

## **FEMININE CHARACTERS IN GEORGE ORWELL'S BURMESE DAYS AND A CLERGYMAN'S DAUGHTER**

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*Abstract: At the beginning of the 1930's George Orwell wrote a series of novels with a significant ideological load, merging ideas such as class prejudice, gender inequality, and personal freedom.*

*The object of the research consists of a critical approach of Orwell's feminine characters from **Burmese Days** and **A Clergyman's Daughter**, seen through a feminist perspective. Despite the diversity of the theories and movements for women's emancipation, feminism has its social, political, and literary goal in promoting and extending the roles and the rights of women in society.*

*By proposing the discussion of the two novels which have been less visited by the critics, the article aims to undergo a decoding of the writer's perspective, seen in the social and political context of the time regarding the role and the identity of women in the twentieth century.*

*Elizabeth Lackersteen, the main female protagonist in **Burmese Days**, although being the only attractive woman in Orwell's novels is still described as having a boyish look and willing to marry anyone in order to escape poverty and her uncle's harassment. Moreover the author portrays her as being unable to escape her prejudices related to Burma despite Flory's efforts to show her the hidden beauty of this country.*

*On the other hand, although Dorothy is an educated, clergyman's daughter, thus having a higher status, she is condemned to a life of unpaid physical work in the parish of her father just like any other poor, low social class woman.*

**Keywords:** *feminism, identity, George Orwell, gender inequality, literature.*

At the beginning of the 1930's George Orwell wrote a series of novels with a significant ideological load merging ideas such as class prejudice, gender inequality, imperialism, colonialism and personal freedom.

### **Burmese Days - introduction**

In 1921, he joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. Spending five years in a British colony he got a thorough experience of the colonial life disliking profoundly what he learned and saw. He resigned from the position while he was on a leave in England.<sup>1</sup>

*Burmese Days* was the literary product of the years he spent in the colony. It was one of his first novels published in the USA, in 1934. At the beginning there were some doubts about publishing it since the publishers were afraid of being charged of libel. Orwell had to demonstrate that he did not use the real names of the people involved in Burma colonial society. Thorough checks were made in colonial lists so as no British citizen could be considered as being one of the characters in the book. But, later, many of the names used by Orwell were identified in a local newspaper.<sup>2</sup> For example, U Po Kyin was the name of a Burmese officer working with Orwell (Eric Blair) at the Police Training School in Mandalay.

*Burmese Days* is set in Burma in the 1920s, today's Myanmar, in the village of Kyauktada, a name invented by the author. The novel opens with U Po Kyin, a corrupt

<sup>1</sup> Crick, Bernard. 'George Orwell. A life', Secker and Warburg, London 1980

<sup>2</sup> Crick, Bernard. 'George Orwell. A life', Secker and Warburg, London 1980

Burmese magistrate who is planning to ruin the reputation of the local Indian doctor Veraswami. U Po Kyin begins by sending to the British authorities anonymous letters with defamatory events involving the doctor. Due to the fact that the doctor was friends with a white man, Flory, he had a higher position among the natives and, consequently, could not be directly touched by the intrigues of his enemy.

After fifteen years spent in Burma, Flory is deeply disappointed with his lifestyle but on the other hand he is so rooted there that he simply cannot leave for England. When Elizabeth comes, Mr and Mrs. Lackersteen's niece, his friends from the club, he seems to have found the purpose of his life there- the perspective of having a wife. They spend some time together and he falls in love with her immediately. Flory tries to show her Burma through his eyes. Thinking that she shares the same ideas, he could not have been more mistaken. However, as time passes by, they become close and marriage seems inevitable. But much in Orwell's style, nothing goes according to our expectations. One night, at the club, Flory wants to propose but an earthquake keeps him from doing that. At the same time, Mrs. Lackersteen - discovering that a bachelor, military police lieutenant, called Verall is coming to Kyauktada and perceiving him as a more suitable husband for her niece - deliberately tells the girl that Flory has a native mistress. This causes Elizabeth to break things off with Flory immediately. Now, free to be pursued by Verrall, she spends several weeks with him before he disappears without even saying goodbye, not to mention the much expected proposal. After Verall's sudden departure, Flory seems to be the only option left for Elizabeth and she turns to him again. He is happy about the change of things and, once again, plans to marry her.

