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Imperial Orwell

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George Orwell's three accounts of British colonial rule in Burma have been said, not least by the author, to express his revulsion at that regime. While the image given of the British authorities does not offer wholehearted endorsement, many aspects in fact sustain ideas which are central to pro-colonial literature, and go even further, through the portrayal of characters in a manner consistent with racialist and social Darwinist theories. To some extent the causes of this outlook are open to speculation, but certainly a lingering embitterment towards his experiences as a policeman in Burma is evident in his writing, and, above all, a close and honest reading of the texts reveals a side to Orwell that many critics have shown a distinct reluctance to acknowledge. In each of his Burmese stories, although the British are depicted as morally lacking, the indigenous people, including those of mixed race, are resolutely inferior beings: timid, puerile and comical, with a couple of villainous exceptions.

Keywords: colonialism; racial discourse; Burma; policeman; empirical

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Orwell imperial

Los tres relatos de George Orwell sobre el dominio colonial británico en Birmania han sido entendidos como expresión de su repulsa hacia aquel régimen. Aunque la imagen de las autoridades británicas que aparece en ellos no ofrece un respaldo incondicional, otros muchos aspectos contienen ideas que habían sido centrales en la literatura pro-colonial—las cuales se desarrollan aún más, sobre todo mediante la caracterización de personajes de acuerdo con las teorías sociales y raciales darwinistas. Hasta cierto punto, las causas de esta perspectiva pueden ser objeto de alguna especulación, pero sin duda una amargura persistente relacionada con su experiencia como policía en Birmania se evidencia en estos relatos de Orwell y, sobre todo, una lectura minuciosa y honesta revela un lado del autor que muchos críticos se han mostrado reluctantes en reconocer. En cada uno de sus cuentos birmanos, si bien los británicos son retratados como moralmente deficientes, los indígenas, incluso los mestizos, son presentados como seres resueltamente inferiores: tímidos, pueriles y cómicos, con un par de viles excepciones.

Palabras clave: colonialismo; discurso racial; Birmania; policía; empírico

Life sometimes disrupted George Orwell's political beliefs. The novel and two short stories he wrote about Burma[1] are transparent testament to what Eric Arthur Blair experienced in that country. While it is conceivable that he wrote of more than his direct experiences, it is only possible to understand the consistently pejorative view of the indigenous people in these three texts as the result of his time as a colonial policeman, as opposed to being the unalloyed product of a political philosophy.

In "Pacifism and the War," an essay which served as a response to criticisms levied against him in 1942, Orwell wrote that he was "against imperialism because I know something about it from the inside. The whole history of this is to be found in my writings, including a novel (*Burmese Days*)" (Orwell 1968, 228). However, any remotely careful reading of the novel shows a marked ambivalence toward the colonial enterprise as it affected Burma. A number of critics—including Stephen Ingle (1998), Graham Holderness, Brian Loughrey and Nahem Yousef (1998), and Christopher Hitchens (2002)—have been content to take Orwell at his word, as if reluctant to engage fully with some of the implications of the novel and, in the process, ignore many issues which signify a qualified vindication of the British Empire. To view *Burmese Days* as anti-imperialist involves disregarding, for example, the shiftless nature of the Burmese characters and the derisory manner in which Orwell portrays their independence movement, while, in contrast, even some of the feckless British characters suddenly become heroic, and as individuals are capable of dominating crowds of "natives." British racist attitudes also prove to be justified.

These and other examples will be looked at in more detail later, but it is striking that Orwell considered it important to be seen as anti-imperialist despite writing fiction which is frequently at least imitative of adamantly pro-colonial literature. It is evident that his attitude to other experiments of European occupation was conspicuously sympathetic to the local people and so unforgiving of the foreign power. From September 1938 to March of the following year he lived in Morocco (Bowker 2004, 243-248), and he described what he witnessed in the French colony in his essay "Marrakech" (1939). While he was feeding bread to a gazelle, a navvy asked if he could have some; and on another occasion, when it was noticed that the author had cigarettes, he was suddenly surrounded by men pleading for one: "None of these people, I suppose, works less than twelve hours a day, and every one of them looks on a cigarette as a more or less impossible luxury" (Orwell 2002, 122-123). Europeans were blamed for not considering the people whose brown skins blended with the soil and whose lives were

[1] *Burmese Days* (1934), "A Hanging" (1931) and "Shooting an Elephant" (1936). "A Hanging" first appeared in the *Adelphi* magazine in August 1931 (Orwell having left Burma in 1927), written by "Eric A. Blair" (Stansky and Abrahams 1994b, 162); *Burmese Days* was initially rejected by the left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz—he thought it could have offended some British and Indians and have resulted in libel suits—and Heinemann Cape, but the American group Harper Brothers accepted it after legal advice (Bowker 2004, 155); "Shooting an Elephant," after an enquiry by an editor (Peter Lehmann) gleaned a hesitant suggestion from Orwell of a "sketch," which was encouraged and published in the second edition of *New Writing* in the autumn of 1936 (Stansky and Abrahams 1994a, 146-147).

