

British Imperial Rhetoric: Pukka Sahibs, Memsahibs and Orientals in *Burmese Days* by George Orwell

İngiliz İmparatorluk Retoriği: George Orwell'in *Burmese Days* (Burma Günleri) Romanında, Pukka Sahibler, Memsahibler ve Doğular

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Abstract

George Orwell's *Burmese Days* is set in the colonial town of Kyauktada in Burma in the 1920s when demands for self-rule and independence were articulated vigorously in the sub-continent and Burmese people started to show slight hints of dissent towards the British colonial authority. This study aims at exploring the reflections of the British imperial discourse in the existing cultural, economic, social and psychological barriers between the colonized and the colonial or between the "pukka sahibs" and "memsahibs" and the "orientals" in *Burmese Days*. After a brief historical insight into the era and 'British imperial rhetoric', the second section analyzes how British imperialist discourse undermines their perceptions, ideas, and relationships of all the colonials, male and female, with the colonized and nourishes their ignorance, prejudice and hostility towards the local people. In contrast to the commonly-held perception that "pukka sahibs" and "memsahibs" are fair, honest, decent, impartial, aloof, and incorruptible in their deeds, the male and female British characters populating the novel are afflicted with their contempt, disdain and dislike of the local people whom they are afraid to mix with. The main concern in the third section is to dwell on Flory, who, unlike the other British men and women, does not believe that the colonial regime has a civilizing or educating mission. Instead, he believes that the British colonials are obsessed with uplifting their values, principles and ideals in a colonial station in Burma where they have apparently crouched upon economically, linguistically, socially and culturally. The fourth and the last section probes into the pejorative impact of the dictations and impositions of the dominant discourse upon two local people of power who have internalized the perception that they are inferior, corrupt, and degenerate in comparison to superior, civilized and educated "pukka sahibs" and "memsahibs". Although the "orientals" desperately and vainly to aspire for and therefore struggle, imitate and adapt to the British people's life styles, habits, codes, and culture, the picture Orwell draws about the colonial society is alarming as the colonials are comprised of immoral, indecent, unfair, drunk, racist womanizers or husband-hunters in stark contrast to the imperial indoctrination.

Keywords: British Imperialism, *Burmese Days*, George Orwell, pukkasaheb, memsahib, colonialism

Öz

George Orwell'in *Burmese Days* romanı otonomi ve bağımsızlık taleplerinin Hint Yarımadasında güçlü şekilde ifade edildiği ve Burmalıların İngiliz sömürge yönetimine karşı küçük çaplı muhalefet işaretleri göstermeye başladıkları 1920lerde Burma'nın Kyauktada adlı sömürge şehrinde geçer. Bu çalışmanın amacı *Burmese Days* romanında sömürülenler ve sömürgeci ya da "pukka sahib" ve "memsahibler" arasında var olan kültürel, ekonomik, sosyal ve psikolojik engellerdeki İngiliz imparatorluk söyleminin yansımalarını araştırmaktır. Dönem ve İngiliz imparatorluk retoriği hakkında kısa bir tarihi açıklamadan sonra ikinci bölümde, İngiliz imparatorluk söyleminin, erkek ve kadın tüm sömürgecilerin algılarını, düşüncelerini ve sömürülenlerle ilişkilerini nasıl baltaladığını ve bu insanlara olan cehalet, önyargı ve düşmanlıklarını nasıl beslediği analiz edilmektedir. "Pukka sahib" ve

