

EXPLORING SUPERIORITY AND RACISM AS THE IMPACTS OF PATERNALISM IN “BURMESE DAYS” BY GEORGE ORWELL

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Abstract: *Burmese Days* is a novel by George Orwell, inspired by his experiences as a police officer in Burma. At that time, Burma was under British colonial rule, which led to the belief that local people were inferior to British people. This research aims to show how George Orwell depicts one of the characters, Ellis, with a sense of superiority and racism based on paternalism. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method, using Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism as the primary source to understand how the West defines the East. Orientalism is a way to understand the East based on the experiences and knowledge of Europeans. This research aims to discover the sense of paternalism in the novel and how paternalism caused racism and superiority. The researchers found that the arrival of the British to Burmese made Ellis think that local people could not govern themselves. He felt that local people were destined to be enslaved, and this sense of colonialist paternalism caused racism and superiority to emerge in him. Ellis firmly refused to accept local people into the club by raising the issue of racism and the superiority of British people over local people.

Keywords: *burmese days, paternalism, racism, superiority*

INTRODUCTION

History records that the British Empire was the largest empire with extensive influence in the world, which at that time was estimated to have 24% of the Earth’s total area. At the turn of the twentieth century, England’s realm was defined as “the empire which the sun never set,” because England’s territories reached from the Caribbean to Micronesia (Paradis, 2018). Burma was one of the areas colonized by the

British. The historiography of British colonialism in Burma began when The British abolished the monarchy system in 1886 and deported King Thibaw, the last Burmese king, and his immediate family from Mandalay into permanent exile in India (Ikeya, 2017).

From colonialism in Burma emerged the novel by George Orwell, written when he served as a British officer in Burma, titled *Burmese Days*. The novel portrayed the unequal relationships between the British residents and the Burmese people in the colony (Ersan, 2019). This novel tells the story of a British man named Flory, a 35-year-old European who comes to Burma to work as a manager of a lumber company. His principle of worshipping natives gave rise to many conflicts that later came into his life. The conflict between Flory and the British club members involved his friend Doctor Veraswami, an Indian doctor who was at odds with U Po Kyin, a powerful magistrate in Kyauktada. This conflict occurred because of the promise that Flory had made to Veraswami to propose his name to become a member of the club to save his pride, which had been damaged by U Po Kyin (Azzahra, 2023). However, the plan to include local people in the club received resistance from other club members, especially from Ellis, a European lumber trader who strongly disagreed with local people joining the exclusive British club. Orwell showed how his fellow countrymen from England also exhibited racism towards the native inhabitants and oriental people in Burma (Anjarsari, 2015). Orwell not only focuses on racism, but he also describes superiority through the character named Ellis. This research attempts to discuss the character of Ellis in depth, focusing on explaining the attitudes of superiority and racism as the effects of paternalism.

Paternalism focuses on a person's ability to interfere in another's sphere of autonomy based on the authority between them (Zarako, 2017). Through Ellis, a White European, George Orwell creates a character who thinks he should govern local people and teach them how to run a good government because local people cannot do it alone. To justify its imperialism and colonialism, the British attempted to influence colonial society with ideas such as white supremacy through propaganda in media, families, and schools. This resulted in White people looking down on the native people and viewing them as inferior creatures, who should be thankful for being slaves (Fei, 2015). Ellis is depicted as a man who thinks the arrival of White people in Burma is to rule the local

people. He believed that White was higher than the local community and that is what made Ellis superior and racist to local people. Racism is closely related to Orientalism and colonialism because both originate from the superiority of the Western race as White (Al Hafizh, 2016). This study addresses how paternalism is established in Burma as narrated in the novel and how racism and superiority emerge from paternalism in Burma as shown in the novel. The study aims to provide novelty in the discussion about the novel and to show how paternalism exists in the novel and how paternalism has an effect in the form of racism and superiority as the result of colonialism. The study also aims to provide an example of postcolonial implementation in literature, especially in paternalism, superiority, and racism and to inspire future researcher about postcolonial study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Edward Said, through his book entitled *Orientalism*, divides the West and East. The West consists of Americans, French, British, Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss. Meanwhile, the East, or what is called the Orient, consists of China, Japan, Korea, Middle East countries, and other countries stretching from China to the Mediterranean (Sunatri, 2017). Said stated that the East had been Europe's largest, richest, and oldest colonies, the source of civilizations and languages, and one of the deepest and most frequently occurring images of the Other. Said also stated that the East has helped to define Europe as it is today (Said, 1979). In *Orientalism*, Said focuses on the West's view of the East (Bilqis et al., 2023).