"an endless, back-breaking struggle to wring a little food out of an eroded soil" (124), but it could not last indefinitely: the sight of a column of Senegalese soldiers with "splendid bodies" made him wonder, "How much longer can we go on kidding these people?" (126-127).

Therefore, rationally or philosophically speaking, he thought this type of political domination was both wrong and unsustainable because it was intolerable to the indigenous population: independence from colonial dominion was inevitable. But his view of Burma was quite different. In *Burmese Days* the nationalist cause is represented by a newspaper of borrowed stories and few readers, whose real purpose is to serve the nefarious ends of the locally dominant criminal (Orwell [1934] 2001, 254-256). Even the possibility of a desire for independence is absent in "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant" and is antithetical to the servile character of the Burmese people as he depicted them. Disparaging portrayals of the Burmese and their trivial political ambitions are a recurring feature of *Burmese Days* and an explanation of the author's conspicuous hostility has to be his five years as an instrument of British rule. By itself, spending such a long time at such a distance from home as a very young man—he began when he was nineteen, almost immediately after leaving school (Bowker 2004, 75)—defending a system he ostensibly opposed, would have been cause enough for lingering enmity, but other factors could plausibly have had an effect.

There were a number of conceivable personal and cultural influences on him from his childhood. Before he travelled there as a young man, Burma specifically and the imperial sub-continent in a more nebulous form were endowed with positive associations. His maternal grandfather fled personal tragedy by moving East and the result was a happy marriage and a prosperous business (Bowker 2004, 7) (like Flory in *Burmese Days*, he worked in the timber trade). As Orwell wrote in his essay "Boys' Weeklies" (1940), he had been an avid reader of comics in childhood and at the time the adventure of colonialism—or as he put it, "at the outpost of Empire the monocled Englishmen are holding the niggers at bay"—was a recurring theme (Orwell 2002, 198-199). According to his obituary of Kipling ("Rudyard Kipling," published in 1942), for Anglo-Indian families like his own, the writer had been "a sort of household god" and, consequently, a dominant influence, whether positively or negatively, on the young Blair (Orwell 2002, 38-39). Another experience which made an impression on the boy was the West End musical *Chu Chin Chow*, which he was taken to see as a reward for passing his Eton Entrance Examination, and which he recalled (in 1940) as a depiction of "droves of women, practically naked and painted to an agreeable walnut-juice tint. It was a never-never land, the 'gorgeous East,' where, as is well-known, everyone has fifty wives and spends his time lying on a divan, eating pomegranates" (Bowker 2004, 48).

The appeal to a boy answerable to the doctrines of British private education must have been about as great as the contrast of the musical's hedonistic appeal to his later life as a colonial policeman. For Blair the incongruity between an image of

an acquiescent population and the frustrating reality of hostility and resistance is illustrated in an incident he experienced and then used, with significant alterations, in *Burmese Days.* In the fictional account, five schoolboys attack the racist Ellis, to rub home their sense of power after the murder of an Anglo-Indian, while, as a policeman, Blair was said to have ended an argument with a Burmese boy by hitting him on the back with a stick (Bowker 2004, 87). Orwell later claimed to have regretted the violence, but the narration of Ellis's encounter gives a resolutely different impression. One very notable feature of the description is Orwell's overt use of racist discourse, something he resorted to at various points in the Burmese tales, but which many critics do not find worthy of much, or indeed any, consideration, and which I will look at below. However, strictly in terms of his experiences informing his fiction, what is conspicuous is both his emotional language and the sudden adoption of Ellis's viewpoint as the narrator's: "Ellis saw them coming, a row of yellow, malicious faces—epicene faces, horribly smooth and young, grinning at him with deliberate insolence . . . The look of their faces, jeering at him like a row of yellow images, was maddening" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 252). This incident ends with Ellis victorious, representative of manly and British virtue, and the idea of regret on the Briton's part is inconceivable, but the emotionally charged, spiteful description of the children, for example with the oxymoronic "horribly smooth and young" faces which were "maddening," is implicitly the result of a personal grievance.

