

## Naturalistic Tendencies in *Burmese Days*

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**The Study of George Or' well's Novels under the Perspective of Naturalism (SCWY14-17)**

### Abstract

*Naturalistic works tend to be pessimistic, emphasizing the destructive power that environment, inheritance, and instinct collaboratively have on an individual who has no free will. *Burmese Days*, George Or' well's autobiographic story of his life in Burma, is such a work. It sets Flory, a timber merchant in Burma, the British Empire, observing quite objectively his failure and devastation. Flory is the victim of the British colonialism, and his death, in turn, is a prophecy of the end of the British Empire.*

**Key Words:** Naturalism, Imperialism, Inheritance, Beastliness

### 1. INTRODUCTION

George Or' well (1903-1950) is one of the most influential English writers in English Literary history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2008, *The Times* ranked him second on a list of 50 greatest British writers since 1945. He is well-known for the political allegory *Animal Farm* (1945) and the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighteen Four* (1949). In 2005, *Nineteen Eighteen Four* was chosen by Time magazine as one of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005. Concepts, such as "Big Brother", "double think", "thought crime", "2+2=5" and "memory hole" have find their way into everyday use. However, in contrast to the fact

that *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighteen Four* are widely read and commented upon, *Burmese Days* (1934), his first novel and the fountain head of his later novels, to some extent, remains neglected. *Burmese Days* (1934) is one of the three important novels on British colonialism and imperialism, the other two being Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and E. M. Frost's *A Passage to India* (1924). In "Why I Write", George Orwell recalls his intention to write a novel about his experience in Burma, "I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed description and arresting similes, and also full of passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound. And in fact, my first complete novel, *Burmese Days*...is rather that kind of book" (Orwell, 1994:2).

"Naturalism," according to *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (2005), "is a critical term applied to the method of literary composition that aims at a detached, scientific objectivity in the treatment of natural man. It is thus more inclusive and less selective than realism, and holds to the philosophy of determinism. It conceives of man as controlled by his instincts or his passions, or by his social and economic environment and circumstances. Since in this view man has no free will, the naturalistic writer does not attempt to make moral judgments, and as a determinist he tends toward pessimism. The movement is an outgrowth of 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific thought, following in general the biological determinism of Darwin's Theory or the economic determinism of Marx. It stems from French literature, in which Zola emphasizes biological determinism and Flaubert economic determinism". Thus, the present paper aims at discussing how naturalism is manifested in *Burmese Days*, that is, the individuals' failure under the crushing power exerted by the environment, passions, and inheritance, which is depicted in a detached and objective manner.

## 2. The pressure of the environment

The Great Britain launched three wars to invade Burma in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually took Burma as one of its colonies and conquered it for over half a century. To justify its imperialism and colonialism, GB saved no efforts in brainwashing its people and subjects with notions such as "white supremacy" and "white man's burden" through propaganda in media, families and schools. It results in the white men taking it for granted that the natives are inferior creatures, who should be gratified for being enslaved.

In *Burmese Days*, colonial politics in Kyauktada, India, in the 1920s, come to a head when the European Club, previously for whites only, is ordered to elect one token native member. The deeply racist members do their best to manipulate the situation, resulting in the loss not only of reputations but of lives.

Kyauktada, a fairly typical Upper Burma town remains underdeveloped. It has a population of about four thousand, out of which only seven white men rule the majority of Burmese, several hundred Indians, scores of Chinese and two Eurasians. Apart from a military police, the colony has a court, a prison, a school, a church and a hospital to serve for the Empire. The British Colonialists not only rob the natives of their natural resources but also continue its slavery educations. The white men deal with the natives in their daily life, but confine themselves to the club where they entertain and associate with each other. The club culture originates in England, where the membership is difficult to come by as it is the symbol of social status. The European Club in Kyauktada is especially the cultural centre for white people and its membership indicates the distinction between the white men and the natives. As what is mentioned in the novel: "In any town in India the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain."(Orwell, 2009: 89)

The European Club has strict regulations for its members to follow: “keep 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” (230). The five regulations are typical of the imperialistic discourse, whose core value lies at the fact that their Euro-centralism is not to be violated. Once their supremacy confronts challenge from an Oriental, they will go out to fight back.

