

## The other colonized: Animals, empire, and narrative warfare

Sadhana Naithani: *The Inhuman Empire: Wildlife, Colonialism, Culture*. Routledge 2024

Does postcolonial scholarship consider how British colonial violence extended beyond human subjects and affected nonhuman animals? If one is interested in exploring such questions related to the intersections between postcolonial studies and animal studies, *The Inhuman Empire: Wildlife, Colonialism, Culture*, acts as a timely intervention, where Sadhana Naithani delivers a bold exploration into the entangled histories of empire, narrative, and the nonhuman. When postcolonial studies have historically emphasized the human costs of colonization, Naithani directs her focus to another site of violence: the mass suffering and systematic erasure of nonhuman animals in the colonial encounter. Her central argument is straightforward and strong: Wild animals, like colonized people, were victims of violence, dispossession and discursive subjection under British imperialism, but their pain is seldom part of historical and cultural conversation. In tackling this



### THE INHUMAN EMPIRE WILDLIFE, COLONIALISM, CULTURE

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major gap, Naithani builds her “narrative warfare” between two radically different narrative traditions, imperial hunting memoirs and Indian folk narratives, each reflecting opposing ethical and ontological orientations toward nonhuman animals.

Framed in the context of British colonial rule in India (1860–1960), the work considers a group of British texts on India’s wildlife. The core chapters of the book are organized as close readings of five colonial authors: Major Henry Shakespeare, Captain James Forsyth, G.P. Sanderson, John Lockwood Kipling, and Jim Corbett (a sixth author, J.C Fife-Coocson is also discussed briefly). These widely

read texts of their time were instrumental in forming the British public view of India as an untamed, exotic country filled with threatening beasts and ready for conquest. Naithani's accomplishment is to reclassify these as not neutral or marginal documents, but 'modern folk narratives' whose popular pursuit, imaginative format and moral inflection had far-reaching ideological effects.

Naithani argues that the story of Indian wildlife under colonial British rule may serve to change human perspectives on the conservation of those that are "still alive, wild and free" (Preface, ix). From this moral premise, the book opens with addressing a fundamental concern that comes in the way of the multispecies justice debate more often: Are animals sentient? Naithani draws upon Indian folk narrative traditions, especially the *Pañcatantra* and *Jataka* tales, besides the scientific backing, to argue that the sentience of animals has long been recognized in the Indian cosmologies. These narratives, she shows, are cognizant and responsive, just as human beings are.

This ontological claim, later, becomes the critical lens through which the colonial texts about hunting and Indian animals are read. In Chapter 1, Naithani examines Major Henry Shakespear's *The Wild Sports of India* and Captain James Forsyth's *The Highlands of Central India*, focusing on how they aestheticize killing and trivial-

ize suffering. Shakespear's prose, Naithani suggests reads like a manual of slaughter where animals are stripped of agency and reduced to targets. Forsyth, is seen reveling in "making them suffer," often prolonging hunts and turning cruelty into sport. Naithani makes us see how these narratives do more than describe, they cultivate and normalize a moral indifference to the pain of the colonized, the pain of the non-human. Similarly, chapters 4 and 5 look at tiger hunting exclusively. Chapter 4 offers a comparative study of representations of tigers across the works of Shakespear, Forsyth, Sanderson, and J.C. Fife-Cookson. In this chapter, tigers emerge as both metaphors and material targets, iconic figures of both fear and fascination. In "Tiger – the Trophy," what Naithani writes, reads like an apt condensation of colonial obsessions where the tiger becomes a symbolic double of the colonized land itself, something to be conquered, displayed, and consumed. Chapter 5 centers on Jim Corbett, the most famous of the colonial hunter-writers, whose writings are often cited for their conservationist sentiments and personal respect for animals. Yet Naithani argues, while Corbett is more sympathetic than his predecessors, his work still situates the animal as a problem to be solved, a man-eater to be understood and dispatched. The tiger may be a "gentleman," as Naithani notes with irony, but the hunter remains the hero in the Corbett stories.

In Chapter 2, Naithani analyses G.P. Sanderson's *Thirteen Years Among the Wild Beasts of India*. Sanderson, a government officer, is portrayed as embodying the colonial bureaucrat-hunter archetype. His work shows how he saw wild Indian Elephants as "useless and destructive", to show the contrary Naithani quotes from the *Pañcatantra* where elephants are portrayed as "elephant king named Four Tusks" (50). The extreme view of Sanderson of seeing them as manageable populations or logistical obstacles is prominent in the chapter. "Rocking the life of elephants," as the chapter title puts it, becomes a metaphor for colonial control and cruelty over India's megafauna; an enterprise justified through scientific language and bureaucratic logic, but deeply embedded in spectacle, domination and greed. Contrasting to other chapters in the book, Chapter 3 turns to John Lockwood Kipling's *Beast and Man in India*, which presents a text that equivocates between ethnographic observation and colonial superiority. Kipling acknowledges the nuanced place of animals in Indian culture and art, however, Naithani notes that he ultimately fails to transcend the limitations of his colonial gaze of superiority.

Chapter 6, "Narrative Warfare," marks the conceptual apex of the book, where Naithani presents her most powerful argument: that colonial and Indian storytelling traditions represent two

competing narrative regimes, one built on domination, the other on interspecies ethics and empathy. In this chapter, the concept of 'theriocide' is introduced by Naithani to describe the systemic, ideologically sanctioned extermination of nonhuman animals under the empire, not only as physical violence but as discursive erasure. British hunting narratives, she argues, operated through what she terms the "Three Ps": Pleasure, Profit, and Propaganda, mechanisms that aestheticized killing, justified ecological devastation, and bolstered imperial authority. In contrast, Indian folk traditions, such as the *Jataka* and *Pañcatantra*, offered a counter-epistemology rooted in empathy, relationality, and ethical coexistence. This chapter crucially reframes narrative itself as a tool of power: not merely a way of telling stories, but a means of producing which beings are grievable, which are disposable, and which are erased altogether. Chapter 7 draws a rich philosophical conclusion to the book, challenging readers to confront the narrative and ethical legacies of colonialism in the context of ecological crisis. It calls for a radical reimagining of how we remember, mourn, and tell stories. Naithani advocates for decolonial, multispecies storytelling rooted in relational ethics and folk knowledge. For her, reclaiming these fractured narrative traditions is a necessary intervention not merely an act of nostalgia, one that expands the boundaries of justice and en-

ables new, restorative ways of living with the more-than-human world.

*The Inhuman Empire* is an outstanding example of an interdisciplinary scholarship. It asks us to reexamine the very foundations of how we know, represent, and remember the nonhuman. The book is rich in empirical detail, theoretically rigorous, and ethically urgent. Naithani's frame gestures to the

global colonial context as well, especially Australia and Africa. Nonetheless, the methodology she develops, juxtaposing narrative traditions to expose epistemic violence, is readily transferable to other imperial contexts. This is a scholarship that not only forces us to understand the past but dares to make us imagine a more just and inclusive future.<sup>1</sup>

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1 *Note on the use of AI:* No generative AI was used to generate any part of the review text. However, Grammarly and Claude AI was used for spell-checking and proofreading purposes.