

Between Resistance and Complicity: A Postcolonial Reading of George Orwell's *Burmese Days*

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Abstract:

This article examines George Orwell's *Burmese Days* through a postcolonial lens, focusing on the contradictions within its representation of British colonialism in Burma. It argues that while the novel exposes the racism, corruption, exploitation, and moral failures of the colonial system, it also reproduces some of the Orientalist ideas and representational patterns of colonial discourse. Using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, the study examines colonial space, the representation of Burmese people, the internalisation of colonial ideology, and the unstable identities of both colonisers and colonised. The analysis of characters such as John Flory, Dr Veraswami, U Po Kyin, Ma Hla May, and Elizabeth reveals the limits of resistance within the colonial system. The article concludes that *Burmese Days* occupies an ambivalent position between resistance to and complicity with imperial discourse.

Keywords: Orientalism, Colonialism, Cultural Hegemony, Mimicry, Postcolonialism.

1. Introduction

George Orwell remains one of the most influential political writers of the twentieth century. While he is best known for *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), his first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934), occupies a unique position in his body of work. The novel is a fictional account of life in Burma during the colonial period, when Orwell himself served as an officer in the Indian Imperial Police from 1922 to 1927. The novel is based on Orwell's own experiences and aims to reveal the social, political and racial structures that sustained colonialism. Unlike his later work, which frequently addresses totalitarianism and political oppression, *Burmese Days* focuses on British imperialism and its effects on both the oppressor and the oppressed. Hence, the novel has always fascinated postcolonial critics interested in race, power, identity and colonial narratives.

In *Burmese Days*, colonial Burma is often seen as Orwell's most overtly anti-imperialist novel, a deeply divided society organised around racial hierarchy and endemic injustice. Through the experiences of John Flory, an English timber merchant who is increasingly disenchanted with British rule, Orwell critiques the moral duplicity, racism and brutality of colonial governance. There is also a major contradiction within the novel. Though it shows the exploitative nature of imperialism, it often reproduces the colonial assumptions and orientalist depictions it ostensibly criticises. Burma is always seen through a European lens, indigenous culture is largely excluded from the discourse, and racial clichés continue to shape the representation of the colonised. It is this dialectical tension between critique and complicity that makes *Burmese Days* one of Orwell's most nuanced and contested works.

Postcolonial criticism provides an effective lens for examining such contradictions. With Edward Said's publication of *Orientalism* (1978), there has been a gradual reassessment of colonial literature amongst scholars, examining the role of literary texts in shaping relations

between West and East through representational mechanisms. Said argues that the Orient was not just a place on the map; it was a cultural and political construction, a product of the Western imagination. The East is depicted in these images as the inferior 'other' of Europe, used as an excuse for colonisation. Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony elucidates how imperial power operates not only through political subjugation and military might but also through ideological consent, thereby making the colonised accept colonial values. Colonial subjects negotiate their identity through imitation of the coloniser, but are always excluded from colonial society. This is again illustrated by Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry. In sum, these theoretical frameworks offer indispensable tools for comprehending the complicated dynamics of colonial power depicted in *Burmese Days*.

Several scholars have studied *Burmese Days* from a postcolonial perspective, particularly through Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Moosavinia et al. examine Orwell's representation of the Orient and the construction of colonial distinctions, while Shabanirad and Marandi focus specifically on the representation of Oriental women in the novel. Dönmez discusses the imperial and anti-imperial perspectives in *Burmese Days*, while Perdana analyses mimicry and the crisis of identity through the characterisation of U Po Kyin. These investigations have significantly increased our understanding of Orwell's engagement with colonial discourse. However, existing scholarship has largely examined Orientalist representation, imperial ideology, and mimicry as distinct aspects of the novel, leaving unexplored how these processes intersect. In particular, the relationship between the representation of the colonial Other, the hegemonic structures through which colonial ideology is sustained, and the ambivalent forms of mimicry through which colonial subjects negotiate those structures requires further attention. While Said's concept of Orientalism illuminates the representational construction of the colonial Other, Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps explain how such representations participate in the maintenance of colonial power, and

Bhabha's concept of mimicry reveals the ambivalent ways in which colonial subjects negotiate and reproduce that power. Bringing these perspectives together, this article examines how *Burmese Days* simultaneously exposes and participates in the ideological structures of colonialism, thereby revealing a tension that is less visible when these dimensions are considered separately.