However, more and more clashes between the British colonialists and the natives break out when the Burmese demand for independence from the British Imperialism in 1920’s. In order to lessen the conflict between the Burmese and the white men, the British Colonial Officials compromise to agree the European Club to grant token membership to the Oriental. Once the news is spread in Kyauktada, it initiates the furious competition between two natives, Dr. Veraswami, Flory’s Indian friend, and U Po Kyin, a sub-divisional Magistrate, Yet, the white men of the club try their best to prevent it from happening. Among the seven members of the club, Ellis is a typical chauvinist who worships “white-supremacy”. He is strongly opposed to the Club’s admittance of the Oriental. Even though he is from the East District of London, a district known as the dwelling place for gangsters, paupers and smuggled people. But in Burma, he is a stuffed shirt who has little tolerance for the native Burmese and “hardly ever opens his mouth without insulting somebody” (93). Upon learning that the club opens its membership to the Oriental, he flew into a rage: “I’ll die in the ditch before I’ll see a nigger in here” (93). He tried to incite his compatriots to prevent the native Burmese from getting the admittance into the club: “It’s a question of keeping those black, stinking swine out of the only place where we can enjoy ourselves; you’d have the decency to back me up” (94). He is especially angry with Dr. Veraswami; even calls him nickname of “Dr. Very-slimy,” and insults him publicly as one of “little pot-bellied niggers breathing garlic in your face over the bridge table” (93).

On the contrary, Flory, a socialist with equalitarianism in his mind, has sympathy for the native Burmese and hates his arrogant and evil white compatriots. He is the only white man going out of the club to make friends with the natives. He is fascinated by their language, culture and art. Thus, he becomes a thorn in the side of Ellis and the like, and is isolated by them. Undoubtedly, Flory is quite out of place in the club. But he dares not air out his feelings in the club but keep them to himself. Even though he feels free to talk to his Indian friend Dr. Veraswami, but the doctor himself who has been successfully brainwashed by the English Colonial Education, can’t understand Flory. Flory has to learn to live inwardly, secretly, in books. However the corrupting effect of living in secret almost makes him mad.

When he meets the white girl Elizabeth from Paris, he takes it for granted that she, as a girl from an artistic capital in the world, must have understood him. He is overjoyed and eagerly shares with her his secret: “You see, I try- just sometimes, when I have the pluck- not to be a pukka sahib. (Indian for master, interpreted by the present writer)” (175) However, Elizabeth, being a girl of vanity, comes to India with the intention to marry a white master. She has a strong sense of white supremacy and racial discrimination. What she admires in Flory is the chivalry in saving her from the threats of a cow and the masculinity he manifests in hunting. Both chivalry and masculinity are traits of a white gentleman. Therefore, she is pleased whenever Flory appears to have the traits of white man: chivalry and heroism whereas whenever Flory shows his sympathy for the natives and interest in their language and art, she turns cold and distant.

As U Po Kyin says, “No European has any faith in a man with a black face. Flory is a coward” Flory was aware of the enormity of the evil power of the imperialism and that he couldn’t fight against it single-handedly. So,

on deciding whether to warn his friend Dr. Veraswami of the danger of being humiliated by U Po Kyin, he hesitated and chose to keep out of this business altogether. "It is so important (perhaps the most important of all the Ten Precepts of the pukka Sahib) not to entangle oneself in 'native' quarrels. With Indians there must be no loyalty, no real friendship..." He turns the matter in his mind: "The doctor was a good fellow, but as to championing him against the full fury of pukka sahibdom-ah, no, no! What shall it profit a man if he save his own soul and lose the whole world" (139)? In the end, his cowardice sacrificed his friend and himself as well.

### **3. The Effect of heredity.**

What deprives Flory of his courage to confront his rivals is the effect of his birthmark, in addition to the evil power of the colonial environment. Naturalists believe that the inherited physical features or diseases will eventually cause the failure of individuals. For Flory, it's birthmark that leads to his devastation. As is mentioned, "Flory's trouble began in his mother's womb, when chance put the blue birthmark on his cheek" (127).

The birthmark is an inherited feature that matters little to life, and yet, its effect is doubled in restricting or controlling an individual in the social environment. The societal environment in schools has various effects on individuals. On one hand, a teacher can exercise his power in manipulating and teaching the students; one the other hand, gang games and nick names given by peers can be very influential. Flory gets along well with his birthmark until he first arrives at school at the age of nine. He got the nickname of "blueface". What was even worse, the school poet writes a couplet to ridicule him: "New-tick Flory does look rum/ Got a face like a monkey's bum." From "blue face" to "a monkey's bum", the couplet not only demonizes but also dehumanizes Flory, justifying their insult, isolation and attack. Thus, in the subsequent years, every Saturday evening, the older boys inquire the heretic in what they called a Spanish Inquisition and carried out a torture called Special Togo in which the boy being tortured is hold in a very painful grip by some boys while the others beat the boy with a conker on a piece of string. The pain Flory experiences was "known only to a few illuminati" (127) First Flory is derogated and then is tortured only because of his birthmark. This nightmare undoubtedly impresses Flory in his boyhood. He soon frees himself of the nickname of a monkey's bum with his maneuver with big boys and his skills in playing football. Luckily, he gets even with the poet in the last term of his primary school.

