



**Memsahibs and *Bo-kadaws*:
Representations of Feminine Imperial
Authority in *Burmese Days***

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Orwell's *Burmese Days* is widely accepted as a comment on British imperialism in issues of race, class, and even gender. Scholars such as Daphne Patai emphasize the submissive role the few female characters of the novel; she suggests that Orwell's female characters are muted – unable to speak for themselves, their voices and language controlled by a dominant force (44). Historically and in Orwell's novel, however, the women who occupied this world of imperialism discovered through their positions a powerful new authority over men. The women of *Burmese Days* – both British and native – exercise an authority over the novel's men that is often overlooked or misinterpreted. Due in part to the unique circumstances of the empire and its effect on the men who work within it, women gained power and authority over men, a social and sexual reversal that is exhibited most effectively in the novel by Elizabeth Lackersteen and Ma Hla May.

The unique structure of Imperial culture created for women a new social space in which they could assert their value, authority, and domestic roles. Both Englishwomen and native women of the

empire gained a certain level of control over men, utilizing their power to support imperialism or threaten to subvert it. According to Rosemary Marangoly George, Englishwomen not only wielded power in the empire, but contributed to Western feminism through their contributions to domestic imperialism:

Hence, one could argue that given the value placed upon their contributions to the imperial cause, the Englishwomen in the colonies were further along the route to 'full individualism' than women back home – even those struggling to win the right to vote. (101)

In the empire, George says, Englishwomen became more significant, their work carried more value, and they were able to traverse previously prohibited social spheres. Because they were no longer surrounded by Western ideologies, men looked to Englishwomen as representations of British culture, turning them into valuable national subjects (99). In addition, the empire offered a new social sphere for women, one of "public domesticity" that allowed women to move within the masculine public life as well as contribute domestic skills (100). And, of course, women retained their role as homemakers, but in the empire this meant establishing and maintaining imperial control over the household. According to George, an Englishwoman's "...triumph [was] to replicate the empire on a domestic scale" (108). This meant caring for, disciplining, and controlling the native help. Women therefore assumed authority over the domestic space as well as the people who work within it, utilizing a microcosm of imperial power to maintain her authority. We will see both Mrs. Lackersteen and Elizabeth exert this kind of authority in

Orwell's novel.

Native women also held a level of power within the empire, though this power manifested itself mainly in threats against European imperialism. Nalin Jayasena examines the regulation of sex and colonial authority, conjecturing that the frequent sexual relations between native women and British men posed a distinct threat to imperialism and colonial authority (117). Jayasena first describes the repressive sexual state of affairs in England that caused the colonies to become "an alternative site of sexual permissibility" (116):

The injunctions against homosexuality, especially the crackdown on London's boy brothels in 1837, the criminalization of homosexuality in the later part of the century, and the Purity Campaign of the 1870s that suspended the regulation of prostitution in England all contributed to an increased pathologization of sexuality (ibid).

He goes on to explain that obstacles that impeded British soldiers from marrying – low pay, the need to obtain permission – further encouraged concubinage (116). However, in Burma particularly English authorities worried about the influence Burmese mistresses could have on Englishmen. Jayasena notes the moral conundrum this presented for British authorities:

Using suspicious logic, they felt that marriage allowed the Burmese women greater ability to compromise her husband, since once married she was under no restraint. One assumes that a concubine, unlike a wife, could be dismissed far more easily. Racial

stereotypes about the colonized played a role in these assumptions as well, as some Burmese women...were considered 'ungovernable.' (118)

Made more anxious by the possibility – and soon reality – that enchanted British officers marry their native mistresses, British authorities issued the Crewe Circular of 1909 that dictated the government's objections to concubinage and the impediment it presented to the work of imperialism (119). This information does not prove that native mistresses actually wielded any real power or influence over their English lovers, however the fact that the British government feared these women gave them power. And in *Burmese Days* Orwell shows us that regardless of whether an Englishman is emotionally influenced by his native mistress, her mere existence poses a threat to his imperial authority.

