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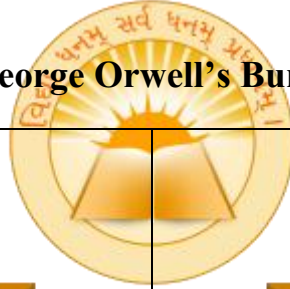
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## Ecological Imperialism in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*: A Critical Study

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Through his famous work, *Burmese Days*, Orwell contextualises the great ecological disaster the world is facing. The underlying development of environmental abuse is unveiled in this novel. In this novel, *Burmese Days*, the concept of Ecological Imperialism is exhibited here in the form of a timber business handled by a small European settlement in Upper Burma. The acute hypocrisy or double standard practises of the British Empire in Upper Burma are also disclosed in this novel. These British colonial practises were also characterised by the fundamental determination to evaluate imperialism openly and its ecological dimension. Thus, the present paper aims to observe the impact of ecological imperialism on the characters of the novel.

Key Words: Ecological Imperialism, Empire, Post-Colonial Literature, Environment

### Introduction

The adverse effects of imperialism are manifested in George Orwell's novel, *Burmese Days*, through dialogues with the main character, John Flory. It is also evident in the novel that direct rule is used by the British to exert control over the Burmese. But Orwell does not condemn the institution of imperialism, and in order to fight the British Empire, the central character lacks strength and integrity; instead, the central character is ambivalent and defective.

In 1928, after returning from Burma, Orwell originally started writing *Burmese Days*, but it took the author more than six years to finish the novel because he was concerned about his feelings about the Burmese people. When the British Empire was in decline, *Burmese Days* was published in 1934. Not only does the novel reflect Orwell's views on imperialism's injustices, but it also reveals his internal conflict over his experiences in Burma and his attitudes toward the Burmese and their culture.

### Overview of the Novel

The novel highlights how Anglo-Indians, individuals of "British descent or birth but living or having



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lived in British India for a long time" ("Anglo-Indian,") are negatively affected by colonialism. *Burmese Days* obscures how the Burmese are destructively affected by the ineffective form of an imperialist government. Critic Malcolm Muggeridge suggests that "there was a lot in the British Empire that Orwell admired" for all his criticism of British rule in India and Burma (Maes-Jelinek 343). Since the author is unable to sort out his feelings about the native until his later years as an author, not only in his essays, but also in the novel *Burmese Days*, his psychological struggles manifest themselves.

During the waning days of the British Empire, *Burmese Days* is about the struggle of Anglo-Burmese or Englishmen living in Burma as British subjects, and their interactions with each other. John Flory and Elizabeth Lackersteen, the main characters, are Anglo-Burmese and English. U Po Kyin and Dr. Veraswami, the minor characters, are non-Europeans. The real-life experience of Orwell in Burma closely mirrors the personality of John Flory, an Englishman living in the village of Kyauktada. Some critics believe the novel is Orwell's struggle to express his ambivalence to the Burmese. The Burmese characters are minimalized, and Orwell falsely implies that British rule is passively accepted by the Burmese because the novel moves between reality and fiction, leaving readers to determine what part of the narrative is fact or fabrications.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most individuals could not afford to travel outside of their community due to the high cost of travelling overseas. Novels have provided readers with a way of experiencing other cultures on their native soil. In descriptions of the natives, critics do not address inaccuracies and damage the inaccuracies because of the way Europeans perceive Burmese. Readers may assume that the Burmese are uneducated "savages" and that the natives of the British colonies are superior to Europeans.

Through the actions of the main protagonist, John Flory, Orwell diminishes the value of non-



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Europeans and utilises grotesque deformations to expose the ills of imperialism. Flory is the only Burmese sympathiser in the novel who, under British rule, seems to understand the misery of non-Europeans in Burma. He has a mistress from Burma and is close friends with Dr. Veraswami, an Indian doctor. Orwell, however, paints Flory as a weak person who is physically and mentally flawed, so his character doesn't go far enough to portray the Burmese as people who deserve to be heard, let alone. Flory is also physically flawed because, on the left side of his face, he has a significant purple birthmark. "The flaw of Flory is so clear that "the first thing one [notices] in Flory [is] his hideous birthmark stretching down his left cheek in a ragged crescent, from the eye to the corner of the mouth (Burmese Days 17).