However, critics have been remarkably reticent in acknowledging the presence of these features in Orwell's Burmese stories. I will refer to critics such as Stephen Ingle, Alok Rai and Christopher Hitchens later in the essay, but an impression of views of the works from the year of publication until recent times can be gained from three critiques. *Burmese Days* was first published in the United States, and in 1934, in the *New York Herald Tribune Books* journal, Margaret Carson Hubbard astonishingly wrote that Orwell had written wholly out of sympathy for the natives, and that U Po Kyin (the presiding and devoted villain) and Dr. Veraswami (a steadfastly obsequious Indian) were the only realistic characters (Stansky and Abrahams 1994a, 43). It is, at least, an indication of what some readers at the time expected from such fiction. As recently as 1998 Holderness, Loughrey and Yousaf, in their introductory essay, still believe Burma had made Orwell aware of the dichotomy between those in power and those subject to it, and had led to his rejection of his social and colonial background (1998, 3). Implicitly, for such an experience to be manifest in these stories there should be sympathetic portrayals of Burmese and Indian characters, something that is in fact entirely absent, having instead their wholesale denigration. In a mostly salient assessment Elleke Boehmer recognizes that Orwell's attacks on the institution of the British Empire were markedly ambivalent, for example that the defence of the European Club, a symbol of white social exclusion and supremacy, echoed older tales of imperial valour, but she still holds that "*Burmese Days* signals the closing down of an entire genre of imperial heroics" in spite of the defence's significant role in the novel (Boehmer 2005, 153-

154). When Boehmer mentions "A Hanging," it is notable that she does not find it necessary to go beyond Orwell's evaluation of his own work, that it was unequivocally anti-imperialist (2005, 152). Similarly Holderness, Loughrey and Yousaf are satisfied that Orwell's comparison of the Burmese with the English working class in *The Road to Wigan Pier*—"I wanted to . . . get down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants"—elucidates his feelings about Burma and does not need to be challenged (Orwell [1937] 2001, 3).[2]

If Orwell's self-assessment is more useful as a guide to his intentions than as a summary of the resulting stories, the explanation is clear. As Terry Eagleton states, Orwell was a devout empiricist, or, as Eagleton puts it, "he suffered from the empiricist illusion that what was real was what you could smell with your own nose and feel with your own fingers" (2003, 6-9). Orwell's high regard for experience was shown through his decision to work as a hop-picker (Orwell 2000, 224) and live as a tramp (Stansky and Abrahams 1994b, 194) for a couple of weeks at a time, rather than simply asking hop-pickers or tramps to describe their lives. He even decided to have himself arrested as a drunk, methodically consuming whisky and several pints of beer and then looking for a policeman, so that he could discover what life in prison was like. He was disappointed to be released two days later (Orwell 2000, 254). His voluntary exposure to what were at the very least unpleasant circumstances is testament to the primacy that tactile and lived experiences had for him. A cynic could claim that he was seeking vindication for his political opinions, but these exposures also made it possible that he would find something incompatible with his world-view. Even the fact that he could not escape being a "lower-upper-middle class" writer (Orwell [1937] 2001 139) who was only a hop-picker, tramp or prisoner for a short time had value. For his mainly middle-class readers he was their surrogate, witnessing either an alien lifestyle or location (such as a coal mine) from roughly the same perspective they would have had. Biography is then very relevant to the study of Orwell's writing, even if some consider the form "anti-intellectual" (Eagleton 2003, 8). Its use can help to explain those incompatible aspects and, paradoxically, enable a freer analysis as opposed to one that is (presumably) informed by his reputation as a left-wing spokesperson for his generation.

The combination of being a Briton and a policeman in Burma repeatedly put him in opposition to the indigenous people. The effect, as is evident from even not so close an analysis of his writing, was profound, but it was not homogeneous. His three texts about life in Burma show marked differences between them in his depiction of the nature of power and attitudes toward it, determined on racial lines. Some critics have attempted to discern a progress (as if towards a bright post-colonial future) through

[2] In *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell makes clear, through a mixture of heightened sensitivity and blunt honesty, that he found the Burmese to be not "physically repulsive" (including their "distinctive smell"), in contrast to the English "lower class" odour, which he thought nauseating ([1937] 2001, 94-96). He was, nevertheless, prepared to live with the latter in the hope of revealing the hardships they endured with a sympathy he could not achieve for the Burmese.

