



Subjugating the nonhuman: Colonial masculinity and the genre of shikar literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the convergence of colonial masculinity, governance, the formalization of Shikar as an imperial sport in British India, and the rise of Shikar Literature. It moves past a neutral depiction of Shikar and its literary works, arguing that the colonizer's hunting practices represented a hyper-masculine endeavor aimed at legitimizing the colonial mission of gendered control. Through the implementation of structural policies such as the Forest Act of 1878, the colonial regime systematically labeled indigenous subsistence hunting as unethical, effeminate, and poaching, while simultaneously establishing legal and moral frameworks to criminalize nonhuman entities. By categorizing apex predators as dangerous outlaws or vermin, the colonial authority sought and justified its control and subjugation. This administrative approach sharply contrasted with indigenous ecological practices, which emphasized localized coexistence and sacred cosmologies rather than the imperial dichotomy of resources and vermin. Additionally, this paper examines the institutional evolution of Shikar literature into a unique commercial genre that reinforced metropolitan anxieties, ultimately merging into the mainstream canon of English literature. In conclusion, by investigating the pragmatic concessions, subaltern resistances, and the deep somatic trauma inflicted on colonized fauna, this study illustrates how the violent domination of the nonhuman realm was intricately connected to the psychological and political enforcement of comprehensive colonial power.

Keywords: Colonialism, shikar literature, nonhuman, forest act, binary

Introduction

The evolution of Shikar from a traditional localized practice to a highly regulated imperial sport reflects what environmental historians identify as a specialized predatory masculinity driving the British colonial apparatus. Within this framework, the colonizer constructed an explicit ideological link between the colonized human population and the nonhuman animal, viewing both as components of a wild, chaotic landscape that justified external subjugation. This perspective framed the subjugation of nature alongside the control of native populations as interconnected elements of colonial rule. As argued by Vijay Ramadas Mandala in *Shooting a Tiger: Big Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India*, the confrontation with apex predators was not merely a recreational pursuit but a profound metaphor for imperial governance. Hunting dangerous animals represented a struggle for dominance, where the act of killing was intertwined with the assertion of power. By positioning the white, rational hunter as the sole arbiter of fair play and physical grit over dangerous fauna, the colonial state effectively mapped the alleged biological weakness and passivity of the colonized populace onto the broader Indian ecosystem. This narrative served to validate the Empire's self-perceived civilizing mission through the literal and symbolic conquest of both wildlife and human beings. Such practices ultimately reinforced a worldview that justified imperialism by presenting it as a necessary endeavour for control and order.

However, during the initial phases of British expansion under the East India Company, colonial perceptions of

Indian wildlife were overwhelmingly utilitarian, viewing the nonhuman through the dual lenses of economic asset and agrarian hazard rather than as objects of sport. As explored by environmental historians like Mahesh Rangarajan and Vijay Ramadas Mandala, early administrators viewed animals like elephants not as majestic game, but as vital military and logistical machines that required strict protection for state transport. Conversely, apex predators such as tigers, along with massive herbivores like gaurs, were initially perceived as vermin and impediments to the expansion of revenue-generating agricultural land. Rather than pursuing these animals for personal prestige or masculine validation, early colonial authorities established extensive bounty systems to incentivize the mass culling of tigers and leopards, framing their elimination as an administrative duty to secure the frontier and protect the native labour force (Sinha 1995) ^[11].

This purely extractionist and defensive ethos highlights how the early colonial state viewed the jungle not yet as a romanticised theatre for testing European grit, but as an unpredictable obstacle to imperial commerce that needed to be systematically tamed. However, with the expansion and settlement of the colonial rule within the varied territories of India and following the stability of the empire, the desire of extraction of the human economy paralleled the desire to intervene into the colonised world of the nonhuman (Sramek 2006) ^[12].

Apart from the domesticated and burdened beasts capitalised for human society and management, the

wilderness became a new arena of conquest and Shikar a popular medium of colonial intervention. The imperial engagement thus diverted from the colonial standard of obsessive extraction to delve upon Shikar as a civilizational permanence.