This article argues that *Burmese Days* reveals the contradictions and moral corruption of British imperialism, but also reproduces many of the ideologies that supported colonial rule. In his story, Orwell frequently relies on orientalist stereotypes and colonial frames, making his critique of Empire ideologically inconsistent even when he denounces imperial violence. The story, therefore, reveals the contradictions in the liberal colonial discourse and the limitations and possibilities of anti-imperialist literature written in the colonial context.

2. Approach and Conceptual Framework

This article employs postcolonial literary criticism in a qualitative textual analysis of George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. The study does not treat Orwell's novel as a historical document or as a biography of Orwell's time in colonial Burma, but as a literary text that critiques and engages with colonial narratives. The assessment calls for careful reading with attention to Orwell's characterisation, point of view, description of space, and representation of race, culture, and power relations.

The research is based on three interrelated concepts from postcolonial theory. Edward Said's Orientalism provides a framework for examining how colonial epistemologies and cultural demarcations represented Burma and its people. The notion of cultural hegemony, advanced by Antonio Gramsci, is employed to examine Orwell's processes by which colonial power secures both consent and coercion. The idea of mimicry, as theorised by Homi K.

Bhabha, is used to analyse the contradictory identities constructed in colonial society and the fragile relation between the coloniser and the colonised.

The article views these theories not as separate entities but as interconnected parts of colonial discourse. This systematic approach reveals a conflicted ideological representation of imperialism in Orwell's work, highlighting the brutality of colonial governance while also reproducing many representational structures.

3. Colonial Space and Orientalist Representation

3.1 The European Club: Spatialising Colonial Power

The European Club is an important manifestation of orientalist thought within *Burmese Days* ' social institutions, serving not only as a site of leisure but also as a symbolic arena for the organisation and reproduction of colonial authority. Edward Said claims that Orientalism depicts the East as the cultural and political other of Europe. Orwell demonstrates how this otherness is manifested in segregated colonial contexts. The Club is the embodiment of imperial stratification; it isolates the leaders from the subjugated and renders racial identity a factor for inclusion in society.

Although the Club is in the geographical heart of Kyauktada, most of the town's residents cannot get to it. The irony is apparent: a small number of Europeans hold power over a large number of Burmese in a territory that is at once publicly influential yet privately accessible. The "battle" between Dr Veraswami and U Po Kyin for joining the Club is more than a personal feud and a search for recognition in the colonial hierarchy. This understanding is crucial to the argument and must be maintained. The Club is referred to as "that remote, mysterious temple, holy of holies far harder of entry than Nirvana" (14), and U Po Kyin describes it as "the very highest honour an Oriental can attain to" (146). These descriptions

imply that membership of the Club is a metaphor for proximity to colonial power, rather than any real equality.

However, the story also shows the limitations of that dream. Any idea of an indigenous fellow being absorbed into the British administration will always face resistance from the majority of the European population. Membership is a managed form of participation; it creates the illusion of gradual change while preserving the racial exclusivity that underpins colonial dominance. The Club's structural boundaries are ideological as well. They mark out who is considered civilised and who is not afforded such recognition.

This spatial arrangement, from the Saidian point of view, shows how colonial rhetoric relies on dichotomous oppositions between the civilised and the uncivilised, the European and the Oriental. What makes the Club important is not only what it does in itself, but what it leaves out. It bars the Burmese from meaningful participation in the colonial society. It reinforces the idea that Europeans are naturally in positions of power and the locals are forever on the margins.

Nevertheless, Orwell's picture is more complex than a simple condemnation of segregation. While he exposes the Club's prejudices, the story continues to privilege European concerns over Burmese realities. John Flory is at the centre of the novel, "the lone and lacking individual trapped within a bigger system that is undermining the better side of human nature" (Larkin ix). The audience is invited to sympathise with Flory's moral isolation and discomfort, rather than with the structural oppression of the Burmese people daily. The novel explores colonial establishments yet maintains the coloniser's narrative prominence. This tension illustrates the article's main argument: Orwell is critical of imperialism but is also constrained by many of the representational beliefs embedded in imperial ideology.

3.2 Landscape, Climate, and the Oriental Imagination

The landscape in *Burmese Days* is not simple realism but a colonial fabrication of the Orient. The story portrays Burma as a beguiling yet despotic land, whose climate, vegetation and topography appear entirely unlike – and implicitly inferior to – the ordered landscape of Europe. These images are not just aesthetic choices; they are what Edward Said calls Orientalism, a discourse that turns geographical differences into cultural and civilisational ones.

