

Against the “Uprush of Modern Progress”: Exploring the Dilemma and Dynamics of Modernity in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*

Angelia Poon
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract

Published in 1934, George Orwell’s first novel *Burmese Days* was the result of his five years in Burma doing “the dirty work of empire” and oiling the “actual machinery of despotism” (*Wigan Pier* 147). This article considers the specific relationship in the novel between anti-imperialist politics and what it means to be modern in the early part of the twentieth century. How, for example, does modernity as a structure of feeling about breaking away from the past and tradition play out within the framework of a political dispensation of the imperial coupled with colonial governmentality? And what particular conception of culture and humanity might such a modernity be premised on? In *Burmese Days*, I argue that Orwell expresses the dilemma and dynamics of modernity through his use of a self-conscious narrative voice, and the story of his main character Flory, specifically the latter’s failure as a colonial, masculine subject. Orwell attempts to propose an alternative to the hegemonic version of European modernity that is based on the presence of an Other and the equation between colonialism and modernization. He explores a humanism written on and expressed through the body as part of the struggle with prejudice and bias that underlies Flory’s yearning for an alternative modernity. Such an alternative proves unsustainable however and the result is cynicism, despair, and irony. Despite this, the textual search for another modernity remains ultimately of critical epistemological interest for its disclosure of the contested and far from monolithic nature of European modernity.

Keywords

Burmese Days, modernity, anti-imperialism, humanism, colonial masculinity

In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a book where George Orwell devotes considerable space to his previous experience in Burma as a member of the Indian Imperial police, he writes, “The truth is that no modern man, in his heart of hearts, believes that it is right to invade a foreign country and hold the population down by force” (146). There is nothing on first reading anything decidedly ambiguous about these words. Read in context, Orwell is clearly making a statement about how the British Empire was long past its expiry date, and that colonialism, conquest, and the subjugation of a people should not be part of a new, modern world order. Yet the notion of modernity alluded to in Orwell’s observation poses several interesting questions. What does he mean by being modern in the early decades of the twentieth century when the British imperial machinery was sputtering but far from entirely stilled? How does modernity as a structure of feeling about breaking away from the past and tradition play out within the framework of a political dispensation of the imperial coupled with colonial governmentality? More pertinently perhaps, is the modern man’s belief as Orwell describes it—underpinned it would seem by a notion of geographical and territorial sovereignty at least—premised also on a particular conception of culture and humanity? And if so, what might this be?

These questions inform my discussion here of Orwell’s first novel, *Burmese Days*, a work that has not traditionally received much extended scrutiny and attention from either Orwell scholars examining his entire oeuvre or postcolonial scholars interested in the literature of Empire. The relative neglect is understandable perhaps as it is an early work after all, the dismissal of which Orwell himself may be said to have encouraged.¹ Published in 1934, the novel is based on Orwell’s five years (1922-1927) working in Burma doing “the dirty work of empire” and oiling, as he calls it, the “actual machinery of despotism” (*Wigan Pier* 147). With its anti-imperialist politics, it subverts the genre of the colonial memoir that its own rather idyllic-sounding title might conjure up to readers at the time: writing typically undertaken by former members of the imperial machinery who view the people and places they once administered nostalgically and exotically. At the same time, the novel’s virulent anti-imperialism is expressed with a realism markedly different

¹ In his essay “Why I Write” (1946), Orwell notes how he “wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound.” *Burmese Days*, he continues, “is rather that kind of book” (2). For recent scholarship which makes an attempt to consider Orwell’s fiction of the 1930s more attentively, see Loraine Saunders’s *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell* and the chapter by Michael Levenson in *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, “The Fictional Realist: Novels of the 1930s,” 59-75.

from the modernist existential ambiguity and ambivalence of a text like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1900), which similarly highlights the abuses and corruption in the colonial system. While the novel is not modernist in its style, it offers nevertheless a perspective on the struggle over modernity. My concern lies with how Orwell expresses the dilemma and dynamics of modernity in his novel through the engagement of his narrator and main character with Britain's (waning) imperial power in the first part of the twentieth century. Before turning to the novel though, I wish first to sketch the critical framework within which I intend to situate my reading.