His birthmark is once again mentioned and gossiped about in Burma so that he loses confidence and self-respect, which eventually results in his failure in the proposal and his subsequent death. Whenever he fails to act according to pukka sahibdom, white men are likely to find the proof in his birthmark in order to alienate him as non-white, and even non- British. Ellis intentionally calls the "dark blue-colored" birthmark "black-colored" and explains the reason he doesn't like Flory: "He's a bit too Bolshie for my taste. I can't bear a fellow who pals up with the natives. I shouldn't wonder if he's got a lick of the tar-brush himself. It might explain that black mark on his face. Piebold. And he looks like a yellow belly, with that black hair, and skin the color of a lemon" (102) He even calls directly Flory "Booker Washington, the nigger's pal"(102), a black politician and educator of the US. Such concerns over Flory's birthmark widely occur in the remarks of characters in the novel, no matter whether it an Indian or a European, whether it is a friend or an enemy; whether it is out of malicious slanders or well-intentioned cares. Even Ko S'la, Flory's servant, is inclined to pity rather than respect Flory "partly because of the birthmark, which he considered a dreadful thing" (116)

The tragedy of Flory lies in the fact that he identifies with the distortion the others force upon him. Looks of the others make him sensitive of his birthmark again. The novel describes how sensitive he becomes whenever he is caught sight of: “The first thing that one noticed in Flory was a hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth. Seen from the left side his face had a battered, woebegone look, as though the birthmark had been a bruise- for it was a dark blue in colour. He was quite aware of its hideousness. And at all times, when he was alone, there was a sidelongness about his movement, as he maneuvered constantly to keep the birthmark out of sight” (89). Thus, the birthmark has a formative function that molds Flory into a timid, weak and selfish man. It robs Flory of his courage to assert himself publicly. Consequently, in the face-to face confrontation with the other white men, he, though otherwise eloquent, flinches as “he could feel his birthmark palpable on his cheek” (127). He also identifies the notion of white supremacy to some degree. He deserts Ma Hla May, his native lover, as he attaches shame, guilty and corruption to the sexual intercourse with the native girl, which reminds him of his birthmark. He places great hope of a new life on some civilized white girl from the civilized world who doesn’t mind his birthmark to save him out of the loneliness and isolation from other Europeans.

He falls in love with Elizabeth, who makes him even more painful and more aware of his birthmark. He tries to hide the side of his cheek with birthmark from Elizabeth at her presence. Even though he realizes Elizabeth is a superficial girl who can hardly understand him, let alone share with him his complicated sentiments of loving Burma and hating Burma. He belittles himself and feels guilt at her presence. She actually is no less than a racist herself. In her eyes, the dark colored naked Burmese men were “hideous as demons”(154); and the Burmese woman was such a queer little thing—she was almost like a doll” (156).The very appearance of the Eurasian men “excited a peculiar dislike in her” (175). She classifies them into the category of the South Europeans, who often play the role of Mexican and Italian rogues in the films. She even believes such hearsay that “the colored people had their skull kind of slope up behind like a tom-cat’s, and then their foreheads slant back, and that a person with a sloping forehead is a criminal type” (171); and that “the Eurasians were degenerate as the half-castes always inherit what’s worst in both races” (175). She can’t understand Flory’s attempt to introduce her to the Burmese customs and culture. “The very notion of wanting to rub shoulders with all those smelly natives-had impressed her badly. She was perfectly certain that that was not how white men ought to behave” (162) Later, Elizabeth dumps Flory and turns to chase Verrall, a military policeman. Unlike Flory, Verrall is a man of action, who detests anything “highbrow”. Elizabeth loves him presently and almost forgets Flory except that she can always remember his birthmark. Ironically, Verrall turns out to be a womanizer and sneaks away secretly. Unexpectedly, Ma Hla May, Flory’s deserted native lover, humiliates him publicly in the church, which puts an end to his daydream of reuniting with Elizabeth. He desperately clings to Elizabeth, who is shocked to notice that “his face appalled her, it was so ghastly, rigid and old. It was like a skull. Only the birthmark seemed alive in it. She hated him now for his birthmark. She had never known till this moment how dishonoring how unforgivable a thing it was” (298) She makes up her mind that she would rather go back to Europe as a single woman than marry Flory. “When she thought of his face as it had looked at the church, yellow and glistening with the hideous birthmark upon it, she could have wish him dead. ... But not after that shameful, squalid scene, and the devilish ugliness of his disfigured face in that moment. It was, finally, the birthmark that had damned him.”(302)

With the hope of a happy life gone, Flory committed suicide. He has long given up and has been living like a dead man. The birthmark, a physical feature generates tremendous effect upon the owner himself and eventually devastates him. Strange enough, with death, the birthmark fades immediately, so that it is no more than a faint grey stain.

#### **4. Beastliness is human nature.**

Apart from enormity of the environment and the inheritance, human nature is believed by naturalists to be a decisive power to push the individual to doom. Characters in *Burmese Days* were, without exception, full of insatiable lust and desire for sex, money and power.

Flory leads an empty and meaningless life in Burma where he idles away his time by gambling and prostituting even though he is more elegant. Having dumped an affectionate Eurasian girl before he is transferred to Kyauktada, he buys Ma Hla May as a sexual partner from her parents and deserts her when he gets tired of her two years later. He doesn't truly love Burma, which arrests him with exotic culture. To him, a civilized girl from Europe is his ideal wife. He falls in love with Elizabeth only because she is from Paris. He hopes to be saved out of the lonely and isolated world by a girl like Elizabeth, and when Elizabeth left him for Verrall, he is tortured sleeplessly with his brain full of intimacy between Elizabeth and Verrall. To quench his lust, he accepts a prostitute brought by his thoughtful servant. When he realizes Elizabeth determines to break up with him forever, he desperately thinks of the obscenity on Elizabeth's bridal night with her newly married husband. The mental torture is so great that he goes mad to kill himself.

U Po Kyin, Sub-divisional Magistrate of Kyauktada, and Dr. Veraswami vie with each other for the membership into the British Club. U Po Kyin rises from a humble origin. Since he watches the British troops marching victorious into Mandalay in his boyhood, he is awed and convinced that "his own people were no match for this race of giants" (80). To fight on the side of the British is his top ambition. Therefore, he takes advantage of the opportunity to work for the British to bully his compatriots. He climbs up the social ladder at the sacrifice of other natives. In his eyes, the European Club is a remote, mysterious temple, the holy of holies far harder of entry for him. He dreams of entering the sacred place, to rub shoulders with Europeans. To clear his way to his destination, he incites Ma Hla May to humiliate Flory, who can hardly stand the loss of face and the loss of love, commits suicide by shooting himself. The wicked U Po Kyin wins the membership at last and is soon promoted and awarded by the governor for his "long and royal service and especially for his timely aid in crushing a most dangerous rebellion in Kyauktada district." Yet, before long, he is stricken with apoplexy and dies without speaking again." (308) In contrast with U Po Kyin who is mean and brutal, Dr. Veraswami is kind and upright as is illustrated by the way he treats Old Mattu, the European Church watchman, he gives Mattu money whenever he begs. In fact, he is notorious for his soft-heartedness, and all the beggars in Kyauktada make him their target (110). However, no matter it is mean U Po Kyin or gentle Dr. Veraswami, they both have been brainwashed so that they have neither nation pride nor self-respect. He truly believed he is of inferior race. He tells Flory: "you do not know what prestige it gives to an Indian to be a member of the European Club. In the club, practically, he is a European" (113). So, in order to get the membership of the club, he has internal conflict with his compatriot. He compares U Po Kyin to a vicious crocodile. After Flory's death, he loses the support of his European friend; he fails in the competition. What's even worse, he is reverted to the rank of Assistant Surgeon and transferred to Mandalay General Hospital. Mandalay is a disagreeable

town- it is dusty and intolerably hot. It has five products all beginning with “P”: pagodas, pariahs, pigs, and prostitutes. And the routine work at the hospital is dreary. To make up for the reduced pay, Dr. Veraswami has to run a private clinic in the evening. However, he joins in a second –rate club because its chief glory is a single European member—a Glasgow electrician, a dull lout sacked for drunkenness. The doctor, who never believes that a white man can be a fool, tries in vain almost every night to engage him in what he still calls “cultured conversation.”

Ma Hla May, the only Burmese woman depicted in the novel, leads a concubine life with Flory, whose white skin fascinates her “for the sense of power it gave her.”(119) To incite his lust, she sometimes puts love-philtres in Flory’s food because she believes that lechery is a form of witchcraft that can give a woman magical powers over a man, until in the end she can weaken him to a half-idiotic slave” (119). She does not love Flory and lies to him when he finds out she has a Burmese man as her lover. Flory feels ashamed of having relationship with her, and dumps her as he does a Eurasian girl Rosa before his transfer to Kyauktada. After Flory’s death, Ma Hla May becomes a prostitute in a brothel in Mandalay. Her good looks are all but gone, and her clients pay her very little sum of money and even kick her and beat her.