The treatment of Flory by Orwell as deformed by his birthmark is a way of demonstrating how his character is also deformed. The birthmark of Flory indicates that individuals who associate with non-Europeans are defective and that their defects are so incredibly pronounced that they cannot be hidden. The blueish purple colour might indicate that his behaviour has damaged his bloodline, making him inferior to the other Englishmen. In ways that constantly keep others from seeing his birthmark, he moves his head and body. In a sense, in the novel, Flory is also targeted as the 'other'. He is trying to hide his association in the town with the Burmese and Indians. When he is with other Englishmen, Flory avoids speaking about his friendship with Dr. Veraswami. Dr. Veraswami's request to be nominated as a member of the elite European Club was repeatedly ignored. Unless he is intoxicated, Flory tends to cower and hide.

As he hides his birthmark, Flory also hides his affair with a young Burmese woman named Ma Hla May. Flory keeps the company of Ma Hla May until an English woman by the name of Elizabeth Lackersteen comes into the town of Kyauktada. Elizabeth Lackersteen rejects him for being sexually involved with a Burmese woman, after Flory is publicly humiliated by Ma Hla May in a church. At the end of the novel, Elizabeth's denunciation leads him to commit suicide. Orwell suggests that those who sympathise with the Burmese and oppose imperialism are cowards who are destined to fail, in allowing



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Flory to kill himself for the sake of an English woman. In *Burmese Days*, the tragedy is that the only European sympathetic to the Burmese people takes his life because he is rejected by an English woman. On English relationships, the author places far greater importance than on non-Europeans.

In *Burmese Days*, the leading female character is an Englishwoman, Elizabeth Lackersteen, whose rejection of Flory's marriage proposal causes him to commit suicide. Although she is a shallow person in the novel, with dialogues and multiple points of view, she is a developed character. She would likely not be considered an interesting character if her character were to be placed in England rather than Burma. Orwell makes shallow characters more critical than Burmese natives, even the most boring. "When Elizabeth discovers that Flory has a mistress, she is not upset about the affair, she is frightened that the mistress is a Burmese woman, as the narrator says, "The idea that he [Flory] was the lover of that grey-faced, manic creature made her shudder in her bones" (274).

Elizabeth calls the Burmese woman a "creature" in the narrative and dehumanises her. Elizabeth is an Englishwoman and, in the colonies, she did not grow up, so she represents England. From seeing Eurasians, "which aroused a peculiar dislike in her," to walking through Kyauktada bazaars, she resents everything non-English (126). "Burmese women are what mostly appeals to her, and as she describes them, she sneers, "Aren't they just dreadful too? So coarse looking; like an animal of some sort. Do you think anybody thinks these women are attractive? ... But that black skin—I don't know how to bear it with anybody (119).

Elizabeth describes Burmese women as unattractive black "animals" in one paragraph. She does not take into account the rebuttal of Flory to her comments on the native women; instead, she considers his ideas "funny" (Orwell 119). When he associates him with Elizabeth because she detests anything Burmese, Orwell weakens Flory's character as a Burmese sympathiser. The representation of Burmese women is tainted by



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her discriminatory statements. The author validates the fallacies in Elizabeth's views of Burmese women being inferior to English women, because Orwell does not denounce her biased words.

Even repugnant British characters like Ellis get a voice and have character depth. Ellis is a disgusting character who is consumed in the colonial club with hatred for non-Europeans and flings racial slurs about the natives. In *Burmese Days*, Orwell shows his dislike for mixed-race populations and "pure blooded" Europeans' preferences. Eurasians, or children born to one Burmese parent and one English parent, are referred to as half-breeds and have no voice ('Eurasians') in the novel. When Ellis mentions church services on Sundays, he mocks the two half-European and half-Burmese Christian missionaries and states, "And then those two yellow-bellies, Francis and Samuel, call themselves Christians as well." They had the nerve to come up and sit in the front pews with the white men the last time the padre was here (Orwell 27). In setting mixed races apart from Europeans, Orwell uses nicknames, and so monikers set the natives apart from the English. The term "yellow-bellies" refers to the colour yellow and indicates fear or pollution, while an animal that crawls on the ground is indicated by the word "belly." The taxonomy includes people of mixed races, such as animals and plants. A weapon the English used to maintain power within Colonial Burma was a false representation of the Burmese in literature.

May is one of the novel's principal female Burmese characters and she is a prostitute. Readers might assume the prostitutes are Burmese women. As she walks into a church with torn clothes and shrieks "like a maniac" that Flory owes her money for her sexual services, her caricature is amplified. "May shout at Flory in front of the whole church, "Look at me, you white men, and look at me, you women, too! Look how you ruined me' (273). Just as colonisers ruin and mistreat the colonies, Flory has ruined her. The actions of Ma Hla May, however, dwarf Orwell's criticism of imperialism because May is the one out of control while the dignified English sit in shock and speechlessness. Orwell paints a picture of a wild native Burmese woman



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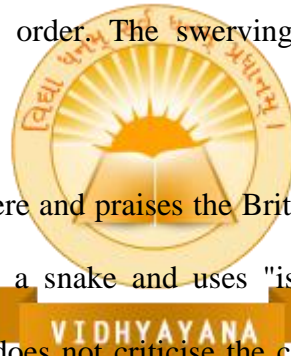
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who needs to be tamed by an Englishman in this particular narrative.

In *Burmese Days*, Burmese men and women are not only misrepresented, but Orwell distorts all non-Europeans in *Burmese Days*. Readers could assume that U Po Kyin's hatred of Dr. Veraswami, the Indian, is an indication that all Indians are hated and resented by the Burmese. The quintessential model of a British subject whose only objective in life is to be a member of the European colonial club is Dr. Veraswami. As a person who continually praises colonialism, Orwell goes overboard and presents Veraswami. Veraswami retorts when Flory criticises imperialism,

My friend, my friend, you are forgetting the Oriental character. How iss it possible to have developed us, with our apathy and superstition? At least you have brought us to law and order. The swerving British Justice and Pax Britannica" (41).



Orwell demeans non-Europeans here and praises the British contribution to the colonies. The author also mocks how Veraswami speaks like a snake and uses "iss" rather than "is," and gives animalistic attributes to the doctor. Because Orwell does not criticise the conduct of Dr. Veraswami, the passage can easily be read out of context. In explaining how non-Europeans beg to be regarded as equal to Europeans, the author goes too far, and Orwell confirms the superiority of Englishmen to natives.

Furthermore, in his novel, Orwell parodies Burmese culture as a whole. Hundreds of Burmese gather around the European Club when the Burmese natives stir up a riot to avenge the death of a Burmese boy at the hands of a European. In a collective effort to get justice for the killing of the boy. The narrator pronounces, as the villagers surround the club armed with bottles and stones, "There were a series of crashes as the windows were broken, and then a ceaseless thudding of stones from all sides, shaking the thin wooden walls and seemingly splitting them" (249)



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Orwell seems to portray the Burmans as formidable opponents, but two sentences later, he rapidly undermines their abilities and states that "the Burmans seemed to have no plan beyond flinging stones, screaming, and hammering at the walls" (248). The author introduces the Burmans as infantile degenerates whose stones are the only means of warfare. They run into another crowd of angry Burmese armed with knives after the English finally escape the mob and travel down a river. In the middle of the mob, Flory sees an Indian Military Policeman swimming through a "sea of bodies" that "fell on him from side to side, bumping his robes and choking him with their animal heat" (251). Here again, Orwell gives the Burmans beastly attributes of "animal heat." When things seem hopeless for the English, a troop of sepoy, or Indian soldiers serving under British rule, suddenly rolls into town and shoot their rifles above the Burmese crowd and quell the riot.

The narrator describes that Burman's horde is trying to "recoil," but the sepoy are preventing them from escaping. "The author makes an extra reference to the natives as snakes that retreat when threatened when using the word "recoil. As the narrator states, "Finally, the entire crowd bulged outward and began to roll slowly up the maidan," the British military men are able to disperse the horde (252). A maidan is a term the British use in South Asia ("Maidan") for a "open space in or near a towne". Orwell states that, since the riot ends almost as quickly as it begins, the Burmese cannot defend themselves. Even when Orwell shows revolting natives, he is not really on their side and demonstrates that the natives are unable and ineffective to defend themselves. The author illustrates, through the narrative of the riot, how the Burmese use their animalistic traits and primitive weapons to defend themselves. Orwell claims that the Burmese are unable to control themselves by describing people as creatures or unevolved humans; therefore, they need to be subjugated.





