

The fear in being laughed at in shooting an elephant

Literature



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George Orwell's seemingly obvious heroic act of killing an elephant is not motivated by any heroism at all. On the contrary, the poor elephant was a victim of George's cowardice, for in order to avoid being laughed at, George found no other alternative than to shoot it. Due to British Imperialism, George finds himself in Burma, working as a sub-divisional police officer. His plight in Burma does not in any way embody the "controlling" image of Britain, for there he finds himself more of a persecuted Englishman, a poor intruder who is a butt of people's anger and joke.

Burmese people would find ways and means to mistreat him (even if he was the one who holds a rifle in one hand) or to laugh at him, like what they did to him in the football field where someone tripped him over and instead of lending a helping hand the watching Burmese crowd laughed at him (Secker and Warburg 1950). His superior position as a police officer and a representative of the British Empire does not bring in the fear, if not the respect, of the colonized people.

As a representative of a country that controls Burma, George could have been expected to act tyrannical and a real big shot but instead he appears as any ordinary man caught in the crossfire of Britain and Burma. In fact, imperialism did not impress George. He considered it a form of oppression and he felt sympathy for the Burmese people. He disliked his job, witnessing in "close quarters" the tortured appearance of prisoners who were the products of the tyrannical deeds of imperialism (Secker and Warburg 1950). If Britain wants somebody strong and in control to represent her in Burma, George was obviously a bad choice.

First, he was not an advocate of colonialism or imperialism, second he was a man endowed with a soft heart, and if only things were different, it seemed likely that he would prefer to be friends with the Burmese. There is no indication that he felt superior over the Burmese nor did he despise them as a people, his desire to “drive a bayonet into a Buddhist’s priest’s guts” is motivated more by his anger in the latter’s acts of making his life miserable and laughable in their country rather than of real hatred (Secker and Warburg 1950).

Nevertheless, in spite of George reluctance in carrying out his duty and his sympathy to the Burmese, he understands his position in colonized Burma. He knew he was perceived to be a subjugator, belonging to a superior race and he should act that way no matter what. The incident with the elephant had enlightened him to this idea. George was put in a position to either follow through with his convictions or act according to the expectations of the Burmese people. George had no intention to ever kill the elephant.

When he responded to the call to pursue it, he only brought a small .22 Winchester rifle that he knew would not be capable of killing the elephant, but would be instrumental only in terrorizing it. Actually, the elephant was a tamed one who is in a ‘must’. Though it had brought some damages and even killed an Indian collie, by the time that George overtook it, he was peacefully eating grass in a paddy. When George saw it in that state he decided then and there that it would be a mistake to kill it. In fact, he considers it murder to kill the elephant (Secker and Warburg 1950).

He saw no point then in avenging the death of an Indian coolie by killing the now “peaceful” elephant. Following him through the paddy however were <https://assignbuster.com/the-fear-in-being-laughed-at-in-shooting-an-elephant/>

2000 happy “ yellow faces” excited to see him kill the runaway beast. The Burmese crowd considers it a fun thing to see the Englishman kill the elephant. Armed with an elephant rifle, the one he borrowed from a friend after he knew it killed an Indian, the Englishman looked like a fearless British imperialist conqueror all set to subjugate and colonize a new land (in the form of a helpless elephant)(Tyner, 2005, 266).

This is, after all, the picture that imperialist Britain had consciously evoked upon the minds of their colonized subjects. The Englishmen are conquerors, all ready to defeat their enemy. Therefore, George had the obligation to impress the Burmese of his superior power as a conqueror even if he had to only deal with an elephant. George realized at that moment that as a conquering master he was also a “ slave” to the people’s expectations, for in order to impress the Burmese of his superiority he had to cast aside what he think deep inside is right.

In reality, the oppressor becomes the oppressed. He further added that this is a predicament imposed by imperialism on white people in the East, “ to face a long struggle not to be laughed at” (Secker and Warburg 1950). George was young, and as he said ill educated. He was not surely caught up with the pride and power that goes with putting men under forceful dominion. He finds no satisfaction in putting up a show just to appear heroic.

He had his own moral values; he knew that certain things are wrong. Yet, the Burmese crowd expected him to shoot the elephant, not to do so, in their opinion would be laughable. He would appear as a coward and incapable of subjugation, an image contrary to Burmese expectations. Besides, there is a probability that the elephant after all, may pursue him and kill him in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-fear-in-being-laughed-at-in-shooting-an-elephant/>

same way that it did with the Indian (Secker and Warburg 1950). That would be a laughable scene, too.

And George had enough laughter to contend with in his stay in Burma. Therefore, in obedience to the wills of the Burmese people, George reluctantly shoots the elephant until it collapses and eventually died. According to him, he killed the elephant in order not to be laughed at (Secker and Warburg 1950). But in a way, the act was also a sign of his cowardice, he could not stand up for what he thought was right in his heart even at the expense of being laughed at.