only independent countries like "Japan and Siam" (Orwell, 1984: 39) developed their own industries, not the colonized ones. Thus, England wrecks (Orwell, 1984: 40) Burmese national culture, instead of bringing civilization.

To conclude, in *Burmese Days* George Orwell deconstructs Kipling's "White Man's Burden" and he is bold enough to say openly that Englishman is in Burma in order to take advantage of it and also contrary to the arguments of bringing civilization, in fact they destroy or rather kill the unique Burmese culture. Furthermore, Flory's act of committing suicide may stand for his belief that English existence in Burma is not a necessity and should come to an end. Flory/Orwell sees "the Empire as a system in which he could not continue to participate and keep his self-respect" (Orwell, 1984: 142). Therefore, in the novel by putting an end to his existence as a colonizer in Burma, he puts an end to the imperialism in Burma and let the other continue his life as s/he wishes.

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