

## Revisiting Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" through the Lens of Post-Colonial Ecocriticism

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to break away from the canonical reading of George Orwell's most celebrated essay "Shooting an Elephant" and analyze it from the perspective of post-colonial ecocriticism. Ever since its publication, "Shooting an Elephant" has been viewed as a literary work that depicts the disturbing nature of imperialism and the impacts of its byproducts both on the colonized and the colonizer. This paper postulates that employing such an anthropocentric view while reading a text that projects the predicament of an animal and the exploitation of nature can be an intellectual misjudgment. The symbiosis of post-colonialism and ecocriticism ensures a synergy that is essential for contemporary literary criticism. The project of post-colonial ecocriticism is to re-read the canonical texts common to both fields and trace out ecocritical concerns in postcolonial literature and postcolonial aspects of environmental writing. In this paper, the ideas of post-colonialism in "Shooting an Elephant" have been addressed while keeping the environmental concerns into consideration.

**Keywords:** Post-Colonial Ecocriticism, Imperialism, Anthropocentric, Symbiosis, Synergy

### Introduction

It might sound sharp to the ears, but George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" seems to have lost its appeal to the academics. The reason is not necessarily the essay's inability to make sense anymore, it is rather an attitude of the critics that they have done enough justice to the text and its author. If we are to blame anything for the decreasing prominence of this masterpiece in scholarly articles, we can point our fingers at the canonical reading of the essay. "Shooting an Elephant" is almost always read as a reaction to British imperialism. I am not denying the fact that it is a text that projects a vivid picture of imperialism, but what I intend to do is to point out what *else* it is about and why it is necessary to revisit the text with a new lens. An ecocritical reading of this essay will not necessarily reduce it to a talk solely focused on nature, it will rather embed a new dimension to the text. This paper is mainly focusing on an integrated and emerging way of doing literary analysis which is Post-Colonial Eco-criticism. As an emerging field, 'postcolonial ecocriticism' combines postcolonialism's critique of colonial regimes and the workings of

transnational capitalism with ecocriticism's focus on the land which has been the crux of such exploitation ([Banerjee](#) 194).

George Orwell's works have always been celebrated for having multi-dimensional appeal and "Shooting an Elephant" is not an exception in this regard. It is not only "Shooting an Elephant" that raises a Zoocritical response, but Orwell's seminal work *Animal Farm* also raises the same concern. *Animal Farm* has conventionally been read as a political satire, particularly of Stalinist Russia, or, more generally, human political failings. But Orwell himself claimed that one of the major motifs for writing the novel had been to protest against the human treatment of animals, especially farm animals ([Huggan](#) and Tiffin 148). Ironically, the critics of *Animal Farm* overlooked this claim from the author and kept on extracting the human messages out of the text. Here in "Shooting an Elephant" the narrator is a colonizer who is also inevitably a human as no other species have mastered the hideous craft of colonialism though they have experienced it almost doubly as humans. It also evolves with a "tiny incident" which by the way is the killing of an elephant that gives the narrator "a better glimpse" of "the real nature of imperialism" ([Orwell](#) 36). If it was only about killing an animal then perhaps a Zoocritical approach would suffice but it is also about exploiting nature. The anthropocentric shutter on our eyes has always made us think about the predicament of the dwellers of the land, but we forgot to think about the land and the other animals that exist and suffer just as much as humans. Therefore, focusing on the impact of colonial enterprise both on humans and nature is perhaps the most sensible way of thinking which post-colonial ecocriticism mainly does. In this paper, it is argued that Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" is a suitable text for reading from the perspective of post-colonial ecocriticism as it involves the intersections of post-colonial ideas and ecocritical concerns.

It is necessary to understand the relations between eco-criticism and post-colonialism as a contemporary approach to either of the fields demands it. Ecocriticism, as Glotfelty puts it "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" as it "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" ([xviii](#)). Travis et al. also reinforces this idea by stating that "ecocriticism examines the representation of and relationships between the biophysical environment and texts, predominantly through ecological theory" ([3](#)). Garrard finds ecocriticism to be unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology ([5](#)).

As colonialism and post-colonialism have affective relations with ecocritical issues, a discussion on colonialism/post-colonialism may also be essential before coming into the key arguments of the paper. Jonathan Bate, the pioneer of Green Studies rightly said in his book *The Song of Earth*, "imperialism has always brought with it deforestation and the consuming of natural resources" ([87](#)). In the book *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark points out that "colonialism was and neocolonialism is, primarily a matter of the 'conquest of nature, the appropriation of local resources'" ([123](#)).

Colonialism for its historical presence and theoretical observations does not need any introduction. Yet it might be insightful to share Mahboob's observation of colonialism:

This was when the European powers went out a contest for *World Domination*. They sailed across the world either claiming lands as their own or snaking their way into existing civilizations to take control of them and rule them through both material (physical) and non-material (socio-semiotic) violence. Once captured, they traded lands and people and animals between each other and some merging powers. ([Colonisation](#) 3.0)

On the other hand, despite the limitations and controversy of this view, the term Post-colonial is used to “cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” ([Ashcroft](#) et al. 2).

### Post-Colonialism & Ecocriticism: From Differences to Synergy

Post-colonialism and Ecocriticism have their similarities and dissimilarities. The similarities are two-fold: first, post-colonialism critiques the euro-centric notion of civilization and the West’s deliberate attempt to undermine the East where ecocriticism almost similarly exposed anthropocentrism and debunked the myth that humans are essentially in the center of everything and everything else is orbiting in the periphery to serve and stimulate mankind. Second, both post-colonialism and ecocriticism pointed out alternative ways of being in the world.

The most essential difference can be found in post-colonialism’s attempt to remain stuck in the past and write back to the colonizers who have eventually become neo-colonizers. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with the future of both mankind and the earth.

Postcolonialism has often been accused of being concerned with processes of economic and cultural exploitation while failing to consider the anthropocentrism of such concerns ([Hugan](#) and Tiffin 3). On the contrary, ecocriticism has often failed to address non-Western concerns ([DeLoughery](#) and Handley 9). Non-Western countries are often blamed for neglecting the ecocritical concerns which Lohmann terms as “Green Orientalism” (202).

“It is only recently that critics have begun to address the synergy which may result from bringing together postcolonialism and ecocriticism by systematically spelling out points of overlap between these two fields” ([Banerjee](#) 196). Especially in Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s and George Handley’s (2011) edited collection *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* and in Graham Huggan’s and Helen Tiffin’s (2010) co-authored study *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, what emerges is the idea that each of these fields may point towards a blind spot in the other. In postcolonial criticism, metaphors of the land and the rootedness of the postcolonial subject in his/her geography have always been addressed eloquently. But these references have generally been read by postcolonial critics only in their rhetorical sense; the material and the ecocritical dimension of these metaphors has often been ignored ([DeLoughrey](#) and Handley 27).

In order to address and redress the evils of the colonial past, the colonial subject has to bear witness to cultural, economic, and environmental destruction. Unfortunately, colonialism has also 'killed off' the witnesses to its violence. That is why the land remains as the sole spectator of the past. In this way, ecocritical readings may add to postcolonial critiques another layer of meaning: Ecocriticism has restored the life of nature that was ignored by post-colonialism. It is in the hands of the ecocritics that nature has seen its transformation from metaphor to the material. This is what Huggan and Tiffin call "greening of postcolonialism" (3). So, the project of post-colonial ecocriticism is to re-read the canonical texts common to both fields and to trace out ecocritical concerns in postcolonial literature and postcolonial aspects of environmental writing. For example, postcolonial ecocritics have focused on the often overlooked nonhuman elements within canonical literature and brought attention to contemporary literature that responds to histories of settlement and conservation, ecological disaster, and the inequitable distribution of resources and waste (Huggan and Tiffin 555).

### **Ecocriticism, Post-Colonialism, and the Animal**

Ecocriticism is not necessarily solely concerned with the inanimate objects of nature. It cares and talks about the animals – an integral part of nature with much eloquence. Although Zoocriticism addresses issues of animal exploitations more vividly, a post-colonial ecocritical reading also takes this issue into account. Post-colonial discourse is traditionally anthropocentric but raising issues like our treatment of the animal world can open a new vista of understanding of colonialism.

"Throughout western intellectual history, civilization has consistently been constructed by or against the wild, savage and animalistic, and has consequently been haunted or 'dogged' by it" (Huggan and Tiffin 134). The European discourses have a common tendency of constructing *Others*. In an odd way, this otherization philosophically and representationally constructs both humans and animals as animals. Huggan and Tiffin point out different ways "in which serious consideration of the status of animal seems to be fundamentally compromised by the human, often western, deployment of animals and the animalistic to destroy or marginalise other human societies" (135).

It is often said that some dominant groups have been treating particular human individuals and cultures like animals and human slavery and genocide are activities that categorize the oppressed people as animals. It often remains unnoticed that we condemn such activities inflicted upon humans, but we take it for granted when it happens with animals. The human notion of 'cruelty' thus gets a double standard.

Another tendency is using derogatory animal metaphors in our language. Animal attribution is used for calling names like 'you stupid donkey', 'capitalist pig', 'sexist beast', and so on. The idea is while humans are committing hideous activities, it is always indicated that these are animalistic actions. Quite ironically, if we take a close look at the history of human civilization and contemporary reality, the most heinous actions are always done by humans and not the animals. If

a human being commits a derogative action then he is an animal but if an animal does something noble, like a dog saving someone's life, then it is addressed to be a 'humane' quality in the animal.

### **"Shooting an Elephant": Beyond Anthropocentrism**

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" serves as an example of how the oppression of animals is often overlooked and an attempt is always made to extract human messages even at the cost of the violation of nature and the animal world. There can be an objection that 'why worry about animals when humans are suffering?' The predicament of the Burmese people under the tyrannical force of the British empire in heart-rendering, the narrator himself was in great traumatizing conflicts, a Dravidian coolie died, an owner lost its 'machinery', some properties were ravaged, and a good number of crops was devoured – amidst all these human sufferings, why should we care about a wretched elephant? The answer is: there is no 'first-thing-first' approach in such matters. The death of humans and the raping of women do not necessarily make animal suffering a secondary concern. As long as we have a notion of the ethical acceptability of animal exploitation, the same exploitation can be inflicted upon humans also. As the perversity has already been taken for granted, it is no wonder that 'what happens with them can happen with us' as well.

The focus is not only on the killing of the animal but also the unnoticed hints of the exploitation of nature in the text which the canonical critics had never time to talk about as they were pre-occupied with thoughts of imperialism and its evil impact on humans – the only species with an illusion that they are the ones who feel the pain, crave to be free and love to live in their fullest at the cost of anything. Post-colonialism forgets the idea that the natives are a *part* of the land just like the animals and not the *owner* of it. So, when the colonizers occupied and exploited the land, they did not exploit 'the native's land', they rather exploited 'the natives' and 'the land.'

If read ecocritically, "Shooting an Elephant" displays the colonization of not only the Burmese people but also the land – Burma. As it is one of the fundamental beliefs of ecocriticism that nature is a living thing and it should not be reduced to a mere setting as it can play the role of a protagonist. Therefore, exercising authority over nature can also be termed colonialism. As we can see in "Shooting an Elephant", a tamed elephant escapes from the chain and ravages the locality. But we know that no elephant is born tamed; it is, by nature, a wild animal. In order to tame an elephant and make it a 'machinery' or a circus attraction, you have to catch it wild first and then you can expect to make the elephant and its children, if they can produce any, to be your slave. In the essay, there was the mentioning that "it was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one" (Orwell 36). Here, there is a hint that it could have been a wild elephant. We know that in mountainous areas, elephants often enter human villages, but do we really know who is the intruder here? Is it the elephant or the local people? When settlers or tourists enter indigenous areas, the indigenous people feel threatened and disturbed. Similarly, when the indigenous or local people start living in places that somehow belong to the wildlife territory, don't the animals feel

equally disturbed? Now, the question is what is the role of colonialism here? Hukan and Tiffin share the same concern in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*:

A second problem arises when, as in so many contemporary instances, humans are pitted against animals in a competition over decreasing resources. Peoples forced off their land to provide game parks for foreign tourists (or sometimes more insidiously included in 'native' displays as part of the local flora and fauna) understandably resent not just the implicit 'animal' comparisons, but also the physical presence of animals themselves. (137)

As my key focus in this paper is on issues of post-colonial ecocriticism, I would like to pinpoint how the colonized were treated as animals in the description given by the narrator: "The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos - all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt" (Orwell 36). The narrator who felt sympathy for the tortured colonized people were also disgusted by the treatment that he received from the natives and at one point, he too used animal terms like "evil-spirited little beasts" (37) to call names the Burmese and show how hideous they were. Another quotation from the title essay of the book *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (1950) can help us illustrate the comparison of the colonized to animals. In the very first paragraph of the essay, it was mentioned that "No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress" (35). It reminds us of the protest and expression of hatred of the monkeys that are either caged or disturbed by humans. Obviously, the monkeys do not have the ability to raise a riot but they do not miss any opportunity to show their disgust towards their human colonizers. Here the intention is to point out when animals are colonized by humans their reaction is almost the same as ours. Colonialism, if viewed ecocritically, seems like a complex system that may often create a fellow feeling in the minds of the colonized people if they can only feel the identical sufferings of the animals.

