

# George Orwell's Depiction of Imperialism in Burmese Days in the Light of Marxist Perspective

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**Abstract:** The current research article highlights the critical analysis of one of Orwell's major literary works namely *Burmese Days* and explores it deeply in the light of the Marxist perspective. The Marxist argument hegemony is the term that evolved by the influential Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci who found two forms of hegemony. These are the coercive hegemony and the consent hegemony which are closely related to imperialism. In this respect, Orwell to some extent, criticized the British imperial system but at the same time, he serves as a police member under his people's rule in Burma. Above all Orwell's experience as an imperial figure of the British colony in Burma granted him a clear idea about the hidden goals that stand behind the other countries' domination. According to this exploration he managed to write his novel *Burmese Days* as a critique of the behavior of British imperialism toward the native population of Burma. Through his literary work, Orwell conveys the indigenous sufferings, fears, concerns, interests, and oppressions. Thus, he describes a situation that violates people's rights in society. This occurred as a result of colonization which separates people into two groups with contradicting conditions, one is privileged and the other is unprivileged.

**Keywords:** Imperialism, colonialism, hegemony, coercive, consent, etc.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

George Orwell is a prominent literary figure of English literature particularly and global literature generally who carries on his shoulder the addressing of the socio-political issues that predominated societies of his period. In this research paper much concern is given to one of the major issues that occupied the attention of many critics, writers, philosophers, thinkers, and scholars which is Imperialism. It is considered the primary issue that threatens the life of people in most parts of the world in general and Eastern countries particularly. This event is crucial and occupies a high status in the mind and hearts of the nations of these developing countries that were situated under British imperialism. As a writer and critic who experienced the colonial authority as a colonizer and a member of the colonial system. Orwell's attitudes towards imperialism were based on his explored experience that resulted in his criticism of the British imperial authority by the touching of the suffering of the indigenous people who had been predominated. In this regard, Ronald J. Horvath writes, "Knowing how people feel about colonialism does not tell us what it is" (1972, p. 45).

Based on his exploration and experience in the British colony in Burma, Orwell discovered the secret destinations behind the hypocrisy of the British authority that always raise the motto of advancement and civilization to those backward people as considering the white man's burden. (Atkins, 1971, p. 29) Meanwhile, this experience is regarded as a window through which Orwell viewed the colonized people's circumstances and confirmed the mistreatment of them without taking any consideration of their respect and dignity as human beings in the first place not as primitive people who need to be educated and civilized. He discovered that the intention of the British existence in Burma was not for civilization and education but on the contrary for controlling the wealth, trade, hegemony, and navigation. Consequently, Orwell portrays imperialism as a rigorous structure in his literary works particularly his novel *Burmese Days* the center of our current study.

## **2. CONCEPT OF IMPERIALISM:**

Colonialism as a movement of predomination and enlargement started around the 18th and 19th centuries and as a school of thought it started around the 1950s and 1960s. It is associated with two important phases; voyage of discovery and profit-making trade. The main objective of colonization is to control the others' products. Therefore, the process of colonization is product marketing. The error of economics is associated with colonialism. A rereading of European history is necessary to recognize the dimensions, reasons, and goals that stand behind colonialism. Western minds are seen as more intelligent due to their thinking to discover, invent, and explore many things. Both imperialism and colonialism are terms that represent the predomination of the others as Ania Loomba writes, "are often used interchangeably" (1998, p. 1). As some critics see that colonialism is beneficial because it can bring about cultural, civilized, and cultural changes among the indigenous population of the countries that are being dominated. But on the contrary, Rupert Emerson points out that,

Whatever its achievements throughout the ages as one of the chosen instruments for the diffusion of civilization, those on whom colonialism has been imposed detest it for its besetting sin of arrogance. (1996, p. 12)

Apparently, the most feature of colonialism is the establishment of linguistic imperialism. Through language, colonization can be established. Colonial masters for their domination, try to establish cultural domination and this is established through language and this is called linguistic imperialism. Mother tongue, therefore, is informally acquired. It is unconscious where it is learned without training, articulation, and expressing of emotion through the mother tongue, so the acquiring of language through training is difficult. The creative purpose of the foreign language is not important. For colonial imperialism creative writing is not valuable in their mother tongue but in their language. Where in fact creative expression and articulation are possible in the mother tongue according to some critics. In light of this, colonial and post-colonial language is a dilemma. As Dean Baldwin and Patrick J. Quinn;

Under colonial rule, facility with English became essential to get ahead to a successful life, and hence many colonized people were forced (or chose) to learn English for the same reasons one needed Latin under the Romans. (2007, p. 15)

In this regard, colonialist writers found themselves in a dilemma of whether to use their language or a foreign language. Based on this, language is the basic thing for colonization to control other people. Thus, they started to establish the aspect of linguistic transcription.