The debate over modernity and colonial modernity has been an important critical thematic and analytical strand in postcolonial studies. It is easy enough to grasp the political imperative that has driven postcolonial scholars to seek to break the monopoly over the claim to modernity wielded by Europe and to assume the epistemological challenge of undermining colonial historiography's assertion that colonialism ushered in modernity for the peoples and places conquered by European imperialists. The result has been a search for native agency, and an attempt to recuperate lost voices and delineate competing historical narratives in the so-called colonial periphery in order to provide a sense of alternative modernities. Greater attention has been paid to the fashioning of modernity from local and historically particular contexts by colonized subjects who simultaneously negotiate the hegemonic notions of European modernity and modernization introduced by the colonial situation. In most cases, it is a fashioning historically and indelibly informed by the concepts of nationhood and nationalism. Partha Chatterjee's work on the emergence of Indian nationalism, for example, discloses the way in which Indian colonial elites fashioned the domain of spirituality and tradition to engage and manage Eurocentric notions of nationalism and the modern, rather than adopt wholesale a template of Western modernity and nationalism. Historians like Tani Barlow and Antoinette Burton have also tended to consider colonial modernity from the perspective of colonized subjects struggling with the restrictions of imperial rule, and their desire to be modern subjects. Colonial modernity, as Inderpal Grewal defines it, is "the way in which modernity was imposed in colonial contexts and utilized by colonized peoples" (139). Deploying a notion of "the Bengali modern," Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued for the need to radically provincialize Europe lest "all other histories [remain] matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially 'Europe'" (56). He writes, "To attempt to provincialize this 'Europe' is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write

over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamt-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of 'tradition' that 'modernity' creates" (69). While endorsing the heterogeneous genealogy of non-European modernities, Timothy Mitchell has cautioned against being too easily satisfied with the mere presence of pluralism. Instead, he argues for "a way to theorize the question of modernity that relocates it within a global context and, at the same time, enables that context to complicate, rather than simply reverse, the narrative logic of modernization" (7). Similarly disrupting the universalizing equation between the modern and Europe, David Scott has also reiterated that the only way one might effectively displace Eurocentrism is to work toward a "conceptual repositioning" of Europe. One of the main thrusts of such scholarship is thus to effectively underscore the critical importance of attending to the fissures and fault lines of European modernity.

Orwell's place within these specific thematic strands of postcolonialism, indeed his significance for the field as a whole, has not historically been spelt out very clearly. Part of my intention here is to rectify that and to suggest more specifically that Orwell's *Burmese Days* provides a valuable perspective on the struggle for modernity by the colonizer rather than the colonized. In line with such a reading, Paul Gilroy's discussion of Orwell in his book, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, is instructive and provocative. Gilroy attempts to reclaim Orwell and his legacy from the narrow political interests and the notion of the national that he has been made to serve in the decades since his death. Gilroy celebrates Orwell's "cosmopolitan affiliations" (76) and humanism as seen most clearly in his act of "translocal solidarity" (76), namely his decision to travel to Spain and join the fight against General Franco's forces in 1936. Additionally, Orwell's worldliness and sense of justice are also shown "by his determination to include the colonies and their consequences—political and economic as well as cultural—in the dissident inventory of British life he was making" (76). Gilroy writes quite explicitly about the need for a critical reassessment of Orwell relevant not only to cultural studies but also to postcolonialism: "I think Orwell's example matters now not just because his work should be placed at the source of those traditions of dissenting cultural reflection and analysis that operate under the sign of 'Cultural Studies' but because his insight and courage are wrongly and routinely recuperated in traditions of political culture that are far too nation-centered and narrowly patriotic" (78). Gilroy finds much to admire in Orwell's version of humanism, a kind of humanism of the body which recognizes the basic propensity for suffering that all peoples share

under oppressive and unjust man-made political structures. It is this humanism which underpins—though not unequivocally or consistently—Orwell’s sense of modernity, and which animates, for example, his objections to Gandhi’s beliefs, specifically the “other-worldly, anti-humanist tendency of his doctrines” (*Essays* 462). In “Reflections on Gandhi” (1949), Orwell readily acknowledges Gandhi’s intellectual honesty, his political savvy, and his incorruptible nature but finds it hard to stomach his spiritualism which is fundamentally at odds with “the belief that Man is the measure of all things, and that our job is to make life worth living on this earth, which is the only earth we have” (*Essays* 462).