Orwell repeatedly uses images of oppressive heat, dense foliage and heightened sensory experience to describe Burma. The tropical environment is not shown as a friendly place but as a forbidding place, creating a world in which nature appears hostile to European life. The narrator describes the Burmese landscape in terms of the

...glaring white sunlight. The heat rolled from the earth like the breath of an oven. The flowers, oppressive to the eyes, blazed with not a petal stirring, in a debauch of sun. The glare sent a wariness through one's bones. There was something horrible in it—horrible to think of that blue, binding sky, stretching on and on over Burma and India, over Siam, Cambodia, China, cloudless and interminable. (33)

The whole sky from pre-colonial India to China, from Burma to Cambodia, a place of such varied culture, climate, topography, and people, is summed up in one word by the author: “horrible”. The flowers are oppressive to the eyes, and the heat is unbearable, which is a constant throughout the novel. The narrative collapses Flory's view of the diverse regions into a vague Eastern world of excess, disease, and otherness rather than distinguishing among them. Different histories, cultures and geographies are conflated into one monolithic perception of “the East”, which is primarily used as the cultural opposite of Europe.

The scenery is rarely presented from the perspective of the Burmese people, but rather from that of a European. Burma thus becomes less a tangible homeland and more a setting for the moral and psychological problems of the British characters. This tendency is also evident in the representation of Burmese society. The novel has some lively descriptions of colonial life, but the Burmese culture, customs, and everyday life are somewhat neglected. Many scholars argue that Flory's alienation from European society is the novel's main concern, rather than the condition of the colonised people. Burma is a narrative space of the colonial subject's suffering as well as a colonial site.

Thus, the geography of Burma should be understood not merely as a geographical environment but as a conceptual one. The climate, geography, and sensory details all contribute to the colonial divide, bringing the distance between the coloniser and the colonised to the fore, even as Orwell criticises the political legitimacy of imperial rule. The Eastern landscape becomes one of the sites where the novel's critique of Empire meets its reproduction of colonial discourses.

3.3 Representation of the Burmese: Cliché, Expression and Narrator's Perspective

Burmese Days is an unrelenting attack on British imperialism, but its portrayal of the Burmese people illustrates how the colonial point of view is not easily shed. Though Flory reveals the cruelty, corruption and hypocrisy of colonial rule, he also frequently portrays the Burmese in imperial stereotypes. This paradox emphasises the fact that Orwell's opposition to Empire does not entirely liberate him from the representational paradigms that colonialism has imposed upon the Orient.

Edward Said suggests that Orientalism functions by rendering the East an object of Western knowledge rather than a voice of its own. The Oriental is described, classified and studied, but is rarely allowed to speak for himself. (Said 3) The same sort of mechanism is at

work all through *Burmese Days*. Burmese characters have significant parts in Orwell's work, but their inner lives are not well explored. Conversely, the emotional and psychological depth of European characters is explored in great detail. Thus, the Burmese are more likely to be actors or witnesses in Flory's story than independent historical agents.

Even more so, the language used to describe Burmese characters in the novel amplifies this disparity. Throughout the narrative, they have been consistently associated with bestial imagery and the narrator's ethical instability. Ellis refers to Burmese people with racial epithets openly, portraying them as inherently inferior, while other narrative accounts describe indigenous characters as animals or focus on their physical differences. The adjectives being used for the Burmese people are unsettling. All sort of names for the natives are being used, calling them swine, ticks, black coolies, the sneaking, cowardly hounds, bloody sods, damned and smelly natives, gutless curs, yellow bellies, evil and unclean Orientals, greasy little babus, little pot-bellied dirty niggers, those with the scents and stench of coconut oil, sandalwood, garlic, cinnamon, turmeric, sweat, and those with black skins, brown, malicious and epicene faces and filthy black lips Such representations are consistent within the lexicon of nineteenth-century colonial writing, in which racial hierarchies were using ostensibly ordinary descriptive language. Though Ellis or Elizabeth might indeed make racist remarks, the story rarely interrogates these beliefs in detail.

This void in the story is significant. Orwell does not doubt that Ellis is a rabid racist, but it is one thing to expose a bias and another thing to dismantle the foundational beliefs on which that bias is built. The novel encourages readers to look past Ellis's savageness, but its depiction of that savageness is predominantly cast from a European perspective. Burmese characters are likely to be seen, represented, and judged from the outside rather than being allowed equal narrative legitimacy. Colonial disparity is central to the story, even when Flory rejects overt racism.