Maxwell, a minor character in the novel, experiences firsthand the danger of keeping a native mistress. In one of his characteristic racist rages, Ellis reveals that Maxwell "spends his time running after Eurasian tarts" (Orwell 25). Rumor says Maxwell was involved with a woman in Mandalay and, Ellis claims, "[would have] gone and married her" if he hadn't been transferred (ibid). According to Bush, Maxwell's transfer is significant: Mandalay is associated with development and modernity in the novel, and Kyauktata with "inconsolable isolation" (121). Maxwell's transfer was obviously a means of deterring his affair with a native woman, whose influence over Maxwell as a British man and imperial authority was feared by his superiors.

In addition to the social and sexual conditions that contributed to women's

authority and power in the colonies of British empire, there was a third contributing factor – the transformations undergone by imperial masculinity created a race of men so desperate and pathetic they bow to a woman’s power. After the First World War, Barbara Bush says, “the ultra-masculine ethos of the Colonial Service was tempered as the brave ‘frontier days’ of the imperial ‘hero’ (often from a military background) gave way to bureaucratic consolidation and development of the colonial infrastructure” (84).

More middle class, less educated men were joining ranks, and many of those already enlisted were now married (*ibid*). Bush cites pro-imperialists of the 1920s who claimed the post-war generation was unadventurous and unpatriotic, selfish and materialistic. And those who had served in the war were now restless and aimless, therefore unfit for imperial duty (84). Bush notes that this shift in masculinity was reflected in the literature of the period by authors such as Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, and Orwell through the trope of the colonial anti-hero, men who, “like lower-class men, lacked imperial masculine virtues and were simultaneously weak, pathetic, neurotic, insecure, brutal, and womanizing” (*ibid*).

We find these qualities in Orwell’s John Flory. Exploring the concept of manliness manifested in Orwell’s fictional colonial world, Patai notes in his male characters a “preoccupation with their own status as males” (26). One way this fixation manifests itself is through a longing for what she calls “that archetypal rite of manhood:” war (*ibid*). Throughout the novel Flory’s companions lament the end of the war, yearn verbally for a native rebellion to squash, and display a gleeful eagerness for violent retaliation when the natives seem to present a threat. Flory,

however, does not share this craving for violence: in dispersing an angry mob of natives he instructs the police to fire above the crowd, and he dodged military service at the outbreak of the war. Patai also addresses Flory’s insecurity:

Flory’s failure as a man is reiterated throughout the novel. He gives vent to both his loneliness and his hatred of imperialism, only to turn these into an attack on himself...”
(27)

Flory’s separateness from the rest of the Englishmen of the novel is acknowledged by them all as a failure of masculinity, and this is the most important fact of the novel according to Patai. In the “chummy masculinity” of the club, Flory is ostracized supposedly for his politics – he is referred to as a “Bolshie” on several occasions (Patai 26, Orwell 26). But what the Englishmen are actually reacting to is Flory’s friendship with a Burmese native, Dr. Veraswami. By befriending a native and showing appreciation for local culture, Flory has destabilized the boundaries between the Englishmen and the inferior Burmese. He has also emasculated himself, for the Burmese were traditionally associated with femininity and compared to women (Patai 24-25). Combining the two thoughts, Patai summarizes:

The breakdown of racial and cultural segregation implies the breakdown of that more fundamental identity established by gender. Flory has become less than a man, and this is a judgment he makes of himself as well...” (33)

Though in Flory’s mind his manhood is compromised by his inability to act on his

beliefs as his racist peers are able to do, the conclusion is the same: Flory is less than a man, and no one disputes this fact (ibid).