"A Hanging" ([1931] 2000), *Burmese Days* ([1934] 2001) and "Shooting an Elephant" ([1936] 2000), with, for example, Alok Rai claiming that the change from *Burmese Days* to "Shooting an Elephant" shows "a surprising maturity" (1990, 40). As Rai was justifiably critical of much of the political and racial content of Burmese Days, it follows that in his analysis "pro-colonial" and "childish" are synonymous, and so "Shooting an Elephant," according to his analogy, was "adult" and "anti-colonial." While the image of British dominion is certainly not the same in the later story, some of the underlying attitudes (at least of the narrator) are essentially indistinguishable and, at most, the story is a half-hearted attack on the imperial project.

The aspect of "Shooting an Elephant" that most clearly indicates disillusion with both the idea of empire and the narrator's role (as a policeman) within it is his moral resignation before the crowds. Although he is sure that the elephant no longer poses any danger, he feels that the combination of an expectant crowd and him having a gun means he has to act, and the situation is metonymy for the nature of the Empire: "to trail feebly away, having done nothing . . . The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at" (Orwell [1936] 2000, 503-504). The mystique of white supremacy is deftly exposed as a fallacy, but the overriding impression is of pity for the policeman and, by extension, all other British servants of Empire. It is distinctly incongruous after an opening declaration that "imperialism was an evil thing," and "I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny . . . upon the will of prostrate peoples" (502). However, the incident (as described) shows he feels a form of condescending enmity to the colonial subjects. He makes clear his antipathy to the local population, especially religious figures—"the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts" (502)—but their hostile behaviour is described in not very threatening terms, as petty and cowardly, where indeed "[n]o-one had the guts to raise a riot" (501-502).

The crowd manage to exert control through social awkwardness, but they lack the will or fortitude to use this power autonomously, and, according to the terms of this story, this self-determination is something they do not deserve anyway. If, as a sincere socialist, Orwell believed that politics involved difficult choices and "the more ordinary people were involved in such decisions the less often morally unacceptable decisions will be taken" (Ingle 1998, 243), it was not applicable to the Burmese. The policeman's view of the situation is that it would be wrong to shoot the elephant as it no longer represents any danger and would be a considerable loss to its owner. He shoots it because of what he perceives to be the desire of the crowd. For a tale which is supposed to illustrate the evil of British rule in Asia, the specific problem is "the futility of the white man's dominion in the East" (Orwell [1936] 2000, 504). What he is about to do he considers murder. The problem, therefore, is that the white man, who according to this story is rational and knows best, has to comply with the whim of the crowd—"all happy and excited" (503)—who are unreasonable and only want

ephemeral gratification. As an exemplary story, and from the outset it is said to show how colonialism was a doomed enterprise, the lesson is that the problem with British rule is that they were not actually in control, and the situation would have been much better for all if they had been. Instead, all too often the British felt obliged to follow the misguided ideas of the indigenous population who, to extrapolate, were not capable of running their own country. As Mohammed Sarwar Alam states, Orwell's expressions of anti-imperialism did not preclude patriotism, especially in comparison to the Burmese (2006, 55-62, see especially page 58). The painfully long process of the elephant's death symbolizes its significance and reinforces how mistaken the crowd's wish was, that they have destroyed what is best about their country, or at least a precious natural resource, and instead of remorse, "they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon" (Orwell [1936] 2000, 505-506).

The state of the nation as depicted in *Burmese Days* also showed the British to be more suited as rulers, despite their obvious shortcomings. What was markedly different to "Shooting an Elephant" was any suggestion that the white men would be cowed into accepting the local consensus. The scarcely plausible Indian admirer of the British, Dr. Veraswami, believes that Burma ruled by the Burmese had been a place of "dirt and torture and ignorance," but since the British took over the transformation is unquestionable: "Look at the whole uprush of modern progress!" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 40-41). In contrast, Flory as a cynic naturally concentrates on the negative effects of the European invasion—disease and exploitation—but admits the possibility of a modernising and civilising influence (40-41). The events that follow support Veraswami's opinion. When the Burmese are the masters they are open to corruption, mendacity and scheming (for example, see page 140); or they are slipshod Indians who are certainly not to be trusted, such as the servants who leave the saddle of the only eligible British woman, Elizabeth, insecurely fastened (193-196). The contrast between the Eastern and Western nationalities reaches its apex when the European Club—"the real seat of the British power" (14)—is attacked by a mob of locals. Flory arrives in the midst of the trouble and, though a part of the crowd could have killed him, "some even tried to make way for him, as a white man" (261). The Military Police Subahdar (the Burmese commander) tells Flory he has been waiting for orders while mayhem has proceeded and the club put in danger, so he, as the Briton, takes control and in a few minutes the crowd is dispersed (261-264). Elleke Boehmer saw the episode as corresponding to those "legends of stalwart white minorities threatened by dark hordes, heroic tales of Rorke's Drift, and Gordon at Khartoum" (2005, 154), while the belief in the automatic deference individual Europeans could expect from multitudes of Asians was fairly widespread in Orwell's time, so that, for example, Leonard Woolf in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) reported how it was understood that during a religious festival attended by thousands of Ceylonese, if he, as one white man, was present there would not be trouble, and he claimed that this proved to be true (Cell 1999, 233-234).

