

Flory: a Pariah among the Anglo - Indians in *Burmese Days*

Tanvir Hasan Malik

Assistant Professor
Eastern University

Abstract:

This article attempts to explore the plight of the protagonist of George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. He is an Englishman feeling ill-at-ease in a Burmese outpost named Kyauktada during the Raj. Revolted by British racism and imperialism, disgusted by a native's knavery, disappointed in love, shunned by his countrymen, unable to come to terms with his lack of moral courage, and blemished by his birthmark, he inches towards his own doom. He becomes estranged from his surroundings until he is at the end of his tether. The drastic decision to end his own life appears a cowardly and an escapist act on his part but, at the same time, can be construed as his definitive protest against the wrongs committed by the people around him. The influence of autobiographical elements of the author on the protagonist's character should be taken into account as should be other characters in some of the famous works in the novel's genre in establishing him as an outcast among his compatriots.

Although a seminal work, *Burmese Days* heralds George Orwell's advent as a committed, conscientious and anti-imperialist author. Drawing on his experience in Burma where he served in the Indian Imperial Police, the novelist interweaves a story fraught with racial tension between the British and the natives, a native's depravity, and a Briton's antagonism towards racism and depravity. The protagonist — John Flory — is caught up in the vicious circle of love, intrigue, disillusionment and defamation until his back is to the wall, and he is unable to extract himself from it. He finds himself in a foreign country where

his countrymen have all but ostracized him for siding with a native regarding his inclusion into the Club and also for his firm stand against British imperialism. Flory's personality sets him apart from his smug compatriots and earns him the reader's respect. However, his anti-imperialistic views, birthmark, respect for Burmese indigenous culture, sincere love for Elizabeth, and loathing for the Burmese judge U Po Kyin nudge him – albeit ironically— towards his ultimate undoing.

Flory is an anti-imperialist. He sees through the inane British Empire that claims to have brought "progress" to the far reaches of the world, including the Raj in the Indian sub-continent. His anti-imperialistic thoughts gush out in his conversations with Dr. Veraswami – a champion of the Raj. In the face of Dr. Veraswami's support for British rule in India he says: "We're not civilizing them (the natives), we're only rubbing our dirt on to them. Where's it going to lead, this uprush of modern progress as you call it (1975)"?

In another place in the novel we come to see his realization of the true colours and the ulterior motives of the British in India ; he says: "I'm here to make money, like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man's burden humbug. The pukka sahib pose. It's so boring". The narrator gives us more insight into his psyche in the following lines: " He had grasped the truth about the English and the Empire. The Indian Empire is a despotism – benevolent, no doubt. But still a despotism with theft as its final object. And as to the English of the East, the Sahiblog, Flory had come so to hate them from living in their society, that he was quite incapable of being fair to them". He finds the imposition of British law on the Indian people a repressive measure on the part of the British. He tells the Doctor – whose zealous adherence to the Empire makes him a foil to Flory in their conversations : " Pax Britannica is its proper name. And in any case, who is the pax for? The money-lender and the lawyer. Of course we keep peace in India, in our own interest, but what does all this law and order business boil down to? More banks and more prisons – that's all it means". He foresees the imminent doom of the Raj even though he is a mere timber-merchant in Burma. He stands firm as the only conscientious person among the British populace in the small Burmese town who wanted the imperialistic yoke off India's neck. In this regard, Flory's antagonism to Kiplingesque notions of British rule is quite discernible here as Kipling strived to glorify the Raj. In the novel, we see Flory finds it boring to "sit in Kipling-haunted little clubs". Flory's strong and left-leaning "Bolshie" thoughts alienate him from the likes of Mrs. Lackersteen, Ellis and Westfield. In effect, Flory's ideology is in direct conflict

with the so-called 'five beatitudes of the *pukka sahib*' in the small Burmese town Kyauktada:

"Keeping up our prestige,
 The firm hand (without the velvet glove),
 We white men must hang together,
 Give them an inch and they'll take an ell, and
Esprit de Corps" (181)

His aversion to these abominable precepts paved the way for his segregation from the other English people.