Flory's lack of manhood is in part why the women of the novel are able to wield power over him. We see this also in Mr. Lackersteen, a married man who fits Bush's description of post-war deteriorating masculinity: Lackersteen is purposeless and restless. His sole ambition is "having what he [calls] 'a good time'" (Orwell 21). This goal consists of getting drunk and engaging in prostitution; in the midst of one of these good times he is described as being "supported on either side by a naked Burmese girl, while a third up-ended a whiskey bottle into his mouth" (Orwell 21). As a result, he is governed tirelessly by his wife, who "never [lets] him out of her sight for more than an hour or two" (ibid). In keeping this strict vigilance over her husband, we see Mrs. Lackersteen fulfilling her powerful role in the empire as preserver of British culture and morals:

In *Burmese Days*, the white woman's burden is to represent the English nation in a non-English space, and to enable and guide dissolute Englishmen in distant corners of the empire. (Jayasena 133)

Lackersteen's lack of masculinity, like Flory, makes him unable to resist the power his wife wields over him. In direct opposition to this condition is Verrall, a satirical character whose very name implies masculinity, being a pun on virile and feral (Patai 24). Verrall is snobbish, flighty, and cares only for riding horses and keeping physically fit. And yet Flory envies and admires him, and openly admits him to be "the better man" (Orwell 226). This masculinity enables him to escape the power

of the women of empire, who Verrall calls "a kind of siren whose one aim was to lure men away...and enmesh them in tea-fights and tennis-parties" (204). Though he occasionally succumbs to the charms of a woman, he abhors them, and is "too callous when the pinch came to have any difficulty about escaping" (ibid). Thus when he chooses to leave Kyauktada he is able to simply jump on a train, leaving behind Elizabeth with her broken expectations and grass-wallahs with their outstanding debts against him. Orwell's narration coolly ponders the purpose of Verrall's quick getaway:

Whether Verrall had started the train early to escape Elizabeth, or to escape the grass-wallahs, was an interesting question that was never cleared up. (268)

Either way, what is clear is that Verrall escapes the moral and emotional control of the women of the empire.

But Elizabeth's lack of control over Verrall is due to the strength and impenetrability of his masculinity, not a lack of her own power in the Burmese empire. It is significant that even before she exercises feminine control over Flory she exerts a strength and competence that grants her power in a masculine sphere. Elizabeth's excitement about and skill in hunting distinguishes her not necessarily from historical imperial womanhood, but from the kind displayed in Orwell's narrative. Historically, hunting was another form of masculine power with which imperial women exercised their control:

The gun, used for hunting and 'self-defence', and symbolic of superior imperial masculinities, became a powerful motif of emancipated imperial

womanhood, enhancing white women's 'fitness to rule' over defenceless, colonized women and 'unmanly' men. (Bush 94)

This explanation is especially significant given Elizabeth's relationship to the gun she wields on her hunting expedition with Flory:

Elizabeth was nursing her uncle's gun across her knees. Flory had offered to take it, but she had refused; in reality, the feel of it delighted her so much that she could not bring herself to give it up. She had never had a gun in her hand until to-day. (158)

We learn immediately after meeting Elizabeth that she is poor, an orphan, and "[dreads] spinsterhood" (Orwell 94). In Europe she would be just another poor, unmarried woman, driven to work for a living or starve, as Mrs. Lackersteen vocalizes to Elizabeth:

She went on to tell Elizabeth about a letter she had had from home with further news of that poor, *poor* dear girl who was out in Burma for a while and had so foolishly neglected to get married...It appeared that the poor, poor dear girl had lost her job and been practically *starving* for a long time, and now she had actually had to take a job as a common kitchen maid...And it seemed that the black beetles in the kitchen were simply beyond belief! (228)

In Burma, however, Mrs. Lackersteen tells Elizabeth via a letter, "She [a young girl] finds herself quite a *queen* in the local society" (95). And though Patai claims Elizabeth's desperate motives are transparent to the men

of Kyauktada, citing Ellis's exclamation that Elizabeth is in Burma "to lay her claws in a husband," Bush's argument seems more logical: as the only marriageable Englishwoman in town, Elizabeth's esteem carries value, and Ellis is bitter and jealous that she has bestowed it on Flory (Orwell 110, Bush 135).