While it is clear how Orwell’s commitment to fighting totalitarianism and advocating democratic socialism may be seen as the practical and political manifestation of his secular humanism, the latter is not without its problematic qualities. This is apparent, for example, in Orwell’s essay “Marrakesh” (1939) where he describes the invisibility and unindividuated nature of poor non-white people. He begins his essay with the unforgettable image of flies rushing after a corpse in a funeral procession before moving on to a discussion of colonized peoples that is almost surreal as he writes, “The people have brown faces—besides, there are so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects” (*Essays* 30). One could argue that the tone and perspective adopted suggests that Orwell is deliberately voicing a hegemonic colonial view as part of a broader satirical critique of European imperialism. Yet it is hard to detect enough of a critical distance in the text that would make such a tactic clear and consequently less morally disturbing. The cynicism and nihilism exhibited in “Marrakesh” is palpably felt in the various discrete vignettes of the native population that Orwell provides. One moment when a line of old women shuffle by bent double by the weight of the firewood they are carrying is particularly striking. Orwell writes, “Firewood was passing—that was how I saw it” (*Essays* 33). He explains his inability to see the women’s humanity by saying, “People with brown skins are next door to invisible” (33). Throughout the essay, the reader is denied stylistic clues that would indicate clearly if Orwell was critical of the views he was expressing. If he admits to them mainly to cynically suggest their potent prevalence, then perhaps we could read his conclusion—where the sight of black soldiers marching past prompts him to wonder when the oppressed and the colonized will finally realize the ruse of the white man’s superiority and revolt—as one where he speaks ironically and with the reckless, sardonic humor of the damned.

There is, however, enough ambiguity to also argue against such a reading given the flagrant and unremitting process of Othering in the text.

In an assessment that also qualifies Orwell's humanism, John Rossi and John Rodden have noted that the nature of his anti-imperialism was one where "Orwell came less to identify with the Burmese and other oppressed races of the Empire than to see the whole process as debasing the ruler even more than the ruled" (2). The result is a combustible mix of self-loathing, guilt and disgust which explains Orwell's confession in "Shooting an Elephant" (1936) about how he could think the British Empire "an unbreakable tyranny" while also announce with startling violence that "the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts" (*Essays* 19). In another critique, Douglas Kerr has written about the relative weakness of Orwell's anti-imperialist stance in an article comparing *Burmese Days* with Leonard Woolf's *A Village in the Jungle*. Kerr writes that Orwell's novel is "thoroughly Eurocentric" (3) while Woolf's novel focusing on a community of villagers in Ceylon is more radically different and oppositional by pushing colonial life and the machinery of colonial government like its law court and prison to the margins of his fictional world. Woolf's novel provides a "heterocentric point of view," "a sort of singular symbolic decolonization, in its project of giving autonomy to the point of view of people for whom a colonized space is not a possession but a native habitat" (12). The differences between the two novels are certainly striking and it is true, as Kerr suggests, that Woolf's attempt to describe a wholly native point of view, manner of thinking and way of life is unprecedented at that point in English fiction. Yet, Orwell's novel also offers something valuable by way of its illumination of the struggle with prejudice and bias that stems from the yearning of the main character for an alternative modernity to the particular hegemonic form he is subjected to. This struggle leads to the confusion rather than the confirmation of the self but it is precisely the text's attempt to grope its way out of this confusion that, I argue, is of critical epistemological importance and interest. In thus focusing the discussion on the relationship between anti-imperialism *and* modernity in the novel, rather than just the former, I want to foreground the contested nature of European modernity. This, even as its hegemony is inexorably constituted by what Walter Dignolo has referred to as the coloniality of power, "quite simply the reverse and unavoidable side of 'modernity'" (22) that has historically involved the suppression and enslavement of various peoples, the expropriation of their lands and the destruction of their cultures.

In *Burmese Days*, the desire for an ideal modern way of being is seen most clearly in, even if not always coherently articulated by, the main character, John Flory. Flory's modern sentiments are expressed through his view of the body and the basic humanity of the native "Other" just as his romantic interest, Elizabeth Lackersteen, is physically repulsed by the Burmese and experiences her racism viscerally. The struggle over modernity thus takes place in the novel over the meaning of the body. Not coincidentally, Flory's ultimate failure in Elizabeth's eyes finds specific expression in a crisis of colonial masculinity. At the same time, the text's performance of modernity may also be apprehended in the voice of the third-person, and at times omniscient, narrator. This narrator unfolds Flory's personal tragedy within a context of competing historical trajectories and perspectives that point self-consciously and ironically to the tensions and conflicts in an uncertain present without the stabilizing co-ordinates of a political alternative—ideal or workable—to British colonialism.

