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Societal Influence on the Identity of an Individual: An Althusserian Reading of George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*

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Abstract

George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* (1936) has long been read as a confessional critique of British imperialism. This paper approaches the essay from a different angle, treating it as a site where the social construction of individual identity can be observed with unusual clarity. Using Louis Althusser's theories of ideology, interpellation, and Ideological State Apparatuses as its primary analytical lens, the paper argues that the narrator's identity in the essay is not an expression of autonomous selfhood but a product of colonial ideology and collective social pressure. The narrator is interpellated into the role of the imperial officer not by any single moment of coercion but by the accumulated force of institutional expectations, public observation, and the performative demands of colonial authority. Close reading of Orwell's prose reveals the gap between his private moral resistance and the identity he is compelled to inhabit in public, a gap that Althusser's framework helps to theorize as the constitutive condition of ideological subjecthood. The paper also draws selectively on Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism, Frantz Fanon's account of colonial psychology, and Michel Foucault's thinking on surveillance to sharpen the analysis at specific points. The findings suggest that Orwell's narrator is a subject whose agency has been so thoroughly captured by colonial ideology that the act of shooting the elephant, which he knows to be unnecessary and wrong, becomes not a choice but a performance of the only identity available to him. The essay ultimately functions as an inadvertent anatomy of how societies produce the very subjects they require.

Keywords: *Althusser, interpellation, ideology, colonial identity, subject formation, Orwell, Shooting an Elephant, ISA, performativity, postcolonial theory*

1. Introduction

George Orwell served as a sub-divisional police officer in Burma from 1922 to 1927, during which time British India was among the most elaborate and self-consciously maintained colonial structures in modern history. *Shooting an Elephant*, first published in *New Writing* in 1936, draws on this experience to produce a first-person account of an encounter that is, on its surface, a minor colonial incident: a police officer shoots a rogue elephant in front of a large Burmese crowd. The essay has secured a permanent place in the curriculum of postcolonial and political literature, cited repeatedly for its unflinching admission of colonial complicity and its satirical exposure of the hollow theatre of imperial authority.

What existing scholarship has attended to less carefully is the mechanism by which the narrator's identity itself is produced within the colonial encounter. Critics have noted that Orwell feels trapped, that he hates imperialism yet enforces it, that he shoots the elephant against his better judgment. But the theoretical account of why this happens, of how the colonial system generates subjects who act against their own convictions, has not been rigorously developed through the conceptual resources most suited to the task.

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This paper argues that Louis Althusser's theory of ideological subject formation provides precisely those resources. Althusser's account of how ideology works not through external command but through the internal constitution of subjects offers a framework for understanding why Orwell cannot simply choose to act on his moral convictions. The narrator is not a free agent who decides to shoot the elephant; he is a subject who has been so thoroughly interpellated into the role of the colonial officer that the social performance of that role overrides private moral judgment. The Burmese crowd is not merely an audience; it is an ideological apparatus that hails the narrator into his assigned identity and holds him there through the pressure of collective expectation.

The paper's central hypothesis is that *Shooting an Elephant* demonstrates how identity is socially constructed through ideological and collective pressures, such that the individual becomes a subject of colonial ideology and performs socially expected roles despite internal moral resistance. The argument proceeds through close textual analysis, theoretical application, and engagement with relevant secondary scholarship in postcolonial theory and the sociology of identity.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

The critical literature on *Shooting an Elephant* falls into several broad categories. The dominant tradition, established by critics such as Lionel Trilling (1952) and extended by Raymond Williams (1971), reads the essay as a document of colonial guilt and moral self-examination. For Trilling, Orwell's value lies in his willingness to confront the psychological costs of political complicity; the essay becomes an exhibit in the case for Orwell's honesty. Williams, from a more politically skeptical position, acknowledged the force of Orwell's self-analysis while questioning whether confession substitutes for structural critique.

Postcolonial scholarship has significantly expanded the critical frame. Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism (Said 1978) provides a backdrop against which Orwell's essay can be read as a document of the colonial episteme: the narrator's relationship to Burma and to the Burmese is shaped by a system of knowledge and representation that precedes his individual experience and constrains what he can perceive. Said's argument that the Orient is constituted through the discursive practices of the imperial power rather than through any transparent encounter with its actual people is directly relevant to the way the narrator of *Shooting an Elephant* apprehends the crowd: they appear to him as an undifferentiated mass, as a collective demand, rather than as individual human beings with their own perspectives.