The narratorial depiction of the racial and power relations in the earliest of the Burmese stories, "A Hanging," is the most sober, or freest from the intoxication of colonial and racial discourse. Perhaps one reason for this is that its main explicit subject is capital punishment rather than a critique of imperial hegemony, although this is unavoidably integral to the events: it is expressly about "the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide" (Orwell [1931] 2000, 208). That the life of an Indian will be cut short by British authorities is, in terms of the story, not so significant. Change the nationalities or races of any of the participants and the immorality of the execution would be unaffected. Orwell wrote the story when he was living in Britain and capital punishment was then a contentious issue: the National Campaign for the Abolition of Capital Punishment began in 1925; in 1930 a Parliamentary Select Committee unsuccessfully recommended a period of five years without the death penalty; from 1931 pregnant women could not be executed after giving birth (the punishment was already prohibited during pregnancy); and in 1932 the minimum age for someone to be given this sentence was raised to eighteen (Block and Hostettler 1997, 271). The magnitude and inherent offensiveness of the punishment in the story is illustrated by the British superintendent's relief when it is over—"Well, that's all for this morning, thank god" (Orwell [1931] 2000, 209)—and by the incongruous appearance of a dog, whose normally playful canine behaviour highlights how peculiar or unnatural the human activity is.

The dog also undermines the political hegemony somewhat: as the animal is the only animate being that does not recognize imperial dominion, it is the only independent figure (Orwell [1931] 2000, 208-209). It is one of various features of the story with pro- or anti-imperialist connotations. The political hierarchy, which could be seen as intended to represent all of the British-controlled sub-continent, is made manifest, sometimes subtly and sometimes clumsily. The fawning Dravidian head jailer ("'Yes sir, yes sir,' he bubbled" [208]), the Indian hangman ("greeted us with a servile crouch as we entered" [209]), and a Eurasian jailer ("Kindly take one of my cigarettes, sir. Do you not admire my new silver case, sir? . . . Classy European style" [210]) conform to a comical ingratiating stereotype, but also demonstrate, as far as the story is to be believed, an unquestioning acceptance by the indigenous population of their foreign lords. The inviolability of British authority is also suggested by the superintendent's initial impatience to have the execution finished: "The man ought to have been dead by this time" (208). In other words, adherence to the details of the British schedule is more important than the condemned man's life. The laughter and whisky the servants of Empire enjoy *postmortem* may ostensibly be their means of dealing with their unease, but it is made patently clear that the British and those Asians who serve their regime experience a privileged existence on quite a different plane to the majority of the people.

A correlative of the power dichotomy according to race is Orwell's surprisingly reductive version of Indian and Burmese defining national traits throughout his Burmese fiction. Unlike the variations in attitudes to colonial power between the

stories, the representations of Asian and Eurasian characters are resolutely consistent and pejorative. They also have striking correspondence to, and occasionally exceed, the racial theories of white supremacists of the time, such as those of Lothrop Stoddard (1883-1950).[3] Stoddard was a Harvard academic and a commercially successful writer in the 1920s and 1930s who warned in his book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1921) of the threat to the white race because of what he saw as the inexorable expansion of other races. The white policeman who feels compelled to obey the irresistible will of the crowd of "yellow faces" (Orwell [1936] 2000, 504) and shoot the elephant is comparable to Stoddard's image of a western political world represented as dykes (the "yellow," "brown" and "red" peoples being "colored tides" [1921, 226]): "The white man, like King Canute, seats himself upon the tidal sands and bids the waves be stayed. He will be lucky if he escapes merely with wet shoes" (235). It is curious that Orwell's racialist use of "yellow" has received little attention from critics (such as Alok Rai) (1990, 40-41), who quote the passage without mention of the homogenous and loaded depiction of the people. The fact that the phrase is only comprehensible within racist discourse—they plainly did not have faces that were the colour of lemons or sunflowers—is congruent with Orwell's fundamentally offensive characterisation of non-Europeans overall, which could be more negative and sweeping than those of Stoddard, the white supremacist.

