

## Pride Causes Tragedy in Burma

by Jeanne M. Berg

Why do we do things we don't want to do? In "Shooting an Elephant," George Orwell recalls a memory that enlightened his perception of the British Empire's imperialism. Orwell's loyalty as a police officer to an empire that he hated sets the stage for him to endure ridicule from the residents of the village of Moulmein, in Lower Burma. In a matter of hours, his strength of character is tried and tested to bend to the will of the people he oppressed, to save him from looking a fool and to pad his pride. He was paid to rule over the Burmese people, yet ultimately served them and his pride, which brought about the untimely demise of one of the Earth's most magnificent creatures. Orwell takes us on a journey through the village ravaged by an enslaved bull elephant that escaped his mahout during his "must," painting a picture of destroyed huts, ravaged food stalls, a skinned corpse smeared into the mud, and finally to the patty grass that serves as the last meal of Orwell's victim (Orwell). Even though the elephant caused such damage and even killed a man, does that necessarily justify killing it? Human pride and weakness of character causes irrational and sometimes immoral behavior.

People sometimes do things they don't want to do for money, so their pride can be supported. Some examples perhaps are becoming a crooked cop, a robber, or a prostitute. These "occupations" happen many times out of desperation, rarely out of choice or original intention. Orwell states, "The sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better," [. . .] "I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear" (620). Orwell tells of the British imperialism and

some of the atrocities committed by it and reveals, "All these [atrocities and mistreatments] oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt." He admits, "In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters" (Orwell 620). This clearly implies that he wasn't truly aware of the magnitude of the oppression until he witnessed it firsthand. Even though Orwell hates his job and has a great sense of guilt because of the actions his job requires him to do, he still does it anyway, knowing some of his actions are morally questionable. As the villagers demonstrate, when humans don't have enough money to supply for their needs, such as housing, clothing, and food, they sometimes, out of pride, choose to accept a job that requires them to do immoral things. Even though the job gives them a sense of guilt, their pride is upheld by not admitting they were, perhaps, wrong in taking the job, in doing the job solely to please their family, by becoming homeless, or by looking like they have a lack of money. Sometimes people do things without any monetary gain, perhaps because of disdain or pride.

Often when people are oppressed, they will retaliate in small demeaning ways against their oppressors if they know they can get away with it. Orwell describes the actions of the Burmese when they come into contact with a single oppressor. Whether it is spitting on a woman's dress, tripping someone and then laughing at him, or yelling insults from a distance to avoid immediate consequences, these actions are neither acceptable nor ethical in any society (Orwell 620). Whether it is thought to be justified or not, it is degrading, disgusting, and antagonistic to spit on someone. Tripping someone could cause great bodily injury, and laughing at or yelling insults is just not nice. These things are usually a product of pride and

show a shallowness of character. Orwell describes the British oppression of the Burmese people as being caught in a complex matrix of hating what he sees done to the people, but at the same time hating the oppressed people for acting out against the oppression. Orwell declares, "I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts [referring to the Burmese] who tried to make my job impossible" (Orwell 620). Whether one is on the receiving end of oppression or the oppressor, acts and gestures are done out of pride, power, disdain, or a spiteful character. Although the Burmese were probably justified in their vulgar and unethical retaliation against their British oppressors, they still seemed to rely on them to provide certain protective services.

After a people have been overtaken by force, they can become dispirited. This can bring about a change of character, opens them up to oppression, and makes it appear, at times, that they actually support the oppression. Early on, Orwell writes that, "No one had the guts to raise a riot." Later, Orwell denotes that the Burmese were helpless and unable to defend themselves. So when the subinspector calls Orwell to ask him to do something about the raging elephant, he obliges and grabs his gun to go see what he can do. When questioning the villagers, some are not helpful in locating the elephant and others rattle off the doings of the elephant. The impression is given that these are a poor people and in the end purposely urge Orwell to shoot the elephant for meat, knowing full well the elephant no longer posed a threat (Orwell 622). This action points to desperation and pride stemming from a lack of food. Given the circumstances, their actions were unethical because the mahout was not present, and they

knew well how much the elephant meant to him. Surely, if the mahout had been present, they would not have persisted in the quest to get Orwell to shoot the elephant. It is a fine line between right and wrong, and knowing that two wrongs don't make it right and when the line should be drawn out of strength of character or for self-preservation. The villagers display this in wanting the elephant for meat, and Orwell displays this in the action of shooting the elephant. As the scene changes from an inquiry about the elephant to a hunt, Orwell declares, "It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute" (Orwell 622). Two thousand against one, even if the one is armed, is no match and could easily be overtaken, but the Burmese held his authority willingly over themselves. People who are fearful and powerless will generally allow people to rule over them. There is a point when oppressed people give up, chose to accept the oppression, and actually come to rely on the authority that comes with it, as well as the oppressor becoming subservient to the oppressed.

Whether it is money for pride or power for ego, if one does not have a strong character and stand for what one believes, he or she will give in and do things that he or she would not ordinarily do. Orwell should have walked closer to the elephant, as he thought, to see if the elephant was still in a rage (Orwell 623-624). It would have been a greater show of authority not to shoot the elephant after proving it was not dangerous anymore. In doing so, he would have demonstrated great courage, especially since the coolie had been killed. Even greater still, since the people wanted him to shoot the elephant, it would have been a far larger show of his power to not pull the trigger because he would be going against their wishes and expectations.

Was it weak character, pride, a lack of presence of mind, or the time to really contemplate the alternatives available to Orwell with regard to his demonstration of authority? It is apparent why Orwell shot the elephant; he flat-out admits that he shot the elephant so as not to look like a “fool” (Orwell 625). It would have taken a stronger character to stand up to all of those people and declare that the elephant no longer posed a threat. It is a fine line between pride and strong character; one must always keep morals and ethics in proper perspective. It is important to always be aware of our actions and how they affect others, being moral, but at the same time standing for what we believe in. In doing so, we should never find ourselves doing things we don’t really want to do.

Work Cited

Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant." *The Bedford Reader*. Ed. X.J. Kennedy et al. Boston:

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