In some ways Flory's condition reminds one of Franz Fanon's insight into the colonial condition. In his first book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon explores the effect of colonial rule on the psyche of the colonized; the author also feels rejected by his French peers in spite of having French education because of his skin colour. Both Flory and Fanon are locked in a repressive colonial situation and are opposed to the draconian measures meted out to the subjugated natives. However, Flory's skin colour is not the mark of his segregation from his peers as was the case with Fanon -- it is his beliefs and ideology. He is up against his own countrymen because, unlike them, he believes in the rights of the Burmese masses. His anti-imperialistic creed makes him stand out of his bigoted compatriots.

However, Flory's anti-imperialistic zeal is not quite beyond criticism: when Flory thinks that the Indian Empire is a "benevolent" despotism, he is contradicting himself: benevolence and despotism cannot go hand in hand and, moreover, if "theft is its final object", then the polity of the Empire can be seen as a malevolent force — not as a "benevolent" one. Here Flory seems to be torn between two contradictory factors: the remnants of his love of the Empire and his hate for it. Raymond Williams' comments about the author reflect Flory's dilemma about the Empire:

"he had come to understand and reject the imperialism he was serving. Imperialism, he wrote, at the end of his change, was an evil thing, and the sooner he chucked his job and got out of it the better. Yet within its service his response was more complicated. He was stuck, as he later saw it, between hatred of the Empire he was serving and rage against the native people who opposed it and made his immediate job difficult. Theoretically, he says, he was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors. Practically he was at

once opposed to the dirty work of imperialism and involved in it" (8-9).

Reverberations of Williams' words can also be detected in what the post-colonial critic Elleke Boehner has to say regarding Orwell's divided view on imperialism. She thinks that Orwell could not fully grow out of his colonialist mindset. She says:

"Orwell's self-declared purpose in *Burmese Days* as in his subsequent work was to expose the hypocrisy of the British Establishment. The novel is repeatedly interrupted by anti-imperial invective. Yet if the work condemns, cursing 'Pox Britannica', it also holds back from a full assault...in *Burmese Days*, though he is outspoken and deliberately oppositional, his sympathies remain divided "(160-1).

This "divided" mindset is quite evident in the author's celebrated essay "Shooting an Elephant". Notwithstanding his strong invective and some very powerful and pregnant passages in it against British colonialism in Burma, Orwell does not miss the chance to criticize the natives e.g. he writes about some Burmese young men " the sneering yellow faces of young men"(91). Referring to members of a particular race by their skin-colour can be considered severely and unpardonably prejudiced and racist.

In this regard, Edward Said's critique of orientalism becomes relevant. If seen through Saidian eyes, Flory as a westerner is just 'romanticizing' the very idea of the East and its people; when he is considering the natives defenceless beings against their colonial rulers, he is merely depicting them as weak, irrational and the feminized "other", and in doing this, conversely, he is elevating the colonizers i.e. the West to a strong, rational and masculine stature. In his book *Orientalism* (1978) Said posits that no westerner has been able to appreciate the spirit of the Orient reductively and shows that a long tradition of false and romanticized stereotyping of Asia has been prevalent in the Occident which served as fodder for American and British imperial machinations. Flory can be said to be an agent of this. Even if he is not conscious of it, subconsciously it must have its effect on him. At the surface level, he is all for the natives' rights but at a deeper level he is perhaps biased against them. At the least, one can say there is an ambivalence in him.

Flory's birthmark represents much more than meets the eye. It can be interpreted in many ways: it can represent the mark of shame for his inability to face his countrymen's imperialistic exploitation of the natives. In this connection Jeffrey Meyers writes:

"Flory, of course, is ashamed, but his failure to come to terms with the intolerable colonial situation is symbolized by his hideous birthmark – as much a sign of guilt, a mark of Cain, as an indication and isolation and alienation. He is unable to mediate between the three worlds of Burma: The English, the "native" and the natural world of the jungle"(69-70).

Malcolm Muggeridge, who knew the author personally, detects an autobiographical strain in Flory's birthmark: "As one can see very clearly in his writings about himself, and in his self-impersonations in his fiction, he was obsessed with the notion that he was physically unattractive. There is, for instance, the ugly birthmark which always shows up with particular vividness on the face of Flory, the hero of *Burmese Days*, in moments of stress and passion." (Muggeridge, online source, retrieved January 16, 2005). The mark also poses a threat to his love-life; when Elizabeth finally turns down his romantic advances, she feels disgusted by his "hideous birthmark". It appears as if but for the birthmark they would live happily ever after. After Flory has committed suicide, the birthmark fades away: "with death, the birthmark had faded immediately, so that it was no more than a faint grey stain". The birthmark, then, is not only a physical blemish but also a psychological one.

And as it disappears "immediately", the psychological trait of it becomes all the more clear; as long as he is alive, it pains and shames him but with death that comes to an end and that is why it becomes "a faint grey stain". When we see him in the company of his countrymen in the Club, we discover that in reaction to Ellis's racist comments his birthmark twitches and so do his facial features but he cannot pluck up the courage to stand up to him and vent his anger: "Flory sat nursing Flo's head in his lap, unable to meet Ellis's eyes. At the best of times his birthmark made it difficult for him to look people in the face. And when he made ready to speak, he could feel his voice trembling – for it had a way of trembling when it should have been firm; his features, too, sometimes twitched uncontrollably". The birthmark here pulls him back from reacting to the injustice perpetrated by his fellow Englishmen and, thus, comes to represent the lack of moral courage. It is an externalization of the faults and foibles of his persona. But at the same time, it also stands for the laudable attributes of his character. The birthmark could be a manifestation of his difference – his 'otherness'. It made him see Burma's forests and trees, like its people. This 'otherness', ironically, manifests the humane qualities—namely opposition towards racism of his compatriots – in him. "May be without it he may have been one of the English expatriates" (online discussion posting). Its very presence makes him stand out

among the English in that small British outpost. But for it he would be – in the author's language -- one of the "petty sahiblog". This physical deformity in Flory has a parallel in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. The hero Philip's deformed foot in that novel, like Flory's birthmark, is a mark of debility that clings to him all the time. "The birthmark is similar to Maugham's hero in *Of Human Bondage*. It probably indicates an indelible perceived deficit the person is stuck with and forever feels at a disadvantage" (online discussion posting). Like Flory's birthmark, Philip also feels ashamed of his club foot and his amorous advances get spurned by the mean and callous Mildred just as Flory's get rejected by Dorothy. However, the settings of the two novels are different i.e. *Burmese Days* takes place in a remote colonial small town of the Raj but the plot of *Of Human Bondage* is set entirely in Europe. Also, Philip, at the end of the novel, marries and settles down and immerses himself in the arts temporarily but Flory neither marries nor dabbles in the arts; his life ends in a tragic suicide and he remains a timber-merchant until his death. Flory's ending is tragic, Philip's is not.

Flory is a typical Orwellian protagonist. He shares the middle-class background of Comstock of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and Bowling of *Coming Up for Air*. All of them are misfits in the surroundings they live. While Flory is detached from his countrymen in Burma, Bowling is stuck in a static English society with World War II looming large, and Comstock struggles not to conform to the norms of a decadent middle-class milieu. Even though Comstock does not commit suicide like Flory, he gives in to the typical money-driven values of the English bourgeoisie to which he was entirely opposed previously. This surrender to the so-called "aspidistra values" is tantamount to Flory's committing suicide. An undercurrent of pessimistic strain can be detected in the Orwellian hero. Orwell biographer George Bowker writes:

"Flory's situation had become evermore oppressive . Alienated from Anglo-Indian society, and always in danger of discovery, he had kept his own counsel – the silent heretic taking refuge in his secret inner world ...but he found such a silence corrupting, and such a life sterile and increasingly intolerable. His mind was enslaved by a repressive system. The theme would come to dominate his (Orwell's) life and work. Flory was the forefather, to some degree, of all Orwellian protagonists, most notably Winston Smith (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*)" (93).

