



# Colonizing Nature, Fragmenting the Self: Ecological Imperialism in *Cry, the Peacock*

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## Abstract

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* creates a subtle literary field to analyze the interrelations between ecological imperialism and psychological fragmentation. The protagonist, Maya, is a complex character whose mental instability can be closely related to her alienation of the natural world. Her disintegrated consciousness is an expression of a personal traumas as well as a larger cultural situation that is defined by the instrumentalization and domination of nature. Desai creates a story in which nature ceases to be a caring entity with the heavy use of image, symbolic landscapes and the air of oppressive isolation in which the author creates a world where nature is no longer the mother. This domination of the natural space resembles imperialistic forms of domination, as land as well as subjectivity is dominated and shattered. The depletion of Maya as inner being becomes symbolic, therefore, of a greater epistemic and ecological crisis.

The analysis preempts the role of environmental exploitation in existential dislocation and psychic imbalance by placing the novel in the context of ecological imperialism. Finally, the paper concludes that the Desai work demands the ethical re-entering of nature, and that the reestablishment of ecological balance is not possible without the recovery of the human wholeness.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, Ecological, Imperialism, Maya, Exploitation.

## Introduction

Human beings and relationship with the natural world have been a fundamental subject of literary research, particularly in the modern world, where blistering industrialization and colonial expansions have transformed the ecological and cultural landscapes. Ecological imperialism where nature is dominated and exploited by means of power structures provides a critical approach to comprehending the way in terms of which environmental degradation is integrated with human alienation. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai introduces a very thought-provoking story that reflects the psychological impact of such a break between people and nature. Backdrop of emotional isolation and existential anxiety, the novel is a mirror of the world where nature is no longer a source of harmony but a dull presence, dominated by human domination and unconcerned. This is not simply an environmental disjunction, but a very deep psychological one, showing that the colonization of the natural world is analogous to the dismantling of the human self.

Maya is the main character of the novel, whose extreme sensitivity and mental instability is the embodiment of the crisis of the self-alienated with his society and nature. Her estrangement is not just a personal one but a representation of a larger cultural state which is defined by patriarchal power, colonialism, and environmental disequilibrium. Desai employs abundant imagery, symbolic themes and interior monologue to paint a picture of a world where the lines between the inner world and the outer world break down and results in a lost state of choking alienation.

## Ecological Imperialism

Ecological imperialism is also known as green imperialism and provides a critical perspective of how human-made environmental transformations reproduce social inequalities of a class, gender, caste, ethnicity, and nationality. This concept is essential in understanding the socioeconomic impacts of transforming the natural resources of colonies into commodities and raw materials to be used by the urban businesses. Ecological imperialism was a term used by American environmental historian Alfred Crosby to describe the effective colonization of the temperate regions of the world of North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and New Zealand by the Europeans. According to Crosby, the European colonial expansion had a significant ecological element and began in 1500 CE.

Crosby noted that the emigrants and their descendants in Europe are everywhere, and this is in need of some explanations (Crosby 2). According to his argument, the ability of European settlers to successfully create colonies was mostly attributed to their capacity to introduce and modify European plants, animals, and other species to these temperate regions, so rendering them more conducive to European agriculture and settlement. Besides easing colonization, this method had an ecological effect that was dramatic and changed the habitat in these new regions.

The term Columbian exchange was first employed by Crosby when he was referring to the tremendous introduction of plants and animals into the so-called New World. The term describes the ecological impact of the physical discoveries made by Christopher Columbus and other early European naturalists and explorers of the time, which eventually transformed the biosphere to the benefit of the European nations. The establishment of European colonies was much assisted through the extensive importation of European species, as weeds, animals, plants, and diseases, to the New World. Crosby, when he wrote about ecological imperialism, is illuminating on how this led to the establishment of what he termed as Neo-Europes because it enabled European colonists to recreate the ecosystems of the countries they inhabited.

In this regard, ecological imperialism emphasizes the strong relationship between ecological transformation and social stratification alongside the mentioning of the environmental control and misuse of the European nations. Besides being a natural phenomenon, restructuring of the ecosystems in colonized regions was a strategic manipulation to maintain and increase the colonial authority, ensuring that the revenue of these transformations was sent back to the imperial capitals. This strategy of environmental manipulation increased the inequality upon which imperial power was based by imitating European social patterns in the colonies.

### **Ecological Imperialism in *Cry, the Peacock***

The mingling of human psychology and nature is a salient theme in the novel *Cry, the Peacock* written by Desai in 1963 and provides a unique approach to social ecology and ecological imperialism. The novel is silent in showing the disintegration of the social and ecological order surrounding the main character Maya, who is largely preoccupied with the internal conflict. Desai uses the environment, which comprises of the stifling heat, the stifling atmosphere and the creeping urbanization, as a reflection of the disjointed psyche of Maya. These components come to signify the greater ecological and social failure. The alienation of people to

their natural surroundings and the consequential psychological pain, so portrayed in the novel, can be considered as an instance of ecological imperialism whereby the harmony of people with their surroundings is disturbed by the introduction of artificial and often colonizing structures.

