



39

COLONIAL MASCULINITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND *SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT*

Ann Elizabeth George

Assistant Professor,

St. Clare College (Autonomous), Bangalore,

Karnataka, India

Abstract:

*This paper explores the intersection of colonialism and masculinity through a comparative analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*. Both texts depict masculinity as a defining force in colonial rule, shaping power dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised. Conrad's novella portrays masculinity as a tool of dominance, where European colonisers exercise control over an eroticised and feminised native population. The coloniser is portrayed as a superior, enlightened, and authoritative figure contrasted against the silent, submissive, and dehumanised colonised. Conversely, Orwell's essay presents masculinity as an oppressive burden. The British officer, despite his position of power, is constrained by societal expectations of masculine authority, forcing him into actions that conflict with his morals. He becomes a puppet of imperial expectations, demonstrating that colonial masculinity is not only a source of power but also a means of entrapment. By examining both texts, this paper argues that colonial masculinity operates as both an instrument of power and a restrictive force, complicating the traditional perception of masculinity as solely empowering. This study offers a nuanced understanding of gendered imperialism, revealing how masculinity reinforces colonial hierarchies while simultaneously limiting individual agency.*

Keywords: *Masculinity, Colonialism, Identity, Agency, Hegemony, etc.*

Introduction:

The idea of colonialism and imperialist domination has an explicit connection to masculinity and the attributes associated with the masculine gender. In many texts of the nineteenth and twentieth century that explores colonialism and imperialism, the coloniser is portrayed as a masculine, dominant entity that exerts power over and subjugates the colonised, who are portrayed as feminine subjects. The paper aims to look at this nexus between colonialism and masculinity through the close reading of two texts namely *Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a novella that explores the superiority, privilege and power that comes with being the coloniser. The story is a representative work of colonial adventure narrative that depicts the colonizer as superior masculine authority that tries to tame the primitive, feminine land of the colonised. On the other hand, 'Shooting an Elephant' is a narrative essay by George Orwell where he narrates the events of a day as a British officer in Burma when he was forced to shoot an elephant. The essay explores a specific side of male privilege where

Literary Cognizance
ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e-Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol.- V, Issue- 4, March 2025



Orwell owing to his rank as a British officer and by extension, the embodiment of masculine authority is forced to shoot an elephant, and commit violence which is expected of him. The paper is an attempt to compare and contrast the portrayal of masculinity in both texts as well as study the relationship between colonisation and gender through the close reading and analysis of the two texts.

“[Gendered] acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise express is fabrications manufactured and sustained through signs and other discursive means...” (Butler, 137). Judith Butler looks at gender as a set of corporeal signs or signs pertaining to the body attributed to the different sexes, the repetition of which within a social and cultural context leads to the performance of gender. Masculinity and femininity refer to a set of attributes generally considered as pertaining to men and women respectively. Traditionally submissive, meekness is considered feminine attributes and aggression, violence are seen as masculine attributes.

Gender identities though may seem to work only at an individual level, yet the advent of colonialism and imperial domination brought a shift in this discourse. Gendering became a way to conquer colonies and retain power in the colonial context. R W Connell coined the term hegemonic masculinity to describe the dynamism between masculinity, gender and power. Hegemonic masculinity demarcates “... masculine norms and practices which are most valued by the politically dominant class and which help to maintain its authority...” (Harvey and Shepard, 278). Hegemonic masculinity can be used to understand how dominant men belonging to a certain class, nationality subjugates other men, women and marginalized groups of the society. Hegemonic masculinity and colonialism work together to build a discourse around the position of the colonizer with regard to the colonized where the colonizer is the masculine authority with power and the colonized represents the feminine subjugated sect of people. This dichotomy is immensely present in narratives that discuss colonisation and imperialism where the masculine authority of the colonizer is always shown as powerful and the colonies are powerless, agency less and voiceless.

Giovanni Stradano or Johannes Stradanus, a famous sixteenth-century painter depicted the prevalent Eurocentric image of the enlightened colonizer and the primitive other in a series of prints relating to the discovery of the new world. A painting called “Allegory of America” clearly shows the distinction and othering made by the coloniser between them and the ‘new worlds’ they ‘discovered’ and the colonised (Markey). The painting shows an interaction between Amerigo Vespucci and a woman from the ‘new world’. Amerigo Vespucci, who is the wealthy and powerful colonizer is depicted as a stark contrast to an almost naked woman representing the colonized, lying on her hammock. His superiority and power are symbolised through the elaborate clothing, the staff on his hand, the huge ship in the background and the mariner’s astrolabe that he holds. Juxtaposed to this image is the nude woman lying on a hammock. In the background, there are depictions of wild animals and a small image of people practicing cannibalism. The fact that the colonized is represented as a sexualised woman shows the prevalent idea of a feminine, barbaric, exotic and inferior colony. The painting was one of the early pieces of evidence that show the idea that was perpetrated by the Europeans about the east and the so called ‘new worlds’. It portrays the image of the European coloniser as the powerful masculine authority and the colonised as an inferior and feminine other.

