

# “shooting an elephant”

Literature, Russian Literature



" Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell in 1936 Imperialism is " the creation and/or maintenance of an unequal economic, cultural, and territorial relationship, usually between states and often in the form of an empire, based on domination and subordination"[1]. During the British colonial period from the late 16th century to the 19th century, Britain assembled an empire which in 1922 held sway over a population of about 458 million people. The United Kingdom had several colonies, dominions, protectorates, mandates and other territories all over the world called the British Empire. In the short story " Shooting an Elephant" we meet the first person narrator and the main character, possibly the author George Orwell himself, who is a sub-divisional police officer in lower Burma around the time of first World War. He is British, white and hated. Because of his British origin, he is being discriminated against by the natives although he is against the British taking colonies and against imperialism. In the following quotes we see how the natives behave when he is around: " When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee looked another way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. " And " In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves". [2] The natives are jeering and bullying the narrator and it is perplexing and upsetting for him. Suddenly his sub-inspector phones him because of an elephant attack. He sets off in a hurry and arrives quickly with a Winchester rifle because he thinks the noise of the gunfire will be loud enough to frighten the animal away. However, as soon as he sees a dead man's body sprawling in the mud because of the elephant's aggression, he sends an orderly to a friend's house nearby to

borrow an elephant rifle. All of a sudden the natives show interest because they have seen the rifle and assume that he is going to shoot an elephant. This makes him vaguely uneasy. He had no intention of shooting an elephant, but decided to watch the elephant and make sure that it did not turn savage again and he only brought the rifle to defend himself. Instead of him being in control of the natives, they seem to have him under control. He has never shot a big animal before and doesn't feel comfortable about it. He is seemingly the leading actor and that's why he is uncomfortable about shooting such an expensive, beautiful and innocent animal. Meanwhile the natives expect him to shoot the elephant. He feels compelled to shoot the animal in the situation where he's surrounded by the natives, because he is afraid of losing face to the people he should be superior to as a representative of colonial power. If he doesn't shoot the elephant he becomes a fool and natives would be laughing even more at him. This point can be seen in the following quote. : " A white man mustn't be frightened in front of " natives"; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. " One must acknowledge that he is afraid of losing his pride. Accordingly he decides to pull the trigger and consider how to shoot it in the best way. Instantly the bullet hits the elephant and the big animal sags " flabbily" to its knees. The narrator thinks he is in control but in reality he is an absurd puppet. He is acting exactly like the others would have done. The elephant represents the British Empire. It kills a lot of people, damages things and dies slowly. Like the Empire becoming smaller

and smaller, the elephant shrinks and sags to its knees. “ At the second shot he did but collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him”. In this quotation the elephant appears as a helpless and incapable animal, which is abandoned and left behind. The British Imperial Police employed George Orwell in 1922 to 1927. He was forced to enforce laws that he basically disagreed with which meant that his disgust grew even more.[3] As a reader, I think Orwell wants to show the true face of imperialism and therefore the short story advocates for the imperialism’s cessation. In addition to that it also appeals ironically to the British to cease being a colonial power to preserve their own freedom. The British Empire had such a large area all over the world that it was known as: “ the sun never sets on the British Empire”. During the World War II and the five following decades, most of the territories became independent and in the 1980’s the decolonization was almost completed. At the transfer ceremony in 1997 where Hong Kong went from being British to Chinese, it signified for a lot of people “ the end of the Empire”. [4] You can say a lot about the moral issues inherent in shooting an elephant, but one thing is sure; the incident with the elephant leaves the narrator with a deep loathing for any kind of hunting and a deep awareness of his own role in the powerful oppression of machinery. ----- [1] The Dictionary of Human Geography, [2] Page 4, in the middle of the page [3] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Orwell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Orwell) [4] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire)