

CULTURAL IDENTITY in GEORGE ORWELL'S SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT¹

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Abstract: The question of identity has been one of the main issues in colonial and postcolonial literature. The very concept of 'identity' in a colonial society is accompanied by ambiguity. The colonial societies try to define themselves constantly. On the other hand, settlements and colonies find themselves trapped in the dilemma of discovering themselves. Tension between the dominated and dominating societies causes the emergence of new identity problems. Place and displacement, which is another major concern, also creates a postcolonial crisis of identity. For Homi K. Bhabha, all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this ambivalent space of enunciation. On the other hand, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel explains why people change due to the dialectic related with 'self' and 'other'. In *Shooting An Elephant*, George Orwell uses his writing to confess the inner conflict of sub-devisional, imperial police officer of a town in Burma and reflects his in-between position with references to imperialism, colonialism and cultural identity. Therefore, this study has been carried out with references to colonial and postcolonial cultural identity problems in the light of Bhabhian and Hegelian perspectives.

Key Words: Identity, Colonialism, Ambiguity, Bhabha, Orwell, Hegel, Space, Cultural Difference, in-Betweenness, Other, Imperial.

George Orwell'ın *Fili Vurmak*'ında Kültürel Kimlik

Özet: Kimlik sorunsalı sömürge ve sömürge sonrası edebiyattaki temel konulardan biri haline gelmiştir. Sömürge toplumundaki kimlik kavramına belirsizlik eşlik eder. Sömürge toplumlar kendilerini sürekli olarak tanımlamaya çalışırlar. Diğer yandan yerleşimler ve sömürgeler kendi kendilerini keşfetme sorununun içinde sıkışmış olarak kendilerini bulurlar. Ezen ve ezilen toplumlar arasındaki gerilim yeni kimlik sorunlarının ortaya çıkmasına neden olur. Aynı zamanda yer ve yersizlik bir başka ana kaygı olarak sömürge sonrası kimlik krizini ortaya çıkarır. Homi K. Bhabha için bütün kültürel ifadeler ve sistemler bu ifadenin belirsiz alanında yapılırlar. Diğer yandan Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel 'ben' ve 'öteki' ile ilgili diyalektiğe bağlı olarak insanın niçin değiştiğini açıklar. *Fili Vurmak*'ta George Orwell kendi yazısını Burma'da

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bir kasabadaki imparatorluĖa baĖlı polis memurunun parçalara bölünmüş iç çatışmalarını itiraf etmesi için kullanır ve onun arada kalmış durumunu emperyalizme, sömürgecilige ve kültürel kimlige göndermelerle yansıtır. Bu yüzden bu çalışma sömürge ve sömürge sonrası kültürel kimlik sorunlarına göndermelerle Bhabha'cı ve Hegel'ci bakış açılarıyla yapılmıştır.

It is a known fact that identity problems occupy a significant place within the postcolonial studies and have been studied by several postcolonial theorists up to the present time. Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall sees identity as a 'production' going on its own formation. For him, it is "an on-going event that is best conceived at the borderline between the self and the other. It is a process, a split, not a fixed point but an ambivalent point" (Hall, 1991:11). Thus, Hall declares that it is a new identity form and differs from the essentialized discourses of 'the old identity form' because the new form is the outcome of such problematics like gender, class, race socially. All these changes fundamentally refer to the very existence of cultural difference and cultural diversity in the formation of identity.

According to Homi K. Bhabha cultural difference is like an option to cultural diversity and he sees culture as an "object of empirical knowledge" (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin, 1995:155) in cultural diversity. In cultural difference, versatile cultures meet and this causes problems. The formation of cultural difference is a discursively constructed process or a "process of enunciation of culture as knowledgeable" (Bhabha, 1994:50). Enunciation, through which cultural difference is recognized, is a kind of expression of a culture. As a practice of domination, or resistance cultural meanings are reproduced in the enunciative process of a culture in a mode of ambiguity and this happens in the third space of enunciation. Hence, it can be said that cultural difference is a process of identification although cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics or ethnology in Bhabhian terms (Bhabha, 1994:85). Therefore, it is understood that Bhabha separates cultural difference from cultural diversity.

George Orwell's story *Shooting An Elephant* takes place in Moulmein, Burma. The narrator is a British police officer who sympathizes with the natives oppressed by the Europeans. Indeed, he has to behave according to the rules of the British imperialism as a member of this system. Despite the fact that he is one of the members of British society and British imperialism, he can't help trying to understand the natives and sometimes feels compassion for them. This is the very natural result of his hybridized thoughts and feelings causing his own in-betweenness after his life experience in Burma. He also notices the hatred in the hearts of the natives towards white autonomy. Thus, his conflict is experienced in a place where cultural difference is dominant and where the

inequality between the natives and white rulers keeps rising. It leads to a transformation in his feelings and ideas towards other people surrounding him.

