
FUNCTIONAL ROLE OF THE CHARACTER OF U PO KYIN IN “BURMESE DAYS” BY GEORGE ORWELL

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Abstract

To highlight and explain the details about a character in a story, the literary device of characterization is used in different manners. An author can use direct or explicit characterization or indirect or implicit characterization. In *Burmese Days*, U Po Kin's schemes and plots drive the narrative in the novel as he has the extreme desire to join the European club as the first member from the local community. This paper aims to analyze the functional role of this character in the novel and the circumstances which help him to achieve his objective of securing a status amongst the Europeans. This analysis is done with relevance to the Marxist philosophy of character, according to which people adopt and personify, or personally represent a certain function, role or behaviour pattern which is required of them to serve their obligations. Their consent to the applicable rules is assumed, as a necessity to succeed in the activities. They have to act a certain way, and others have to conform to them, whether they like it or not. The results of the analysis show that in *Burmese Days*, George Orwell has used the character of U PO Kyin to indirectly criticize the British Imperialism. The character is also a criticism on his English superiors because they are deceived in judging his character. The paper concludes that this character functions as a representation of a thoroughly corrupt imperial system where capabilities are relegated to insignificance, and dishonesties and corruption are encouraged.

Keywords: Functional Role, Characterization, Novel Character, U Po Kyin, *Burmese Days*

Introduction

As a literary device, characterization is the step-by-step use of details about a character in a piece of literature. The author highlights and explains the details about a character in three stages. In the initial stage, the character is introduced with prominent emergence but later the author highlights its behavior and thought-processes as the story proceeds. In the next stage, the character expresses his opinions and ideas, through getting into

conversations with other characters. At the final stage, response of the other characters in the story to the personality of the character is mentioned (Eisinger, 1967; Prithivirajan, 2019; Inayat, 2019; Wani, 2019).

Characterization, as a literary tool, was termed so in the middle of the 15th century. It was Aristotle who, in his *Poetics*, pointed out that “tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life” (“Literary Devices,” 2013). This definition of characterization asserted that the plot is dominant over the characters in a story and the story was thought to be a “plot-driven narrative” (“Literary Devices,” 2013). Due to bourgeois novels in the 19th century, in which the characters were more important than the story and plot, this point of view was abandoned (Eisinger, 1967; “Literary Devices,” 2013).

The author usually uses two different approaches through which the delivery of information about and construction of an image of a character is made possible. These are direct, also called the explicit, and indirect which is also called the implicit kinds of characterization. In direct characterization, someone else in the story as a character, a narrator or a protagonist is taken to deliver the information about a particular character. In indirect or implicit approach, a character is introduced in a subtle way. The readers have to deduce about the characteristics through observing various things about a character, such as the thought process or the behavior, the speech or the talking style, and way of communication with other characters in the story (Prithivirajan, 2019). The appearance of the character also matters in this regard. The response of other characters is also important in indirect characterization (Eisinger, 1967; “Literary Devices,” 2013). To write good literature, an author needs characterization as an essential component. Modern fiction has used characterization as a literary device a lot. Understanding a character is important because it helps to understand the behavior and function of a character in a particular story. It is important the characterization is used in a better way because it always leads the readers to relate better to the events taking place in a story. In this regard, the actions and dialogues also provide an opportunity to the readers to evaluate the motivations and intentions of a character deeply (Eisinger, 1967).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the character of U Po Kin in *Burmese Days* with respect to the functional role it serves in the novel. This paper advances to critically understand U Po Kyin and his unorthodox schemes in creating events for his future prospectus.

U PO Kyin of Burmese Days

U Po Kyin, born Circa in 1869 is a corrupt and cunning magistrate. He is perfectly groomed and can afford anything. His age is 56 and the “U” in his name is his title which is considered honorific in the Burmese society (Orwell, 2009). He usually wears traditional Burmese attire and speaks the local language Burmese, although he can also speak in English. He chews and spits betel but he has clean and numerous teeth despite that. He cannot stand up on his own when he is sitting and requires help due to his being hideously overweight. He views his own fatness as desirable and also the metaphysical result of devouring the essence of those has defeated to clime that ladder of success. He has yellow complexion but despite his girth, he has an unwrinkled skin (Orwell, 2009). U Po Kin schemes and plots drive the narrative in the novel (Osborne-Bartucca, 2015). U Po Kyin desires to join the English club. He is already in possession of wealth and power but he desires for a status amongst the Englishmen. His power and wealth together with influential skills are due to his impressive art of manipulation. He has plans to destroy the reputation of Dr. Veraswami who is another potential candidate for the English Club. In this way, he eventually secures membership of the European Club for himself (Slater, 1972).