Frantz Fanon's account of colonial psychology offers a complementary resource. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1952), Fanon analyzed how colonial subjects are psychologically produced through the imposition of an externally defined identity, with their own sense of self mediated by the colonial gaze. While Fanon's primary concern is with the colonized subject, his analysis of the psychic damage inflicted by colonial power on both parties in the colonial encounter resonates with the narrator's self-description in Orwell's essay. The narrator is not simply an oppressor; he is himself deformed by the system he represents.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and surveillance (Foucault 1977) has been applied to colonial contexts by scholars including Ann Laura Stoler (1995), who extended Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge into the domain of colonial governmentality. The relevance to *Shooting an Elephant* is clear: the narrator is watched, and the condition of being watched constitutes him as a certain kind of subject. Stoler's work demonstrates how colonial power operated not merely through overt coercion but through the internalization of surveillance, producing self-regulating colonial officials who policed their own behavior in accordance with the demands of imperial authority.

Where the existing scholarship has been less systematic is in the application of Althusser's specific theoretical vocabulary to the construction of the narrator's identity. References to Althusser in Orwell criticism are sparse, and those that exist tend to treat his concepts as background context rather than as analytical tools applied with precision to the text. The research gap is therefore clear: a rigorous Althusserian reading of *Shooting an Elephant*, one that foregrounds interpellation, subject formation, and the operation of Ideological State Apparatuses in the colonial setting, has not been produced. The present paper addresses this gap.

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3. Theoretical Framework

Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," first published in 1970, represents one of the most consequential interventions in twentieth-century Marxist theory. Against the classical Marxist tendency to treat ideology as false consciousness, as a distorted representation of material reality that subjects might in principle see through, Althusser argued that ideology is a material practice with a specific function: the reproduction of the conditions of production. Ideology is not primarily a set of beliefs held by individuals; it is inscribed in the practices and rituals of institutions, in the way people behave within the apparatuses of social life.

Althusser distinguished two types of state apparatus. Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), including the army, the police, and the prison, operate primarily through physical coercion, though they also use ideology. Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), including the church, the school, the family, and the media, operate primarily through ideology, though they also use repression when necessary. The distinction matters because ISAs function with a degree of invisibility that RSAs cannot claim: they produce subjects who experience their subjection not as constraint but as identity. Education does not feel like ideological training; it feels like learning. Religious practice does not feel like the reproduction of social hierarchy; it feels like devotion.

The concept of interpellation is the pivot on which Althusser's theory of subject formation turns. In his famous illustration, Althusser describes a police officer calling out "Hey, you there!" in the street. When the person addressed turns around, the act of turning is the act of becoming a subject: of recognizing oneself as the one being hailed, of accepting the identity that the hailing imposes. This is not a process of conscious assent; it happens faster than deliberation, at the level of social reflex. The subject who turns is already constituted as a subject by the act of turning, already embedded in the ideological framework that makes the hailing intelligible.

The implications for colonial identity are substantial. Colonial ideology interpellates both the colonizer and the colonized into their respective subject positions: the colonizer as the bearer of civilization, order, and authority; the colonized as the object of those civilizing functions. For the individual colonial officer, interpellation means that the role of the imperial authority figure is not chosen but assigned, and assigned in a way that precedes and shapes every particular encounter. When the narrator of *Shooting an Elephant* faces the crowd, he is not choosing how to behave; he is discovering, under pressure, what the ideology that has produced him requires.

Althusser's insistence that ideology has no outside, that subjects are always already ideological subjects, has been critiqued on the grounds that it leaves no room for resistance or agency. Subsequent theorists, including Judith Butler (1997) in her reading of Althusser in *The Psychic Life of Power*, have pointed to the possibilities of performative failure, of citations of norms that deviate from their originals, as sites where the hold of ideology can be loosened. Butler's framework is relevant to the reading of Orwell, precisely because the narrator's moral discomfort represents a kind of subterranean resistance that the surface performance of colonial authority cannot fully suppress. The tension between the performance and the resistance is where the essay's most revealing analysis of colonial subjecthood occurs.

4. Methodology

The methodology of this paper is qualitative and interpretative. Close reading of *Shooting an Elephant* forms the primary analytical practice, attentive to the textual details of Orwell's prose: his choice of vocabulary, his narrative stance, the way he positions the essay's narrator in relation to the crowd and to the elephant. Close reading in this context is not an aesthetic exercise but a political one, aimed at identifying the moments where Orwell's text reveals the mechanisms of ideological production that its narrator is not always consciously analyzing.

Theoretical application involves bringing the conceptual vocabulary of Althusserian Marxism to bear on specific passages and narrative moments in the essay. The aim is not to impose a theoretical grid on the text but to use theory as a clarifying lens: to ask what Althusser's concepts reveal that a reading without those concepts would miss. Where Althusser's framework is supplemented by Said,

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Fanon, Foucault, or Butler, those supplements are introduced because they illuminate aspects of the text that Althusser alone does not fully address, particularly the racial and psychological dimensions of colonial subjecthood.