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'memsahib'lerin adil, dürüst, namuslu, bitaraf, mesafeli ve işinde kusursuz oldukları yolundaki yaygın algının tersine, romanda yer alan kadın ve erkek karakterler bir araya gelmekten korktukları yerel halkı hor görmekte, hakir görmekte ve sevmemektedirler. Üçüncü bölüm esas olarak, diğer İngiliz kadın ve erkeklerinden farklı olarak sömürge rejiminin medenileştirici ya da eğitici bir amacı olduğuna inanmayan Flory üzerinde durur. Flory, böyle yapmak yerine İngiliz sömürgecilerin açıkça ekonomik, dilsel, sosyal ve kültürel olarak çörelendikleri Burma'daki bir sömürgeci değerlerini, ilkelerini ve ideallerini yüceltmeye takıntılı olduklarına inanmaktadır. Dördüncü ve son bölümde ise, üstün, medeni ve eğitilmiş "pukka sahib" ve "memsahib"lere göre kendilerinin daha aşağıda, ahlaksız ve yozlaşmış oldukları yolundaki algıyı içselleştirmiş iki Burmalı üzerindeki baskın söylemin dikte ve dayatmalarının olumsuz etkisi araştırılır. "Doğulular" umutsuzca ve boş yere İngilizlerin yaşam biçimlerine, adetlerine, usullerine ve kültürüne öykünse ve bu yüzden bunları taklit etmeye ve uyum sağlamaya uğraşsa da, imparatorluk öğretisinin tam tersine sömürgeciler ahlaksız, edepsiz, adil olmayan, içkici, ırkçı kadın avcılar ve koca avcılarından ibaret olduğu için Orwell'in çizdiği sömürgeci topluluk korkutucudur.

Anahtar sözcükler: İngiliz Emperyalizmi, Burmese Days, George Orwell, pukkasahib, memsahib, sömürgecilik

Burmese Days which George Orwell penned in 1934 is set in Burma in the 1920s. The novel obviously reflects Orwell's (Eric Arthur Blair) experiences and observations in Burma as Orwell himself was born in India and worked in Burma as an officer of the Indian Imperial Police for five years in the 1920s when the British Empire reached its widest geographical borders with colonies, dominions and dependencies all over the world. However, the imminent disintegration of the British Empire loomed in the horizon after the First World War, the secession of the Irish Free State, and the growing independence sentiment in the Indian sub-continent. The Anglo-Burmese relations which started with the representatives of the East India Company coming to the country in the mid-eighteenth century turned sour in the late 1910s when Burma was not included in the Government of India Act in 1919. Although the Act was also extended to Burma in 1923, the country was in turmoil until independence in 1947 (Gopinath, 2009, pp.202-211; Edwards, 2002, pp.279-284; Moya, 2001, pp.93-94). This era of unrest and uncertainty finds an echo in *Burmese Days* because throughout the novel it is apparent that demands for self-rule and independence are articulated vigorously in the colony and the British colonials in *Burmese Days* Kyauktada, Burma, where *Burmese Days* is set, are bitterly complaining that democracy and reforms are impending because the Burmese people started to show slight hints of dissent towards the British colonial authority. Indeed, Orwell shows that the colonials in the novel are aware of the inevitable loss of the colonies and the colonials in the town are worried that their benefits and privileges will be compromised as they have realized that it will no longer be possible to maintain their rule in Burma.

Burmese Days is informative about "the relationship between imperial authority and the society it was set to dominate" (Paczulla, 2007, p.56) which was established and maintained to the detriment of the latter through colonial apparatuses. The imperial dominance also required the transport of all the rituals, traditions, manners, attitudes, language, institutions, pastimes, cuisine and all the instruments of British life style from Britain to the colonies worldwide, which was in line with the British imperial rhetoric. Indeed, imperialist discourse and ideology compartmentalize the colonials and the colonized with a distinction "between the supposed superiority of the colonizer as opposed to the supposed inferiority of the native" identifying local people as "savage, backward, and underdeveloped" (Tyson, 2006, p.419) in the imperial power categories. As an outward manifestation of this discourse, the colonials in the novel use terms like "natives", "niggers", "creoles" and particularly "orientals" to stigmatize the inhabitants of the town and to avoid "the perceived creeping corruptions of mixing