Returning to our hunting metaphor, Elizabeth's gun is a symbol of the exhilarating new sexual power she obtains on moving to Burma. According to Bush, "the narrative represents shooting as an erotic exercise that excites Elizabeth more than ever" (135). At first she is too excited and nervous to make much progress, but her natural skill soon prevails, and she successfully brings down, significantly, an imperial pigeon. The height of her power, Bush says, comes when she helps kill a wounded leopard. With this act, she says, Elizabeth establishes her authority in the empire:

By performing well above expectations during the hunt, Elizabeth demonstrates that she is interested in being equal partners not only in the public sphere but also in a domestic arrangement. (136)

Elizabeth's imperial power, therefore, takes time for her to develop consciously. Once she does, however, she uses it to control Flory, dictating their level of intimacy based on the quality of his actions.

Before she is even conscious of her power, however, its effect has already sparked a change in Flory. The very night following his initial meeting with Elizabeth, Flory has his hair cut and begins shaving twice a day (something he hasn't done in years); and within two weeks he has dismissed Ma Hla May. Flory's servant summarizes the

remaining changes in his habits:

'I have been watching him...these ten days past. He has cut down his cigarettes to fifteen a day, he has stopped drinking gin before breakfast, he shaves himself every evening...And he has ordered half a dozen new silk shirts!' (Orwell 114-5)

In addition, the servant Ko S'la notes, Flory has been going to church, all sure signs that he is under the power of an Englishwoman. These marked changes signify Elizabeth's moralizing English influence – her mere presence reminds Flory of the ideologies of British domestic life. In order to win her favor, he must renounce the imperial bachelor lifestyle he has been leading and conform to the standard role of a British gentleman.

This renunciation of imperial bachelorhood is significant because Elizabeth dictates the bounds of their relationship based on the success of Flory's conformation. When he fails to fulfill the role of a traditional English suitor Elizabeth simply and coldly denies any emotional ties between them. She controls their interactions, refusing any attempt at intimacy on his part and allowing only polite parlor-room chatter to pass between them. Elizabeth first restricts her interactions with Flory after she discovers that he has been keeping a Burmese mistress. She does not confront him or even acknowledge a change in their relationship; instead, she ignores him, deliberately walking past him as he calls cheerily to her on the street, totally unaware of the shift that has occurred. Later, at the club, Flory is able to confront Elizabeth by physically trapping her in a doorway. The confrontation plays out thus:

'...Whatever I've done to offend you – please tell me what it is. Tell me

and let me put it right...'

'I really don't know what you're talking about. Tell you how you've offended me?' Why should you have *offended* me? (193)

The conversation persists in a similar manner, with Flory pleading for an explanation to Elizabeth's cold behavior and Elizabeth stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that her behavior toward him has altered. Flory soon realizes that she "was going to leave him in the dark – snub him and then pretend that nothing had happened....," and in his desperation he provokes Elizabeth into utilizing the extent of her merciless power (194):

'Please tell me. I can't let everything end between us like this.'

"End between us?' There was nothing to end,' she said coldly. (ibid)

Elizabeth is in total control of the relationship, shifting it from a romantic attachment to a mere acquaintanceship in the course of a single night. Any attempt Flory makes to bring up their previous relationship – such as mentioning the kiss they shared – is declared "absolutely caddish" of him (Orwell 193). And though Elizabeth does explain to Flory why she has limited their relationship, he lacks the power to exact any change himself. He does not even try to influence her decision to extend the relationship again by offering a defense. He claims that to deny the charges against him – that he was keeping a Burmese mistress at the same time he was courting Elizabeth – would be useless despite the fact that "it was not even true" (195). Flory does later write a letter to Elizabeth citing only his undying love for her, which she pointedly

ignores. As predicted, she is not influenced by his emotions or desires when wielding her control over him. The dynamic between the two clearly indicates that Elizabeth holds all the power in the relationship and dictates its terms without so much as considering (or even informing) Flory.