Set in the town of Kyauktada in Upper Burma, *Burmese Days* presents the English timber merchant John Flory in desperately unhappy terms, caught as he is between an intense awareness of the corruption and corrupting effects of the colonial situation, and his inchoate hankering for something more. Disillusioned and downright cynical about the white man's burden, Flory views, with increasing impatience and frustration, his fellow Britons as co-actors in a charade or a farce:

Was it possible that they could go on week after week, year after year, repeating word for word the same evil-minded drivel, like a parody of a fifth-rate story in *Blackwood's*? Would none of them *ever* think of anything new to say? Oh, what a place, what people! What a civilisation is this of ours—this godless civilisation founded on whiskey, *Blackwood's* and the 'Bonzo' pictures! God have mercy on us, for all of us are part of it. (33; emphasis in original)

Stripped of any sense of a greater morality or sense of a civilizing mission, the British are stuck in their own imperial drama in never-changing roles, mouthing the same old lines from a well-worn script. In clear, hard-nosed materialist fashion, Flory sees through the false rituals of colonialism and the futile hypocrisy of assuming the character of *pukka sahib*. As he explains, "I'm here to make money, like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man's burden humbug. The

pukka sahib pose. It's so boring. Even those bloody fools at the Club might be better company if we weren't all of us living a lie the whole time" (39).

Flory's awareness of colonialism as an inherently unfair, exploitative system of greed, extraction, and expropriation of resources sets him at odds with the anti-intellectualism of the European Club and earns him the disparaging appellation "Bolshie" from some of his fellow Britons. In contradistinction as well to the racist all-white exclusivity of his fellow Britons, Flory is friends with the Indian doctor, Dr. Veraswami, who, like the classic mimic man of colonial discourse foregrounded by postcolonial theory, is enamored of British culture and civilization. His high regard for the English is matched only by the depth of Flory's "seditious" (40) disdain for his countrymen. Dr. Veraswami equates the colonizing project with an "uprush of modern progress" (42) measured largely in terms of infrastructural improvement, scientific and technological changes, and commercial development. It is precisely this hegemonic version of modernity which Flory refuses to accept even if he is hard pressed to conceive of a coherent, alternative political rationality to frame and publicly act out his opposition.

In the novel, Flory's loneliness and sense of isolation as a result of his views make him particularly vulnerable to the charms of the main female character in the novel, Elizabeth Lackersteen, when she arrives to join her aunt and uncle in Kyauktada. Flory is immediately drawn to Elizabeth upon her revelation that she had lived in Paris. The admission excites him and he imagines, erroneously, her Bohemian lifestyle in the modern intellectual culture of a European metropolis—"[s]itting in cafes with foreign art students, drinking white wine and talking about Marcel Proust" (85). Here, Flory's fantasy of modernity recalls the fascination with other lands, and the concomitant impatience with the parochialism of suburban Britain, that British intellectuals and writers in London between the wars shared.² Flory's misguided sense of Elizabeth's progressiveness and of her status as an exemplar of the ideal modernity he seeks shorn of coloniality is that which leads to his downfall. That he persists in regarding her as modern and different despite all the evidence to the contrary is suggestive of his desperation more than his naïvete. Thus he wonders, for example, even as he is being snubbed by Elizabeth, where she has learnt her "tee-heeing brightness" (219) and determined cheeriness, concluding that it must have been in one of "these brisk modern girls' schools, no doubt" (219).

² See Paul Fussell's *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars*, and Mica Nava's *Visceral Cosmopolitanism*, 63-94.

Flory and Elizabeth's incompatibility is strikingly encapsulated in their differing responses to Burmese culture and to the non-white, non-European body.³ Flory's attitude toward the latter, like that of the narrator, is shot through with ambivalence, sympathetic for the most part but often also laced with scepticism, misgiving and cynicism. We are introduced to this attitude early on in the text when, in their debate over colonialism, Dr. Versaswami attempts to persuade Flory of the colonizer's right to rule by drawing attention to Old Mattu. The latter is the watchman of the European church who appears before them as they are discoursing to beg for food. Old Mattu was "an old fever-stricken creature, more like a grasshopper than a human being, and dressed in a few square inches of dingy rag" (43). A few lines further, he is described as "doubling himself up like a caterpillar" (44) in gratitude at having been cast a few coins; he is a woeful man who utters no words, only wails and cries. In the doctor's view, Old Mattu is a concrete example of the inherent wretchedness of the colonized and the "degeneracy of the East" with his "abjectness," "servility" and "ignorance" (44). To Flory, Old Mattu's wretched body is less an indisputable symbol of the inherent inferiority of the native than visible proof that the British have not brought progress to the country. His ostensibly charitable gesture of throwing money at Old Mattu is ironically done as he urges the man to use it to drown his sorrows: "Be as degenerate as you can. It all postpones Utopia" (44).