Said defined *Orientalism* as a representation that is part of cultural and ideological discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, occurring imagery, doctrines, colonial bureaucracy, and colonial styles (Chibber, 2018). He divided the use of *Orientalism* into three categories. First, Westerners conducted academic research into relations with Eastern culture. Anyone who teaches, writes, or researches the Orient and this applies is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is *Orientalism*. Second, *Orientalism* is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West. Therefore, many writers have accepted the fundamental differences between East and West as the starting point in creating several literary works. Third, *Orientalism* can be discussed and analyzed as a

corporate institution that deals with the East by making statements about it, justifying its views, describing it, teaching it, defining it, and mastering it. Oriental was the Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the East (Said, 1979).

This current study refers to the third definition, which is related to stereotypes given by Western society to the East. The similarity between this study and Said's third definition of Orientalism is that both discuss how Western colonialism in the Eastern region had a negative impact in the form of racism and superiority that emerged. Said explained that Orientalism had a significant and lasting impact on both imperialism and colonialism (Said, 1979). The strategy of Orientalism depended on this flexible position of superiority, which placed the West in a range of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing its relative superiority (Sunatri, 2017). Said also explained that we have all been influenced by the West regarding European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and dogmatic views of the East as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction produced by almost countless writers, who are considered as examples of writers who deal with the Orient (Zhang, 2023).

The relationship between Orientalism and Paternalism is explained by Descola & Pálsson. They assumed that orientalism is shared by the paternalistic paradigm because both paradigms are the intellectual heirs of the Renaissance. The difference between Orientalism and Paternalism is that Orientalism used to dominate the Orient, meanwhile, Paternalism used to protect the Orient (Descola & Pálsson, 1996). However, the initially protective function of Paternalism began to change during colonialism because the paternalistic idea of empowerment in development discourse and practice was rooted in European colonialism. The development orthodoxy views people in colonial countries as needing help from the outside. A Paternalistic understanding of empowerment expands the civilizing mission of colonialism and promotes the narrative that the West is the savior for the third-world victims who are responsible for the lack of development in colonial countries (Rogers, 2018). Orientalism and Paternalism have made Western people assume that they are above the Orient and caused them to be racist and superior as they rule the Orient.

There have been a significant number of discussions on this novel (Biederstadt (2017); Shabanirad & Marandi (2015); Shihada (2014). Biederstadt (2017) attempted to

give voice to the subaltern by building a framework with the perspective of Ma Hla May, who can be considered as subject to multiple layers of Orientalism as both a colonial subject and a white man's "mistress" as she was much more a victim than she was a villain. Then Shabanirad & Marandi (2015) demonstrated how the 'female subalterns' are represented in *Burmese Days*. While Oriental women are represented as the oppressed ones, they are also regarded as being submissive, voiceless, seductive, and promiscuous. Other discussions about this novel include racism as Shihada (2014) defined how racism was used as a tool by British colonialists to keep the colonizer's identity, and sense of superiority over the colonized, maintain racial boundaries, and instill feelings of inferiority to control the colonized natives. There are no studies that describe paternalism, racism, and superiority based on the novel. This study provides novelty by exploring superiority and racism in Ellis' character as the effects of paternalism. This study aligns with the previous study to explore more about racism and superiority by using Edward Said's Orientalism as a theory.

METHOD

The research used the descriptive qualitative research technique; thus, the result of this research is in the form of words rather than numbers. Descriptive qualitative research is needed to concentrate closely on the rigor and trustworthiness throughout the study, and provide the reader with explanations of how they attended to the method and methodology (Turale, 2020). The material object of the study is *Burmese Days* novel by George Orwell (2021) as the researchers have found racism and superiority as the effect of Paternalism in the novel. *Burmese Days* is a novel that focuses on a character named John Flory, a British timber merchant who lives in Kyauktada during the British occupation of Burma. Flory befriends Doctor Veraswami, an Indian doctor threatened with being overthrown by U Po Kyin, the cunning district chief. The only way to save Doctor Veraswami is to get him into the British club. The formal data were taken from the Orientalism book by Edward Said.