After Elizabeth nullifies their relationship Flory retreats into the jungle for a period of time. The only interaction they have is in the form of the letter that she does not respond to. When Flory returns to town he visits Elizabeth on the pretext of bringing her the leopard skin he had cured for her. In their exchange, which takes place in the most traditional, civilized of British spaces – the drawing room – Elizabeth again directs the tone of the conversation: “You *have* been away a long time, Mr. Flory! You’re quite a *stranger!* We’ve so missed you at the Club! etc., etc.” (218). Flory’s internal narrative exhibits an unsatisfied helplessness about the situation:

For three minutes they actually talked of the weather. He was helpless. All that he had promised himself to say, all his arguments and pleadings, had withered in his throat. ‘You fool, you fool,’ he thought, ‘what are you doing? Did you come twenty miles for this? Go on, say what you came to say! Seize her in your arms; make her listen, kick her, beat her – anything sooner than let her choke you with this drivel!’ But it was hopeless, hopeless. Not a word could his tongue utter except futile trivialities. (Orwell 219)

What is interesting to note here and elsewhere in the text is the submissive language Flory employs to describe his

relationship with Elizabeth. Here Flory describes letting Elizabeth drown him in small talk. Later, when she has forgiven him for his imperial indiscretion, she lets him take her arm and then her hand and “yield[s]” to his kiss – Flory describes her manner as “gentle, even submissive” (Orwell 259, 258). This language indicates not only that Elizabeth is in charge even when she appears to be merely reacting to Flory’s romantic aggression, but also that this air of deference is uncommon in their relationship.

This is evident in Flory and Elizabeth’s final scene together, which is a horrible subversion of the scene of forgiveness described above. This confrontation follows Ma Hla May’s public humiliation of Flory in church. Flory follows Elizabeth out and takes her arm as before, but this time Elizabeth is violently assertive; she cries out for him to release her, and the two physically struggle before Flory finally relinquishes his physical hold. However, he again attempts to assert the romantic nature of their relationship after she has decided to erase it:

‘...do listen to me, please! Answer me this one thing. After what’s happened, can you ever forgive me?’

‘Forgive you? What do you mean, *forgive* you?...I really don’t know what you’re talking about...What has it got to do with *me*? I thought it was very disgusting, but it’s not *my* business. I can’t think why you’re questioning me like this at all.’ (Orwell 275)

Again Elizabeth has chosen to deny any previous relationship with Flory; she denies that they expected at one point to wed and refuses to discuss the relationship. Flory pleads once more to be treated as the lover

he once was to her and begs her to take time, "...a month, a year, five years....," to reconsider her stance on their relationship (277). It is obvious that she is in total control of their connection, and Flory realizes that she "[doesn't] seem to know or care how much [she makes Flory] suffer" as a result of excluding him from her decision (276).

Elizabeth subjects Flory to this roller coaster of emotional turmoil because she acknowledges that her role as a Britishwoman in the colonies affords her the power and responsibility of establishing a domestic version of England in her home. Flory, however, has been disgraced and degraded to a status "less than a man" in allowing his former imperial bachelorhood to infiltrate the sphere of public domesticity that is the church. Elizabeth therefore relinquishes her conscious control over Flory and rejects any mention of their previous claims on each other. When the narrative ends she has married Mr. Macgregor because he "is not to be despised" (287). She exerts her control over him, it seems, as the text tells us that since their marriage he has become more likable. Elizabeth, meanwhile, has fulfilled the role and taken on the responsibilities of a woman in colonial Burma that George describes. She has established her little England in her home, exerting her imperial power over her husband and taking her place in the sphere of public domesticity:

Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese. She has an exhaustive knowledge of the Civil List, gives charming little dinner-parties and knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their places.... (ibid)

Elizabeth's power afforded her the ability to seek out and mold an imperial bachelor into a

proper British husband, and establish herself as a feminine agent of England in Burma and imperial authority in her home.