and miscegenation” (Boehmer, 1995, p.111). Colonialist rhetoric also imposed widespread use of some titles like “pukka sahib” and “memsahib” for the white Anglo-Saxon British colonials in order to categorize people, to set apart colonial from colonized and man from woman, and to maintain hierarchies to their benefit. In this classification “race becomes the defining factor of the Englishman” (Gopinath, 2009, p.205) and “pukka sahib” was a title of respect and a form of address used by the colonized people when speaking to a white colonial British man implying he was real gentleman, pure white gentleman, excellent fellow who was thought to be fair, honest, decent, impartial, aloof, and incorruptible in their deeds and attitude. However, the six pukka sahibs Orwell portrays in *Burmese Days*, namely, Flory, the timber merchant; MacGregor, the Deputy Commissioner and the secretary of the Club; Mr. Westfield, the District Superintendent of Police; Mr. Lackersteen and Ellis, the local managers of two timber firms and Maxwell, the acting Divisional Forest Officer, running the British colonial apparatus are evidently pretentious and shallow in their outlook in the novel. In the novel, as Muggerridge (1962) argues,

Orwell savagely attacks the shoddy way of life of the English in Burma, their fatuous insistence on their innate superiority to the ‘natives,’ their arid isolation as sahibs in a land which they govern but never bother to understand. At the same time, he himself adopts many of the sahibs’ characteristic assumptions. Thus, missionaries are contemptible, Eurasians pitiable; the Indian doctor, Veraswami, speaks and writes Babu English, and is altogether absurd in his fawning administration of his sahib overlords; while the sahibs, with all their faults and deficiencies, prove courageous in the face of a rioting Burmese mob and go about their duties conscientiously. (p. xii)

The Government circular to the Clubs to admit native members becomes a hotly debated issue among the colonials who fiercely oppose it as they regard it as a compromise which would result in the loss of their privileges. Flory nominates Dr. Veraswami for club membership but his proposal allows Ellis and Westfield to express their hatred, animosity and fury against the local people and their ultimate fear of contamination which is aggravated with their sense of a physical threat to “the maintenance of order and hierarchy” (Nyman, 2001, p.207). Their frantic attempts “keep the stink of garlic out of this Club for ever” (Orwell, 1934, p.215) is indeed a repetition of the imperial rhetoric and pukkasahibdom which favors the small Christian congregation of 15 people and still smaller British community of 9 people unfairly by explicitly discriminating against and humiliating the indigenous population who are regarded as “little babus ... with filthy lips” (Orwell, 1934, p.19).

As for the memsahibs, the female colonials, it becomes obvious in the novel that they are equally obsessed with status, rank, race and hierarchy despite the fact that in India, a memsahib “commonly derived her status from her husband’s occupation; her social position was clearly defined by her husband’s rank in the colonial administrative system” (Chaudhuri, 1988, p.519). As Gowans (2003) argues, they played secondary roles in the colonial regime as they were busy with womanly, wifely and motherly pursuits because “female efficiency and domestic discipline required for successful housekeeping in the sub-continent was seen to be part of the imperial project” (p.427). Despite their subordinate position in the organization and operation of the colonial system, the two memsahibs, Mrs. Lackersteen and Elizabeth, in *Burmese Days*, are also afflicted with their contempt, disdain and dislike of the local people whom they are afraid to mix with. Mrs. Lackersteen is a complete sham who always tries to keep the ‘orientals’ away from her life. Her ignorance and prejudice of the local people

develop into paranoia of “herself being raped by a procession of jet-black coolies with rolling eyeballs [which] kept her awake at night sometimes” (Orwell, 1934, p.124). On the other hand, the local women “repelled Elizabeth more than the men; she felt her kinship with them, and the hatefulness of being kin to creatures with black faces ... dreadful, so coarse-looking, like some kind of animal” (Orwell, 1934, p.107). Elizabeth wonders what kind of men will find native women attractive and when she learns that Flory has a Burmese mistress she is disgusted and enraged because “the thought that he had been the lover of that grey-faced, maniacal creature made [Elizabeth] shudder in her bones” (Orwell, 1934, p.251). When Flory takes Elizabeth to watch *pwe*, a kind of Burmese play with an orchestra and female dancer, “the whole expedition – the very notion of *wanting* to rub shoulders with all those smelly natives – ... impressed her badly” so she felt like “an artist exiled among ‘the Philistines’” among “this horde of natives”, “strings of Burmans”, “swarms of stocky peasants”, “mob of people”, “absolute savages”, “the black beetles” with “their filthy, disgusting habits” (Orwell, 1934, pp. 80, 95, 96, 112, 113, 114, 116, 209). So, in contrast to the pretensions of the colonials about their superiority, the picture Orwell draws about the colonial society is alarming as the colonials are comprised of apparently immoral, indecent, unfair, drunk, racist womanizers or husband-hunters.

