

Introduction to Cultural Studies
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Lecture - 07
George Orwell's Shooting An Elephant (Part - II)

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course, Introduction to Cultural Studies. In this lecture we will continue with the study of George Orwell's Shooting An Elephant which we started already and we covered sessions of it in one lecture and we talked about how the mappings of the essay are very interesting because he talks about the hatred he has for the empire, as an agent of the empire paradoxically.

But equally he has talked about the hatred he has for the Burmese people who surround him all the time, who hate him all the time because he is a white colonial police officer. So we talked about the discursive quality of hatred in the essay. The constructive quality of power, privilege and how the privileged position, the privileged male position paradoxically becomes the position of hatred, the position of ambivalence, the position of cynicism, hollowness and hypocrisy, right.

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One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism

— the real motives for which despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an old .44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise might be useful *in terrorem*. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone 'must'. It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of 'must' is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violence upon it.

So you know we will set out the, Orwell had really set out the map of imperialism, the map of the dirty work of empire in the essay and then he moves on the section we will cover today, he moves on to study the event in the essay the one event which really reveals before him is like a

negative revelation, a negative epiphany a negative enlightenment of the constructed quality of the privileged, the constructed quality of power, identity, hegemonic identity in the colonial context right.

So this is the essay and we will start with the essay right away now, this section where he talks about the mad elephant and then the entire episode which follows from it. And I quote, one day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. The word enlightening over here is very interesting. It is a dark negative enlightenment right. It is just the reverse of positive, spiritual, uplifting enlightenment. This is just the opposite of that. It was a tiny incident in itself.

It was a tiny incident in itself but it gave me a better glimpse than I had before of the real nature of imperialism; the real motives for which despotic governments act. So you know he is saying quite clearly that this was a tiny event. This was not really a major event in itself but it became a symbolic trigger an existence of trigger for him, a cognitive trigger for him to understand the deeper structures of imperialism, the deeper structures of control, torture, exploitation, despotism, anarchy, etc.

And you know it gives him a really a perverse image of power and the perversion of power the perversity of power is revealed before him and is quite unsettling as essentially and it exhausts him essentially as well. Because as I mentioned in the opening lecture for this particular essay that this is also among other things an essay about existential exhaustion and a lack of agency, death of agency and how he ends up being a really hollow hypocritical person.

Despite knowing that what he is doing is a terrible thing he has to go on doing it. He has to end up doing it and that makes him really cynical. That makes him really superfluous at all levels; discursive levels, you know agentic levels, existential levels etc. So he is saying quite clearly that this particular episode of shooting the elephant you know it was in itself not a major act but then it revealed before me some real negative knowledge about imperialism and how imperialism really works or what imperialism really is.

So this is what happened. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it. I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. Now imagine the condition over here. Suddenly he gets a phone call from a sub-inspector telling him there is a mad elephant ravaging the bazaar and his first reaction is you know he does not quite know what to do.

He does not quite know how to handle it. But then as a police officer, a white police officer it is his job to handle anarchy, it is his job to control anarchy, to tame anarchy. So he has to go out on a pony with a rifle to see what is happening. I took my rifle, an old .44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant. But I thought the noise might be useful in terrorem. So he is just thinking ahead.

He is saying that you know I did not take a real rifle, I took a small rifle just to create some noise, some diversion which would potentially terrorize the elephant, scare the elephant away if need be but this was way too small to kill away the elephant. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. So he is waylaid by different people on his approach to the elephant.

It was not of course a wild elephant but a tamed one which had gone must. So it was you know it just had this you know attack of mast, the attack, the very amorous experience where the elephant becomes very wild and frenzied because of sexual activity in its body and then as a result of that the elephants gone wild temporarily.

It is not a wild elephant at all. It is a perfectly tamed domestic elephant but it is just highly sexualized in the moment because of the particular bodily movement, bodily behavior as a result of which it has become potentially problematic. It is just you know running amok in the bazaar. It had been chained up as all domestic elephants would be. It had been chained up as tame elephants always are when their attack of must is due.

But on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. So you know the routine of controlling elephants when they are attacked by this sexualized experience, sexual experience is you know was (()) (05:51) chained up with you know but then he broke his chain and ran away the previous night and as a result of which he is now running amok in the bazaar. Its mahout the only person, I mean notice also the preponderance of Indian words; bazaar, mast, mahout.

So and this also gives you a very interesting idea of how culture influences language because this is obviously written in English by George Orwell, one of the finest writers of English language but then notice the invasion, the preponderance, the presence of Indian words over here because you know he is describing an episode which is colonial. He is describing an episode which is Indian in all essence, in all respect.

So you know his boy heavily is drawing on quite heavily from a Indian vocabulary, a Hindi vocabulary largely. So must, mahout, bazaar all these words come really they appear they are foregrounded really in this essay. Its mahout the only person who could manage it when it was in that state had set out in pursuit but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours journey away. And in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town.