U PO Kyin has been doing odd job since he was 17, while working in bazaars. He receives a large sum which helps him to get a job. Slandering Dr. Veraswami is his chief plan to get membership of the European Club. For that purpose he has a plan to secretly begin and squash a Burmese uprising against the Englishmen. In this way he aims to prove his usefulness to the Europeans by getting their favor (Lee, 1969).

U Po Kyin has made progress by all possible evils, which include stealing, bribery, blackmailing, or betrayal. This character is used as a tool to criticize British rule because the drawback in the system permits these vices to work (Seshagiri, 2001; Keck, 2005). He is also a criticism on his English superiors (Robertson, n. d.) because they misjudge his character. He is free and thinks it justified to commit all wicked acts, including cheating of people of their money, putting the innocents in the jail, or even he can abuse young girls (Lee, 1969). According to Buddhist belief, people who have committed vices in this life will suffer in the next life because of being incarnated as some lower-level animal such as a rat or a frog (Orwell, 2009). He, therefore, has plans to provide against these sins. He wants to spend the rest of his life doing good works, including the financing of the building of pagodas. In this way, he can balance the scales of karmic justice. However, he dies before he can do anything truly good, despite the fact that he attains earthly success. He dies when even a single brick has not been laid for the

building of pagodas (Kirsten, 2015) which makes his wife believe that he will be reincarnated as a rat (Course Hero, 2019).

The novel begins with Orwell briefly reviewing the materialistic imperialism of Great Britain through U Po Kyin. He as a child has his first memory about watching the victorious British soldiers marching into Mandalay. He realizes even as a child that that the people of Burma are “no match for this race of giants”(Orwell, 2009), especially military and advanced weaponry (Keck, 2005). As time progresses, the British find that Burma is important “not only as a potential source of wealth but also as an element in Britain’s rivalry with France” (Orwell, 2009; Robertson, n. d.).

U Po Kyin is very much aware of the effects of imperialism on the social structure. He therefore has plans to manipulate the circumstances to activate the Europeans racist ideals to ruin Veraswami’s reputation. In this way, he would become the first native member of the Club which is an honor few would experience (Slater, 1972). He knows that Veraswami’s reputation can be ruined through the rumors about him inciting people to rebel against the British. He explains this through saying, “No Europeans care about proofs. When a man has a black face, suspicion is proof. A few anonymous letters will work wonders” (Orwell, 2009; Datta& Mukherjee 2015). He misused his power and exploited locals for his plans and gains, which indicates that the character of U Po Kyin is an imperialist collaborator. He is the master of imperialism at the local level and uses rank and reputation to extort, and blackmail. He secures promotion to ultimately achieve his childhood goal (Slater, 1972), to “fight on the side of the British” (Orwell, 2009). Though he is an oriental, yet as a magistrate, he possesses the European mentality of executing policies (Moosavinia et al., 2011). This side of his character indicates that the civilizing mission conducted by imperialists in “educating”(Orwell, 2009) the natives to the British way of life is working. Instead of inculcating the positives attributes of English society, the British are conveying the worst to the locals (Slater, 1972).

He effectively continues to attack Dr. Veraswami and for that purpose he instigates a rebellion which would eventually make Dr. Veraswami look bad in the eyes of British. As a result, the doctor will be eliminated as a potential candidate of the English club (Slater, 1972; Robertson, n. d.; Osborne-Bartucca, 2015). This will pave way for him to secure the club membership. Moreover, the intrigues which have been plotted against him will also cease because he will be member of the club. He initially fails in his plans when Flory and Veraswami successfully suppress the riot but after Flory commits suicide, he becomes a member of the European Club (Martins, 2007).

U Po Kyin, is the character whom Orwell has portrayed through the device of authorial commentary. In a way, the character shows the author's perception of the hollowness of British imperial system (Robertson, n. d.). U Po Kyin can fall to the lowest level of any vice and misconduct as a power-hungry creature. If a person stands in the way of his cherished aim, he can do anything intriguing against him in the most villainous way. It is evident through the way he attacks Flory by his mischievous methods and intrigues (Slater, 1972).