## **3. EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF IMPERIALISM THROUGHOUT THE BOOK, BURMESE DAYS**

Throughout the book *Burmese Days* from the beginning to the end, it is observed that Orwell adopted ultimately the issue of Imperialism. There are many malicious techniques that the imperial authority uses to hegemonize their native subjects. They first focus on the well-known figures of society who have a great influence on people and consider them as elites who belong to their policies. The reflection of Orwell's disillusionment about the British imperialism represented by *Burmese Days* as Larkin writes, is as "a portrait of the dark side of the Raj, chronicling sordid and shameful episodes of empire life" (2009, p. ix). To control them, they first try to destroy their reputation in case of refusing to be supporters for them. This technique can be pointed out in Orwell's *Burmese Days* book,

We are not proceeding against a miserable clerk or police constable. We are proceeding against a high official, and with a high official, even when he is an Indian ... How does one ruin a clerk? Easy; an accusation, two dozen witnesses, dismissal, and imprisonment. (Orwell, 2009, p.8)

As occurred with Dr. Veraswami, the imperialists accused him of mutiny. To take him to prison and jail him, there should be an accusation. Because they did have not any accusation against the doctor, they pretended to accuse him of the rebellion and this denotes the political technique of colonialism. The colonizers utilize seditious propaganda to disturb the life of ordinary people in their false allegations. According to the book incidents, it is seen in the following context, "We must persuade the Europeans that the doctor holds disloyal anti – British opinions" (2009, p.8).

Furthermore, the imperial leaders intended that the Europeans must suspect the loyalty of the native people as a kind of colonial strategy to fight the official figures of the native Indians and the doctor is an instance. In this case, the targeted figure should be ruined in his fame and reputation in their society. According to the book events, it is evident that *Burmese Days* portrays chiefly the issue of imperialism in India in general and Burma particularly. Many features of the imperial system can be indicated through the imperial leaders' practices such as racism, ethnic discrimination,

oppression, bigotry, intolerance, sedition, and exploitation. In this context, British colonialism considers the natives as black and treats them according to their color. It is declared “When a man has a black face, suspicion is proof” (p.9). Another form of imperialism is the artificial trials for their opponents and this occurred clearly with the native Indian doctor Veraswami. As long as there is a colonial system, there should be restlessness, resentment, depression, racial discrimination, hatred, and marginalization.

According to the incidents of BD, the British imperial in Burma that Orwell is critiquing, they used both Gramsci’s hegemonies, the coercive and the consent. The coercive hegemony is represented by utilizing powerful military devices such as weapons, espionage, trials, repression, persecution, violence, and terrorism while the consent one is represented by the demographical and cultural changes via considering the colonial discursive as the central discursive in the country. In the light of the Marxist arguments, to hegemonize people means to alienate them socially, politically, economically, culturally, religiously, and mentally as well. The imperial aim to control people is meant to destroy their heritage, art, language, culture, and moral values. One feature of orientalism can be seen through the consent hegemony due to the soft instruments that can be used which is known as the intellectual invasion that intends to change the linguistic forms and styles of thinking of the colonized people.

Based on the imperialistic authority policies using the oriental soft strategy that is matched properly to the consent hegemony is counted as the successful way to control the native colonized nations. In this way, they can manage the thinking and passion of the natives as in the case of Veraswami who defends the British and believes that his countrymen are less civilized. Notably, this technique is the access of British imperialism to dominate the other nations. They consider their existence essential to civilize the colonized people. According to this allegation, British imperialism views the other nations as primitive and uneducated and they need to be civilized. This style of domination contributes in one way or the other in the change of the natives’ intellectuals, culture, style of life, language, behavior, and moral values. This quest according to Marx’s claims represents the consent hegemony that exploits the possibilities of the natives socially, economically, mentally, and politically which is meant by Marx the alienation.