The Growth of Shikar Literature

This expansion of the British imperial apparatus necessitated a parallel textual subjugation of the Indian wilderness, resulting in a rich corporate and personal archive designed to translate the nonhuman world for consumption by an anxious European metropole. Initially, representations of Indian wildlife appeared disjointed, scattered across natural history catalogues, surveys by the East India Company, and personal epistolary travelogues. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, these disparate documents began to coalesce into a distinct, commercialized genre that prioritized the hyper-visceral representation of the colonized fauna as a violent and epidemic problem. Scholars of the imperial imagination note that this nascent literature systematically constructed the animality of the Indian landscape by projecting Western anxieties regarding the concept of alterity, climatic hostility, and bodily vulnerability onto the native fauna. By illustrating the exotic and dangerous unpredictability of the jungle, these texts fulfilled a domestic demand for adventure while establishing a clear cognitive distance between the rational, writing European subject and the chaotic, nonhuman object of the colony. Furthermore, the portrayal of animals in this context served to reinforce colonial power dynamics, simultaneously depicting the British as both conquerors and protectors of a land teeming with perceived threats, thus justifying their dominance over it.

This evolving narrative framework reached its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the formal consolidation of Shikar literature as an idealised masculine genre of hunting memoirs self-exemplified by authors ranging from William Rice to Jim Corbett (Corbett 1944)^[2]. Within these texts, the nonhuman animal underwent a profound biopolitical conversion: apex predators were no longer just ecological hazards to be cleared by state bounties, but were instead written as calculated, malevolent villains whose physical strength directly challenged the authority of the Raj who had to secure the lives of the hapless natives. Authors meticulously recorded the mechanics of tracking, ballistic technicalities, and lethal confrontations, deploying what contemporary critics describe as a perceptual gaze that objectified the animal while framing the hunter as a heroic protector of vulnerable native populations. By consuming these highly stylized accounts of the coloniser's grit, stoicism, and adherence to codes of fair play, the metropolitan European audience received a weekly or monthly reinforcement of imperial legitimacy. Shikar literature thus functioned as an essential cultural apparatus, transforming the violent execution of nonhuman lives into a moral performance of righteous, disciplined masculinity that validated the ongoing subjugation of the colony (Nandy 1983)^[6]. The number of people who wrote and read Shikar Literature grew with time advancing the institutionalisation of the same as a genre that reflected a network of colonial engagement within a dangerous field.

The crystallization of Shikar literature into a recognized genre was thus heavily accelerated by formal and informal

networks of colonial writers, publishers, and sports societies rather than disjointed individuals. While formal guilds did not exist, institutions like the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), elite officers' clubs, and colonial publishing houses like Thacker, Spink & Co. acted as critical conduits, providing the archival infrastructure and print platforms necessary to standardize hunting narratives. Prominent shikaris leveraged these networks to publish highly sought-after memoirs; William Rice's *Tiger-Shooting in India* (1857)^[10] and Samuel Baker's *The Rifle and Hound in Ceylon* (1854)^[1] established the early Victorian benchmark, which later culminated in the massive global success of Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944)^[2] and even the South Indian accounts of Kenneth Anderson (Rashkow 2014)^[8]. Over the decades, the target audience shifted dramatically: initially intended for a niche circle of military officers and civil servants seeking tactical advice, the genre transitioned into a commercial enterprise targeted at the metropolitan European public. This shift triggered a parallel evolution in narrative treatment, moving away from blood-soaked accounts of indiscriminate slaughter toward highly suspenseful, quasi-detective plots that blended high adventure with early conservationist rhetoric. However, the idealised masculine stereotype underlined such narratives, plots and storytelling.

Colonial Legitimacy and the Animal Outlaw

To fully institutionalize this gendered representation of treating the nonhuman especially the flora and fauna of colonised spaces, the colonial administration leveraged legal frameworks most notably the Forest Act of 1878 to restructure the relationships between local communities and their environments. Under this legislative shift, traditional, subsistence-based hunting methods practiced by marginalized or subaltern tribes were systematically denigrated as ungentlemanly, sneaky, and effeminate. Research by Wani and Bhat (2022)^[13] highlights how the British defined their own big-game hunting as an elite code of masculine sportsmanship, simultaneously rendering indigenous methods a criminal act of poaching. In doing so, the state constructed a dual subjugation: the nonhuman animal was reduced to a bio-political or necro-political object often demonized as a villainous vermin or man-eater that threatened imperial safety while the indigenous human was stripped of traditional livelihood and conflated with the primitive, uncultivated elements of the wilderness. This matrix allowed the British civil servant or military officer to perform an idealized, stoic masculinity that claimed to protect the vulnerable native population while asserting total dominance over the nonhuman world (Orwell 1936)^[7].