Meanwhile, U Po Kyin has been plotting a fake rebellion which he succeeds in starting. However, during the hassle, a Burmese is killed, which starts a real riot this time.

Flory is the man of the day for dispersing the people and bringing the rebellion under control without any bloodshed. Dr. Veraswami also receives acclaim for having helped Flory calm the crowd, thus, his honour being restored. Being unsuccessful in his plans, U Po Kyin will play his most daring card in order to destroy Flory and, thus, the doctor's position in the local society. He pays Ma Hla May, Flory's former mistress, to create a scene, in Sunday church in front of Elizabeth and all the Europeans, in order to disgrace Flory. His plan is more than successful. Elizabeth does not want to hear of Flory anymore. Overwhelmed by the situation and losing all hope for a better future, Flory kills his dog and himself.

The end of the novel is quite unexpected in terms of the conclusion of events. Dr. Veraswami is demoted and sent to a smaller town working for less money, living in near-poverty. U Po Kyin manages to get where he wanted - to be elected in the Club - but he dies before he can start building pagodas in order to redeem all the evils he had done during his life. Elizabeth will marry Macgregor and live the life of a perfect "mensahib".<sup>3</sup>

### **Elizabeth Lackersteen – representation of the traditional British society**

Except being a bold attack on the British colonialism of the time, hidden under the mask of a simple description of how things were around there or illustrated through Flory's

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<sup>3</sup> Orwell, G. 'Burmese Days', Time Incorporated, New York, 1962

words, *Burmese Days* is worth being discussed by analysing the only unmarried British woman in the book.

Elizabeth Lackersteen, the main female protagonist in **Burmese Days**, is the only attractive woman in Orwell's novels but still described as having a boyish look with short hair and glasses. She had lived in wealth while her father was alive but after his death she went to Paris together with her mother where she had a life of privations. Her mother thought of herself as being an artist but could make no money from this business. Elizabeth grew to hate the bohemian lifestyle she was exposed to, associating it with poverty and low class. When coming to Burma she first meets Flory who thinks that she actually shares his ideas about art and literature. Considering her background, his talk only reminds Elizabeth of her mother who died in Paris, broke and poisoned by her own painting materials. Although she has quite long conversations with Flory about these subjects, under the surface, she deeply disliked his interests but she was willing to marry anyone in order to escape poverty and her uncle's harassment. Moreover the author portrays her as being unable to escape her prejudices related to Burma despite Flory's efforts to show her the hidden beauty of that country. She sees the natives as being "bestly" and she is appalled by the things she has to put up with when going out in the village to watch a native's show. "But the whole expedition -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."<sup>4</sup> She feels uncomfortable about being too close to the natives; her experience in Burma will not be one of understanding the local culture. This sentiment is rooted in her fixed set of beliefs of how the different races should interact with each other. Since Flory is white, there are certain boundaries he should not cross, and when he appears to do so, Elizabeth feels a threat to her world. Clearly she is not a very open-minded person, and, to be fair, she only just arrived in Burma and has had little time to adjust her beliefs. She cannot appreciate Flory's efforts to explain and to expose her to the richness of the Burmese culture. She is simply incapable, too blinded by her prejudices, to see Burma as he does. She finds demeaning his relatively egalitarian attitude towards the natives. Elizabeth is only concerned about status, wealth and having servants, idealizing the British upper class lifestyle while dismissing everything it had any connection with art or culture. Flory is in love with what he thinks Elizabeth is: a well-educated, kind, honourable lady, whereas she is just racist, vain and full of prejudice having nothing at all in common with Flory. Nonetheless, being so different from the man that loved her so much, she still wants to marry him when the proposal would come.

After Flory's suicide, Elizabeth eventually marries Macgregor, the Deputy Commissioner and lives happily, with lots of servants around her, in contempt of the natives she does not wish to understand, who in turn live in terror of her. Indeed, she ended up being the type of person Flory despised the most.