Stoddard thought that Burma was on the border of "the yellow and brown worlds" (1921, 23). The "diverse racial amalgamation" (54) he saw in much of that general area made generalising about characteristics more difficult, but he acknowledged that Asians were "not inferior" (229), even if they could be described as "by nature less restless, less ambitious and consequently less aggressive than ourselves" (234). With few exceptions, Orwell's Asian characters correspond to the latter definition. In "A Hanging" the subservient attitude of those who work in the prison implies they are complicit with British rule, and even the condemned man shows no explicit objection to his sentence or treatment. When the narrator/policeman feels he is being impelled to shoot the elephant it is a combination of what he feels is the will of the spectators and the force of their numbers, while the crowd are passive to the extent that the only aggressive acts in the story (i.e., those that would cause others harm) are done by the elephant (killing a coolie) and the policeman. In general (with the exception of two conspicuous individuals, to be discussed later), the Indians and Burmese in *Burmese Days* are either content, as with Dr. Veraswami, or not serious—"aggressive" to use Stoddard's description—enough in their discontent to present a serious threat. The crowd that attack the club do so for a spurious reason—a boy has been blinded, but

[3] This is not, of course, to claim that racialist or social Darwinist theories began in the twentieth century. There were, for example, French writers like Francois Bernier (1625-1688), who divided man into four or five species or races, and Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), who espoused ideas of polygenesis, that different races had different origins, and that, of the three main races, whites were inherently superior. However, Stoddard clearly has more contemporary relevance to Orwell's writing (James 2008).

because of an incompetent Burmese doctor rather than directly because Ellis hit him (Orwell [1934] 2001, 254)—and Flory and a few sepoys are able to disperse all 2,000 within a few moments (260-264). It is notable that their retreat reinforces their docile image (prey not predatory) and shows them to be utterly homogenous: they fled as "an endless line of young men gracefully leaping through a gap in the hedge like a procession of gazelles" (264).

The relatively easily foiled assault on the British is part of a recurrent theme which dismisses any idea of a nationalist or independence movement as a joke. The *Burmese Patriot* is a newspaper, or "miserable eight-page rag," which is "composed partly of news stolen from the *Rangoon Gazette*, partly weak Nationalist Heroics." The quality of the paper is terrible and, due to a printing error, the final page is black, "as though in mourning for the smallness of the paper's circulation" (5). When the editor is arrested he goes on hunger strike, but relents after six hours (114). Orwell's mocking depiction of Burma's struggle for independence is in marked contrast to Stoddard's analysis and, of course, the actual situation. As a result of their history and potential, Stoddard believed Asians could not be kept within a white hegemony and would become independent (1921, 229). The Burmese nationalist movement began during the 1920s and from 1930-1932, so before Orwell wrote *Burmese Days*, there was frequent rioting and a jungle guerilla rebellion (Myint-U 2002, 246). That Orwell told his publisher, Victor Gollancz, he wanted to call the *Burmese Patriot* the *Burmese Sinn Feiner* ([1934] 2001, v-vi), while inconsistent with one aspect of its representation in the novel, further suggests the writer's marked antipathy to Burmese independence. It is a puzzling choice because of the geographical distance between Burma and Ireland, the use of two non-Burmese languages (English and Gaelic) for a Burmese nationalist newspaper, and the attempt to connect a movement that had just successfully overthrown British rule with one that Orwell wanted to show as risible for trying to do the same. However, linking the two political fights could be expected to provoke a hostile reaction to the Asian cause, by association, from a large proportion of his English readership at the time.

The vision of a local population that shows, at most, token signs of resistance, and is most often (in the three stories) submissive under its colonial masters, includes one manifestly idiosyncratic figure. The central villain of *Burmese Days*, U Po Kyin, is so single-minded in his nefarious ways that he "was too absorbed in intrigue ever to fail through carelessness or ignorance" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 3). Kyin conforms to the stereotype of Oriental villain, a feature of music-hall productions since the nineteenth century and revived in films of the 1930s, most famously with the character Fu Manchu (MacKenzie 1984, 53-54 and 89), but he serves other literary purposes in this novel. Apart from Ellis' squabble with schoolboys and the half-hearted riot, the British police would have little trouble to resolve, and without the constant criminal counter-plot the story would lack the dynamic element of a serious threat to British rule. Above all, though, it indirectly serves Orwell's stated aim of being anti-imperial.