To make people feel loneliness, restlessness, alienation, loss of identity, resentment, and disappointment is the main goal of imperialism. And how the imperial authority can control their subjects via utilizing soft instruments of domination that can alienate them? This can be called consent hegemony. Imperialism cultivates the hatred against the natives in their subjects and this can be shown in the case of the lady Elizabeth who has come recently from England. Immediately after her reaching, she met Flory the English character in Burma who praises little bit the natives but she bothered his way in defending the natives and attempting to praise their culture, heritage, and more. Colonizers see themselves as superior while their colonized were considered as inferior. Therefore, the relationship between the imperial authority and their subjects is based on discrimination and is similar to the relationship between slave and master, superior and inferior, upper and lower, poor and rich, etc. Dr. Veraswami is considered an elite by Europeans in Burma. He admires their culture, attitude, and thinking and regards their existence in Burma as a blessing that enlightens his people. According to him, the British colonizers can assist the natives to be educated, and civilized. The influence of the orientalist’s principles in the change of the Indian doctor’s consciousness who has a positive point of view toward colonialism. According to BD incidents, Dr Veraswami later has become a member of the British imperial club and this socio-political status will never be given to any ordinary man of the natives.

According to the book’s series of events, it is clear that Orwell as a critic of the imperial system has conflicted thoughts about imperialism. As Sheldon comments that it was Orwell’s experience in Burma that led him to realize his desire for writing. (1991, p. 107) From one side, he is well aware of its harmful repercussions on both the colonizers and their native colonized. Besides his ability to express the hypocritical and dubious actions and the European viewpoints who stake their allegation in the East through Flory’s speech. On the other side, it appears that Orwell is unable to entirely transcend a colonial perspective and imagine the natives as full-fledged human beings. His portrayal of them almost borders on caricature and cipher. As a former member of the imperial system, Orwell has a sympathetic attitude toward the English trapped within it and offers some justifications for them. In this context, imperialism is not acceptable as the reader is left to conclude. Orwell hates to pretend the colonial authority, but at the same time, he follows the imperial norms as a member of British imperialism in the East. He is considered as one of the Western orientals like Forster who came to the east (India) to study history, culture, nature, demographical dimension, and social norms of the dominated nations and tried to reconstruct the east according to their perceptions.

It is said that racism, discrimination, and ethnic dissertations are not caused by Europeans; rather, it is aided by them. The prejudice displayed by the Europeans varies throughout the story. Ellis is one such person who believes that the

locals are intrinsically inferior and who expresses this opinion by using various insults. Others may not be as overtly dismissive of the natives, but they undoubtedly think they are less civilized, if not quite as nasty or low. Then some do not recognize the distinctions between the races and like Flory, even find something to appreciate about their way of life. Indeed, racism eventually contributed to the perpetuation of the colonial experiment by providing a rationale for the subjugation of the Burmese. The Burmese, according to this, feel inferior towards the British, and this behavior is legitimized by the English authority. In this respect,

Orwell believed that despite its benevolent nature, there was something evil about English Imperialism. The evil sprang partly from the unenviable position of the Anglo-Indians. There were, of course, men who hated Orientals, people like Ellis who were sorry that Flory hadn't ordered the police to shoot at the crowd during the riot, or who hoped that a serious rebellion would give the English an excuse for repression. (2009, p. 341)

According to the Marxist term, consent hegemony as a flexible technique of imperialism that is matched closely to orientalism can be observed through culture. When it comes to the English and Burmese cultures, the book is conflicted. The English seem to have very little to give in terms of culture, their lethargy, despotism, stupidity, and hypocrisy overshadow all the splendors of their history, literature, music, philosophy, linguistics, and art. It is unlikely that this book will support the idea that the English have anything to give the Burmese in the way of renowned Western civilization. Orwell, though, finds it difficult to openly embrace Burmese culture either. Based on this, the relationship between Flory and Elizabeth is so fascinating. It is there for people to gaze at and admire for its exoticism. The qualities of the Burmese culture are not explored here. In this regard, the Burmese culture is shown as a mirror for the English rather than being analyzed in terms of its qualities. Veraswami assertions on the scarcity of Burmese culture and civilization. As a result, neither culture is wholly praised nor derided, rather, they both provide fascinating insights into Orwell's views on imperialism. Hence, in the case of Flory, the central character of the book who represents Orwell struggles to reconcile his identities as an English figure and simultaneously an opponent of imperialism, ultimately dooming himself. So his lack of self-awareness brought about his demise. In the same context, Ellis serves as a reminder of how the system corrupted both the colonizers and the colonized throughout the age of imperialism and serves as a model for many other Europeans of the era.