Critic Raymond Williams says regarding *Burmese Days*: "We can now recognize... the deep Orwell pattern: the man who tries to break from the standards of his group but who is drawn back into it and, in this case, destroyed".

The protagonists also share the stamp of Orwell's own childhood and life experiences. Comstock's discomfiture amid the richer boys as well as Flory's humiliation at school are redolent of Orwell's own experience at Eton. The apocalyptic doom envisaged by Bowling reminds the reader of young Orwell's sense of insecurity. As Jeffrey Meyers writes, "The overwhelming doom that threatens the young Orwell also threatens Bowling in *Coming Up For Air*" (28).

On the other hand, Flory can also be seen vis-a-vis other literary characters of contemporary English literature. Fielding in *A Passage to India* is also caught up in a similar situation in which he tries to strike a balance between his love of Indians and his loyalty to the British. But unlike Flory, Fielding redeems himself in not committing suicide and trying to bridge the gap between Indians and the British. Jeffrey Meyers comments: " *Burmese Days* is a far more pessimistic book than *A Passage to India*, because official failures are not redeemed by successful personal relations. There are no characters, like Fielding and Mrs Moore, who are able to prevail against the overwhelming cruelty of the English and maintain a civilized standard of behaviour". Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has two characters worthy of being compared with Flory. Marlow is hurt seeing the miserable plight of the natives in the Congo at the hands of their colonial masters and Kurtz. Here Marlow's journey has more of a metaphysical character whereas Flory's is very empirical and political in nature. Kurtz's apparent sympathy for the natives ends up in a nightmarish episode when he dies shouting "the horror! the horror!" Flory's characteristics are thus diametrically opposite to Kurtz's as the former is out to emancipate the colonized but the latter not only subjugates them but also manipulates them to be worshipped like a god-like figure. Whereas Flory exemplifies the political principle expounded by Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748): "If a democratic republic subdues a nation in order to govern them as subjects, it exposes its own liberty", Kurtz is the last person to adopt them. According to Montesquieu, in order for a government to form, a division of power or "separation of powers" is needed among three branches or agents with equal but different powers; but Kurtz assumes the stature of God among natives and holds them under his sway. Fowler, in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, is marooned in a similar paradoxical situation. He lives in a political world he rejects morally and inwardly. But Greene endorses a positive note, using Fowler's character to reflect the inanity of values and precepts which his adversary Pyle stands for. Another Greene character of the same mould is Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*. Perhaps Scobie resembles Flory more than Fowler. Both Flory and Scobie are stationed in a colonial set-up and are in favour of the natives' emancipation from their rulers. But there is a basic difference between them in

that Flory is a secular, left-leaning and idealistic character whereas Scobie's conception of life is existentially religious; his activities emanate from his basic Christian beliefs.

Flory's respect for indigenous Burmese culture and also nature is quite apparent in this novel. During the first stage of his courtship of Elizabeth, he attempts to interest her in the native people and culture only to encounter vehement opposition from her. He takes her to witness a pwe-dance¹ rendition but she leaves the place sulkily, thinking that it was beneath her status as a white woman to be sitting among 'the black people' and watching that 'hideous and savage spectacle'. She fails to grasp the nature of his admiration for the country and the culture. The book details the situation thus:

"She perceived that Flory, when he spoke of the 'natives', spoke nearly always *in favour* of them. He was forever praising Burmese customs and Burmese character, he even went so far as to contrast them favourably with the English....After all natives are natives – interesting, no doubt, but finally only a 'subject' people, an inferior people with black faces....He so wanted to love Burma ...He had forgotten that most people can be at ease in a foreign country only when they are disparaging the inhabitants ".