A less cynical, more open and appreciative attitude toward the native body is disclosed later in the novel, when Flory makes the disastrous mistake of taking Elizabeth to watch a Burmese play or *pwe*, thinking it might interest her culturally and aesthetically. The whole episode is initially presented to the reader by the narrator sans mediation through either character's consciousness. The reader is told how, when the Burmese dancer begins to move, it is first "a rhythmic nodding, posturing and twisting of the elbows, like the movements of one of those jointed wooden figures on an old-fashioned roundabout" (104). As the music quickens and the dancer's movements pick up speed, the narrator relates, "Then she danced in a grotesque posture as though sitting down, knees bent, body leaned forward, with her arms extended and writhing" (104). Described in this fashion, the dancer and the dance appear alienating and strange. The perspective then shifts explicitly to

³ In his article, Kerr delineates the differences between Flory and Elizabeth in terms of their responses to Burmese nature and the natural landscape. If Flory can see the Burmese jungle as "temporarily Rousseauesque," to Elizabeth, it is "Hobbesian, monstrous and chaotic" (155) and something to be ruled over.

Elizabeth's and we learn how the whole experience of watching the *pwe* surrounded by Burmese people leaves her horrified and repulsed. She recoils in disgust at having been brought in such close proximity with the natives.

We next hear from Flory as he speaks and attempts to explain the dance. His effort to articulate the profundity of the dance and its impact on him represents an attempt to grapple with alterity. Singling out the dancer's moves to Elizabeth, he concludes, "And yet when you look closely, what art, what centuries of culture you can see behind it! Every movement that girl makes has been studied and handed down through innumerable generations. Whenever you look closely at the art of these Eastern peoples you can see that—a civilization stretching back and back, practically the same, into times when we were dressed in woad" (105). While Flory's appreciation of the Burmese dance form and culture may be described as primitivist in tone, there is nevertheless a refusal of the denial of coevalness common in colonial discourse. The Burmese are not shorn of contemporaneity; they inhabit the same historical moment as Europeans. Indeed they have an intimate and continuous relationship with the past, embodying and carrying their history with them. The dance, a synchronizing of movement and gesture to music, allows for a more visceral form of communication, one through bodies rather than language. Putting his thoughts into words, Flory admits the estranging experience of the *pwe* yet attempts to express some kind of connection and kinship. The intense focus on the body here underlines a vague if powerfully felt sense of commitment to a kind of basic and elemental humanity. The appeal to the physical body, shorn of language and seen at its most basic and instinctual, makes another famous appearance of course in Orwell's essay, "A Hanging" (1931). Here, the narrator describes how the condemned man in his walk to the gallows, "At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel" (*Essays* 16). He "stepped slightly aside" (16) to avoid a puddle of water. It is a reflex action, borne out of instinct and delicately executed, a tiny act of self-preservation that confirms his humanity.

Elizabeth's reaction to Flory's excursus on Burmese art and culture in this incident is of a piece with her general aversion to Burmese bodies and her view of them. Her racism is encoded in terms of an alienation from their physical appearance; she finds them "*revoltingly* ugly" (118; emphasis in original). The Burmese women in particular repel her because "she felt her kinship with them, and the hatefulness of being kin to creatures with black faces" (119). When she first sees Ma Hla May, Flory's mistress, she wonders aloud about her sex, adding, "Oh, is *that* what Burmese women are like?" (87; emphasis in original) Admitting that

she had thought all the women she had seen were boys, she added they were just “like a kind of Dutch doll” (87). Elizabeth appears especially callous given Orwell’s deliberate portrayal of her as a woman lacking any kind of maternal instinct who remains unmoved at the sight of native children. At the *pwe*, for example, she is indifferent to the three Burmese children asleep at her feet, “their small oval faces side by side like the faces of kittens” (104). Similarly when she and Flory stop at the shop of Li Yeik, the Chinese grocer, in the bazaar, she enters the place reluctantly only to see a naked child “crawling slowly about the floor like a large yellow frog” (129). Through the use of free indirect discourse, the observation is made by the narrator but from her point of view. The child disgusts Elizabeth when, frightened by the sight of the visitors, he eventually urinates on the floor. This encounter with town life, like the episode at the *pwe*, ends in tumult and disarray with Elizabeth, creating a scene and upsetting the local people who had accommodated her.