The best example of this contradiction is the character of Flory. Unlike colonisers, he knows the exploitative nature of British rule and openly criticises the imperial rationale of the "white man's burden." However, his sympathy for the Burmese seldom amounts to identification with them. His critique is largely intellectual and reflective, expressed mainly in conversation with Dr Veraswami or in personal reflection rather than in sustained political activism. Most importantly, the story invites readers to identify with Flory's struggle to reconcile his ethical convictions with his social position, rather than with the Burmese whose lives are changed by colonial oppression.

4. Hegemony and the Maintenance of Colonial Power

4.1 Colonial Rule Beyond Violence: Consent, Ideology, and Everyday Authority

Burmese Days exposes the cruelty and injustice of British imperialism, but Orwell argues that colonial power is maintained not only through violence but also through encouraging submission. Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony provides a useful lens for understanding this phenomenon. Hegemonic authority is not only based on military or legal preeminence. It maintains its dominance by convincing leaders and people that the current social order is natural and fair. Colonial governmentality in Kyauktada is a mixture of force and ideas of superiority.

This rationale is clearly demonstrated in the story by the power differential. Europeans govern a community of about 4,000 Burmans. Physical force cannot explain the difference between the numbers. The British government relied on institutions, social standing, and the general acceptance of the colonial hierarchy as normal practice. The European Club, the civil administration, and the judiciary all collaborated in bolstering the myth that British rule was the mecca of civilisation, justice, and progress, and that this was the justification for imperial rule, both in the eyes of the colonisers and a large part of the colonised population.

This ideological hegemony is especially evident in the symbolic value attached to European institutions. The prestige of being part of the European Club does not lie in material benefits but in the representation of proximity to colonial authority. The validity of state institutions, likewise, rests more on the strength of their connections to the imperial state than on individual "legitimacy" in a colonial context. In a colonial context, legitimacy was not simply about political government; it was about the social relations of everyday life and about how individuals perceived prestige, respectability, and achievement.

The power of this system is that it makes you think that you want to be subjugated. Burmese officials seek recognition. In Flory's colonial regime, European officials experience a sense of innate superiority, and even anticolonialists struggle to imagine social movements outside the colonial paradigm. According to Gramscian theory, Orwell's colonial ideology becomes 'common sense': an ideology so well established that it is rarely a coloniser's explicit justification. Orwell repeatedly shows that imperial authority endures not because it is widely thought to be ethically justified, but because its institutions shape everyday life in ways that make it difficult to think of alternatives.

Orwell exposes the contradictions that underlie this apparent stability. The colonial administration is confident but always anxious about holding authority. European concerns focus on preserving racial hierarchies, containing threats to their social status, and policing the boundaries between rulers and ruled. Not only are they overseen by the bureaucracy, but they also must constantly demonstrate that they are better. The colonial administration is stable because it must constantly reaffirm the boundaries that underpin its legitimacy.

This contradiction points to the precarious foundation of colonial authority. Moreover, if British supremacy was really a done deal, why would the European Club be so fiercely race-exclusive? Why would small slights to imperial honour be met with so much rage? Orwell sees

the colonial regime as both powerful and weak. It is an ongoing process of ideological affirmation, not a matter of unquestioned acquiescence. The story moves from the overt violence of Empire to the subtler ways Empire sustains itself in the everyday life of the colony.

4.2. Internalisation of Colonial Ideology: Dr Veraswami

Dr Veraswami exemplifies Gramsci's concept of hegemony in his attitude toward the Burmese and Indian characters in *Burmese Days*. The particular kinds of colonial violence are, of course, dependent on coercion, but Veraswami's unfailing belief in British rule illustrates how imperial power is sustained by ideological submission. He is not a passive recipient of colonial authority but an active propagator of it. He regards British rule as a symbol of justice, culture and progress. Orwell shows that colonial subjugation is carried out not only by political institutions but also by the infiltration of imperial values into the colonised.

When Flory says anything bad about the British Empire, Veraswami always defends the British Empire in the story. He further believes that without the British, the Burmese could not trade, could not make machinery, ships, railways, on roads and argues with Flory, saying that, “while your business develops the resources of our country, your officials are civilising us, elevating us to their level, from pure public spirit. It is a magnificent record of self-sacrifice.” (39) He is convinced to the core that the British are 'civilising us', that they are raising the Burmese by altruistic sacrifice. This conviction reflects the ideological victory of colonial administration rather than the reality.

This conviction is the victory of hegemony from a Gramscian perspective. The Empire does not have to force Veraswami to support it physically, because he has already accepted its basic tenets. He incorporates the imperial discourse of the 'civilising mission' into his own understanding of history, culture and political power. In this way, he interprets British

supremacy not as external domination but as internal guidance, demonstrating how hegemonic thought turns the dynamics of domination into the dynamics of seemingly voluntary consent.