On another occasion, Flory takes Elizabeth to a Chinese-owned shop and, seeing the Chinese women's diminutive feet, she exclaims: "These people must be absolutely savages!" Flory takes up the side of the Chinese and says: "Oh no! They're highly civilized; more civilized than we are, in my opinion". Not only does he have regard for the Burmese he also has regard for all the cultures of the world and this puts him at odds with his countrymen . Before Elizabeth's arrival, we find him retreating into the forest appreciating its sylvan ambience and birds. When he plans to propose Dr. Veraswami's name to be included in the Club he is derided by Ellis. Ellis uses racially provocative language to abuse the Doctor and also terms Flory as "the nigger's Nancy Boy". Verrall's arrogance and overweening attitude creates a sharp contrast between him and Flory. Verrall calls natives "black beggars" and his arrival on the scene fills Flory with fear and insecurity – not on account of his love for Elizabeth only but also for Verrall's rudeness and surly disregard for native culture.

Flory has, to a large extent, been modelled on Orwell himself. Like Flory, Orwell also stayed in Burma while serving in the Indian Imperial Police. There,

¹.Traditional Burmese musical play. The word literally means 'performances.' It involves dancing and acting with music.

the "devious machinations" of the Empire dawned on him and he gave up his position in the Police. As the end of five years he wrote: "I hated the imperialism I was serving with a bitterness which I probably cannot make clear...it is not a possible to be a part of such a system without recognizing it as an unjustifiable tyranny...I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate" (192). Flory's abhorrence towards imperialism is echoed in these quoted words. Even the birthmark has some autobiographical bearing. Jeffrey Meyers says: "The facial deformity of Flory in *Burmese Days* is the symbolic equivalent of Orwell feeling that he was an ugly failure, and Flory also suffers agonies of humiliation at school"(28). Flory's distaste for the Kiplingesque view of the Empire is also reflected in Orwell's comments: "Kipling is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting"(192). Raymond Williams is of the opinion that Orwell's early novels' central characters are extensions of his own. He says: "All of Orwell's writing until 1937 is... a series of works and experiments around a common problem. Instead of dividing them into 'fiction' and 'documentaries' we should see them as sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, 'Orwell'...Flory, and Dorothy (*A Clergyman's Daughter*) and Comstock, or the later Bowling, are aspects of this character..."(52). George Woodcock likens Flory's inability to protest against the wrongs he witnessed around him to Orwell's: "Flory...not only projects Orwell's antagonism to imperialism; but also lives through Orwell's own fascination with the Burmese and his failure to stand out firmly against the injustices he saw around him while he was still a police officer" 937-8 (1979) .

Even in his love-life, Flory is treated like an outcast. From the very beginning, Elizabeth treats him with certain reserve and contempt. His heartfelt enthusiasm for her is reciprocated by an equal amount of disregard. Theirs is a relationship that is meant for doom from day one. Their diametrically opposite characteristics make them an odd couple. In fact, Elizabeth strings Flory along while she is searching for a moneyed husband. His amorous leanings towards her sees a momentary gleam of hope in the hunting expedition when he teaches her to hunt. But even that episode has a symbolic connotation that reveals her disaffection towards him: she shoots down the very jade pigeons which Flory appreciated on an earlier occasion while he retreated into the jungle for peace of mind. The gift of the leopard skin Flory killed and the birthmark are also symbols that signal their ultimate dissociation. The shrivelled and dilapidated leopard skin and the birthmark are symbols of her distaste for him. Jeffrey Meyers says: "When Flory shoots a male leopard, his gift of the skin silently seals their troth. Later on, the ruined leopard skin, like Flory's facial skin, is both a cause and a