The transition of the colonial state from a mercantile venture to a sovereign administrative power required an aggressive legal reclassification of the natural world, resulting in what environmental historians term the criminalisation of the beast. Rather than viewing the colonised nonhuman through a lens of ecological equilibrium, the British administration introduced a binary legal taxonomy that divided the animal kingdom into useful state resources such as transport elephants and malicious, anti-social outlaws. Through official government acts and regional gazetteers, animals like tigers, panthers, wolves, and wild dogs were systematically designated as vermin or man-eaters (Mandala 2018)^[5]. This administrative label was not merely descriptive; it functioned as a biopolitical death sentence

that legally stripped the animal of any inherent right to existence. By framing the predator as a fugitive trespassing on the civilised boundaries of the Raj, the state legitimized a state-sponsored economy of extermination, transforming the slaughter of these nonhuman entities into a vital legal obligation to preserve colonial public safety.

To reinforce this legal framework, Shikar literature and official government records heavily anthropomorphised negatively these designated vermin, projecting human criminal traits such as malice, cunning, and moral degeneracy onto the nonhuman animal. British hunting memoirs frequently described the tiger or leopard not as a biological creature driven by predatory instinct, but as a calculated, bloodthirsty murderer (Kipling 1894) ^[4] that took pleasure in terrorising local villages and disrupting imperial labour lines. As Joseph Sramek observes in his analysis of colonial hunting ideologies, this moral vilification was heavily gendered; the cunning and deceitful nature ascribed to man-eaters directly mirrored the untrustworthy stereotypes the British projected onto colonized Indian men who resisted imperial assimilation. By presenting the predatory animal as a villainous, unnatural anomaly that actively targeted the vulnerable and defenseless native population, the British hunter could step forward as a chivalrous, hyper-masculine protector, using the moral depravity of the beast to validate the righteous violence of his rifle.

Ultimately, the criminalisation of the beast served as a powerful justification for the aggressive restructuring of the Indian landscape, aligning the eradication of wildlife with the territorial expansion of the Empire (Gadgil 1992) ^[3]. By rendering the jungle, a space of inherent criminality populated by monstrous fauna, the colonial administration argued that the untamed wilderness was a direct threat to the agricultural and economic stability of the state. Consequently, the eradication of these animal outlaws went hand-in-hand with the violent displacement of indigenous tribal communities, who were frequently accused of harboring or failing to report these dangerous predators. This dual pacification allowed the British civil servant or military officer to perform an idealized, disciplined masculinity that conquered the dangerous spatial frontiers of the colony. The physical elimination of the criminalised animal thus became synonymous with the physical pacification of the colony itself, demonstrating that British masculine reason could successfully tame both the wild landscapes and the nonhuman threats that jeopardised the progress of the Empire.

The Binaries of the Human and the Nonhuman

Contrastingly, within Shikar literature, the portrayal of the colonised native human society stands in distinction to the hyper-masculine and self-sacrificing identity constructed for the British coloniser (Baker 1854) ^[1]. Where colonial memoirs celebrated the white hunter as an icon of rational courage and mechanical mastery over apex predators, indigenous communities particularly forest-dwelling tribes and native Shikaris were systematically represented through a framework of racialized lack. British writers frequently cast indigenous tracking methods, which relied on ancient ecological knowledge and rudimentary tools, as inherently cowardly, sneaky, and effeminate. This narrative erasure obscured a deeply contrasting worldview, while the British viewed the Indian jungle as a hostile space of resource

extraction and competitive trophy accumulation, local communities traditionally operated under ethics of localized coexistence, mutual preservation, and cautious respect for felines and other megafauna. By reducing indigenous people to either primitive, terrified victims requiring imperial rescue or incompetent poachers who violated Victorian codes of fair play, Shikar literature successfully rationalized the total displacement of native authority over the nonhuman world (Rangarajan 1996) ^[9].

