

From Commodification to Companionship: Human-Animal Relationality in R. K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi*

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan's A Tiger for Malgudi (1983) offers a distinctive narrative in Indian writing in English by placing a tiger named Raja at the centre of its story as both protagonist and first-person narrator. This article examines the shifting dynamics of human-animal relationality in the novel, tracing Raja's journey from a commodified animal exploited successively by the circus and the film industry as a spectacle for human profit, to a companion and spiritual equal under the guidance of an ascetic Master. Drawing on Nicole Shukin's concept of animal capital and Donna Haraway's notion of companion species, and situating the analysis within the Indian philosophical traditions of ahimsa and Vedantic non-dualism, the article examines how Narayan deconstructs anthropocentric assumptions by asserting Raja's interiority, consciousness, and capacity for transformation. The research article further argues that the novel moves beyond the binary of human and animal to propose a model of interspecies relationality that is grounded in recognition, empathy, and spiritual companionship. This contributes to the growing field of Animal Studies in Indian literary criticism.

Keywords: Animal Studies, animal capital, companion species, ahimsa and Vedantic non-dualism, interspecies relationality

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Introduction

Animal Studies has shifted the focus of the humanities by placing non-human animals at the centre of discussions about ethics, society, and human relationships. Rather than simply reflecting prevailing views on animals, literary works actively shape the imaginative frameworks that either sustain or challenge their oppression. Kari Weil argues that literature affords access to forms of creaturely otherness that scientific or empirical investigation cannot adequately address, making narrative a privileged site for exploring interspecies relations (Weil 3). Systematic, animal-centred readings in Indian writing in English remain largely underdeveloped. The non-human figure is frequently absorbed into postcolonial, nationalist, or spiritual interpretive frameworks, to function as a symbolic vehicle rather than as an autonomous individual. This critical subordination reflects a widespread anthropocentric bias in humanist literary discourse.

This article examines how R. K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) poses a direct challenge to this tendency. The novel grants the position of first-person narrator to a tiger named Raja, who presents himself as a subject capable of thought, memory, judgment, and moral transformation. Narayan's authorial preface frames this choice as a critique of anthropocentric fiction, observing that humans "have monopolized the attention of fiction writers" (7) while ignoring the possibility that other creatures possess their own sense of self, moral perspectives, worldviews, and means of expression. This statement, made outside the fiction itself, aligns the novel with the foundational concerns of Animal Studies, anticipating its central questions about animal subjectivity, interspecies ethics, and the critique of human instrumentalism. The novel appeared in 1983, a decade after India's Wildlife Protection Act had codified state responsibility toward endangered species, yet left the cultural conditions of animal instrumentalism structurally intact. Narayan's philosophical intervention thus occurs at a historically precise moment: legislative protection had arrived without any accompanying vocabulary of animal interiority.

Animal violence is a global problem that affects millions of animals every year. It can manifest itself in various forms, such as abandonment, physical abuse, and commercial exploitation. Animal violence has a negative impact on animal welfare, but it can also have consequences for society at large. Detecting animal violence is a major challenge. (Vargas et al. 218)

Critical engagement with *A Tiger for Malgudi* has tended to read the novel primarily as a spiritual allegory. D. W. Atkinson's close reading establishes the novel's three-part structure by tracing Raja's dharma-karma journey through stages of increasing spiritual awareness, treating its philosophical vehicle as a tiger rendered as allegory rather than as an animal subject with independent ethical standing (Atkinson 8-9). This spiritual-allegorical orientation has long positioned Raja as an instrument of Hindu philosophical discourse in Narayan criticism, with the consequence that Raja becomes a vehicle for human philosophical or cultural narratives rather than a subject with autonomous ethical claims. This elision is not

confined to Narayan criticism. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin demonstrate in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2015), postcolonial literary studies more broadly have tended to absorb animal figures into human political narratives, treating the non-human animal as metaphor or symbol rather than as an ethically autonomous subject in its own right. Animal Studies offers a corrective to this displacement within Narayan scholarship. Recent scholarship in the field shows that reading literary animals as subjects rather than symbols opens analytical dimensions that humanist criticism systematically closes off (Weitzenfeld 197–205). The gap in Narayan criticism, unremarked in both the spiritual-allegorical tradition Atkinson represents and the postcolonial spatial framework, is the absence of a sustained reading that engages Raja’s animality as a primary analytical category. “People can feel various kinds of loss and grief in relation to non-human animals. This has been increasingly studied in relation to pets and companion animals” (Pihkala and Aaltola 1).