Nasution, (2023) states that a qualitative research instrument is a tool used in qualitative research; in this study, the researchers themselves serves as the instrument. They have used their thoughts and opinions to find racism and superiority as the impact of paternalism in the novel. The findings are supported by data and research from

previous studies related to paternalism, racism, and superiority to provide accurate results. The data collection was conducted by reviewing documents related to paternalism racism and superiority (Turale, 2020). For data analysis, according to Turale, (2020), researchers focus on interpreting data in a meaningful, accurate, and careful manner. This is evident in the data analysis process where the researchers sorted and coded the data based on the topic. They employed a content analysis system that could be modified, developed categories from paternalism, superiority, and racism, and provided a straightforward description of the data. The researchers conducted a close reading of the novel, examined previous literature, and analyzing the presence of racism, superiority, and paternalism both in the novel and other documents related to the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Paternalism

Colonialists used paternalism to gain a place in local society under the pretext of saving local society: however, they had no intention of saving the colonized society. Paternalism was an overt and accepted hierarchical structure in Western politics, it had an explicit justificatory ethos in colonial politics and is present in many areas of government (Zarako, 2017). Westerns implemented an approach of paternalism to justify the removal of Indigenous people who were viewed as obstacles to capitalistic goals. Europeans perceived themselves as civilized and contrasted this with the wildness of Indigenous individuals. The establishment of a racial hierarchy was then used as justification to legally define Indigenous people as dependents of the colonial state (Wilcock, 2024). Paternalism in this novel is depicted through the figure of Ellis, who adopts the paternalistic nature of colonialism. This is shown in the conflict between Ellis and the club's members as they discuss receiving local people. Ellis disagrees with the idea that inviting local people to the British club means that local people hold the same position as the British colonizers.

The conflict started when Macgregor, the British Deputy Commissioner in charge of the Kyauktada post, put up the announcement to invite local people into the club, as it was the only British club that was still excluded them. Ellis immediately rejected this information by persuading other members not to accept local people into

the club. Ellis' stance starkly contrasted with Macgregor's idea who wanted to welcome local people, whereas Flory did not say anything as he secretly promised Doctor Veraswami that he would take her to the club. This tension created conflict between Ellis and the other club members. Ellis' rejection came from his judgment that local people did not have enough capacity to join the club. It also stems from his paternalism as he believes that local people cannot save themselves so he should rule them, not walk along with them. The club also operated under the principles of white superiority. Ellis' rejection portrays colonialism paternalism, as he had no intention of protecting or saving the local community; in other words, he just wanted to rule them. He believed that local people were beneath the West, so he became racist and superior to them. Ellis defined local people as destined to become slaves and the arrival of Western society was to control the local government and society.

'My God,' said Ellis a little more calmly, taking a pace or two up and down, 'my God, I don't understand you chaps. I simply don't. Here's that old fool Macgregor wanting to bring a nigger into this Club for no reason whatever, and you all sit down under it without a word. Good God, **what are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we aren't going to rule, why the devil don't we clear out? Here we are, supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who've been slaves since the beginning of history, and instead of ruling them in the only way they understand, we go and treat them as equals.** And you silly b——s take it for granted. (Orwell, 2021: 21)

In the quotation above, Ellis complained about the attitude of his friends toward the local community. Ellis thought that his friends were too close to the local people and they thought that the local people were equal to the Whites. Ellis questioned his friend's sense to rule the local people as he felt that he was the only one who still upheld and maintained that feeling. He also thought that the arrival of the British to Burmese was to rule the local people because it was their destiny to become slaves. This shows the paternalistic side of Ellis. He considered that local people were unfit and could not lead themselves, so they needed help from Western people to manage the country.

This idea aligns with Edward Said, who explained that the Oriental or East is often depicted as irrational, childlike, and different, whereas the European is rational, virtuous, mature, and normal (Said, 1979). However, this is how the attitude of paternalism was present in the era of colonialism. Paternalism became a tool for the West to conquer East nations. Whites always think that local people do not have proper knowledge and abilities, so they must be helped, just like the relationship between father

and son. British colonialism in India is often associated with Paternalism in father-son relationships, in which the father figure is always concerned with the son (Poudel, 2022). This paternalism made Ellis both a racist and a superior character because he considered that the status of local people was beneath the West. Ellis embodies the racial consciousness of the colonizers, where he serves as a warning that the purpose of the British coming to Burma was to conquer and rule Burma. As a reminder that the British were a superior nation and treating the Burmese as slaves was the right action to maintain British superiority (Zulkarnaen et al., 2023).