Orwell underlines this paradox in the dialogues between Veraswami and Flory. Flory is frank in admitting that the British Empire is mainly a means of profit, calling it “simply a device for giving trade monopolies to the English” (38), but Veraswami denies this. He continues to defend British institutions even when faced with evidence to the contrary. The conflict between these two figures is more than a political debate; it is a war between personal experience and ideological brainwashing.

Crucially, Orwell does not paint Veraswami as stupid or morally weak. He is empathetic, respected in his profession, and intellectually brilliant. We must not interpret his loyalty to the Empire as mere personal gullibility. It shows how deeply the colonial ideology has penetrated the minds of the educated colonial subjects. Orwell argues that imperial domination works precisely because it gets competent men to subordinate their own interests to those of the colonial regime. Here, Veraswami becomes a tragic rather than purely comic figure, symbolising the psychological consequences of prolonged ideological subjugation.

Nevertheless, the narrative also demonstrates the limits of such allegiance. Despite Veraswami's profound commitment to British culture, he remains a victim of racial marginalisation and political exploitation. His professionalism and personal dedication cannot protect him from bias in the European community. The fact that he gets into the European Club does not depend on his credentials but on whether the British government, for a moment, steps out of the racial hierarchy that supports colonial power. His experience also shows that recognition by colonial powers is always conditional: no amount of loyalty can change the fact that he is regarded, from the Empire's perspective, as a colonial subject rather than an equal. The contradiction is a case of one of Orwell's most penetrating observations on colonial power.

Hegemony requires that the colonised accept the values of the Empire, but the colonial system refuses them the equality those values seem to promise.

4.3 Flory and the Limits of Colonial Resistance

John Flory is a paradoxical figure in *Burmese Days*. He understands that the British are not there to “uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them” (37). Orwell depicts Flory as a man whose moral perspective is indelibly shaped by the colonial environment he criticises. The narrative through Flory reveals that hegemony is sustained not solely by the consent of the colonised but also by regulating the activities of colonisers who oppose imperial power.

Flory always realises that British rule is motivated by economic exploitation rather than any benevolent desire. In his talks with Dr Veraswami, he denies the imperial assertion that Britain has come to civilise Burma. He admits that companies like his own profit directly from imperial control, and Veraswami's own role in this oppressive system. Despite this recognition, Flory rarely confronts colonial power in the public sphere. He only criticises in private, but in public he always behaves like a gentleman. He is reluctant to nominate Dr Veraswami for membership in the European Club, is afraid of social ostracism by the British community, and ultimately avoids confrontation with colonial bias whenever it threatens his own status. In private, Flory disagrees with him, but in public, he remains a loyal British officer.

Hegemony does not mean total agreement on ideology. Hegemony is often exercised by narrowing the choices available to those who disagree. Flory sees the injustice of imperial rule, but it is difficult for him to conceive of life outside the colonial system that has shaped his identity, his diet, and his social bonds. His dependence on the European community turns moral disagreement into political paralysis. Colonial power is strong not only because each coloniser is firm in their conviction, but because those who oppose it are, by their nature, dependent on it.

The European Club exemplifies this dependence. Flory personally rejects the racist views of Ellis and the others, but he continues to work with the organisation that represents the colonial elite. His reluctant endorsement of Dr Veraswami's admission is not a defiance of the colonial hierarchy but an act of reform. He does not want to see the Empire go away. He wants to see a kinder Empire. The importance of this distinction lies in how it shows that Flory's anti-imperialism is limited by the ideology of the colonial setting in which he operates.

His relationship with Elizabeth is another case in point. Flory thinks she will understand his admiration for Burmese culture and his dissatisfaction with imperial society. Elizabeth, however, is seduced by the principles of the colonial society and spurns his compassion for the East. Flory never openly states his beliefs but instead always tempers or hides them to remain acceptable. His behaviour shows the difference between his beliefs and his actions, so his moral position is always unstable.

That instability keeps Flory from getting involved in the larger structures of colonial government. His empathy for the individual Burmese citizen does not imply that he endorses their political aspirations, nor does he actively oppose the systems that support imperial hegemony. In this way, Orwell shows him as a tragic figure whose moral understanding is confined by the boundaries of colonial society. It is not so much personal weakness as a symptom of the all-pervasive character of colonial oppression that even those who can see its inequities are bound by it.