To indirectly deal with the concept of ecological imperialism, the modernity and urbanization to come is represented in the changing scenery of India in the novel. Desai portrays the shifting environment as an external projection of the inner world of Maya, where she grows more and more hopeless and alienated, and the loss of natural spaces reflects that sadness. The novel also asks concerns regarding the broader ecological consequences of rapid urbanization and introduction of non-native cultures to traditional civilizations. The manner in which the natural world is being reconfigured to meet the needs of the modernizing society, which is often done at the expense of the local population connecting with their land and heritage, can be seen as a form of ecological imperialism. Desai stresses with the help of the heightened sensitivity of Maya to such changes the significance of the influence which such ecological disturbances can have on the identity of individuals and groups.

The psychological and existential issues explored in the novel are grounded by the profound sense of identity crisis of the main character Maya. It is always accompanied by a feeling of confusion and turmoil due to her internal struggles and her perception of the external world. The mind of Maya is depicted as a disorderly battleground where conflicting thoughts, ingrained fears and acute concerns come to a clash, leading to such a strong feeling of disorientation and mental breakdown.

The identity crisis is exacerbated by the fact that Maya struggles with the expectations of society, particularly those that are related to marriage and the traditional gender roles. Her psychological conflict is even deeper when she is scared of losing her individuality behind the rigid lines of those anticipated sets of roles, those of a righteous wife and mother. The fear experienced by Maya drives her to ask the questions of the traditional methods of thinking and existence and denies the stances of the conventionality that the society has imposed on her. It is this going against the societal expectations that she resorts to which makes her directly confronted with society since she refuses to live to its expectations and further complicates her crisis as she attempts to escape social norms.

The excessive focus on death is one of the key elements of existential crises that Maya experiences. Her fascination with death acquires a symbolic meaning that presents her greater existential problems and her effort to give meaning to her world which is growing more meaningless. Since death renders her being more fragmented and makes her fearful about the impermanence of life, the memories of death in Maya are interwoven with her identity crisis.

The problem of identity that Maya faces is exacerbated by her isolation by other individuals. Her alienation is also aggravated by the fact that she is increasingly losing traditional social contacts. This sense of loneliness is most agonizingly portrayed in the breakup in contact between Maya and her husband Gautama. Maya is frustrated and lonely in her own thoughts due to the emotional and psychological distance that exists between them and prevents her to express the most personal feelings and thoughts. The fact that Maya has no emotional connection with any person around her, and in particular, Gautama, only leads to her feeling even more lonely and further complicates her predicament. She is lonely and antagonistic in the world that appears to be even more foreign and unfriendly because of her inability to establish intimate relations with individuals. By skillfully working with the issues of psychological, existential, and cultural issues, Desai creates a story that reaches deep into the issues of a person trying to cope with the complexities of personal identity and the burden of societal expectations. The problem of social ecology in the novel is directly connected with the exploration of the human relationships and the loss of them in the nature. Desai illustrates the society where social cohesion is on the decline, which mirrors the condition of the surrounding where the characters inhabit. The strained relations and misunderstanding between Maya and her husband Gautama could be regarded as a miniature of the larger disintegration of society and nature. Desai says that ecological changes brought about by modernity and urbanization have resulted in the disintegration of social relations. The overarching themes of the novel of social and ecological balance lost in a rapidly changing world are reflected in how Maya desperately longs to revert to a more peaceful life and a life where she has a positive relationship with nature.

Besides, Desai goes further to explore the social ecology and ecological imperialism through the symbolism of animals, in particular, the peacock. The gradual loss of popularity of the peacock can be seen as a metaphor to the gradual exodus of the natural world which is a manifestation of the powers of modernity that are slowly eliminating ecological and cultural identities. This loss has been worsened by the ecological imperialism by colonial and post-colonial powers that changed the environment and disrupted the usual mode

of life. Through symbolism, Desai highlights the psychological and social impact of ecological destruction without sparing the environmental and cultural consequences of such imperialist pressure in a broader way.

## Conclusion

Therefore, the concept of colonising the nature and fragmented self of Desai in *Cry, the Peacock* has been applied by the environmental historians to analyze the comprehensive implications of the European hegemony on the social arrangement and environment in the conquered regions. This expression embodies all the ecological and social facts of colonialism underlining the close connection between exploitation of natural resources and the support of social injustices and the enslavement of the indigenous population. The harm that colonialism inflicted over the environment was not just a collateral damage to the economic exploitation process but a strategic decision to make the process of wealth extraction in the colonies work in order to ensure the domination and prosperity of European imperial powers in the coming years. This view highlights interrelations between environmental and social pasts in great depth, showing how the ecological changes during colonialism were both a reason and an effect of the imperialistic influence on the globe that was far-reaching.

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