The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against him. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit stalls and devoured the stock. Also it had met the municipal rubbish van and when the driver jumped out and took to his heels had turned the van over and inflicted violence upon it. So he gives you a bit of a summary of what that elephant had damaged, the damaged summary.

So obviously the Burmese had no weapons to control the elephant and they are quite helpless, they are quite vulnerable against the mad elephant who had been running amok and killing people, not killing people but destroying property. So it had destroyed someone's hut, it had killed a cow, it had raided some fruit stalls and eaten other fruits essentially and also more importantly it had sort of overturned a municipal rubbish van and then it sort of played with rubbish and that created more you know more problems for the people in town. So this was the long and short of what the elephant had done so far.

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The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of 'Go away, child! Go away this instant!' and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts thatched with palm leaf winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and as usual failed to get any definite information.

Now again we find that this is the kind of description he is about to give. You know it is hard to get information in the East. It is hard to get any kind of concrete data in the East and that that becomes a very problematic kind of description if you use a modern measuring yardsticks, right. It is almost racist if you are saying that these people have no sense of direction and these people are ignorant people. They do not know geography, they do not know mathematics.

They have a completely different way of describing distance. So that becomes a very almost offensive way, patronizing offensive way to talk about some people but then the point is he is not even attempting to be politically correct and that is the whole point of the essay. He is just giving or confessing what he exactly felt at that point of time and he is not aware of the modern measuring yardsticks that we are using.

So perhaps we should treat this racism, the racist rhetoric in the essay as something which makes it more honest and interesting for us today looking at it from a cultural studies perspective because here was the man who hates imperialism, hates empire who ideologically is aversive to the empire but at the same time he ends up hating the Burmese people as well. There is no escape route at all right and that is the whole point in the essay.

So and he says that is how information travels in the East. This is how information is communicated in the East. They do not give any concrete information at all and he completely lost the directionless. So this is invariably the case in the East. A story always sounds clear enough at a distance but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. So he is saying this is exactly how it works in the East.

People talk about all kinds of things when you are at a distance but the closer you get to it the more ambiguous everything sounds. The more vague it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction. Some said that it had gone in another direction. Some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. So he is getting all kinds of contradictory reports, contradictory you know narratives about the elephant.

So some people are saying it is gone in that direction. Some people are saying it has gone in completely opposite direction and a major section of people saying what elephant, we do not know of any elephant at all, what are you talking about. So he is completely confused. So again the confusion over here becomes discursive. It is not just the cognitive category confusion, it becomes discursive, it becomes political and is heavily racialized as well.

So he is saying this is a confusion that happens to a white British person if the person is staying in the East because you know people over here are ignorant. People over here do not know what they are saying. People over here have no sense of mathematics or geometry or geography. So they keep confusing you with their sense of direction which is also a very racist thing to say using modern measuring yardsticks.

So I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud scandalized cry of go away child, go away this instant and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of the hut violently shooving away a crowd of naked children.

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shooving away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.



So suddenly there is some kind of commotion happening, an old woman comes out with a switch in hand and driving away the children; children all naked. Again the description over here is very graphic and is very so stereotypically imperialist. I mean all the children are naked because they are so poor and they are like barbaric, uncivilized naked children who run around the streets because that is where they are, that is how they live their lives.

Some more woman followed clicking their tongues and exclaiming evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. So something must have happened. There is some kind of a commotion and you know there is some negative feeling. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked and he could not have been dead many minutes.

So now you have a corpse, now you have a dead body, right. And that becomes an empirical evidence for the presence of the elephant. So you know there was somebody who has been killed by the elephant presumably and there was a dead body that somewhere children have seen the

dead body and an old woman they are scandalized because the children ought not to have seen a dead body and now all those attention is aroused.

And he goes in that direction and now examines it more closely. So the people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. So it is a very violent torturous kind of death. The elephant had come, found him, ground him to the ground and then you know basically made him some kind of a pulp by pushing him into the earth.

This was the rainy season and the ground was soft and the face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple yards long. It was almost like he was buried in a tomb inside, he is almost made into a coffin. He is pushed into the earth by the elephant because the mud was soft. It was a rainy season and so you know he just sank into the mud and that makes even more morbid to a great extent. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side.

His face was coated with mud, his eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. So you know it is a very disturbing kind of a sight to see a dead man, not just dead man but a dead man has been tortured to death by a mad elephant. So it is a very violent kind of death and that violence, that torture is being expressed in the face and there is also a grin in the face which makes it even more morbid to the onlooker.

Never tell me by the way that the dead people the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish. So again you know he is giving a very unromantic, graphic, honest, candid description of dead. He is saying you know do not tell me that dead people look peaceful, they die a natural death and their soul goes away; a very Christian way of looking at dead. He is saying that does not happen. I have seen dead bodies who look devilish, who look tortured.

So that is nothing romantic or nothing you know liberatory about death okay. The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man, I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant's rifle. I had

already sent back the pony not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant. So now he knows that the elephant is really there, its real presence.