Superiority

Colonialism harmed the image of one race compared to other races. Differences between races have underlain and formed a sense of racism and superiority. The existence of Orientalism also establishes a dividing line between the East and the West and highlights the superiority of Western culture (Zhang, 2023). According to circulating history, White supremacy began during the expansion carried out by White British Anglo-Saxon Protestants on the American continent. Racist attitudes are not only shown towards Black people and local Indigenous people, formerly called Indians, but also toward other White residents who are from different religions (Ridwan & Sofianto, 2019). This supremacy was continued by the White race in other colonial countries.

In this novel, superiority is clearly explained through the conversations and characterization portrayed by Ellis. This is also implied by the existence of a British club which further explains how superiority is present in this novel. Ellis is a representation of British superiority over non-European countries. In this novel, Ellis is an antagonist character who strengthens the power of colonialism in the discourse of Orientalism (Zulkarnaen et al., 2023). The supremacy is carried out by Ellis when the club members discuss accepting local people into the British club. Strongly rejecting this idea, Ellis saw that bringing local people to the club would make the British club lose its superiority. As paternalism grows within his traits, Ellis not only rejects it but also demands that the other club members side with him. It creates a deeper conflict in the novel.

He's asking us to **break all our rules and take a dear little nigger-boy into this Club.** (Orwell, 2021: 19)

In that quotation, Ellis criticized Macgregor's policy of opening local people to join the British club. He claimed that local people should not gather with British people. It shows the continued attitude of paternalism towards supremacy and racism. He argued that British people should not change their rules and should not let Doctor Veraswami, an Indian doctor, to join the club that Ellis considered exclusive to British people. Ellis perceives the club as a boundary that differentiates British people from local people. At the same time, it is also more than a boundary; the superiority symbol divides people into different levels of class.

Knowing that this exclusive club would be open to local people, they were encouraged to enter the club so that they could get special treatment like the British. The local people were aware of the superiority that the club possessed behind its exclusivity. The opportunity to be a member triggered the Burmese people's ambition to join the club. This ambition proves that the club was built to show the different classes of people in Burma, where the British remained still superior to the Burmese people who will always be inferior (Afiah et al., 2022).

'My God, I should have thought in a case like this, when 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. (Orwell, 2021: 27)

Sitting down at table with him as though he was a white man, and drinking out of glasses his filthy black lips have slobbered over—it makes me spew to think of it.' (Orwell, 2021: 27)

In the quotation above, Ellis reiterated his disagreement with Flory. Ellis continues to keep the club clean of the local people because Ellis would not think that the club would be fun anymore when they received local people. This explains the superiority of the British club as a real supremacy. In the next quotation, Ellis strengthens the dominance that he felt. He did not want to sit with the local people because he was afraid they would feel like they were in the same position as the British. White people assume that people of different skin colors are not men in general and this contributes to the inferiority complex of non-White people (Dankertsen & Kristiansen, 2021).

No natives in this Club! It's by constantly giving way over small things like that that we've ruined the Empire. The country's only rotten with sedition because we've been too soft with them. The only possible policy is to treat 'em like the dirt they are. This is a critical moment, and we want every bit of prestige we can get. We've got to hang together and say, "WE ARE THE

MASTERS, and you beggars—” (Orwell, 2021: 27)

In this quotation, Ellis again explains that he refused to accept local people into the British club. His feeling of superiority is evident as he thought that having local people in the club would destroy the club. He claimed that local people did not have the same abilities as British people. Ellis again emphasized his paternalism attitude where he thought that the British existed to rule local people, while local people existed to be ruled by the British. Ellis also believed that whites should get all the prestige, or in this case, the privileges and advantages compared to local people. As immigrants, British people should be considered special and get better things than the local people. In this novel, the British people received many advantages such as making local people work for them or choosing them as their mistress or servants. However, the superiority and paternalism wrapped up in Ellis further explains how British colonialism in Burma gave a lot of superiority to the British people. This is under Orientalism which explains that the relationship between West and East is a relationship of power, domination, and varying degrees of a complex hegemony. Orientalism tries to divide the West and East through their traditions, cultures, history, races, and societies triggering the legitimacy of the view of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority (Widjajati & Setiawan, 2022).