Moreover, Flory considers how he must resist becoming involved in the battle with Veraswami and U Po Kyin. These statements serve as an example of the unnoticeable ways in which even the most informed Englishman can still hold attitudes towards the Indigenous that of superiority and patronage. It is acceptable to show affection toward or to treat indigenous like children. It is not acceptable to view them as equals deserving of genuine respect and friendship. This appears insignificant in comparison to Ellis's vile remarks, yet it is this more covert sort of racism that sustains empire. If one can always convince oneself in private that there is an insurmountable intellectual and cultural division between Europeans. The relationship between the imperial Europeans and the natives is shown in the following speech of the story's course "We are masters, and you the beggars"... "You beggars keep your place" (2009, p. 32).

In the case of the attitude of the English female character Elizabeth who represents the clear side of British imperialism in Burma. She worries that she is getting too close to the locals and that her time in Burma will not be spent trying to comprehend or question the natives' way of life. Her viewpoints on how people of different races should get along with one another are the basis for this opinion. These beliefs, therefore, are unchangeable and unalterable. Flory should not cross certain lines because he is white and when he does, Elizabeth thinks that her world is in danger.

Although Orwell assures his readers in the final sentence of the book that Elizabeth is the ideal memsahib and hence not likely to alter at all. She is a close-minded figure. To be honest, she has only recently reached Burma and had little opportunity to construct her opinions. One of the things that Orwell criticizes as one of the major objectionable reasons for imperialism is the persistent close-mindedness and sense of cultural and racial superiority pointed out by several English figures in the book, including Elizabeth.

One feature of imperialism can be seen through practicing violation and exploitation. And this exploitation can be performed in different forms physically, sexually, socially, politically, and economically. In the meanwhile, Flory exploited Ma Hla May sexually by taking advantage of her need emotionally and financially. Further, he treated her disrespectfully. In this situation, it appears the imperial inclination of exploitation practiced against the female native sexually by treating their victim violently regarding them as servants. Their intention was only to satisfy their desires without taking any consideration of their humanity, rights, morality, respect, and social norms. This action can be observed in the course of the conversation between Flory and Ma Hla May,



Get out of this room! I told you to go. I don't want you in here after I've done with you.' 'That is a nice way to speak to me! You treat me as though I were a prostitute.' 'So you are. Out you go,' he said, pushing her out of the room by her shoulders. He kicked her sandals after her. (2009, p. 59)

Comparing Flory and Veraswami's perspectives on imperialism is one of the first section's most fascinating features. The two men supply the most fundamental defenses for both sides and are equally voracious in their ideas and principles. According to Veraswami, the Europeans brought civilization, improved infrastructure, legal system, progress, modernity, and so on. And this is one of the orientalist inclinations that deceive the colonized people. Conversely the Europeans, according to Flory, are destroying Burmese culture, building prisons, and referring to them as advancement, exploiting the Burmese and giving the Indian money lender priority, and ultimately telling the "lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them" (2009, p.40).

From a colonial perspective, the British asserted that their stay in India was advantageous for the advancement of the country's extremely backward population which required British domination. As a result, they saw the native Indians as an inferior race that needed to be cared for and ruled by a superior race that is the British. The English had a superiority complex that led to racism, the othering process, and the exclusion of Indians from white social angles. Based on this, Ellis emphasizes the pervasive racist British attitude that white people are superior to the indigenous people and that Indians are banned to join the English club in India by saying the aforementioned racial statements. They should not be included in the white circles as well. Therefore, they should remain as the trodden people and be aware of their surroundings and limits. As cited in Fatma Kapakli's article in which Memmi and Fanon mentioned in their books that "Indians have been brainwashed and made to believe that a person of white skin is superior to one of dark skin" (20014, p. 1216).