Elizabeth’s judgment of Flory after the *pwe* debacle is devastatingly telling: “She had thought him a manly man till this evening” (107). In the novel, again and again, we are shown the equation between a particular version of the modern—a more open, self-conscious, even proto-cosmopolitan disposition toward the world with a premium placed on the aesthetic—and a lack of “true” masculinity. Throughout, Flory’s attempts to introduce Elizabeth to Burmese society and to the possibility of cultural relativism and difference when it came to ideas about beauty and civilization are all strenuously rebuffed. Flory, she felt, “was too eager in his attempts to interest her in things Oriental” (118) and in so behaving, he was being especially “ungentlemanly” (133). If Flory’s desire for Elizabeth is founded on the hope that she would share his views and lead him out of his existential crisis of loneliness and solipsism, Elizabeth’s attraction to Flory, on the other hand, *when* she experiences such feelings, works differently. Her desire is excited when he seems to fit traditional colonial masculine roles. Thus he appears most manly and sexually alluring when he takes her on a hunting trip in the jungle. Captivated by his knowledge about the intricacies of trapping and hunting wild animals, she thinks, “If only he would always talk about shooting, instead of about books and Art and that mucky poetry!” (161) Later, musing over her first kill of the day, “[s]he was conscious of an extraordinary desire to fling her arms around Flory’s neck and kiss him; and in some way it was the killing of the pigeon that made her feel this” (167). Thus portrayed in largely unsympathetic terms as perversely cold-blooded, even murderous, Elizabeth Lackersteen, with her short-cropped boyish hairstyle and

modish ways, appears deceptively like a Modern Girl set to transform traditional gender roles.⁴ Again and again however, the text makes her a scapegoat for the failure of Flory's modern dream and discloses her to be small-minded, self-serving, and resolutely anti-intellectual, given her categorical dismissal of Art and "braininess" as "beastly" (94). "'Highbrow,'" the narrator tells us, "was a bitter word in her vocabulary" (94).

Flory's already questionable colonial masculinity is further undermined when the imperious and "manly" character, Verrall, of the Military Police arrives on the scene. With his very name suggestive of virility, Verrall's penchant for horses, polo, and his more favorable class position make him the ideal embodiment of traditional colonial masculinity and the more suitable suitor for Elizabeth. To her, "[a]n aura of horsemanship and soldiering surrounded him. In his tanned face and his hard, straight body Elizabeth saw all the romance, the splendid panache of a cavalryman's life" (214). Elizabeth's hopes are dashed however when Verrall eventually proves a cad. Flory's final chance at reconciliation with her occurs after his unexpected heroic turn stopping a revolt by a vengeful Burmese mob. For once he seems to embody the requisite colonial masculinity. But the moment is short-lived as he is publicly humiliated by his Burmese mistress, Ma Hla May. The public advertisement of this relationship turns Elizabeth resolutely against Flory. His white male sexuality and masculinity are irrevocably sullied and the incident exposes the racial and class foundations of colonial masculinity. At this point, Flory's birthmark also finally becomes a too public sign of private transgressions. The narrator relates, "She [Elizabeth] hated him now for his birthmark. She had never known till this moment how dishonouring, how unforgivable a thing it was" (274). Any possibility of a romantic union, of what Flory calls "a way of living—civilized, decent—" (277), is irrevocably shattered in their last exchange. To Flory's mournful plea that she would have a piano if they were married, Elizabeth retorts, "I don't play the piano" (278).

In a final ironic twist, however, Elizabeth eventually gets her wish to assume the role of memsahib after Flory's suicide, when she receives a marriage proposal

⁴ See Weinbaum et al., eds. *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, 1-2. In colonial discourse and fictive texts about the empire in decline (for example, E. M. Foster's *A Passage to India*), white women are often blamed for the deteriorating relations between brown men or natives and their white masters, harkening back to an illusory prelapsarian stage in colonial relations. In *Burmese Days*, Elizabeth plays a major role in Flory's destruction but she is less culpable when it comes to causing a breakdown in colonizer-colonized relations, and she does not really have a role to play in the friendship between Flory and Dr. Veraswami.

from the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Macgregor, a man old enough to be her father, and a pukka sahib whose morning exercises once led Flory to compare him to “one of those beastly middle-aged scoutmasters, homosexuals almost to a man, that you see photographs of in the illustrated papers” (77). Elizabeth, we are told by the narrator at the end, “fills with complete success the position for which Nature had designed her from the first, that of a burra memsahib” (287). As the relationship between Flory and Elizabeth shows, the struggle over what it means to be modern has highly gendered contours. Flory’s tragedy in *Burmese Days* is the result of a longing for modernity that can find no suitable form or release within the oppressive and repressive machinery of empire where (gendered) subject positions have become fossilized. Yet we see that this reading and understanding of his performance of modernity is itself gendered—based on a rather misogynistic portrayal of Elizabeth—and heteronormative, as Flory’s throwaway remark about Mr. Macgregor confirms.