Racism

Racism has been an issue that continues to exist from ancient times until now. The slavery system in the 18th – 19th centuries in America is believed to be the initial system of racism which believed that the Black race, group, tribe, or citizen had or was at a lower social level compared to the White race, group, tribe or citizen in America (Pratama, 2016). Racism continued to be brought by Western societies when they carried out colonialism in their colonies, including by stereotyping the people of the colonies as belonging to a backward, almost bestial race, a race to be ruled over and civilized (Datta & Mukherjee, 2015). Colonialism is carried out through various practices and forms, such as occupation, slavery, population transfer, language imposition, or cultural replacement. Colonialism has destroyed the life and culture of colonial society with an attitude of superiority and racism (Amalia, 2021). The definition of racism according to Chaudhary & Berhe (2020) is prejudice against individuals because of their race in the context of a belief in the inherent superiority and

inferiority of different racial groups.

Many factors contribute to racial conflict, and the triggers vary in each country that experiences it. Factors that often trigger these actions include injustice, oppression, and racial discrimination by certain groups against other groups. Racism appears among high-ranking people forming a global hierarchy of superiority. In all its forms, racism is a human right that is under-recognized as an important problem to find a solution for. These problems threaten the lives and rights of millions worldwide (Kusumadewi & Pandin, 2021). Racism has many impacts on people who commit racism and people who are victims of racism. According to Syarifuddin & Zakia (2022), people who commit racism will have the freedom to run the political system. They want to maintain their power so that it is not threatened by other parties. However, those who are restrained, oppressed, and completely controlled by the race that controls them, cannot voice complaints, objections, or suggestions against the race that controls them because the ruling party determines everything. Even if they are forced to appreciate it, this is only possible through rebellion or resistance which in the end always fails and even more worrying suffering.

Ellis is a character that uses one of the latent Orientalism characteristics, which is racism. According to Said, latent Orientalism consists of three general characteristics: racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. Latent Orientalism exists as an inherent part of Orientalist discourse in society because it reflects the popular vision that the West has of the East (Güven, 2019). It then encourages the emergence of racism in Ellis's character.

‘No, I do not,’ said Ellis tartly. ‘Nor my Mongolian brother. **I don’t like niggers, to put it in one word.**’ (Orwell, 2021: 26)

In that quotation, Ellis described how he did not like the local people. While talking about local people, Ellis always called them a “nigger”. The phrase “nigger” is a slur because it is more than just a descriptive term and imposes a derogation on Blacks as the lowest race (Adegbembo, 2017). Nigger is a term that explains how racist Ellis is towards the local people. Ellis's racism is based on his perspective on local society which is also driven by his understanding of Orientalism. Ellis emphasized the differences that existed between him and the local community. He claimed that Whites were the best and superior to the local people and that other races were inferior. As a result, he became a racist as well as feeling superior to the local people. This is driven

by a sense of paternalism which assumes that local people cannot manage the country so that the West is there to manage it for the sake of local people. According to Ellis, local people have a destiny to become slaves or people ruled by the West and will continue to be like that.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Paternalism that developed during colonialism had negative impacts as it caused racism and superiority toward the colonized people. Western society thought that local people in the colonies could not regulate themselves, so the arrival of White people was to regulate the people in the colonies. This assumption makes people act superior and racist towards native people in colonial lands. White rejects local people so they cannot think of themselves as equal to White people. This rejection leads to racism because White people divide people based on race. In one of George Orwell's novels entitled *Burmese Days*, there is an example of the phenomenon of racism and superiority which come from Paternalism. In this novel, Orwell creates one of the characters with a racist and superior attitude towards the local community. The superiority and racism that existed were based on the idea that the British came to the colonists to save the local people because they could not govern themselves. As a result, it makes superiority and racism stronger by gripping toward this assumption.

Suggestions

Paternalism is still a global phenomenon that many people are probably unaware of. Many governments smoothly use paternalism to organize countries because they feel responsible to their people. This research is only limited to the impact of paternalism which causes racism and superiority. Future research could discuss equality as a positive impact of paternalism or paternalism which causes dependency and limits individual freedom.

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