The traditional critics always wanted to focus on the metaphors of "Shooting an Elephant" whereas the concrete fact is always right before our eyes. Some viewed the "slow death of the elephant as an allegory of imperialism" (Meyers 24) while others argued that the death of the elephant symbolizes the death of the empire. Edward Quinn said that the elephant represents "traditional Burmese culture" (307). These metaphors and symbols served the purpose of distracting the discourse. Canonical reading often takes the reader away from the fact and "Shooting an Elephant" is an example of that. Let us take a look at the story through the lens of post-colonial ecocriticism. First of all, the killing of the elephant, which by the way was the first time for the narrator, is described as such: "It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism - the real motives for which despotic governments act" (Orwell 36). The ghastly murder is referred to as a "tiny incident" and the lesson that was learned was about imperialism and its true motifs. This is what ecocritics call 'extracting human messages' out of the sufferings of nature and the animal world. Secondly, the destruction done by the animal is described with vivid details:

It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van, and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violence upon it. (37-38)

What is ironic here is the reason behind this aggressive behavior of the elephant does not get much highlight in the narration. It simply says the beast "had gone must" (37). The elephant was being denied to fulfill its biological necessity and was chained so that it can suffer in a handicapped way. This is a common practice of human civilization. We sometimes castrate bulls and sometimes make cows get pregnant against their will. We master over the social and biological life of animals. Thirdly, as we notice in the essay that the killing could be avoided. The animal was almost pacified and when it was eating paddy peacefully in the paddy field, it looked "no more dangerous than a cow" (39). The narrator even said that all he was supposed to do was to observe the beast's actions and if it does not go wild then leave it alone until the mahout comes. Fourthly, the narrator did not want to kill the animal primarily because "It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant - it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery" (39). Animal life seems less valuable than the monetary value that humans add to its life. Finally, we can ask the question what made him kill the animal then? The answer is obviously given in the text that he had to act like a sahib and do what the crowd wanted him to do as he could not afford to look foolish in front of the colonized. Here the observation of Hukan and Tiffin seems to be relevant:

That western exploitation, both past and present, has resulted in the murder, displacement and impoverishment of people, animals and their environments; and it has also generated apparently 'either/or' situations in contexts of land and resource scarcity or degradation. (137)

Here the moral degradation of the narrator is also an "either/ or" situation and we see that in such sort of situations, the Westerners always pick to destroy the resource instead of their image or interest.

Although the white colonizers are generally blamed for exploiting the nature and animal world, the colonized too are in no way different in their attitude towards the animals. The colonized despite being the victim of racism, commit *speciesism*. This anthropocentric attitude is common regardless of ethnicity, geographical position, and political status. Elephants have always been a target of humans for meat and ivory. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998) give us the account of human cruelty to elephants regardless of their ethnicity. Gowdy was the most radical author in this regard as she did not even employ anthropomorphism (attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities) in her narrative technique, she rather gave us the elephants' perspective in a way that is remote to human perception. Gowdy shared the idea that since the elephants' contemporary killers are likely to be both black and white, race is of no importance it is the species itself that, after the advent of the Darkness, has become evil (93). An almost similar situation can be traced in Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" where the white man kills the animal and the natives make him do that for

their amusement and most importantly for the meat. When the narrator gave the first shot he heard a “devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd” (42). This monstrous celebration indicates that it does not matter whether you are a colonizer or colonized, you still belong to a species that is more dangerous and crueller than any animals in the jungle. It was the natives who wanted the meat, and they used the white man because they knew, with his gun, he is a better killer of the wild.

The dying process of the elephant has been portrayed with vivid description by Orwell in “Shooting an Elephant.” It tells us about the great agony of dying and ghastliness of killing but unfortunately, this too has been interpreted as the metaphor of the slow decay of the British Empire. The anthropocentric critics never cared about descriptions like “the bullet had paralyzed him”, he looked “thousands of years old”, “the agony of it jolt his whole body”, “he trumpeted for the last time”, “his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling”, “the thick blood welled out of him like red velvet” “He was dying, very slowly and in great agony”, “ the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die”, and “the tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock” (41-42). It is quite shocking that we still manage to overlook this heart-rendering description of the murder of such a large animal and replace it with thoughts of human power politics. The narrator acknowledged that it was a clear murder, and his ending remarks are yet more shocking.

And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool. (42)

It clearly shows that the death of the collie was just an excuse, and this hideous task was done only to keep the masterly image of the white colonizer intact. The narrator admitted that he did not want to look like a fool, but what could be more foolish than murdering an innocent creature when it could have been easily avoided? Here comes the idea of the human ego and self-centeredness. We humans have always participated in the race of becoming superior. We try to be superior among our own species and we take it for granted that we are by default superior to other creatures. This is how post-colonialism and eco-criticism play the same tune from two different flutes.

## **Conclusion**

George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” can be considered to be a text which still has much to give to the critics and readers. This essay is a brilliant example of rethinking a text from a green perspective. The ecocritical reading does not reduce the colonial message of the text. It still keeps its post-colonial value, but the employment of a double-coded approach is all we need in today’s ever-changing world of academia. Reading “Shooting an Elephant” through the lens of post-colonial eco-criticism serves as a reminder that there is the urgency of such synergy in the process of knowledge-making if we aim at renewing our thoughts to match with our contemporary and the days ahead.

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