Flory claims that he "always found it difficult to believe that Orientals could be really dangerous" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 259), and his friend Veraswami confirms the concept of inscrutable Eastern malevolence: "Only an Oriental could know him. You, an English gentleman cannot sink your mind to the depth of such ass [*sic*] U Po Kyin" (44). As Flory is presented as an open-minded Briton who has lived in the East for fifteen years (42), beyond adding a veneer of mystery, by extension it is a forlorn task for Westerners to try to maintain law and order in such a place.

Flory's blindness as regards Asian malevolence is, naturally, a danger to the character (as he is living in Asia), and it is consistent with a series of incidents in which racism proves to be more or less perspicacious so that integration between the races is foolhardy. His friendship with the oleaginous Veraswami is, in itself, hard to comprehend. The Indian doctor's passionate Anglophilia—"your civilisation at its very worst iss [*sic*] for us an advance. Gramophones, billycock hats, the *News of the World*—all iss [*sic*] better than the horrible sloth of the Oriental" (41)—is matched by his feelings for Flory—"Ah, Mr. Flory, how very delightful to see you! . . . Ah, my dear friend, how I have been pining for some cultured conversation!" (34). Tellingly, the doctor's reputation precedes him. Before Veraswami appears in the novel, Ellis gives him the soubriquet "Very-slimy" (31), a comment that initially sounds simply puerile and racist, but which becomes fully vindicated by Veraswami's words. Indeed, the suspicion must be that Orwell chose the Indian name to be able to make the joke applicable. Another sign that he wanted Veraswami to look comical is the purportedly phonetic manner in which his speech is written. Orwell complained in his obituary of Rudyard Kipling (1942) that every time one particular soldier appears in one of his stories, he "is always made to speak a sort of stylized cockney, not very broad but all the aitches and final "g's" carefully omitted . . . Kipling ought to have known better" (2002, 402-403), However, what Orwell found unacceptable for Kipling's cockney did not inhibit himself with the Indian doctor, with all the s's doubled whenever he spoke (*is* becomes 'iss' and *as* becomes 'ass'). These imperfections mysteriously disappear after Flory's death, a sign that a comical element would be inappropriate at such a moment, and therefore that Orwell intended Veraswami to look somewhat ridiculous for most of the novel. It is especially strange that he felt it necessary to mock the doctor's pronunciation because, in a review quoted by Christopher Hitchens, Orwell claimed that generally "Indians write and even pronounce English far better than any European race" (2002, 32). Indeed, Hitchens rather mystifyingly believed that *Burmese Days* was "quite advanced for its time" in its attitude to race. Its supposedly progressive outlook was exemplified, for him, by Flory's tolerance of Eurasians (Hitchens 2002, 179), a view that is only sustainable through a very partial reading of the novel.

As he is a zealous advocate of the British Empire, it is natural that Veraswami is passionately eager to join the European Club. For mischievous reasons, U Po Kyin's ambition to do the same is also easy to explain, and what looks like an innocuous wish undermines the local social and political structure. It is again anticipated by Ellis, who

is adamantly opposed to taking "a dear little nigger-boy into this club" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 20). Once the possibility of a non-European joining the European Club becomes known, Kyin schemes to ensure the honour falls to him (144-146). Kyin explains that as Veraswami "is the highest native official in the district" he has to be removed from the running (147), and Kyin is prepared to go to great lengths to achieve his ends—framing the doctor through a prison escape, arranging a riot in which the rioters are given bullet-proof vests which do not actually work (139-143)—in order to enter "that remote, mysterious temple, that holy of holies far harder of entry than Nirvana!" (147-148). When Flory tells Veraswami he will be proposed, "[t]he doctor's emotion caused him almost to choke" (155). The tone is obviously satirical, but the object of the satire is the desperate Oriental and, as representatives of their nations, they are the absolute reverse of nationalists. Even though the two would-be members' motives are morally contrary, their aspirations both require, indeed celebrate, the continuation of British colonial rule.

Flory's only other social hazard is his only other non-British relationship, his Burmese mistress, Ma Hla May, and Kyin is also able to exploit this situation, but in this case the greater intimacy means the consequences are fatal. They are far from a happy couple, and Flory implicitly believes that any sort of close involvement with a Burmese woman is thoroughly unnatural and shameful. He is said to have known many and, when it appears to have spoiled his chances with the attractive English visitor Elizabeth, he sees "an endless procession of Burmese women . . . a full hundred at the least . . . but they had no faces . . . He had dirtied himself beyond redemption and this was his just punishment" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 203). He has been with his most recent Burmese mistress for two years and it has become a source of profound discontent for Flory. In some respects it can be seen as analogous to imperial dominion, but again the pleasure, because of the power supposedly associated with connections to white men, is all on the Burmese side, as is the exploitation—Ma Hla May steals from Flory, pawns his gifts and has a pseudo-secret lover. As a result, she is eager for her and Flory to remain together, while the Briton wants independence. Their relationship is also unhealthy at a human level. Flory is said to be angry after making love, and then treats his companion as a prostitute by telling her to take money from his pocket so that she will leave (see pages 50-54 and 116-117).

