

# **SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT**

## **THEME OF IMPERIALISM**

Tyrants are oppressive rulers who hold abusing power and act superior about their inferior feelings. While trying to maintain the power, they dominate people by completely restricting their individual freedom. Hence, tyrants inarguably implement the rules of the tyranny that they belong. Tyranny which has control over people fits together with the concept of imperialism in the best way. Therefore the basic idea is that where imperialism is in charge, there also exists the power of tyranny. It is mainly understood that the only people who suffer under imperialism are from colonized countries; however the citizens of the colonizers also lose their freedom. Through its threatening policy, a colonialist country forces its officers to act like a tyrant man. “He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it” says George Orwell by describing the politics of colonialism and tyranny in “Shooting an Elephant”. Considering the implications of this statement, it becomes clearer that even though the man is unwilling to act like a tyrant, he has a force from Empire and people. Thus, he closes his eyes to his own values. In his masterpiece “Shooting an Elephant”, Orwell describes the struggle of a British officer, in other words a tyrant man who has abandoned his own morals, who exists only for doing “dirty work of Empire at close quarters”. Therefore, imperialism which perfectly fits to its “double-edged sword” definition makes a tyrant man play an absurd puppet under the concept of it and leads to abandonment of free will of both “sahib” and his “immensely old” people.

Imperialism acts like a process or advocacy of seeking the extension of control by indoctrinating its colonial policy. It occurs when a stronger country takes control over a weaker nation and dominates its people in terms of culture and policy. However imperialism does not always act destructively for a colonized nation or country. According to historical

facts, some colonies took advantages of colonial policy and benefited from it. For instance, Fordham University statistics denotes that the British Empire improved India, while being its colony, in cause of civilization. While expanding the concept of education for females besides males, British Empire also resuscitated India`s own noble literature. The veracity of these facts does not mean that British Empire always showed its mercy to colonies. In “Shooting an Elephant” Orwell refers to “evils of imperialism” by describing the dominant regime of the British Empire over its victims – Burmese people. While depicting the essential aspects of imperialism, the author tries to prove that imperialism is a double-edged sword. Thus, the incident occurring in the story uncovers the fact that imperialism induces damage on both sides in terms of imperialistic relationships. While the British officer plays an “absurd puppet” and implements rules of the big tyrant – the British Empire, the elephant together with its Burmese people represents “stricken, shrunken, immensely old” countries.

If a man sacrifices his moral values for tyranny of an empire, he limits his freedom in order to do what is best for the Empire. That limitation directly leads to abandonment of free will. As it can be referred from Orwell`s quote, as soon as a tyrant man becomes dependent on the empire, he cannot have a single word about freely expressing himself and making decisions by following his own morals. In “Shooting an Elephant” Orwell says “I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him”. However, a huge mass of yellow faced people and the main tyrant-Empire put him under pressure. Therefore the man who is in the image of a “sahib” appears to be powerless to resist Burmese people. For white people being addressed as a “sahib” gives the sense of superiority over native people. However in the language of natives, the word takes its mocking meaning. By respectfully referring the white man as “sahib”, natives make him believe that he is in charge of everything. Orwell tries to differentiate respectful and mocking meanings of this word by saying “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He

becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib". By taking a role of tyrant, a man is forced to keep up his position; therefore he is forced, even unwillingly, to accept the Burmese definition which mockingly applies to him. Here the British officer who is described as a victim of imperialism and plays "an absurd puppet" has been left with Hamlet's dilemma "to shoot or not to shoot an elephant". However the British officer, here, is not only dominated by Empire, but also he is under pressure of Burmese people while he is making the decision. While the British tries to have a control over Burmese people, Burmese unwittingly take control over the tyrant man.

Under the dominion of imperialism, no one is born as a tyrant, but unwittingly becomes a tyrant. As soon as a man forfeit his beliefs to implement empire's orders, his face grows to fit the mask of tyranny. In his essay Orwell describes the British officer wearing an artificial mask of the Empire as soon as he shoots the elephant; therefore, he completely turns to be an imperialist and destroys his human nature.