Flory's misfortune is not his own destiny alone. He was the embodiment of the contradictions of colonial liberal anti-imperialism: ideologically opposed to Empire, yet materially and socially dependent on it. Orwell uses this paradox to show that awareness of being subjugated does not invariably lead to rebellion. *Burmese Days* suggests that colonial ideology can control dissent, so that even its opponents reinforce the systems they are trying to

challenge. In this sense, Flory is one of the most interesting figures of the novel, demonstrating the ethical potentialities of anti-imperialist consciousness and its pragmatic limitations in the totalising framework of Empire.

5. Mimicry, Gender, and the Instability of Colonial Identity

5.1 U Po Kyin and the Politics of Colonial Mimicry

If Dr Veraswami is the internalisation of colonial thought, U Po Kyin is its tactical appropriation. Unlike Veraswami, whose respect for the British stems from a genuine belief, U Po Kyin sees colonial authority as a means of personal advancement. So his desire to be a member of the European Club is not just a quest for social status, but also a bid for the symbolic power of British governance. His persona can be read through Bhabha's idea of mimicry, which implies that colonial identity is not only an imposition but also actively negotiated, replicated, and performed.

Bhabha argues that colonial discourse encourages the colonised to replicate the language, customs, and principles of the coloniser, yet simultaneously prevents them from achieving full equality. The colonial subject must be made "almost the same, but not quite." (122) This partial replication preserves the distinction that guarantees imperial power, so that cultural integration equates to political equality. U Po Kyin is a classic example of this circumstance. He accepts the rules of the colonial regime, strives for recognition from the British authorities and alienates himself from his compatriots, believing that closeness to imperial influence will raise his social status. He is constantly ambitious to become a member of the European Club, which he considers the highest honour attainable by an Oriental.

Remarkably, U Po Kyin does not merely mimic British behaviour; he personifies the very logic of colonial rule. His campaign against Dr Veraswami is based on manipulation, surveillance, and contrived allegations of the strategic use of colonial administration. Rather

than directly challenging imperial power, he exploits its systems for his own benefit and against other colonised peoples. In this sense, mimicry is no longer a practice but becomes a political tactic. Orwell shows that colonial ideology is not only a structuring principle of the coloniser/colonised relationship but also an agent of change within the colonised community.

The apparent successes of U Po Kyin, however, are inherently limited. In the end, he was accepted by the European Club, but not unconditionally. The British tolerate him for his usefulness, for his social adaptability, for his entertainment value, but they never think of him as their equal. His admission does not alter British views of the Burmese or the racial hierarchy in Veraswami's colonial society. He lives in a state of "not quite, not white," a place of nearness without genuine inclusion.

This contradiction reveals the intrinsic volatility of colonial imitation. Imperial discourse supports progress by cultural assimilation, but preserves racial distinctions that hinder full acceptance. U Po Kyin has won the outward trappings of colonial success, but he remains excluded from the equality those trappings purport to represent. His identity is suspended between two worlds: he is not at home with many of his fellow Burmans, for he seeks imperial recognition, but he is also never fully accepted by European society. The colonial authority employs mimicry, but also limits its effects. U Po Kyin's experience shows that when a colonised subject engages with colonial power, the imperial society is very careful about racial boundaries.

Orwell presents mimicry not simply as a lack of individual identity but as an element of colonial power. The tragedy of U Po Kyin is not that he had ambitions but that he never fully fulfilled them. Imperial edict without parity, integration without association, and advance without liberation. His persona thus supports the main thesis of this article, which claims that

colonial discourse is self-replicating through contradictions that both sustain and threaten imperial authority.

5.2 Ma Hla May: Imitation, Gender and Colonial Aspiration

U Po Kyin's political evolution is a question of mimicry. Ma Hla May's is a question of emotional and social endurance. Her character is an example of the gendered dimensions of colonial mimesis. Unlike male colonial subjects who aspire to formal recognition, Ma Hla May seeks to obtain social status through her connection with a British person. Orwell, through her relationship with Flory, demonstrates how the colonial power makes intimacy a site of oppression where racial stratification and gender inequality meet.

From the beginning of the novel, Ma Hla May's sense of self is constructed by colonial authority rather than by her own desires. She is Flory's Burmese wife, and her position in the colonists' society is ambiguous. She has some privileges that many Burmese women do not, but those privileges are entirely dependent on Flory's continued favour. She is a *bokadaw*, a white man's wife, and is sure of herself and convinces herself and others that she has a position comparable to that of a legitimate European partner. She mimics British femininity because it gives her the dignity, security, and social position that colonial society cannot afford her as a Burmese woman.