The conflict emphasized in this way is the new form of existence connecting self and world, old and new, subject and object causing in-betweenness in a sense. "In-betweenness is a process of breaking boundaries, of disidentifying with one phase of life and beginning the transformation to another phase" (Honey II, 2002:96). It is seen that the central incident of the story creates the main conflict in the text. The narrator receives a call, and then he learns that he is missioned by his menagers to bring an angry elephant under control. When he goes to the place where the incident takes place he tries to defend himself and takes a rifle but the natives misunderstand this situation and they expect the police officer to kill the animal by the gun fire. Later, the police officer notices that the elephant is peaceful and is not dangerous any more. Therefore, he does not want to shoot it. He says "I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary" (*Shooting An Elephant*, p.2).

As it is understood from the story, cultural expectations determine people's behavioral reactions and responses to other persons' actions because culture has a place in the individual positions, inter subjective and collective experiences. Hence,

Cultural communality and the resultant formation of organizations and institutions result from a complex negotiation of both disrupting and integrating impulses. In this sense, culture is not a more or less stable sum total of a society's values, but rather a mode of persistent self observation which negotiates values and possible counter-values. This negotiation takes the form of communication, or, in more abstract terms, signifying processes (Grabes, 2001:69-70).

The police officer's communication with the natives is a kind of communication without speech. From this perspective, it can be argued that culture provides the necessary communication and negotiation through the native society's values and the police officer performs what he is expected from him.

Finally, the police officer has to shoot the elephant in the story because the natives behind him demand that he shoot it. His ambivalence is clear for the reason that he is trapped and hybridized in thought in an ambivalent place between his culture and the natives' culture. This situation emerges due to the ambivalent character of colonial authority for Bhabha. The meeting of versatile cultures causes difference. It is a kind of difference "that is almost total but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994: 131).

In the story, it takes several shots for the animal to die painfully. The officer cannot stand this scenery and leaves there whereas the natives look forward to

sharing the meat of the elephant. Therefore, he is in complex feelings and he does what he should do culturally as a manifestation of his hybridized cultural identity. The police officer representing Orwell in the story has complicated feelings about imperialism. He considers that imperialism has harmful effects on the metropolitan and periphery. He is strongly cognizant of hypocrisy permeating on both sides. He can't help criticizing the evils of imperialism. He finds everything perplexing and upsetting. He expresses his thoughts as such in the story: "For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better" (*Shooting an Elephant, p.1*). He never respects his occupation and does not enjoy to be police-officer in Burma. He explains his problematic feelings in the following way:

As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been bogged with bamboos -all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt" (*Shooting an Elephant p.1*).

He feels guilty due to the fact that he is a member of British imperialism on the one hand and conceives of the natives as helpless creatures rather than self-satisfied persons on the other hand. He describes the natives around similarly with their miserable situation in periphery in the story: "It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over a steep hillside" (*Shooting an Elephant p.2*).

As a British writer, Orwell is against imperialism and he suggests that imperialism destroys not only the conqueror but also the conquered. He affirms the Marxist theory and does not accept any notion of moral or cultural benefits for two sides. For him, "imperialism debased both sides utterly" (Ingle, 1993:12). Orwell feels obliged to do what the natives demand during his life in Burma in his real life and claims that everybody wears his own mask to behave according to the imperial rule and has to be alienated from each other (Ingle, 1993:13) as in the exemplified in the story.

As Orwell practises the same experience in his real life, *Shooting An Elephant* is considered like an autobiographical story by some critics. But "autobiographical or not experiences are used by the writer for an entirely political purpose" (Ingle, 1993:11). In the story, he is expected to kill the elephant and to minimize the damage the elephant is causing although he understands that it is because of the elephant's sexual frenzy and that it has not gone wild. As a representative of imperial system, he isn't liked by the natives. And the story starts with the following words: "In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people" (*Shooting an Elephant p.1*). The

police officer also hates the natives despite the fact that he sometimes enjoys them and tries to understand the natives due to their subordinate position in the society. Therefore, it is clear that he has complicated feelings. However, he does what he is expected to do all the time. He realizes that he must shoot the elephant in this situation and states his ideas: "I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind" (*Shooting An Elephant p.3*). He is in conflict with the British imperial hegemony inherently. Thus, he becomes ambivalent because his free will is destroyed and he leads a life of hypocrisy experiencing a dilemma between his real feelings and actions that he has to show. This is the very natural result of British imperialism because "expansionism and the conquering of new territories and its peoples, perforce, challenge self-identity in the face of cultural otherness" (Garbero, 2009:180).