In the novel, the presence of the third-person narrator serves in many ways to reinforce and gesture toward the kind of modernity that Flory appears to desire and stand for. It is clear for example that Flory’s restless discontentment with himself and colonial rule coincides with the narrator’s views on the despotism of the British Empire. In passages of documentary realism, the narrator describes with Foucauldian perspicacity the materialist workings of colonial power and the self-interest that is its engine. The narrator explains, for example, how Kyauktada is identified as “a seat of Progress” before translating that wryly to explain that the term is “interpretable as a block of law courts, with their army of fat but ravenous pleaders, a hospital, a school and one of those huge, durable jails which the English have built everywhere between Gibraltar and Hong Kong” (18). Clearly evident here are the standard features of colonial rule replicated in geographically dispersed colonies where the aim of the British is to induce servility, discipline, and docility in the colonized population. The *sahiblog* or the English of the East are mainly a “dull, decent people, cherishing and fortifying their dullness behind a quarter of a million bayonets” (69). The novel’s unflinching realism and its materialist critique of imperialism as a system means that there is nothing opaque about the workings of the colonial apparatus and culture in Orwell’s novel. The narrator is searing in his analysis of the atmosphere of oppression and restriction, and clear about the threat of physical violence that ultimately props up colonial power. So poisoned is the white man by this atmosphere in which he lives that as the narrator says, “The time comes when you burn with hatred of your own countrymen, when you long for

a native uprising to drown their Empire in blood” (69). But even here, the narrator’s skepticism and cynicism come into play as he pulls back to say that there is no sincerity in this. Writing in the second person, he implicates his readers—“what do you care if the Indian Empire is a despotism, if Indians are bullied and exploited? You only care because the right of free speech is denied you. You are a creature of the despotism, a pukka sahib, tied tighter than a monk or a savage by an unbreakable system of tabus” (69). It is a characteristic reversal—sympathy and the merest hint of revolutionary idealism or change are dashed almost as soon as they are suggested. The narrator reveals a clear-sighted modern sensibility characterized by radical skepticism, consciousness of self-interest, and inaction.

If the narrator’s critique of imperialism and colonialism is unwavering, his views of the Burmese and native agency prove less consistently affirming. When Elizabeth and Ma Hla May meet each other for the first time in Flory’s house, for example, the narrator describes a moment of indecipherability and uncertainty. “For the best part of a minute neither of them could take her eyes from the other; but which found the spectacle more grotesque, more incredible, there is no saying” (87). In this confrontation, even if it is the briefest of moments, mutual estrangement makes for a sense of equivalence between colonizer and colonized as the narrator withholds comment and access to both characters’ inner thoughts. Such moments are relatively rare though. For most of the novel, the narrator’s attitude toward the Burmese must be inferred *vis-à-vis* the main villainous character of U Po Kyin. From the start when the narrator introduces us to U Po Kyin and describes his rise within the colonial system through deception and cunning, we are brought into a modern colonial world where native subjects are seen, unflatteringly perhaps, but as no less rational and calculating than their British masters. On the one hand, U Po Kyin is described derogatory as physically repulsive, obese, unscrupulous, and sexually rapacious. Yet he is nevertheless also impressed upon the reader as a manipulative character who seamlessly intertwines his knowledge of the colonial machinery with his Buddhist beliefs to build his own personal empire. He does not seek the overthrow of the British but exploits loopholes and maneuvers within the crevices of British authority. With much irony, the narrator describes how U Po Kyin has increased his wealth and status by successfully preying on the fears and paranoia of British imperialists through denouncing fellow Burmans as insurgents. Simultaneously, he plots to secure his reincarnation in the next life with a plan to build pagodas and temples. U Po Kyin thus operates entirely according to self-interest.

