Секция «Англоговорящий мир и Восток: лингвокультурный аспект»

# British Imperialism through the prism of «Shooting an Elephant» by G.Orwell

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The term “imperialism” was first mentioned in the English literature in 1851 in the article “France after 1848”, where the anonymous author attributes such features as the loss of principles of civil liberty, militarism, and despotism [4]. But at that time, it was only about France, which was gaining power, and its domestic policy. Only in the 1860s did the term “imperialism” begin to be used in relation to foreign policy.

The first author to use the word “imperialism” in the context of England was considered to be Charles Dilke, who wrote “Greater Britain” in 1868. The book, written in the genre of a travelogue, vividly conveys the full extent of despotism: “The English everywhere attempt to introduce civilization, or to modify that which exists, in a rough-and-ready manner which invariably ends in failure or in the destruction of the native race.”[1] This work is notable for containing a chapter entirely devoted to India, where the author puts forward the concept of the superiority of the “Anglo-Saxon race” over the locals. Drawing on Darwin’s Origin of Species, Dilke takes the idea of natural selection and places it in a socio-historical context: “... the Indian is mentally, morally, and physically inferior to the white man...” [1] Today, such ideas seem very racist and wrong, but at the time of active colonial policy, they were a good help for the colonization of “weaker” peoples who needed colonization: Dilke shows that the English helped weak races grow up to English political institutions. And such a concept seems to drive progress.

The essay “Shooting an Elephant”, written by G. Orwell and published in 1936, clearly answers the question of how a person who has found themselves “locked” in the cage of imperialism feels. In his characteristic manner (Orwell uses a whole range of allegories, metaphors, comparisons) the author conveys the problem of British imperialism. And, unlike “Animal Farm” or “1984”, where the problem is not stated so directly, in “Shooting an Elephant”, Orwell surpasses himself. From the first pages, the reader is introduced to the context: we learn what the setting for the unfolding events is, the position of the main character, on whose behalf the story is told, and the attitude of the local population towards him. And the main character himself is full of reflections on his attitude towards imperialism: “For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing ...”[3], “I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British”. The narrator’s internal conflict is noticeable from the first pages: as a police officer, he sides with the citizens, not the state.

The essay centers on the event when the narrator was forced to kill an elephant that had escaped from its chain at night and was causing mayhem in the market. The narrator himself presents this event as “enlightening”, “a better glimpse ... of the real nature of imperialism” [3].

The protagonist emphasizes that he did not intend to kill the elephant, and even took an unsuitable weapon for this - an old 44 Winchester, which could only scare the elephant with its sound, but in no way kill it. As events unfold, he states many times: “... I ought not to shoot him”[3], “I did not want to shoot him”, etc. [3]

The elephant in the essay is an allegory of colonial pressure and the power of the British Empire, and it is interesting that the narrator refers to the elephant as a person, not an animal:

throughout the story he calls it “he”, “him”, but not “it”. The mad elephant is a symbol of the powerful British Empire. When the elephant raids the bazaar, he symbolizes the British invasion of Burma. Killing the coolie represents the fact that the British have suppressed the natives. The essay reveals the side of imperialism that affects the local population of India where elephants have been considered sacred animals since ancient times. This shows the complete loss of national self-awareness.

Despite the obvious reluctance to kill the elephant, the narrator still shoots it. Under the burden of the system (and in this case, the burden on the local population, which needed to demonstrate strength), a person can sacrifice his principles and desires, go against them. The crowd is expecting a spectacle, and the narrator feels morally obliged to satisfy their desires: “... I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool”. [3]

In addition, the narrator’s emotions play an important role: he is depressed, insecure and suffering from what is happening. He understands that he cannot go against the people, because he "was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind"[3]. And then he realized the futile and meaningless nature of the white man in the East: “... 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”[3]. The author leads readers to a simple but very logical thought: any colonial policy comes down to the desire not to become a laughing stock in the eyes of local residents. And the colonizers will do everything possible to maintain the image of despotic rulers when their real power has long been out of their hands.

With the killing of the elephant, much changed in the narrator’s soul: he realized that colonialism always comes with conflicts of power, responsibility and individual choice. A person ceases to be an individual, but becomes only a stupid puppet in the hands of an entire system, forced to act under the burden of social pressure, without any attempts to express protest.

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