The interpretative approach acknowledges that literary texts are not transparent documents of social reality but complex, internally contested representations whose meanings are produced through the interaction of textual detail and analytical framework. Orwell's essay is not used here as sociological evidence about colonial Burma; it is read as a literary text that makes visible, through its narrative strategies and rhetorical choices, the ideological structures that produce the narrator's identity.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Colonial Ideology and the Production of the Subject

The narrator of *Shooting an Elephant* does not present himself as a committed imperialist. From the essay's opening sentences, he makes clear that he is divided: he hates imperialism intellectually, yet he enforces it practically. "I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British," he writes, and in the same paragraph acknowledges that he is himself one of those oppressors (Orwell 1936, p. 148). This self-description might suggest a subject with some degree of critical distance from the ideology he serves. Althusser's theory complicates this reading significantly.

For Althusser, the subject who recognizes an ideology as ideology and yet continues to act within its terms is not thereby free of that ideology. Ideology is not a cognitive error that can be corrected by intellectual awareness; it is a material practice embedded in institutions, habits, and social relationships that persist regardless of what any individual thinks about them. The narrator's awareness that he hates imperialism changes nothing about his structural position as a colonial officer: he still carries a rifle, he is still responsible for policing a population that has not invited his presence, and he is still accountable to the institutional apparatus of British Burma. His intellectual dissent is real, but it operates at the level of private consciousness while his public identity is produced by structures that are indifferent to private consciousness.

Althusser's concept of the ISA is directly applicable here. The colonial administration of Burma functions as a cluster of Ideological State Apparatuses, producing officers who embody the ideology of imperial authority not because they are individually committed to it but because the institutional structures within which they operate reproduce that ideology through daily practice. The narrator wears a uniform, carries a weapon, occupies a role defined by the colonial state, and is expected to behave in ways consistent with that role. His identity as an imperial officer is produced by these material conditions, not by his beliefs. As Althusser wrote in a formulation that is directly pertinent here, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1971, p. 162). The narrator's imaginary relationship to his conditions, his sense of himself as a reluctant enforcer rather than a true imperialist, is precisely the ideological form in which his real subjection to those conditions is lived.

5.2 Interpellation and the Hailing of the Imperial Officer

The mechanism of interpellation operates in *Shooting an Elephant* with unusual explicitness. Orwell describes the moment when he is summoned to deal with the elephant in terms that closely parallel Althusser's street scene: a call is issued by the institutional apparatus (reports from the Burmese sub-inspector, then from the Indian constable), the officer responds by going to the scene, and in responding he becomes, once again, the colonial authority figure that the apparatus requires. The hailing is not dramatic; it is routine. And it is precisely its routineness that gives it ideological force.

The crowd, however, produces a second and more psychologically powerful act of interpellation. When the narrator arrives on the scene with his rifle, he finds that two thousand Burmese have gathered. Their presence transforms the situation. The narrator describes what happens to him in terms that are almost clinical in their lucidity:

> *And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing*

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Volume 16, Issue 1 – 2026

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> *me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd, seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind me. (Orwell 1936, p. 152)*

This passage is among the most analyzed in the essay, but its Althusserian dimensions have not been fully drawn out. The narrator recognizes, in this moment of enforced clarity, that the role he is performing has been assigned to him by a collective social expectation that he did not author and cannot refuse. He is "the white man with his gun," a subject position whose content is determined by the colonial ideology that circulates between the British administration and the Burmese crowd. The crowd does not want the elephant shot because they have some rational preference; they want it shot because the presence of the armed white officer has generated an expectation of decisive colonial action, and that expectation is itself a product of colonial ideology. The narrator is interpellated into the role of decisive authority not by the administration alone but by the very population whose subjugation he is supposed to enforce.

Butler's extension of Althusser is illuminating at this point. Butler argues that interpellation is not a single decisive moment but an ongoing process of citation, of repeated performances of a norm that gradually consolidates the subject who performs it. The narrator of *Shooting an Elephant* has been performing colonial authority for years; the specific encounter with the elephant is the moment when the accumulated weight of those prior performances makes deviation impossible. He cannot refuse the crowd's expectation not because he lacks the physical capacity to walk away but because the identity that has been constituted through years of colonial performance has no other available form.