For Orwell, Socialism is morally necessary for it's including of the main perfect features as freedom, justice, and equality. While the policy of the second form of imperialism namely orientalism can be seen in the case of Dr. Veraswami who is considered as an elite to colonizers. He has been tempted and has become more admirer in their existence in Burma. Besides, his belief that the British existence in their country can greatly help to civilize the primitive Burmese People. In this case, it reveals the extent of imperialism's influence on the social consciousness not only of the ordinary people but also of the educated who illuminate the society. Due to his admiration for the British, Dr. Veraswami feels grateful to the colonizers. On the contrary, Flory, the English character, says that the English are existing in India for the sake of their interests, concerns, money, trade, and domination. According to the Marxist perspective, the main reason behind hegemony is to alienate the natives economically, socially, politically, and culturally. In other words, British imperialism exploits the Indian land not for the sake of civilization, education, or humanitarian values as they always pretend but on the contrary there is a perceiving evil behind the white mask. The evidence presents thus for suggesting Orwell's *BD* portrays the events in Burma at the end of British imperialism realistically and that he uses the English club in Burma as a metaphor to show the reader the authority struggle between the West British and the East Burmese. Hence, the English club is described by Orwell as "the seat of the English power" (*Attitudes to Imperialism*, p. 61).

The color of the Burmese character Veraswami is perceived as an obstacle to getting into the British club. Even though he admires the British culture and praises the Englishmen, he is not allowed in the group of white members. He feels alienation even in his country because he does not belong to either the English or Burmese cultures. He begins to live in social isolation. He supports blindly the British presence in Burma without hesitation and has a naïve faith in the supremacy of the English. His caricature-like description in Orwell's writing may be interpreted as a criticism of the natives who satisfy with the colonial system and work with the British as elites to advance socially. Above all, the reality that Englishmen are there to exploit the indigenous population's land and resources cannot be disputed. As a result, Orwell compares the seizure of Burmese land and Burmese women in the book. Even the kind Flory who has the greatest tolerance, friendliness, morality, and moderation against the Burmese people, freely abuses the Burmese women sexually.

Thus, to sum up, George Orwell recognizes in *Burmese Days* that the Englishmen are in Burma to exploit the country's resources despite claiming that they are providing civilization. But they assassinate or destroy the distinctive Burmese culture. As well as Flory's suicide may have represented his conviction that English presence in Burma is not necessary and ought to terminate. Flory's views represent Orwell's "the empire as a system in which he could not continue to participate and keep his self-respect" (2009, p.255). As a consequence, in the book, by ceasing to be a colonizer in Burma, he puts an end to imperialism there and allows the others to live their lives as they like. Based on this, it is

obvious that Orwell's attitude toward imperialism is quite straightforward since he only sees it as a type of political and economic oppression meant to benefit the oppressors. Consequently, Orwell's thoughts on equality and liberty are rooted in his time in Burma as a colonial officer in control of a large population at the age of twenty. Hence, Orwell directly links colonialism to economic inequality as two instances of the same type of injustice, noting at the same time that imperialism is just the most over form of inequality "Foreign oppression is a much more obvious, understandable evil than economic oppression" (2009, p.93), he adds.

Although, Orwell acknowledges that the exploitation of colonies is a prerequisite for ensuring the prosperity of a capitalist nation like England. Orwell criticizes Western dishonesty in trying to justify the binary system of ruler and subject even though they are aware of how morally repugnant it is. The dialectical patterns that existed in England and Burma can be compared if we look at the questions of class and imperialism/colonialism in this context. There is not the same level of class division in the colonies as there was when Orwell was a child, the most significant factor was not whether you had attended the proper schools but whether your skin was technically white, not black. So treatment within the British colony in Burma was based on this racial discrimination.

#### **4. CONCLUSION:**

It is concluded that George Orwell as a socio-political satirist had intently adopted the criticism of British imperialism, however, he is one of its members. Throughout his book *Burmese Days*, Orwell explored all the socio-political issues that are related to the practices of the imperial authority there in Burma. In comparison to the Marxist argument that is coined by Gramsci, hegemony is a new term used in connecting with both terms of imperialism and orientalism under the field of colonialism. Hence, imperialism represents the violent instruments of colonization while orientalism represents the soft instruments of colonization. According to the Marxist allegations, both of these political movements are seeking for predomination of others in various ways. These can be similar to a large extent to that of Gramsci, the coercive hegemony and the consent hegemony. The first encompasses the violent tools of imperial domination such as massacres, military force, trials, cheating trials, oppression, rebellion accusations, racism, and bigotry. While the second takes into consideration the cultural, social, and linguistic changes of the native populations such as fashion, food, architecture, language, imitation, and style of life. Besides considering the English language as the main language instead of the mother tongue to be the language of politics, trade, administration, arts, literature, and education. Thus, in this essay, all these issues of imperial practices had been analyzed properly in the light of the Marxist perspective throughout the book of *Burmese Days*.

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