symbol of Elizabeth's disaffection"(70). Verrall's arrival on the scene further complicates things between them. About Verrall the author writes: "Up and down India, wherever he was stationed, he left behind him a trail of insulted people, neglected duties and unpaid bills"(192). Verrall's youth and job rank put him head and shoulders above Flory and Elizabeth snaps up, as it were, the younger and moneyed man. She cuts off her ties with Flory in favour of Verrall. Verrall's contempt as well as Elizabeth's neglect make Flory a *bete noire* to both of them. The digging up of English flowers by the gardener and replacing them with balsams, cockcombs and zinnias immediately after Elizabeth and Verrall's horse-ride together symbolize the eviction of Flory from her life and the initiation of Verrall in his place. However, Verrall's abrupt disappearance inclines Elizabeth towards Flory but only to break off for good later. She flatly denies having any weakness for him ever. Her final rejection of his advances comes at an opportune moment when Flory's former mistress Ma Hla May creates a scene in public asking money from him. She refuses to accept a piano from Flory saying: "I don't play the piano". This definitive retort from her seals their parting. All his desperate pleas fall on deaf ears. At last we see that she marries the much older Deputy Commissioner MacGregor and becomes a "*burra memsahib*". His failure – in spite of his sincerity — in love adds to his already wretched existence which propels him towards suicide.

Flory is often seen as a coward. It seems that being mired in the upheavals of his miserable predicament, he takes a drastic decision to terminate his life. Rejected by his lover, discredited by the knavish U Po Kyin, forsaken by his compatriots, and unable to stand up to the wrongs perpetrated by the English, it appears, he commits suicide. But the question is: is he a coward or a hero in committing suicide? In the conventional sense we can interpret it as a cravenly act on his part. However, the suicide can be seen as a protest against the wrongs – the barbarity of the 'intolerable colonial situation' – he could not put right and also his own faults. Also, it has a self-deprecating side to it : he kills himself to put an eternal end to the lack of his own moral shortcomings. The symbolic fading of the birthmark bears testimony to that. Jeffrey Meyers writes : " His suicide, a violent yet appropriate gesture of physical courage and moral cowardice, is his terrible protest against ... failures"(70).

Flory falls prey to the circumstances around him. His well-meaning, humanistic tenets earn him the the opprobrium of the Anglo-Indian society and not its approval, His love gets spurned by Elizabeth despite its intensity. It appears that he is destined to be a pariah amid the Britons in that up-country Burmese town. He enacts the part of the underdog, as it were, in this *mise en scene*. His goodness of heart becomes his worst enemy. His character also epitomizes the author's own life experiences and the typical Orwellian protagonist. However, his cowardly persona is externalized by his birthmark. It disfigures him physically as well as psychologically. His suicide brings down the curtain on his excruciating experience i.e. life. It gives him, seemingly, release from the pettiness of his situation. But it is a pusillanimous act on his part all the same; he succumbs silently to the blows dealt to him without hitting back. Also, he can be criticized for merely patronizing the natives and of paying lip-service to the idea of their emancipation from the Raj. All in all, his virtues and vices constitute him as a human being – a good human being largely – but also a very complex person who at least endeavoured to live up to the expectations of a better creature than his compatriots but, in doing so, unfortunately, was treated like an outcast.

References

- Boehmer, E. (1995). *Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bowker, G. (2004). *George Orwell*. London: Abacus.
- Cusack, A. (n.d.). *The World of George Orwell*. Retrieved January 15, 2005, from http://andrewcusack.com/blog/2004/07/muggeridge_on_o.php.
- George Orwell Page*. Discussion Postings. Retrieved December 13, 2004, from <http://constantreader.com/discussions/burmesedays.html>.
- Meyers, J. (1975). *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Orwell, G. (1937). *The Road to Wigan Pier*. London: Martin Secker & Warburg.
- Orwell, G. (1975). *Burmese Days*. London: Penguin.
- Orwell, S. & Roxburgh, A. (Eds.). (1968). *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (Vol. 2). London: Penguin.
- www.wikipedia.com
- Williams, R. (1974). *Orwell*. London: Fontana.
- Woodcock, G. (1979) "George Orwell". *Novelists & Prose Writers* (Vinson, J. Ed.). London: Macmillan.