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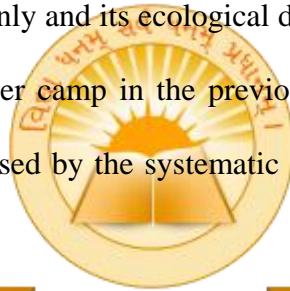
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## Ecological Imperialism in Burmese Days

John Flory, the leading character of the Burmese Days novel, runs a lumber camp in the previously unscathed jungle of Burma and he is unaware of the environmental impact caused by the systematic tree clearance of his company on the local ecosystem. Through his famous work, Burmese Days, Orwell contextualises the great ecological disaster the world is facing. The underlying development of environmental abuse is unveiled in this novel. In this novel, Burmese Days, the concept of Ecological Imperialism is exhibited here in the form of a timber business handled by a small European settlement in Upper Burma. The acute hypocrisy or double standard practises of the British Empire in Upper Burma are also disclosed in this novel. These British colonial practises were also characterised by the fundamental determination to evaluate imperialism openly and its ecological dimension. John Flory, the leading character of the Burmese Days novel, runs a lumber camp in the previously unscathed jungle of Burma and he is unaware of the environmental impact caused by the systematic tree clearance of his company on the local ecosystem.



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Flory is unusually quiet and open to Burmese culture, although he speaks of the subjugation of colonial laws in an offensive way. By all chance, he also participates unusually blindly in the reduction of resources. In a conversation with his Indian friend, Dr. Veeraswami, for example, he openly reveals the real intent of the British Empire's existence in Burma. Burma's natural resources are the sole purpose of the British Empire and its colonial policies. But their policies do not indicate any ecological concern for Burma's ethnic people.

How can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It's so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the businessman goes through his pockets. Do you suppose my firm, for instance,



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could get its timber contracts if the country weren't in the hands of the British?

Or the other timber firms, or the oil companies, or the miners and planters and traders? (BD 60)

It was a matter of financial priority for the British to manipulate nature. They frequently disregarded the environmental implications of their actions unless their economic interests were obviously at risk. Orwell also draws some orthodox imagery of flora and fauna to illustrate how nature is bestowed by the text as the exotic other, against which the European self-expresses itself in a strongly relished way of indulgence in personality. This self is entirely anthropocentric and is characterised by the excessive desire to seize nature and exploit it. In an enlightening light, Flory's portrayal delineates this process:

The lower jungle paths turned into morasses, and the paddy fields were great wastes of stagnant water with a stale, mousy smell... It was the beginning of the short winter, when Upper Burma seemed haunted by the ghost of England. Wild flowers sprang into bloom everywhere, not quite the same as the English ones, but very like them - honeysuckle in thick bushes, field roses smelling of pear drops, even violets in dark places of the forest ...One went shooting after duck and snipe. (BD 66)

In addition, Orwell discusses the imperialist socio-political structures inflicted on the Burmese land by the British Empire through the scenes of shooting animals. The anthropocentric colonialist mindsets of the British are exposed in these scenes. In such scenes where the act of shooting animals for fun is narrated as a natural pastime activity of the British on the Burmese, Ecological Imperialism is recurrently presented. For colonisers, the only value nature has is entirely instrumental. Ecological imperialism is described for the economic welfare of the centre as the systematic exploitation and re-shaping of the local ecosystems of the



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outskirts.

It is necessary to properly address the ecological and environmental problems encountered globally due to ecological imperialism and the harmful effects of scientific and technological advancement and industrialization. Intellectuals around the globe and ecologists in particular are currently working to identify solutions to this worsening threat that disrupted the very existence of living beings on earth. In the Western context, the role played by Western industrialization and its modernization programmes in seducing developing countries to destroy and annihilate their environment is of great importance. In Orwell's *The Burmese Days*, Ecological Imperialism is thus contextualised.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the main references that determine the fate of Orwell's first novel *Burmese Days* are: the British Empire's colonisation of Burma to obtain raw materials for British industrial markets, justification of British rule for the welfare of indigenous people from pro-British intellectuals, the despotic Empire's exploitation of the Burmese on the basis of racism, Burmese culture and tradition. Orwell was a part of all these social conditions during his service from 1922 to 1927 as a police officer in imperial Burma, and whatever he witnessed, experienced and felt is depicted in the novel.



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