### **A Clergyman's Daughter- identity versus personal sacrifice**

On the other hand, although Dorothy, from *A Clergyman's Daughter*, is an educated, clergyman's daughter, thus having a higher status in society. Nevertheless, she is still

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<sup>4</sup> Orwell, G. 'Burmese Days', Time Incorporated, New York, 1962, page 66

condemned to a life of unpaid physical work in the parish of her father just like any other poor, low-class woman.

*A Clergyman's Daughter* was published in 1935 and the author's interests, this time, were in common social themes like class distinctions, prejudice, poverty, aspects of real life, personal freedom and social observation. The various experiences of the heroine in the novel were drawn from Orwell's own past and are vividly described attacking Britain's traditional class system for its damage to the individual. The novel's main character is Dorothy Hare, a spinster in her late twenties, according to the common thinking of the era. She is running the household for her tyrannical father and herself, having no help from her parent. Except that, she is also doing parish work for free just because she was the clergyman's daughter. Dorothy suffers an amnesia attack and suddenly finds herself far from the security of her home and village, wandering dressed in dirty clothes down the New Kent Road, in London in the company of three homeless youngsters. She does not remember how she got there but what is even more alarming is that she had been robbed as well. An appalling life follows: she spends a cold night among the tramps in Trafalgar Square, she gets to hop picking in the fields just to get something to eat. Then, with the help of her father's cousin, she spends a dismal period of teaching in a fourth rate girls' day school in a filthy London suburb where the headmistress, Miss Creevy has never read an entire book and she was proud about it. In the end, helped by Mr. Warburton, she comes back home only to return to her old daily routine.

By placing the focus only on Dorothy's wanderings, we discover that she always ends up being trapped and becomes the victim of the circumstances and environment. The clergyman's daughter is unable to direct her own life and she can only be saved or not by exterior intervention. She is successively dependent on several people that influence her life one way or the other. First, her father is in complete control of her life. It is only his name and job that gives her an identity and a purpose in life. Despite his position, supposedly lofty, she still works physically as hard as any poor woman for both of them. Second, she relies on Nobby, a vagrant, for means of survival and direction in the new, hard life she was living in the streets of London. Suffering of amnesia she hangs on the first friendly face she sees in order to have some guidance in the new environment she found herself. Then, there are the hop pickers to help her get food. Later she depends on her father's cousin to find her a job and take her out of the miserable life she was having among people that had nothing in common with her. In the end, it is Mr. Warburton, who brings her home to a class system that keeps her willingly serving a religion in which she no longer can believe. "What she would have said was that though her faith had left her, she had not changed, could not change, did not want to change, the spiritual background of her mind; that her cosmos, though now it seemed to her empty and meaningless, was still in a sense the Christian cosmos; that the Christian way of life was still the way that must come naturally to her. But she could not put this into words, and felt that if she tried to do so he would probably begin making fun of her. So she concluded lamely:

'Somehow I feel that it's better for me to go on as I was before.'<sup>5</sup>

It is important for us to understand what Dorothy's struggle means in everyday domestic grounds. We need this understanding as a support for her character. She is quite

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<sup>5</sup> Orwell, G., "*A Clergyman's Daughter*", Penguin Classics, London, 2000, page 157

weak in her responses, in most of the circumstances she finds herself she has no strong reaction. She is accepting of all dire circumstances and her reaction is reduced to merely observing what she is subjected to in her daily life. Dorothy, just as Flory, is a passive victim of the social ills she is going through, she cannot and will not change. But, then again, Dorothy was just a pretext for the author, to experiment a different kind of writing, in which he voices his critical ideas about education in the thirties as well as class difference and struggles.

George Orwell deliberately sought out experience that could provide inspiration for his writing. His works are related to the stages of his life and closely connected to the historical events and the political issues of his time: *Burmese Days* reflects the decline of British imperialism whereas *A Clergyman's Daughter* stands for his serious criticism of Britain's traditional class system.

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