5.3 The Burmese Crowd as Ideological Force

One of the more counterintuitive aspects of an Althusserian reading of *Shooting an Elephant* is the role it assigns to the Burmese crowd. In most readings, the crowd is treated as a relatively passive element of the scene, a context for the narrator's moral crisis. In an Althusserian frame, the crowd is an active ideological force, not because its members have consciously designed to manipulate the narrator but because their collective expectations function as an ideological apparatus that produces the performance of colonial authority.

The crowd's power does not derive from any formal institutional status. It derives from the logic of the colonial encounter itself, which has assigned specific roles to both parties and created the conditions under which those roles are mutually enforcing. The Burmese expect the officer to act decisively because that is what the colonial system has taught them to expect; the officer acts decisively because failing to do so would rupture the performance of authority on which the whole colonial edifice depends. Neither party consciously maintains this logic; it maintains itself through their interaction.

Foucault's analysis of surveillance is a useful supplement here. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault described how the panopticon produces self-regulation in those who know themselves to be watched, regardless of whether anyone is actually watching at any given moment (Foucault 1977, p. 201). The narrator of *Shooting an Elephant* is watched, literally and continuously, by two thousand people. The effect is precisely what Foucault theorizes: self-regulation in conformity with the expectations that the watched subject has internalized. The narrator does not need to be coerced; he coerces himself, in the mode of performance, because the presence of the crowd has activated the ideological norms that define what colonial authority looks like.

Said's analysis of Orientalism adds a further dimension. The narrator's perception of the crowd is itself ideologically produced: he sees them as a mass, as a collective will, as "yellow faces" (Orwell 1936, p. 152), not as individuals with distinct identities and perspectives. This mode of perception is not an individual failure of imagination; it is the perceptual form that colonial ideology makes available. The Burmese appear to the narrator in the only forms that the colonial episteme allows: as subjects of administration, as audience for imperial performance, as a foreign presence that exerts pressure on his identity without being fully visible as human individuals. Said's point that Orientalism

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is a way of knowing the East that serves the interests of Western power by constructing the East as a homogeneous, manageable object (Said 1978, pp. 1-4) is enacted in miniature in Orwell's prose.

5.4 Performance of Authority and the Fear of Humiliation

The narrator is explicit about the psychological mechanism that ultimately drives him to shoot the elephant: he cannot bear the thought of appearing ridiculous. "For it is the condition of his rule," he writes of the white man in Asia generally, "that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives,' and so in every crisis he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him" (Orwell 1936, p. 152). The fear of humiliation is not a personal weakness but a structural requirement of colonial authority: an officer who appears uncertain or ineffective undermines not just his own position but the credibility of the entire imperial system.

Erving Goffman's sociology of self-presentation offers a useful secondary framework at this point. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) argued that social identity is performed in interaction, that individuals present versions of themselves to audiences and work to manage the impressions those audiences form. Colonial authority is a particularly high-stakes version of this performance: the officer must maintain a front of competence and decisiveness because the entire political order depends on the credibility of that front. Goffman's analysis of what happens when performance breaks down, when the front is compromised, is directly relevant to the narrator's situation: the consequence of appearing hesitant or weak in front of the crowd is not merely personal embarrassment but the symbolic collapse of imperial authority.

The connection between performance and ideology is where Althusser and Goffman converge. For Goffman, performance is a relatively flexible and strategic activity; individuals have some latitude to manage their self-presentation. Althusser, however, would argue that the ideological subject's performance is constrained in ways that Goffman's framework does not fully theorize: the colonial officer cannot simply choose a different performance because the available repertoire of performances has been defined in advance by the colonial ideology that produced him. He can perform colonial authority competently or incompetently, but he cannot perform something other than colonial authority without ceasing to occupy the subject position that gives him social intelligibility in this context.

The narrator's awareness of this constraint is expressed in one of the essay's most striking formulations. Reflecting on the moment when he decided to shoot, he writes: "I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle" (Orwell 1936, p. 152). The commitment was made not at the moment of pulling the trigger but at the earlier moment of sending for the rifle, an act that was itself a performance of colonial authority in response to a situation that the colonial system defined as requiring such a response. The ideology had already determined the outcome before the narrator was fully conscious of what was happening.

5.5 Moral Resistance and Its Limits

The narrator's moral discomfort runs through the entire essay, from his opening admission of divided loyalties to his final reflection that he shot the elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool" (Orwell 1936, p. 155). This discomfort matters, both to the narrator and to any reading of the essay. It suggests that interpellation is not total, that the subject retains some form of consciousness that resists the identity imposed on it. Butler's argument that the subject formed through subjection always carries within it a form of resistance, a trace of the process of its own production that can become the basis for critical reflection (Butler 1997, pp. 1-10), is relevant here.