As a matter of fact, Flory is alone among the other colonials who express his distaste with the practices of the colonial system because he despairs of finding himself in a conflict between the constraints of being a true gentleman and having a pukka sahib pose. After so many years in Burma he has come to the conclusion that although the British colonials pretend as if they were in Burma for civilizing and developing the country, their economic motives are the real reasons that keep them in Burma. Unlike the other British men and women, he does not believe in the civilizing or educating mission of the colonial regime. Instead, he believes that the colonials are obsessed with uplifting their values, principles and ideals because in reality “British prestige is the white man’s burden” (Orwell, 1934, p.31). Flory is cynical about the future of British imperialism and colonialism as he senses the futility of their work:

Year after year you sit in Kipling-haunted little Clubs, whisky to right of you, *Pink’un* to left of you, listening and eagerly agreeing while Colonel Bodger develops his theory that these bloody Nationalists should be boiled in oil. You hear your Oriental friends called ‘greasy little babus’, and you admit, dutifully, that they *are* greasy little babus. You see louts fresh from school kicking grey-haired servants. The time comes when you burn with hatred of your own countrymen, when you long for a native rising to drown their Empire in blood. (Orwell, 1934, p.61)

Apart from criticizing and blaming the colonial system, Flory is also different from the other colonials with his sympathy and understanding of the colonized. He is the only colonial who befriends and visits a local person in his home. As Elizabeth was shocked to learn, “Flory, when he spoke of the ‘natives’, spoke nearly always *in favour* of them ... she grasped that he was asking her to be fond of the Burmese, even to admire them; to admire people with black faces, almost savages, whose appearances still made her shudder” because she finds them “*revoltingly* ugly” (Orwell, 1934, p.106). However, despite his awareness of the exploitation of Burma by colonialist Britain economically, his reverence for the Burmese culture and history, his “cynical observations on imperialism” (Campion, 2003, p.211), and his friendship with Dr.Verasami, Flory is not immune to racist prejudices and stereotypes about the local inhabitants as he believes “with Indians there must be no loyalty, no

real friendship. Affection, even love – yes ... Even intimacy is allowable, at the right moments. But alliance, partisanship, never” (Orwell, 1934, p.70). He does not abstain from his misogynous attitude towards the Burmese women and by “engaging in the same unquestioned exploitation of native women as the other debauched members of the imperial administration” (Gopinath, 2009, p.218). Although Flory considers himself ‘Anglo-Indian’ because of the 10 years he spent in this country, he still does not align with the country wholly. He considers Burma and Burmese people as “The foreigners, the solitude, the melancholy! Foreign trees, foreign flowers, foreign landscapes, foreign faces. It’s all as alien as a different planet ... a kind of solitary hell to me” (Orwell, 1934, p.163).