Despite these divergent philosophies, the historical record reveals a complex grid of transactional concurrence and acceptance between the colonized populace and the colonizer over the violent execution of wildlife. As Ezra Rashkow demonstrates in his seminal research on subaltern shikaris, forest-dwelling communities such as the Gond frequently formed a pragmatic alliance with the colonial state's vermin-eradication programs. Driven by state-sanctioned financial incentives, bounties, and employment opportunities as beaters or scouts, many indigenous hunters actively participated in accelerated modes of hunting that they knew to be ecologically unsustainable. Furthermore, agrarian peasants often welcomed the lethal interventions of the British rifle when local man-eaters or crop-raiders directly jeopardized their immediate survival and livestock (Rice 1857) ^[10]. This compliance, however, did not signify an alignment of moral or cultural values; rather, it was a tactical submission born of economic marginalization, wherein the colonized population utilized the destructive technologies of the Raj to manage immediate material precarity, unwittingly aiding the state's penetration into India's isolated forest interiors. Yet many did not share the extractive ethos or annihilatory tendency of the coloniser. In fact, for many forest-dwelling and tribal communities, such as the Baigas and Gonds, the jungle was not an adversarial wilderness to be conquered, nor was it a playground for the testing of masculine grit. Instead, their belief systems were rooted in a cosmology of sacred geography and localized coexistence, where nonhuman megafauna were viewed as sentient co-inhabitants or even ancestral manifestations. Apex predators like tigers were frequently integrated into regional folklore and spiritual pacts, honored as guardians of the forest balance whose lives were only taken under specific codes of ritual necessity or immediate self-defense. This stood in stark contrast to the binary of the human and nonhuman of the British administration, which viewed the nonhuman world as a desecralized space for the use of the human as a resource or subject composing of commercial timber, revenue-generating agriculture, and commodified trophies (Sinha 1995) ^[11]. While the coloniser measured his status by the mechanical mastery and singular violence of the kill, the native value system prioritised ecological restraint and reciprocal survival, viewing the total eradication of a species as an act of cosmic and social disruption.

This profound divergence in values manifested directly in how each group conceptualized the purpose and meaning of the hunt itself. To the Victorian colonial official, the hunt was a highly structured, secularized performance of sportsmanship designed to prove human superiority and individual character through adherence to artificial rules of fair play. Conversely, for indigenous societies, hunting was an un-romanticized, deeply utilitarian practice tied to collective survival, food security, and agricultural defence. The native community saw no moral virtue in facing a

cornered beast with a single-shot rifle merely to claim a skin for a metropolitan parlour, such a display of individualistic bravado was entirely foreign to a communal ethos that valued safety, efficiency, and resource preservation. When indigenous trackers used traps, pits, or poisoned arrows, they were executing highly evolved, low-risk strategies developed over centuries to protect human life and crops with minimal environmental disturbance. By denigrating these practical methods as cowardly or unmanly, the colonial state exposed its own inability or refusal to comprehend an indigenous value system that had less distinctions to separate the human from the nonhuman (Rashkow 2014) ^[8].

Beyond the structural policies and ideological debates of the colonial engagement with the nonhuman lies the visceral reality of the somatic trauma inflicted directly upon the bodies of Indian megafauna. The performance of colonial masculinity was fundamentally contingent upon the spectacular and graphic physical destruction of nonhuman life, transforming the living animal into a site of immense agony (Sramek 2006) ^[12]. Shikar literature, despite its attempt to sterilize the hunt through clinical descriptions of ballistic calibres and tracking accuracy, frequently betrays the profound suffering inherent in the sport. Tigers, elephants, and leopards were regularly subjected to non-lethal, crippling bullet wounds, resulting in agonizing, hours-long flights through dense jungle while pursued by tracking parties. The screams of wounded elephants or the defensive, pain-driven roars of cornered felines were meticulously documented by colonial hunters, yet these expressions of intense nonhuman suffering were twisted into narrative proof of poetic justice, accidents or consequence of the animal's inherent savagery and fury. By reducing the organic nervous system of a complex, sentient creature to a target for high-velocity projectiles, the sahib's rifle performed a highly gendered form of violence that celebrated the total domination over physical pain as the ultimate metric of European stoicism and physical control. The popularity of Shikar literature thus as a colonial genre underlined the fact that what was emphasised herein were colonial notions of idealised masculinity, the claim of technological advancements in countering the malicious nonhuman, personification of the nonhuman and ultimately the justification of the immense loss and pain inflicted upon the nonhuman.

Conclusion

The evolution of Shikar from a localized practice of survival into an institutionalized imperial sport exposes the deep structural connections between colonial governance, gender ideology, and environmental extraction in British India. By transforming the Indian wilderness into a hyper-masculine performance, the colonial state used the hunt to justify its political authority, mapping Victorian ideals of Christian manliness onto the violent subjugation of the landscape. Through legal frameworks like the Forest Act of 1878 and the systematic criminalization of the beast, the Raj achieved a dual pacification. It stripped indigenous populations of their traditional livelihoods by branding their subsistence practices as ungentlemanly poaching while reducing apex predators to malicious outlaws that had to be eradicated. This artificial binary stood in sharp contrast to indigenous environmental ethics, which rejected the strict separation of the human and nonhuman worlds in favor of cosmovisions

rooted in coexistence and ecological restraint. Furthermore, the rise in the popularity of Shikar literature provided the necessary textual machinery to broadcast this racial and gendered dominance to a receptive European metropole, embedding its wilderness aesthetics as a mainstream genre.

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