Elizabeth ends up by marrying the pretentious, old man Mr. Macgregor, the Deputy Commissioner of Kyauktada who regrets that those days are gone forever when the white man can send his disrespectful butler to jail with a chit saying “please give the bearer fifteen lashes” (99), is exposed to have three illegitimate children with native women within only one year in Kyauktada, and six young progenies left unprovided for in the last district of Shwemyo.

##### **5. The Detached, Scientific and Objective tone**

Émile Zola (1893) argues in his essay “experimental novel,” “The observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes. He should be the photographer of phenomena; his observation should be an exact representation of nature. He listens to nature and he writes under its dictation. But once the fact is ascertained and the phenomenon observed, an idea or hypothesis comes into his mind, reason intervenes, and the experimentalist comes forward to interpret the phenomenon.”(Zola, 1893) Zola is sure that innovation in the fictional writing is creation of characters and plot based upon scientific method. Like scientists in the lab, the writer must remain detached and observe the character getting deteriorated and ruined by the powerful exterior and interior factors. In order to appear to be detached, *Burmese Days* employs the objective point of view, which “allows the author to be like a movie camera moving to any set and recording any event, as long as one of the character is lugging the camera, It also allows the camera to slide in behind the eyeballs of any character...one of the hardest things to master is to get in your character’s head and to learn their thoughts, but rather let their action and words let the reader figure those thoughts out”(Kidder& Todd, 2013:143). Or’well follows the “show not tell” rule, using the rather turbid, sense-bound “camera eyes,” as is illustrated in the following description of Flory watching stealthily and jealously Elizabeth, his former sweetheart, dating Verrall,

*Flory lounged at his garden gate, pretending to feed the pigeon. He could not deny himself the pain of seeing Elizabeth and Verrall start out on their ride. How vulgarly, how cruelly she had behaved to him! It is dreadfully when people will not even have the decency to quarrel. Presently Verrall rode up to the Lackersteens’ house on the white pony, with a syce riding the chestnut, then there was a pause, then they*

*emerged together, Verrall on the chestnut pony, Elizabeth on the white, and trotted quickly up the hill. They were chattering and laughing, her silk-shirted shoulder very close to his. Neither looked toward Flory. (254)* Another moving, heart-broken scene graphically depicted is Flory shooting his dog and shooting himself later. Before Flory commits suicide, he remembers his dog. He stops to look for the dog. He finds his dog Flo playing with a servant's son in the cookhouse.

*"She was dancing round him with her small teeth bared, pretending to bite him, while the tiny boy, his belly red in the glow of the embers, smacked weakly at her, laughing, and yet half frightened.*

*"Flo! Come here. Flo!*

*"She heard him and came obediently, and then stopped short at the bedroom door. She seemed to have grasped now that there was something wrong. She backed in a little and stood and looking timorously up at him, unwilling to enter the bedroom.*

*"Come in here!*

*"She wagged her tail, but did not move.*

*"Come on, Flo! Good old Flo! Come on!*

*"Flo was suddenly stricken with terror. She whined, her tail went down, and she shrank back. 'Come here, blast you!' he cried, and he took her by the collar and flung her into the room, shutting the door behind her. He went to the table for the pistol.*

*"Now come here! Do as you're told!*

*"She crouched down and whined for forgiveness. It hurt him to hear it. 'Come on, old girl! Dear old Flo! Master wouldn't hurt you. Come here!' She crawled very slowly towards his feet, flat on her belly, whining, her head down as though afraid to look at him. When she was a yard away he fired, blowing her skull to fragments.*

*"Her shattered brain looked like red velvet. Was that what he would look like? The heart, then, not the head. He could hear the servants running out of their quarters and shouting –they must have heard the sound of the shot. He hurriedly tore open his coat and pressed the muzzle of the pistol against his shirt. A tiny moth along the edge of the table. Flory pulled the trigger with his thumb" (303-304).*

## **6. Conclusion**

Naturalism describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Through this objective study of human beings, naturalistic writers believe that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives may be studied and understood. Naturalistic writers thus use a version of the scientific method to write their novels; they study human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters' lives are governed by forces of heredity and environment. *Burmese Days* is a naturalistic novel in which George Orwell adopts an objective and detached point of view to study the characters, who are governed by forces of environment and heredity, their instincts and passions.

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