The pejorative effect of imperial rhetoric is paradoxically observed on two rivaling ‘orientals’, U Po Kyin, subdivisional magistrate of Kyauktada and Dr. Veraswami, the civil surgeon and superintendent of the jail, who are drawn as “caricature[s] of the Westernized native who [have] internalized the imperial discourse of [their] inferiority” (Gopinath, 2009, p.201). These two men fit the description offered by Fanon (1994) with their “internalisation – or, better, the epidermalisation” (p.11) of the inferiority complex which is evidently ailing them to the point of blindness about the true face of colonialism. Indeed, they are representatives of the leading local men of economic, social, military or political power whose interests would be commensurate with those of the colonizers and therefore would be instrumental in the management of the British colonial system. In order to “turn ‘other’ places and ‘other’ peoples into commodities that would serve the needs of the imperial ‘centre’” the colonizers “supported a political hierarchy, one that assumed that the far-flung regions of the Empire were intrinsically of ‘lesser’ importance; [and] depended on the continuation of this relationship for power” (Wells, 1998, p.106). As Cabral (1994) suggests, collaboration between the colonizer and such local men which is based on mutual benefits is essential for the colonial machine so

The colonizer installs chiefs who support him and who are to some degree accepted by the masses; he gives these chiefs material privileges such as education for their eldest children, creates chiefdoms where they did not exist before, develops cordial relations with religious leaders, builds mosques, organizes journeys to Mecca, etc. And above all, by means of the repressive organs of colonial administration, he guarantees economic and social privileges to the ruling class in their relations with the masses. (p.58)

These people would also like to imitate and adapt to the British people’s life styles, habits, codes, and culture although British imperialism and colonialism repressed their culture, exploited their resources, banned their practices, blamed their habits, condemned their life styles, impaired their education and ruined their economies by exporting British economic, religious, cultural, social, military and educational apparatuses and by supplying manpower for the running of the colonial system. U Po Kyin despises his own life style and his own fellow countrymen complaining that “Look at this room! Positively it is no better than that of a peasant. I am tired of eating with my fingers and associating only with Burmans – poor, inferior people – and living, as you might say, like a miserable Township officer” (Orwell, 1934, p.128). Dr. Veraswami, on the other hand, who has adopted “the persona of enlightened English gentleman – more correct, more colonialist, more English in fact than the real item” (Boehmer, 1995, p.116), holds the view that the colonials are in Burma to bring civilization, to develop the resources, to provide amenities, and to cure the diseases. While U Po Kyin is busy defaming the doctor and raising suspicions about the loyalty of the doctor

to the British administration, resorting to every possible malice he can think of including extortions, bribes, rapes, rumors, libel, and backbite, Dr. Veraswami is in a never-ending attempt to persuade Flory about the glory of the British Empire and “the degeneracy of the East” (Orwell, 1934, p.37). He is a passionate admirer of the English, “parrot[ing] pro-English sentiments and praises England’s civic organization” (Seshagiri, 2001, p.108) as well as “maintain[ing] with positive eagerness that he, as an Indian, belonged to an inferior and degenerate race” (Orwell, 1934, p.33). They never realize that they are typically colonized men:

in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (Fanon, 1994, p. 18)

However, these people are not white, Anglo-Saxon, or Christian and therefore they could never be allowed to enjoy the benefits of the colonial system fully or enter the social and cultural spheres which, they were made to believe, through the teachings and impositions of the colonial system, as ideal. They have to be content with secondary and subordinate posts, lukewarm friendships and superficial improvements because the struggle of the leading Burmese people identifying their future with the colonials to imitate and adapt to the British people’s life styles, habits, codes, and culture are futile and insatiable.

To conclude, in sharp contrast to the British imperial discourse which dictates gentlemanly behavior, proper demeanor, decency, and fairness to the colonials in their conduct with the local people, British pukka sahibs and memsahibs populating *Burmese Days* are portrayed with their discriminating, haughty and snobbish attitudes against the native inhabitants despite their own immoral, unethical, illegal, merciless, disgraceful behavior and conduct. The British imperial rhetoric is the culprit behind their obsession with their rank, race, status and colonial hierarchy and the dominant discourse feeds their mannerism, shallowness and hatred against the Burmese people. On the other hand, some of the Burmese civil servants in the colonial administration, who have internalized an inferiority complex, have obviously been mistaken, misled, and deluded by the imperial rhetoric and the colonial system which has crouched upon Burma economically, linguistically, socially and culturally.

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