Literary Cognizance
ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e-Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol.- V, Issue- 4, March 2025



Through the close reading of the two texts *Heart of Darkness* and *Shooting an Elephant*, the paper studies the portrayal of masculinities in the two texts as well as the relationship between gender and colonial rule.

Heart of Darkness:

Joseph Conrad's famous novella *Heart of Darkness* narrates the voyage that Marlowe undertakes up the river Congo in search of Kurtz, an ivory trader. Through the title of the novella when Conrad calls the voyage up the river as a voyage into the heart of darkness, he presents at the core of the text a dichotomy between the coloniser and colonised that runs throughout the novella. African continent and the state of Congo which is described as the Dark Continent is juxtaposed with enlightened Europe. Marlowe comments about the journey up the river - "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (Conrad, 52). The European continent and the African continent were perceived as opposites, in every way. There is a contrast between the white coloniser who is considered superior and the natives who were termed as 'savage', 'cannibals' and 'primitive'. The dichotomy can be extended to be viewed as a contrast between the masculine and powerful coloniser and the feminine submissive colonised. There is a contrast between light and darkness, white and black, civilization and primitive, masculine and feminine in the text.

As in the print of Stradanus, *Heart of darkness* draws a stark contrast between the coloniser and the colonised as masculine and feminine opposites. The coloniser is represented by Marlowe and Kurtz, who are gun-wielding, civilised men as opposed to a nameless, sexualised and eroticized woman who represents the colonised. "From right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman...she was savage and superb, wild eyed and magnificent, there was something ominous and stately in her progress." (Conrad 91). Clearly the natives are feminised to make the coloniser seem powerful and masculine. Owing to the rank of European trader, both Marlowe and Kurtz are portrayed as superior to the natives who are more often than not portrayed as a homogenous dark mass. The natives are shown as voiceless, describing their language as 'screeches' and 'ululations'. A scene describing a group of natives is as follows- "... a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the drop of heavy and motionless foliage" (Conrad, 53). The natives are described as a nameless, homogenous, identity-less mass of black limbs.

Hegemonic masculinity gives them superiority and powers over the native people living near the Congo River. Owing to the superiority and masculinity of the coloniser, they have an advantage and power over the feminine continent and its people whom they exploit. Their masculine position gives them power over the natives whom they use to exploit as cheap or free labour. In an instance in the novella, Conrad shows the devotion and respect the natives have for Kurtz. "I saw the man on the stretcher sit up, lank and with an uplifted arm, above the shoulders of the bearers... I could not hear a sound, but through my glasses I saw the thin arm extended commandingly..." (Conrad, 89). Even though Kurtz was ill and lying on a stretcher, the natives heeded his command and respected as well as feared him. This instance shows the height of superiority that comes from being the masculine authority, as a frail white man has power over a throng of healthy natives. Marlowe and Kurtz are performatively stereotypical masculine figures; they command the natives, use violent means to pacify them and thus has an upper hand over them.

By portraying African continent and Congo as a dark, feminine, with barbaric, dehumanised and voiceless people, Conrad tries to show how powerful, masculine, enlightened



and civilized Europe and Europeans are. The portrayal of masculinity in *Heart of Darkness* is by contrasting it to a feminine other. Chinua Achebe in his *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* comments that “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (Achebe, 338). Throughout the text masculinity and masculine characteristics are shown as making the person (Kurtz or Marlowe) and by extension the European continent superior, having power to subjugate the feminized continent of Africa and its ‘savage’ people.

Shooting an Elephant:

Shooting an Elephant is a personal essay by George Orwell that narrates an experience he had while stationed at a particular village in colonised Burma where he worked as a British police officer. Orwell presents a dichotomy between the British police officer who is the representation of imperial rule and the elephant which is a symbol of the colonised people. Owing to gender, race and nationality and his rank as a police officer, he had the superior position in the village; he was the masculine white colonial authority. Yet he describes how he felt threatened and powerless as the Burmese hated him and used every chance to make a laughing stock out of him because he represented the British raj that oppressed them. He describes in the essay “In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people ... As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so” (Orwell, 20). The dynamic between the colonized and the coloniser as Orwell portrays is shifting where the coloniser feels threatened.