In the story, dichotomy of the self and the other is clearly noticed due to the fact that the Burmans had no guns to kill just an eloped elephant. In the dialectic relationship between the self and the other "the self translates the other or vice versa" (Tomaselli & Wright, 2013:66). This kind of framing the problem occurs as a result of the dialectic between metropolitan and peripheral cultures. For Hegel, otherness "happens wherever one wishes" (Hegel, 2010:131) and "otherness can only be thought as being other-than-something and so can not precede the category of something itself" (Houlgate, 2006:321). It is possible to refer to the concept of negation due to the concept of otherness. In this case, the owner of the elephant cannot do anything to save his animal or resist the authority because he represents the other as a native and he is negated. He is ignored and disregarded in his own place as he is subordinate. He is ruled by the imperialist power in his own country and his existence is determined by his own "others" in the story.

It is clear that other has been negated all the time both in theory and practice. Therefore, something keeps itself in its contrary determinate being in Hegelian concept of otherness. Hegel says "the something preserves itself in its non-being; it is essentially one with it, and essentially not one with it. It therefore stands in reference to an otherness without being just this otherness. The otherness is at once contained in it and yet separated from it; it is being-for-other" (Hegel, 2010:92). For him,

Negative determinate being clearly is determinate being with a negative rather than affirmative character. It is negation and, more specifically, the self-relating negation that constitutes otherness. Hegel's claim, therefore, is that something preserves its own identity in its otherness; that is, in being other than itself (and so changing) and in being other than other somethings. At the same time, something preserves its identity only by distinguishing itself from otherness" (Houlgate, 2006:333).

Hence, it is understood that the police officer is the other of the native on the one hand. Similarly, the native is the other of the police officer who represents British imperialism although his sense of imperialism is problematic in the story. Meanwhile, people compare the value of a dead coolie with an elephant. In the end, the elephant causes damage and kills a coolie. Therefore, some young Britons dare to suggest that an elephant is “worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie” (*Shooting An Elephant*, p.4). It is seen that a kind of orientalist perspective is essentially emphasized in the novel in order to set up the dilemma of self and other and an anti imperialist attitude is also exhibited to reveal the conflict in the thoughts of the police officer in the opening of the story. According to Edward W. Said, the Orient and Orientals are imprinted with an otherness both as an object and subject to be an essentialist character and they are all different characters as a production of otherness (Said, 1979:97). For him,

This object of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a historical subjectivity, above all non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself –the only Orient or Oriental or subject which could be admitted at the extreme limit is the alienated being, philosophically, that is, other than itself in relationship to itself, posed, understood, defined –and acted –by others” (Said, 1979:97).

Consequently, Orwell tries to illuminate the shortcomings of imperialism in a colonial society besides the unequal conditions and practices that cause great damages in the lives of people trapped in two sides culturally. ‘Fixity’ in the construction of otherness refers to such notions like repetition, rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder in Bhabhian terms (Bhabha, 1994:94). Burmans in *Shooting An Elephant* are shown to be suppressed, insincere and impotent and worthless. So, they repeat these qualities during their life. On the other hand, the police officer who represents the white authority is depicted as an ambivalent character. He clearly states his ambivalence saying these words in the story: “Theoretically and secretly of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British” (*Shooting An Elephant* p.1). This ambivalence is based on the existence of the dichotomy between the concept of the self and other. Relations between the self and other and the representation of the citizens of British imperialism and the natives in the story create the chaotic atmosphere of the postcolonial society in Burma. In summary, “in so far as the determination of something is its own most nature exhibited in its relations to another, it cannot be governed solely by the thing itself after all but must always risk becoming part of the constitution determined by the other to which the thing relates” (Houlgate, 2006:352). Due to this situation, it can be said that cultural ambivalence shows itself in the formation of cultural identity as a result

of the negation and then corruption and transformation of the self affected by its relation with other.

In conclusion, when the subject is considered in terms of colonialism and postcolonialism it is clear that hegemony that exists in the colonies influences the cultural identity of the selves because it gives rise to a cultural, racial and historical otherness (Bhabha, 1994:97). Additionally, according to Hegel “something necessarily changes. It does so, not because it is in time nor because it is transformed by other things but because logically it is otherness in itself and, as other, must be endlessly other than itself” (Houlgate, 2006:327). In the story, the police officer is portrayed as the subject of cultural difference. Due to his cultural identity he has to mask his own will and obliges himself to do what British imperialism orders and he becomes an ambivalent character and the other of the natives in the formation of his cultural identity in terms of Bhabhian and Hegelian perspective. Thus, Orwell tries to show the clash between cultures and how one’s cultural identity is formed when individuals are subjected to experience cultural, social, political changes and differences in a colonial and postcolonial society. Therefore, person in a postcolonial society both has to cope with the otherness trapped in his own soul and the otherness in a culturally fixed society and also has to be subject to an in-between position and transformation to a culturally complicated identity in a place to which one does not feel belonging any more.

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