So he sends for a real elephant's rifle and he sends away the pony because he realized the pony can become frightened and then throw him off the ground you know when he sees the elephant. So that will be a bit of a detriment for him. So he must rather walk, he must rather you know be in his foot rather than on the back of a pony where pony will be scared in the presence of a mad elephant and he does a wise thing by sending it away.

So this very symbolic act of sending away his small rifle and asking for a bigger rifle becomes sort of proleptic really, anticipatory. It makes us you know anticipate the fact that maybe he is going to shoot the elephant. Maybe the events will happen and maybe the elephants can be shot because he is preparing for it, right. So the preparations are beginning.

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The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant — I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary — and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I

The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges. So loaded rifle, it is loaded and then he can use it as an ammunition against the elephant. And meanwhile some Burmans had arrive and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me.

And this is a very interesting image. I mean imagine this image, visualize this image. You have a white man with a gun walking in the town and the entire population leaving their houses, abandoning their houses, flocking behind him to see some kind of a magic act happening. So this reminds me when I first read it and you know I keep reminded getting reminded of that all the time when I read it of the Piped Piper image, right.

So if you remember the Piped Piper story about this person with a magic quality coming to a town driving away the pests of the town and the entire population sort of flocking behind him. The second time he comes back all the children flocked behind him. The first time all the rats you know flocked behind him. So we have that kind of a Piped Piper imagery in operation over here, right.

Because you know he is a person who is supposedly about to do, able to do some kind of a magic thing, some kind of a superhuman thing, some kind of powerful privileged thing, right as a white man with a gun and the entire Burmese population following him, flocking behind him in order to see the magic, the magic trick that he is about to perform. So this is the bit in the essay where the performative quality of the white man's superiority, supposed superiority comes into play spectacularly, right.

So it must remain into a spectacle like all performative things. It must have a larger than life effect, it must have an excessive effect, it must have a spectacular effect, right. So spectacular quality of the white man's superiority supposed superiority is about to begin, is about to be performed, is about to be enacted right and so this pushed towards performativity has begun and nevertheless not going back, right.

And so a point will come in the essay when he realize or when he thinks, he looks at the elephant and realize maybe that I do not want to shoot the elephant. I ought not to shoot the elephant, but then he looks back and realizes he has to shoot it because everyone expects him to do it. All the people behind him thousands of them they were expecting him to do it because he is a white man and this is what a white man ought to do in such a situation.

It is a discursive demand from the white man. Rather he shoots the elephant and he does this white man's job of controlling anarchy, any potential, any potential anarchy, any threat to the machinery of control must be eradicated, must be liquidated, must be terminated by the white man. So it is a, you see expected performativity from the white man. So the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me.

They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging the house their homes but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them as it would to an English crowd besides they wanted the meat. So again look at the way in which Orwell describes the Burmese people.

So on the one hand we have this very cynical, ambivalent, doubtful white person and you sort of begin to sympathize with him and begin to feel for him because we realize he is stuck in his you know corridor of hatred in no man's land. But at the same time look at the way in which he is describing the Burmese people. A, he is speaking for them. No Burmese man or woman speak in this particular essay. They are spoken about, they are spoken for.

They are the complete subalterns who never speak and secondly he the Orwell avatar way he seems to know exactly what they want. He seems to know exactly what is in their mind. So that becomes very problematic description of the people. So he seems to know the psychology, he seems to know study the minds and speak for them and that becomes a bit of a problem. He is just telling you that they wanted the meat.

So he is completely convinced that all of them are coming behind him because A, they want a bit of fun. They want this English man's performative action to be enacted before them as some kind of a tamasha, some kind of a show, some kind of a theater and you know the metaphors over here become more theatrical with time. But also and equally they want the meat of the elephant and he seems to know that exactly, right.

There is no uncertainty, there is no ambivalence in his description of the Burmese people. So all the ambivalence is located in the white man, in the uncertainty of the white man. The very glamorous, attractive uncertainty of the white man about imperialism, about the white man's torture of the non-white person and that is already attractive, the ambivalence, the uncertainty he suffers as a colonial officer.

But there is no ambivalence at all in terms of how he is describing the Burmese people. So therein lies the problem of the essay and that is why we should still be careful about romanticizing the Orwell self over here too much. We should not. So it made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant. I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you.

So this is the point in the essay where the question of agency becomes important. He is saying that I did not want to shoot the elephant but then I will have to shoot it very soon. So you know this is the break, this is the breaking point in the essay, the beginning of the breaking point in the essay where the constructed quality of the supposed superiority of the white man begins to get more and more exposed. Okay so I will stop here today and we will continue with the lecture.

We will continue with the essay on the next lecture and I hope you get something out of it. Please read the lecture carefully please read the essay carefully and go through the lecture carefully as well because I am doing a line by line reading of the essay because I want to give you a close textural reading of the question of ambivalence in the agency in the essay because I think it is very important especially if you are looking at it from a perspective of cultural studies. So thank you for the attention and I will see you in the next lecture. Thank you.