Flory is also under the power of a second imperial woman, his former mistress Ma Hla May. May's imperial power, as indicated above, is largely due to her threatening sexual power. Specifically, May yields power over Flory because of the imperial guilt he feels for their relationship. These uniquely imperial circumstances all grant May a significant amount of power over Flory that she uses to threaten Flory's own weak imperial authority. Scholars like Patai claim May has no real power or voice, citing as evidence the fact that May's threatening actions are perpetrated by another man, U Po Kyin – a corrupt Burmese official bent on destroying Flory because of his friendship with Kyin's rival Dr. Veraswami. I would like to refute this claim. Though the text makes explicit that Kyin coaches May and is responsible for her attacks on Flory, he does not give her power. Through her relationship with Flory May gains imperial power over him; as Jayasena proves, May's position as the native mistress of an Englishman grants her a threatening power whether or not she utilizes it. Kyin shows May how to effectively use her power to threaten Flory and his imperial world, but is not the source of her power.

Flory is aware of the dangerous power May could wield against him as his native mistress. As such, he has set a number of guidelines designed to limit her power. Returning to the dilemma of the status of concubines and wives, Flory tries to keep May firmly in the category of concubine (Jayasena 124). He requires her to remove her sandals in his presence, a condition Jayasena says forces her to show him a master's respect (ibid). He allows her "as a special privilege" to take tea with him, but not dinner (Orwell 52).

This prerequisite is meant to separate her from a wife, according to Jayasena (124). Jayasena states that Flory's fear of May reflects the British government's fear of all native women in imperial colonies:

Flory's anxiety about maintaining rigid boundaries reflects the anxiety of the colonial government that hierarchized the Burmese woman according to the degree of threat she posed to imperial authority. (ibid)

All of Flory's careful rules are useless, however. These restrictions do not limit May's influence over her master, not even in her own mind. The gifts and money he gives her have sparked in her a sense of entitlement:

It was the idle concubine's life that she loved, and the visits to her village dressed in all her finery, when she could boast of her position as a 'bo-kadaw' – a white man's wife; for she had persuaded everyone, herself included, that she was Flory's legal wife. (Orwell 54)

Flory is unable to limit May's influence and power over him partially because he himself creates it through the guilt created by her mere presence in his life; this is a feeling May is aware of in her master and exploits to obtain what she wants of him. According to Jayasena, Flory's guilt stems from his realization of "his complicity in colonizing the bodies of Burmese women. Flory is not unaware of how his relations with May turn him into a typical Anglo-Indian male" (125). Hence immediately after sex Flory wants May gone, and finds her "nauseating and dreadful" (Orwell 54). When he dismisses her from his home, he is more ashamed than she is. And May, aware of her master's guilt, uses it to

extract money from him. Before she threatens his own power in the imperial system, she uses her own in an effort to win her position in his house back. She comes to his home looking pitiful and degrades herself at his feet, begging to return. Flory's reaction is disgust not for her, but for the baseness of the position he has put her in:

She heard finality in his tone, and uttered a harsh, ugly cry. She bent forward again in a shiko, beating her forehead against the floor. It was dreadful. And what was more dreadful than all, what hurt him in his breast, was the utter gracelessness, the lowness of the emotion beneath these entreaties. (156)

Flory explains that her passion and debasement at his feet was all for the position and the finery of her life with him, which he says hurts him most. This is because it is an indication of the sorry position she is now in, which she details to him in her plea. She will never marry and will be driven to manual labor in the village she once lived, where she is disgraced as a white man's castaway. And though this is the state of her situation, her debasing plea and outpouring of emotion seems to be a ruse to trigger Flory's white guilt. Once he gives May fifty rupees, her disposition alters drastically and immediately:

Her tears had ceased flowing quite suddenly. Without speaking she went into the bathroom for a moment, and came out with her face washed to its natural brown, and her hair and dress rearranged. She looked sullen, but not hysterical any longer. (157)

May is exacerbating her pitiable state and emphasizing Flory's complicity in it to exploit

his feelings of guilt at his imperial authority over her as a native. Though at the moment she seems dominant over him, in reality she is playing on his emotions and position as her guilty lover in order to extract money from him; she is vaguely aware of the power her new position as the jilted mistress of an imperial authority has gained her, but she is not yet ready to fully exploit it.

