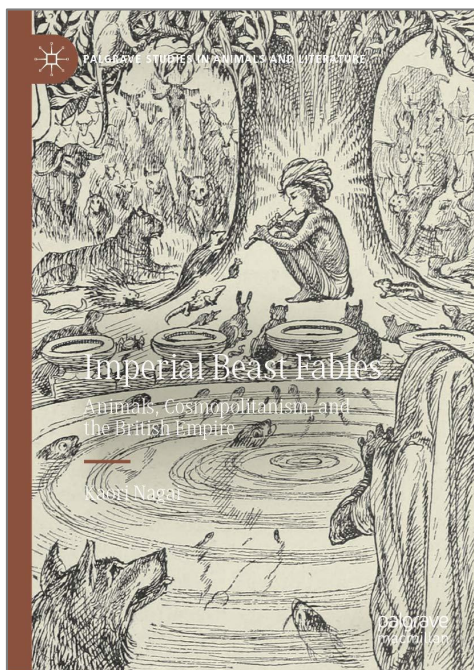


BOOKS

Kaori Nagai, *Imperial Beast Fables: Animals, Cosmopolitanism, and the British Empire*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 265 p.

Although often reduced to moralizing maxims, enjoyed for their exoticism, or relegated to the realm of children's literature, fables resist such restrictive confinements by creating a narrative space that invites the contemplation of intricate political, social, and (trans)cultural relations. Kaori Nagai's *Imperial Beast Fables: Animals, Cosmopolitanism and the British Empire* underlines this generic potential by examining "the fable as a theatre of the human-animal relationship ... within the context of British imperialism" of the long nineteenth century (6).

Published in 2020, Nagai's study provides a fascinating insight into what she calls the fabular Animal-Machine, a term she uses to refer to the British Empire, and the manner in which its configuration revealed important aspects regarding the distribution of power through orality. Through making an analogy to the Skinner Box experiment, a prime example



of conditioning as a "subliminal stimulus, ineffective on its own, becomes effective when repeated" (2), Nagai brings into discussion the various ways in which silence could diminish or bolster one's power. This is the value of fables, Nagai argues, as their very nature of easily repeatable stories made them the perfect tools of colonialism, which she analyses with a very insightful eye for the themes and subversive messages which they explore.

Divided into seven major chapters, the book tackles a variety of aspects relating to colonialism, imperialism and the Anthropocene, discussed through a generous corpus of fables, ranging from Kipling's *Jungle Books* to the *One Thousand And One Nights* collection of Middle Eastern folk tales to Harris' compilation of the African American tales centred around the eponymous *Uncle Remus* and many other texts, each used to exemplify to various degrees the manner in which the

Western world had appropriated and reshaped those texts for its own benefit. The central argument of Nagai's book is that as we seek to depoliticize such texts and remove them from their cultural sphere to be employed globally, we run the risk of overlooking that the rise of the fable is in fact tightly connected with the rise of the state. This is best seen in the case of *The Jungle Book*, which serves as an allegory that captures the human anxieties regarding changing social relations and shows how by "emphasizing the motifs of peace, fairness and justice, animal fables seek to define new rules of conduct in the new regime" (18). Conflict can only be mitigated by speech in Kipling's world, and thus possessing the capacity for speech becomes an inherent tool of power and oppression used over the animals of the jungle.

Nagai explains that for Europeans, fables functioned as study guides into the cultures from which they were appropriated, shifting the focus of readers towards what was perceived to be the natural despotism, luxury and sexuality of these conquered places and people, relying on them in the same way "in which the white masters drew on the fables of a subjugated people to narrate their own history" (32), reframing the fables for the sake of the colonizer, often through replacing the local fauna and flora with alternatives more familiar to the European individual, as well as quite arbitrarily attributing the power of speech to animals based on a mechanism which could only be described as a "colonial anthropological machine" (50). Nagai manages to show very well how language became synonymous with humanity, in that the Other remained staunchly associated with the incomprehensible beast whose

means of communication were unintelligible to the human, – the European, in this context – and to conquer the beast's language was to assert power over it. Power and its agents remain a very prominent theme in fables.

Moreover, the book draws attention to how conquering foreign lands came about as a notion of colonial expansion, with its ultimate result being the 'taming' of forests and seas and thus removing from them the spike of horror, that once lay at the core of humanity's perception of it. Through colonial intervention, mainly the British Empire's push towards the creation of forestry services in places such as India, the forest moves into the space of the law and creates as a result a different relationship between humans and animals, and between colonisers and natives as "the colonial space, imagined by the coloniser as primitive and unhistorical, is shown to be the treasure house of such secrets unappreciated by 'natives', who use, and live in, these 'animal' languages" (88). Nagai explains that now man, actually the European, is the manager of ecology and thus exerts a high degree of power over this particular space. Moreover, authors like Kipling seek to portray this type of involvement as benevolent, thus seemingly situating it above the approach of the locals.

Nagai discusses the use of language as a tool for defamiliarization in a similar manner, by using Kobo Abe's *Kangaroo Notebook* as a potent example. In the novel, Nagai points out, "the literary experience of defamiliarization is invariably accompanied by an invitation to question what makes us feel safe and 'human'" (121), which inevitably brings back the issue of the Anthropocene and post-Anthropocene. This places the discussion

into a different sphere than previously thought as it questions the value of interfering in nature to such a degree that it restructures the concept itself, mostly to the detriment of what they claim are 'noxious influences' such as animals which cannot be tamed or local natives who do not 'appreciate' the environment in an appropriate manner, as defined by imperialists.

Nagai's work points out the value of recontextualizing fables and their themes into their historical and didactic environment. She remarks that they were used as middle grounds for the expanding colonial powers at the time, favouring contexts in which the human element was absent, yet still dominant, with the power

of language being attributed only to animals that displayed human qualities and posed little threat to the colonisers. This notion of species cosmopolitanism, together with its impact and implications, remains thus one of the most important tenets of Nagai's study. It presents an alternative to Western colonial thinking: instead of divorcing itself from its impact upon former colonial cultures and environments, it should refrain from transforming the body of the animal into a scene of reading and focus on disentangling it from human interpretation by instead accepting its inherent complexity as it is, without reconstructing it for the sake of Anthropocene ideals.

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