This desire is a gendered version of Bhabha's notion of mimicry. Ma Hla May does not merely imitate British customs but seeks to reformulate her entire social identity in relation to whiteness. She insists that Flory kiss her because “all white men do that to their women” (52) and even says that she would never allow “horrible brown hands” to touch her, even though she is in love with another Burmese man, Ba Pe. (53) These examples reveal how her sense of value, beauty and self has been altered by colonial ideology. Whiteness is transformed from a mere racial classification into an aspiration that allows her to conceive a more stable identity.

Elizabeth's appearance quickly reveals that this identity is fragile. A real British woman in Flory's life renders Ma Hla May's imitation completely pointless. She is turned out without pity, degraded in the eyes of the world, and robbed of such small security as her tie with Flory had given her. Her life is allowed only until the authentic being supplants the colonial copy. All of this shows how little worth she is in Flory's eyes. At the same time, he thinks of Elizabeth as his salvation from "Burma, the horrible country that had come near ruining him", rather ironic, as it could be debated that it is the other way around, Ma Hla May is just an object of sexual pleasure. (71) Thus, the colonial structure shows that imitation produces likeness but never equality.

The consequences of this exclusion extend far beyond individual dismissals. Flory had deserted her, and Ma Hla May was never able to regain her social standing. She was also excluded from the colonial society she had wanted to emulate. U Po Kyin forces her into public humiliation of Flory, and ultimately drives her to prostitution, where she is subjected to further violence and exploitation. She is not fully accepted as a Burmese woman nor recognised as part of the European community.

However, the plight of Ma Hla May is indicative of a larger tendency in Orwell's depiction of women under colonial rule. Burmese women are consistently objectified throughout the story, either for sexual gratification or for social reasons. Flory buys Ma Hla May from her caretakers, treats her as an object rather than an equal, and discards her when she no longer fits his idea of an acceptable colonial marriage. Other European men have relationships with Burmese or Eurasian women, but will not give them equal status in their hearts or society. This exploitation is made possible by orientalist ideologies that objectify indigenous women as nothing but disposable objects of colonial desire, and not as self-determined women.

Hence, Ma Hla May plays a surprisingly illuminating role in *Burmese Days*. She is not just attempting to mimic British culture but responding to a colonial structure that equates feminine value with proximity to whiteness. Orwell shows how women are susceptible to racial and patriarchal authority but offers little insight into Ma Hla May's perspective beyond her connection to Flory. Her pain, then, is largely that of the European protagonist in an emotional maelstrom, not her own.

5.3 The Performance of Colonial Identity: Elizabeth and the Limits of Imitation

The instability of colonial identity in *Burmese Days* is not confined to the colonised characters. U Po Kyin and Ma Hla May exemplify the limitations of colonial subjects who mimic British culture, while Orwell also shows how British identity is constantly performed and reinforced through racial distinctions. Elizabeth Lackersteen and the butler of the European Club are two interrelated aspects of this phenomenon. Together, they show how colonial power relies on preserving the appearance of distinctions between the governed and the governing, even if those distinctions are socially constructed rather than naturally given.

Elizabeth comes to Burma with little personal knowledge of the colonial system, but she rapidly acquires the attitudes and conventions of a proper British woman. Her superiority is thus depicted not as a natural attribute but as an acquired one through membership in colonial society. She disregards local traditions without trying to understand them, going to the Chinese store and then the Burmese *pwe*. She describes Burmese tea as “absolutely beastly”, the bazaar as filthy and uncivilised, and finally describes the *pwe*, a kind of Burmese play, as a “hideous and savage spectacle.”(107, 108) When she returns to the European Club, she is 'relieved' to find herself back in the 'civilised' surroundings which she knows. These responses demonstrate how Orientalist preconceptions shape Elizabeth's view of Burma long before she is seriously involved in its culture.

Elizabeth's behaviour is important because it shows that Britishness in the colony is performed rather than natural. It is essential for a person to constantly demonstrate one's racial loyalty and one's cultural difference from the colonised to be accepted into the European community. Her rejection of Burmese traditions is not just a personal prejudice but a communal affirmation of the Empire's identity. Although Elizabeth's unmarried status is tenuous and she relies on marriage for economic security, she internalises the values of colonial society in an effort to locate her place within the hierarchy.

