

Treatment of imperialism in orwell's "shooting an elephant" assignment



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Shooting an Elephant: George Orwell Prepared by: A. B. M. Mukhlesur

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Professor of English e- mail: rahman.om Imperialism, as the

term suggests, is a practice introduced by some stronger nations for

controlling and dominating other weaker ones often after defeating them in a

war. It has been a highly controversial issue and many writers have

expressed their strong protest against it. Throughout his life, George Orwell

has been very vocal against this issue. In “ Shooting an Elephant”, he deals

with the issue very critically using his own experience in the British India.

Thus, the essay appears to be something more than an autobiographical

writing. Shooting an Elephant” is a record of Orwell’s attitude towards

imperialism. In the essay, he points out some negative impacts of

imperialism. During his tenure as a sub divisional police officer in Moulmein,

in lower Burma under the British rule, Orwell had had some bitter experience

about imperialism. He observed a kind of perpetual enmity between the

British rulers and the native Burmese. The Burmese people used to tease the

British whenever they got a chance while the British tried to oppress them

with force.

As a police officer, Orwell was an obvious target of the natives, though in

mind he was ‘ all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the

British’. In a job like that, he could see ‘ the dirty work of empire at close

quarters’. All this was ‘ perplexing and upsetting’ to a young officer like him.

As he says: All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire

I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make

my job impossible. According to Orwell, such feelings are 'the normal by-products of imperialism'.

To exemplify this, he narrates an incident that exposed to him the evil impacts of imperialism. One morning the sub-inspector of a police station at the other side of the town informed him that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar and requested him to take necessary steps about it. Orwell at once set off with his rifle, an old ?? 44 Winchester. It was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. As he reached the spot, he found the dead body of an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, killed by the elephant. Instantly he sent to a nearby friend to borrow an elephant rifle.

With that rifle in hand, Orwell went to the paddy field below where the elephant was. As he moved forward, the whole population of the place 'flocked out of their houses' and followed him: It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. As Orwell found the elephant out, he became confused about what to do with it. The elephant was eating grass in the muddy paddy field. It looked 'no more dangerous than a cow'. Evidently, the attack of 'must' had already passed off. In every respect, it was reasonable to leave the elephant and come back.

However, glancing round at the crowd around him, Orwell realized that he had got to shoot the elephant. The crowd was eagerly waiting for this. It was at this moment that he first grasped 'the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East'. He perceived that 'when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys': For it is the condition of his

rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the “ natives” and so in every crisis he has got to do what the “ natives” expect of him.

He realized that when he had sent for the elephant rifle he was committed to shoot the elephant. After coming all this way with the rifle in hand followed by two thousand people, there was no way of him to leave the place without shooting the elephant. If he did so, the crowd would surely laugh at him.

Finally, to save the honor of him and that of other Europeans, Orwell decided to shoot the elephant. Though he had had no previous experience of shooting an elephant, he was more concerned of the prestige than his own safety.

At last, discarding all fear, he pulled the trigger and shot bullet after bullet to confirm the killing. The incident of shooting the elephant gave rise to a much-talked issue. It also created a tremendous negative impact on Orwell's mind. Even the opinion of his fellow Europeans differed ??? the older people supported his act, while the younger ones condemned it and argued that ‘ it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie’. However, deep in his mind Orwell always knew that he had shot the elephant ‘ solely to avoid looking a fool’. Shooting an Elephant” is not merely a personal essay, it is a record of Orwell's negative attitude towards imperialism. The autobiographical narration makes the essay more agreeable and endearing. As a true politician and freethinker, Orwell analyses the issue logically and expresses his views without any pretension. His first-hand experience makes his arguments forceful and convincing. The free, frank comments of the writer make the essay more interesting and acceptable to the general readers.

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