When the elephant had gone rogue, being the authority, Orwell was called to deal with the situation. He took his rifle as a precaution and self-defence measure not intending to shoot the elephant. Yet when the Burmese saw the officer with a rifle in hand, they believed he was going to shoot the elephant. Being the white masculine authority, the people expected him to shoot the elephant and Orwell had no other option but to shoot the elephant. “The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly” (Orwell, 22). Orwell depicts in the essay the way his freedom was compromised so was his right to make a choice and that he became a ‘puppet pushed to and fro by the will of the yellow faces’. “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” (Orwell, 22). Due to his identity as a British officer, he was denied his agency and choice and was forced to commit an act which he did not want to do.

His position was such that he had to act the way the ‘natives’ wanted him to act. They wanted him to show violence and aggression, fit into the idea of masculine authority they deemed fit of a British officer or he will be ridiculed. As he describes in the essay, “A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things” (Orwell, 22). He had to ‘perform’ as the white masculine authority to retain the power over the colonized. In the paper titled *Postcolonial Reading of Shooting an Elephant* the author writes “In this tiny incident, the narrator is in a quandary to succumb to collective pressures which expects a white man to “act like a sahib” his own freedom and individuality. However, in the long run, it is the narrator participant’s individuality which is paralysed” (Ghaforian and Gholi, 1365). In the effort to be the superior coloniser, he loses his freedom and right to choose. “A white man mustn’t be frightened in front of ‘natives’; and so, in general, he isn’t frightened” (Orwell, 23). The white man as shown by Orwell has to uphold the stereotypical idea of the male identity to be feared and wield power. He is forced to hide his emotions and put on a mask of courage and resoluteness. His



masculine position as opposed to the feminine position of the natives curb him of his freedom, agency and becomes burdensome and oppressive.

He is also forced to constantly prove his authority and masculinity. To not be ridiculed and thus emasculated in a sense, Orwell continuously shot the elephant. “I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat” (Orwell, 23). It shows how imperial masculinity is produced and perpetuated through violence and aggression to retain control over the colony. Orwell clearly shows a different side of masculinity where the person is curbed of their freedom and forced to commit a crime; where his identity becomes a heavy and oppressive burden he has to live with.

To conclude, *Heart of Darkness* and *Shooting an Elephant* are texts that deal with the nexus between colonialism and gender, more specifically, colonialism and masculinity. Yet the two texts deal with the same idea from different vantage points. In *Heart of Darkness* masculinity is portrayed as giving power, superiority and authority to the masculine colonizer. The attributes of masculinity aid the colonial mission, it aids in subjugating and exploiting the colonised. It thus proves advantageous by giving power and agency to the masculine entity. Yet in *Shooting an Elephant* the colonizer is forced to perform as masculine. It takes away his agency and individuality, curbing his freedom. Here rigid gender norms prove to be disadvantageous and burdensome and oppressive. Through these texts the authors present a spectrum of experiences associated with masculinity that shows that masculinity does not lead to a single experience of power as is showcased in the majority of texts, but it is a range of experiences that can be oppressive in certain instances as well.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” *Heart of Darkness*, Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. Norton & Company, 2006. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. Edited by Linda J Nicholson, Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*. Random house, 2004. Print.
- Ghaforian, Ahmad, and Ahmad Gholi. “A Postcolonial Reading of George Orwell’s Shooting an Elephant With Special Reference to Edward Said’s Orientalism and Binary of the Self and the Other.” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 5, no. 7, July 2015, p. 1361. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.17507/tpls.0507.07. Web.
- Harvey, Karen, and Alexandra Shepard. “What Have Historians Done with Masculinity? Reflections on Five Centuries of British History, circa 1500–1950.” *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, [Cambridge University Press, The North American Conference on British Studies], 2005, pp. 274–80. JSTOR, doi:10.1086/427125. Web.
- Kimmel, Michael S., et al. *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. SAGE Publications, 2004. Print.
- Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*. Penguin books, 2009. Print.
- Sinha, Mrinalini. *Colonial Masculinity*. Manchester University Press, 2017. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.7765/9781526123640. Web.



Literary Cognizance

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)

**An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e-Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism**

Vol.- V, Issue- 4, March 2025



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: George, Ann. “Colonial Masculinity: A Comparative Analysis of Heart of Darkness and Shooting an Elephant.” *Literary Cognizance*, V-4 (March, 2025): 254-259. Web.