Yet the resistance is also structurally contained. The narrator does not refuse to shoot the elephant; he shoots it while privately knowing he should not. His moral consciousness operates in a register that is entirely separate from his social performance. The ideology does not require his belief; it requires his behavior. And his behavior is determined not by his beliefs but by the social and institutional structures that have produced him as a colonial officer. Fanon's account of the colonial officer who experiences guilt without transforming that guilt into political action (Fanon 1952, pp. 17-40) is instructive: guilt, without structural change, is simply the affective residue of ideological subjection, an internal drama that leaves the external performance intact.

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The final lines of the essay are revealing. The narrator reports that he was "glad that the coolie had been killed" because the elephant's death, which had become legally complicated, needed moral justification, and the human death provided it (Orwell 1936, p. 155). This conclusion is morally shocking, and it is meant to be. But its most important function is analytical: it shows a narrator who has so thoroughly inhabited the logic of colonial self-justification that a human death becomes instrumentalized in the service of his own moral accounting. The ideology has not merely shaped his behavior; it has shaped his moral reasoning, the categories through which he evaluates what matters and what does not.

5.6 Identity as Socially Constructed and Performed

The cumulative argument of the analysis is that identity in *Shooting an Elephant* is shown to be socially constructed at every level. The narrator has no authentic self that exists prior to or outside the colonial structures that have produced him: his perception, his moral reasoning, his fear, his performance, and even his private resistance are all shaped by the ideology that interpellates him. This does not mean that he has no inner life; it means that his inner life is itself a product of the social and ideological conditions in which he exists.

The essay is structured as a retrospective account, written some years after the events it describes. This retrospective frame is significant: the narrator has the distance to analyze what happened to him, to name the mechanism of interpellation explicitly, to understand that he was a puppet pushed by forces he did not control. But this critical consciousness, developed after the fact, does not retroactively restore the agency he lacked in the moment. It is precisely Althusser's point that ideological subjecthood is not dissolved by intellectual awareness of it; the conditions of production continue to operate regardless of whether the subject understands them.

What Orwell's essay ultimately reveals, through the specific case of the colonial officer, is something about identity formation in general. The colonial setting is extreme, but the structure it exposes, the gap between the subject as socially constituted and the subject as privately experienced, is not unique to colonialism. Althusser's theory claims universal applicability: all social subjects are produced through ideological interpellation, and the experience of freely chosen identity is itself one of the primary effects of that production. *Shooting an Elephant* is a literary text in which this process has become visible, not because Orwell designed it as an Althusserian allegory, but because the particular pressures of the colonial encounter stripped away the usual invisibility of the mechanism and forced the narrator to observe himself being produced.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Shooting an Elephant* is most productively read not as a simple confession of colonial guilt but as a text that makes visible the production of colonial subjecthood through ideological interpellation. The narrator's identity as an imperial officer is not chosen or freely maintained; it is produced by the colonial administration as an Ideological State Apparatus, reinforced by the performative pressure of the Burmese crowd, and held in place by the logic of a colonial encounter that assigns roles to both parties and penalizes deviation.

Althusser's theoretical vocabulary has allowed the analysis to move beyond the level of the narrator's stated attitudes and intentions to the deeper structural mechanisms that determine his behavior. The distinction between what the narrator believes and what he does, which the essay itself foregrounds, is precisely the distinction between private consciousness and ideological subjection that Althusser theorizes. The narrator's moral resistance is real, but it is contained by the ideological structures that have produced him: it operates as private experience while his public identity continues to perform its colonial function.

The supplementary frameworks of Said, Fanon, Foucault, and Butler have sharpened specific aspects of this analysis. Said's account of Orientalism explains the perceptual structure through which the narrator apprehends the Burmese crowd; Fanon's psychology of colonial subjecthood illuminates the psychic costs borne by both colonizer and colonized; Foucault's analysis of surveillance theorizes the panoptic pressure of the crowd's gaze; Butler's reading of interpellation as a repeated performative process explains why the narrator cannot simply opt out of the role he has been assigned.

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The broader significance of this reading extends beyond the specific context of colonial Burma. *Shooting an Elephant* is a text that, read through Althusser, reveals something about the general conditions of social identity: that the experience of autonomous selfhood is always, to some degree, an ideological effect, produced by the structures that assign us our social roles and invest those roles with the force of apparent necessity. Orwell's narrator shoots the elephant because he cannot do otherwise, not because he lacks the physical ability to walk away, but because the identity available to him within the colonial system does not include the option of refusal. Societies produce the subjects they need, and the subjects they produce perform the roles they have been given, often, as Orwell's essay makes painfully clear, while knowing exactly what they are doing and why it is wrong.

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