The authorial commentary suggests that U Po Kyin, his dishonesty and intrigues, have been successful throughout his life and his sycophancy of the English rulers earned him a brilliantly successful life. He remembered as a child, standing naked, pot-bellied, and was clever enough, even at that age, to deduce that Britishers were a might. At the age of seventeen, when he tried for a government appointment, and due to lack of money and influence, he failed to get it, for three years he worked as a clerk two rice merchants, sometimes stealing (Fei, 2015). At the age of twenty, he got a chance to have four hundred rupees in his possession through a lucky stroke of blackmail. He secured a position as a clerk which was a job with opportunities to earn money through misappropriating government stores. It emerges here that the character is a dishonest and intriguing person. It also highlights that the imperialistic system is rotten and corruption ridden (Keck, 2005).

Further U Po Kyin's intriguing mind is summed up by the author in the words of Veraswami, who thinks that U Po Kyin is a crocodile who strikes at the weakest spot. Flory and Veraswami are his victims and they meet disastrous fate because of him. He becomes not only the officiating deputy commissioner but his other plans are also successful. His extreme desire to get elected as a member of the English club is also fulfilled and he dies full of honor (Datta & Mukherjee 2015).

U Po Kyin, in his very character, is a Burmese version of Machiavelli's prince as both are dedicated to using conspiracy and coercion to attain status (Ahmed, 2019). The context of the novel plays an important role in determining the functional role of his character. He is also a prototype of O'Brien. All engineer events and manipulate people to realize their plans. He implicates Veraswami as the ringleader of a spurious rebellion (Keck, 2005). He clearly admits his plans as:

“I have accused Veraswami of raising a rebellion against the Government. Well, I must have a rebellion to show and the victims shall be the ‘fools of villagers’ at Thongwa”(Orwell, 2009).

Moreover some of U Po Kyin's accomplices are involved, such as the Deputy Commissioner's office head clerk, Ba Sein and few other persons. They are used as 'useful tools' to execute his plans (Martins, 2007). He states clearly to his wife Ma Kin.

"I am raising this rebellion merely to crush it. I am against provocateur. First I persuade these fools at Thongwa to rebel, and then I arrest them as rebels. At the very moment when it is due to start, I shall pounce on the ringleaders and clap every one of them into jail. After that, I dare say, there may possibly be some fighting. A few men may be killed and a few more sent to Andamans. But meanwhile, I shall be first in the field, U Po Kyin the man who quelled a most dangerous rising in the nick of time! I shall be the hero of the district" (Orwell, 2009).

His character is not an autonomous entity; rather it is a part and parcel of the total experience of the novel and determines the progression of various other characters. He personifies a prominent aspect of power politics and abuse of authority, which is deception through force and fraud typical to authority in the region at that time (Zairdjanovich &Ugli, 2019). He, like other icons of authoritarians and totalitarian despotism, undertakes apparent acts of self-sacrifice, in the name of piety and duty, to gain the admiration and respect of others and hence feed his hunger for power and prestige. One example of deceit is U Po Kyin's plotting, scheming and implementing of apparent animosities against himself or others he wants to impress and then appearing as the sole debunker and destroyer of such seditious actions to make and break sedition that he has himself created and encouraged, a ploy that is a benchmark of political deception. He uses people as lever to gain higher status (Slater, 1972).

The character of U Po Kyin is practically invulnerable. He is a very good judge of people and manipulations. He always chooses the best instrument for his manipulations and plans. He is very much absorbed in intrigue that he can never fail through carelessness and ignorance. This character functions as a representation of a thoroughly corrupt imperial system where capabilities are relegated to insignificance, and dishonesties and corruption are encouraged. U Po Kyin knows that a 'black face' is sufficient proof for suspicion. Capability does not have any importance in imperialistic society but the intriguers find a smooth sailing by virtue of their mischievous acts. U Po Kyin is dishonest and can do anything to achieve his ends, even manage to kill his own people through his intrigues and pseudo – rebellion. He personifies a prominent aspect of power politics and abuse of authority, which is deception through force and fraud (Slater, 1972).

Conclusion

George Orwell has used the character of U PO Kyin to indirectly criticize the British Imperialism in the novel. He also has used this character to criticize English superiors because they misjudge U Po Kyin's nature and character so disastrously. U Po Kin's schemes and plots drive the narrative in the novel. He has spent a life since his childhood using his skills of manipulation and has grown powerful due to this. U Po Kyin is dishonest and can do anything to achieve his ends, even manage to kill his own people through his intrigues and pseudo - rebellions. He personifies a prominent aspect of power politics and abuse of authority, which is deception through force and fraud. Earning a place in English Club by all means makes this character function as a representation of a thoroughly corrupt imperial system where capabilities are relegated to insignificance, and dishonesties and corruption are encouraged.

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