Although the novel does not devote much attention to the desire for self-determination and the nationalistic sentiments of the Burmese, Orwell, through his narrator, nevertheless manages to insist on the coeval nature of both his British and Burmese characters. The British colonizer cannot be immune from native machinations, which is his own greed, and the whole corrupt system have helped foster. On this matter, Orwell is faultlessly equitable. U Po Kyin and the other Burmese are not inscrutable; in fact, they behave rationally and calculatedly, as subjects who know how to manipulate the system for self-preservation and advancement, and who see how power works. The conclusion of *Burmese Days* establishes some of the main features of the text's attempt to express a different modernity. As Timothy Mitchell has noted, "the experience of modernity is constructed as a relationship between time and space. It is a particular way of expressing one in terms of the other" (13). The narrator in meting out justice to the different characters is ironic, juggling knowledge of various systems, blending notions of chance, destiny, fate and Buddhist belief. Depicting the coeval nature of his characters, he shows clashing world views and systems. It is in this way that the narrator attempts to seal his alternative modernity, one built on an intensely felt co-presence although cynically expressed. The death of U Po Kyin is especially ironic given the jibe at the end about him receiving his comeuppance within his own belief system:

U Po Kyin had done all that mortal man could do. It was time now to be making ready for the next world—in short, to begin building pagodas. But unfortunately, this was the very point at which his plans went wrong. Only three days after the Governor's durbar, before so much as a brick of those atoning pagodas had been laid, U Po Kyin was stricken with apoplexy and died without speaking again. There is no armour against fate. . . . Or even if he has escaped the worst, his other fear has been realized, and he has returned to the earth in the shape of a rat or a frog. Perhaps at this very moment a snake is devouring him. (286)

Rather than an outright dismissal of another cultural system or frame of reference, there is instead an ironic, tongue-in-cheek following through of its logic for a character who professes belief in it. The narrator marshals different forces to constitute the heavy-handed determinism of the text: the inescapable dynamics of

colonialism, the fatalism of the Western realist novel tradition, and Burmese-Buddhist cosmology.

Ultimately, in the face of the hegemonic view that colonialism is synonymous with modernization and modernity, Orwell can only respond with cynicism, despair and irony. *Burmese Days* is a novel about the struggle to envision an alternative modernity, one founded on the possibility of cultural equivalence and difference rather than discrimination or the presence of an Other. We see this in Flory and the narrator's inchoate humanism which, besides the relative openness to cultural difference and bodily sameness, also entails the scapegoating of Elizabeth as part of the text's narrative logic. Like passengers on a speeding train looking out at the scenery racing by, we are privy to only fleeting glimpses of what is possible before the rush of inevitable failure. Robert Young observes that "Othering was a colonial strategy of exclusion: for the postcolonial, there are only other human beings" (39). *Burmese Days* appears stuck between these two political and epistemological positions. Its failure, however, is instructive as it discloses the fractured and contested nature of European modernity and gives the lie to the "uprush of modern progress" (42).

Works Cited

- Barlow, Tani, ed. *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Burton, Antoinette, ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History." *The New Imperial Histories Reader*. Ed. Stephen Howe. New York: Routledge, 2010. 55-71.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Minnesota: Zed Press, 1986.
- Fussell, Paul. *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars*. New York: OUP, 1982.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.
- Grewal, Inderpal. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Kerr, Douglas. "Colonial Habitats: Orwell and Woolf in the Jungle." *English Studies* 2 (1997): 149-61.

- Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2000.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Questions of Modernity*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Nava, Mica. *Visceral Cosmopolitanisms: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference*. London: Berg, 2007.
- Orwell, George. *Burmese Days*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 1934.
- . *The Road to Wigan Pier*. 1937. London: Secker and Warburg, 1965.
- . *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*. London: Penguin, 1994.
- Rossi, John, and John Rodden. "A Political Writer." *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*. Ed. John Rodden. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 1-11.
- Saunders, Loraine. *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell: The Novels from Burmese Days to Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Alderhot: Ashgate, 2008.
- Scott, David. "Colonial Governmentality." *Social Text* 43 (1995): 191-220.
- Weinbaum, Alys Eve, et al., eds. *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.
- Young, Robert. "Postcolonial Remains." *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 19-42.

About the Author

Angelia Poon is Associate Professor of English Literature at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests include postcolonial theory and contemporary literature with a focus on issues pertaining to globalization, and gender, class, and racial subjectivities. Her book, *Enacting Englishness in the Victorian Period: Colonialism and the Politics of Performance* (Ashgate), was published in 2008. She has written articles on contemporary literature including Singapore literature and is one of the editors of *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Literature in English* (NUS Press, 2009). In 2012, she co-edited the book, *Sexuality and Contemporary Literature* (Cambria Press).

[Received 23 September 2013; accepted 29 November 2013]