The latter was a theme of other writing from Orwell's time in Burma. Two poems ("Romance" and "The Lesser Evil," presumably written in Burma, i.e., between 1922 and 1927) try to make humorous use of the proximity and incongruity of love and money—for example, "Each time she swore she loved me true / She struck [*sic*] me for another ten [rupees]" (Orwell 2000, 92-93)—which suggest that he had quite regular contact with Burmese women as prostitutes. However, in an early draft of the story that would become *Burmese Days*, John Flory is warned about entering a serious relationship with a local woman, symptomatic of official policy that strongly discouraged mixed race partnerships. Burma had had a reputation as "a marvellous place . . . The girls

were cheap and sensuous" (Kelly 1992, 477), which could help to explain why, when rules were introduced to keep British officials from becoming intimate with indigenous people, they were first imposed in Burma, in 1903 (Hyam 1999, 60-61). One plausible reason for such a policy is that the authorities imagined control was partly achieved through an indefinable British aura, and both the partnerships and their progeny would make a white hegemony much more difficult to maintain: some indigenous women (in ongoing relationships) could be viewed locally as having acquired, according to this view, a quasi- official status; and the children of mixed races would blur the distinction between Asian and European.

Nevertheless, Orwell's representation, in particular of the two Eurasians in *Burmese Days*, is so affected it has to be the legacy of more than remembered government dictates. Orwell's depiction was, indeed, in accord with the dogma of racial theorists like Stoddard. He warned that whereas those of similar races may produce children without problems, "[w]here the parent stocks are very diverse . . . the offspring is . . . a walking chaos . . . quite worthless" (Stoddard 1921, 166). In spite of obvious contradictory evidence in life, these and similar ideas had been accepted as scientific truths in the nineteenth century, including the theory that different human races were effectively different species, and so their offspring would be infertile (Young 1995, 8). Again, it is difficult to know how this dogma could endure while being conspicuously undermined on a regular basis in various parts of the world, especially where the slave trade was active. Likewise, the idea that miscegenation led to physical degeneration was believed (5-6), but at the same time "those of mixed race were often invoked as the most beautiful human beings of all" (16).

Orwell's "two Eurasian derelicts" exemplify these alarmist ideas. Their entrance into the novel shows the author's feelings, when they "sidled up to Flory and cornered him like a pair of dogs asking for a game" (Orwell [1934] 2001, 123). They are obsequious, have imperfect English (a serious flaw for Orwell), and the "extraordinary creatures" (125) have to live off the charity of natives. Elizabeth describes them as "thin and weedy and cringing" (126), and Flory says that for conversing with them, he is exceptional (127). The *dénouement* of the novel serves as a compounded condemnation of their existence. When Ma Hla May has humiliated Flory in the church and the Eurasians throw her out, it is described as "perhaps the first useful deed of their lives" (285). The statement is slighting enough by itself, but the fact that it is also about the act of a mixed-race couple being exposed and separated implicitly prevents the possibility of progeny like the two Eurasians. Finally, as the expulsion is too late to have made a significant difference, its usefulness in any sense is puzzling.

Quite incredibly, Orwell had hoped that *Burmese Days* could play its part in fighting racism, and might also be popular in India and Burma. He told his publisher, Victor Gollancz, that he thought it possible the novel might do "a little to mitigate the horrors of the colour war" ([1934] 2001, viii), and he was also concerned that if an Indian or Burmese reader saw a name incorrectly written, "he will naturally be prejudiced

against the book," but with the novel as it was, he believed it could appeal to such readers (Orwell 2000, 379-380 and 388). I think that on both counts his optimism was very much misplaced. His attitudes to race certainly merit more attention and cannot solely be labelled as a product of the time: an obvious comparison, between Orwell's Dr. Veraswami and Forster's Dr. Aziz—from *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, ten years earlier—illustrates that Indians could be represented by British authors as more than shallow caricatures. To whatever extent he was influenced by his upbringing at home and school as well as his time in Burma, the three stories he set there were written in Britain and so they must have been the product of deep-seated feelings, rather than being reactions to immediate experiences. His candour as a writer meant that his philosophical intent could not quench his more visceral impulses.

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