But when her plea to regain her beloved status as a mistress in imperial culture is rebuffed, May utilizes the power Flory attempted in vain to deny her of to threaten his imperial authority. May's power resides in her mere existence as Flory's native lover, but also in her ability to deny him what Elizabeth can offer him: honor and power among British imperial authority. In their first confrontation in which May plays aggressor, she releases only the threat of her power. After sending a "vaguely menacing" letter, May hides in the bushes around the clubhouse and ambushes Flory as he makes his way home (Orwell 128). She demands more money, though he has already compensated her. At first, as with Elizabeth, Flory is unaware of the shifting dynamic of the relationship and believes he still holds the power as white imperialist. May contradicts him quickly by indicating how easily she could rob him of this authority:

To his alarm she began shrieking '*Pike-san pay-like!*' and a number of similar phrases almost at the top of her voice. She seemed on the verge of hysterics. The volume of noise that she produced was startling.

'Be quiet! They'll hear you in the Club!' he exclaimed, and was instantly sorry for putting the idea in her head.

'Aha! Now I know what will frighten you!' (Orwell 197)

In this exchange both May and Flory have acknowledged the shift in power that has occurred. May now has only to make a scene in some public sphere of British authority in order to rob him of his status among his peers. For though Flory is already alienated from the men of the Club for his association with native men, his inability to control a native woman and the open acknowledgement of their relationship in a British public sphere would degrade him completely within his society of British oppressors.

This fact is painfully exhibited in May's very public display of her threatening sexual power over Flory. May enters the church full of mostly white Englishmen and women, screaming at Flory to give her the money he had promised her the night she ambushed him. She distinguishes him by name and appearance, and Flory is horrified at the idea that Elizabeth and all the congregation will know that May had been his mistress. But there is no hope for Flory, as May "[yells] out a detailed account of what Flory had done to her" (Orwell 273):

'Look at me, you white men, and you women, too, look at me! Look how he has ruined me! Look at these rags I am wearing! And he sitting there, the liar, the coward, pretending not to see me! He would let me starve at his gate like a pariah dog. Ah, but I will shame you! Turn round and look at me! Look at this body that you have kissed a thousand times - look - look - ' (ibid)

Elizabeth calls Flory disgraced as a result of this scene, and so he is. Flory notices in the church that even drunken, vile Ellis looks



disgusted at what he has witnessed, and Flory thinks bitterly, "There would be something to talk about at the Club to-night!" (274). The British government and Flory himself had worried about the level of influence contented Burmese mistresses wielded over their lovers, but neither predicted the destructive power of a dismissed native woman. In publicly revealing the intimate details of their relationship and openly claiming him as her lover, May has robbed Flory of his imperial authority to dictate her status in his life as well as his authority as a respected source of imperial power.

Orwell's *Burmese Days* exhibits a gender power structure unique to the imperial colonies of Britain. Due in part to the deteriorating masculinity of imperial Englishmen and the new roles and responsibilities that imperialism opened up for women of both British and native descent women of the colonies wielded a distinct power over Englishmen. This is represented in Orwell's text through Elizabeth and May, women who utilize their power over Flory to obtain their ultimate desires. Elizabeth, an imperial Englishwoman, longs for a husband and a place in the public domestic sphere, and so she utilizes her power in an attempt to mold Flory from an imperial bachelor into a traditional British suitor and husband. Contrastingly, May, the native mistress, desires only money and the security of her status as Flory's mistress, and she uses her power over him to exploit his imperial guilt and the shaming nature of their relationship, and subvert his imperial authority. And though neither women achieve a direct victory – Elizabeth fails with Flory, but finds success with another man, and May succeeds in destroying Flory, but loses her status and her chance at further exploitation with his death – a woman (especially a native one) wielding

power over a man in imperial Burma is a triumph of gender and an expression of Orwell's feminist tendencies.

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