Flory's obsession with Elizabeth exposes the limits of his anti-imperialism. He hopes she will be able to appreciate Burmese culture and relate to his own feelings of alienation from colonial society, only to find that she believes in the racial hierarchy he despises. Flory never challenges Elizabeth's beliefs, but instead consistently suppresses his own to win her approval. Colonial identity is maintained not just through political institutions, but also through personal relationships that provide incentives for conformity and disincentives for dissent.

Elizabeth represents the epitome of British supremacy, and the butler of the European Club marks the well-defined boundaries of colonial mimicry. Ellis scolds the butler for speaking correct English, saying he ought to be speaking incorrect English, and that servants who speak too well should be dismissed. The British desire that the locals adopt their language and customs, but only as far as such adoption permits unambiguous differentiation. As the gap narrows, it threatens to diminish the ideological differences between the sophisticated coloniser and the supposedly inferior native.

This apparently trivial incident reveals a fundamental inconsistency in colonial rhetoric. The focus on English education and cultural assimilation is presented as evidence of the Empire's civilising mission. However, successful imitation is quickly suppressed if it threatens the very differences that sustain that mission. The butler's language abilities subvert the social

hierarchy that colonial ideology tries to impose. So, Ellis's irritation is not with dialogue per se, but with the anxiety of symbolic authority. As Bhabha argues, colonial mimicry produces people who are 'almost the same, but not quite'. The butler's English is dangerously close to that limit.

Elizabeth and the butler together depict the theatricality of colonial identity from different perspectives. Elizabeth has always had to prove she is better than the others to be part of the colonial elite, and the butler has always had to prove he is less than enough to be useful to them. Both characters demonstrate that colonial identity is maintained through Bhabha's repeated social performances rather than a fixed racial core. The only way in which imperial hierarchy can remain stable is through constant regulation of conduct, language and cultural expression.

6. Conclusion

One of the earliest literary explorations of British imperialism is to be found in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. Unlike most colonial literature of its time, the novel boldly exposes the corruption, racial prejudice, and moral contradictions that sustained the British Empire in Burma. This article argues that Orwell's critique of imperialism is essentially ambiguous. The novel interrogates the political and ethical legitimacy of colonial administration. However, it also reproduces many of the modes of representation that colonial discourse employed to describe the Orient. The paradox at the heart of *Burmese Days*, and the reason for its continuing relevance to postcolonial literary criticism, is the tension between resistance and complicity.

The study, using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, shows that the colonial discourse in the novel is not merely a racial prejudice but also a tool for depicting the geography, scenery and the Burmese. The European Club, the Burmese scenery, and the narrative's emphasis on European awareness all indicate that Burma is often seen through a

colonial lens. Much of his story is told from the point of view of the coloniser and his worries, yet Orwell casts aspersions on imperial power. Hence, the Burmese often seem to be represented as objects of representation.

The use of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony suggests that colonial rule in *Burmese Days* operates through both coercive force and ideological consent. Dr Veraswami exemplifies the assimilation of imperial ideals, while Flory reveals the limits of liberal anti-imperialism in a hegemonic colonial context. Those still bound by institutional structures, social norms and economic dependence recognise the injustice of Empire. The colonial power is a system of force and consent, and in describing it, Orwell shows us the mental and political dimensions of Empire.

Similarly, the narrative articulates the precariousness of colonial identity through Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry. Ultimately, Po Kyin, Ma Hla May, the European Club's butler and Elizabeth all propose that colonial identity is always renegotiated through mimicry, performance and marginalisation. The colonised are told to learn the language, values and customs of the British but are never given full equality. Mimicry reveals the basic paradox of imperial ideology: colonial power requires the production of sameness and difference at the same time. The narrative consistently demonstrates that the promise of integration in Orwell's colonial system is ultimately unattainable for the colonised.

These theoretical perspectives collectively suggest that *Burmese Days* cannot be fully understood either as an anti-imperialist story or as a typical colonial text. Instead, it occupies a mediating and profoundly paradoxical position. Orwell shows the brutality and duplicity of imperialism, but is still shaped by many beliefs that colonial narratives had instilled in European ideology. This paradox does not detract from the novel; instead, it emphasises its

significance within the postcolonial critique, revealing the challenges of resisting imperialism from the heart of the Empire.

Burmese Days is ultimately important not for solving the paradoxes of colonialism, but for revealing them. Orwell's text challenges readers to confront the violence of imperial power and the colonial gaze that persists even in anti-imperialist discourse. By reading the novel through the combined lenses of Said, Gramsci and Bhabha, we can see *Burmese Days* not simply as an untainted critique of imperialism, but as a highly ambivalent work whose intricacies remain provocative within the context of postcolonial literary criticism.

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