This article addresses that gap by examining how the novel negotiates the competing logics of animal commodification and interspecies companionship, and what model of human-animal relationality the narrative ultimately proposes. The analytical framework draws on two foundational contributions to Animal Studies. In *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (2009), Nicole Shukin introduces the concept of animal capital to theorize how animal life is transformed into cultural spectacle and biological resource within systems of human profit. Donna Haraway’s notion of companion species, developed in *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003), proposes by contrast a relational model grounded in mutual recognition, co-becoming, and shared vulnerability. Both frameworks provide the conceptual basis for tracing Raja’s transition from a commodified object in the circus and film industry to an ethically recognized companion under the Master’s guidance. The Empathy Toward Animals (ETA) scale measures two dimensions of animal-directed empathy: (1) Empathic Concern, encompassing the emotional aspects, and (2) Perspective Taking, encompassing the cognitive aspects. Although adapted from an existing measure of human-directed empathy, the original version of the ETA scale has not undergone a comprehensive investigation of its internal and external validity (Martins et al. 131).

The Indian philosophical traditions of ahimsa and Vedantic non-dualism provide the cultural and ethical horizon within which Narayan’s model of interspecies relationality acquires its most distinctively Indian articulation. The article proceeds through three sections, examining Raja’s commodification in the circus and film industry, the emergence of the Master-Raja companionship, and the novel’s Indian philosophical grounding.

Raja as Animal Capital

Raja’s earliest experiences in the circus and the film industry in *A Tiger for Malgudi* reveal the reduction of animal life to commodified spectacle, making Nicole Shukin’s concept of animal capital a productive framework for reading the novel’s opening sections. Shukin defines the category as one that “simultaneously notates

the semiotic currency of animal signs and the carnal traffic in animal substances” (7). This dual structure, semiotic and carnal, organizes the circus economy represented in the novel, where Raja’s wildness is transformed into profitable spectacle. Narayan renders this process visible through Raja’s retrospective narration of the ring. Recalling a staged combat with a lion, Raja notes that he received “a pat on my back from the ringmaster himself” (Narayan 13). The significance of the gesture lies in its impersonality: the ringmaster’s approval is directed not toward Raja as a conscious being but toward the successful performance of commercial entertainment. Raja’s value arises only through his capacity to generate spectacle, exposing the logic by which animal life becomes economically exploitable within institutional structures of captivity. India’s Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 prohibits performances inflicting animal suffering, yet the novel suggests that such legislative protections are unable to address the lived realities of captive performance animals.

The circus’s instrumentalization of Raja does not operate solely through physical confinement. Shukin’s second formulation extends the analysis: “animal memes and animal matter are mutually overdetermined as forms of capital” (7).

In the circus economy, Raja’s body generates the affective thrill of proximity to danger, while his image as a tiger subdued by human command circulates as a cultural sign that consolidates the circus’s commercial appeal. These two functions are inseparable. There is conflicting evidence regarding the role that empathy plays in the emission or inhibition of aggressive behaviours and how generalizable interspecies empathy is. In this respect, three phenomena of interest stand out: empathic erosion, progressive desensitization to violence and compassion fatigue (Moll et al. 184). Narayan exposes Raja’s awareness of this structural condition with precision. Reflecting from his zoo enclosure at the novel’s opening, Raja addresses the spectator directly, insisting that unlike the tiger beside him, he possesses an inner consciousness capable of thought, judgment, memory, and emotional understanding comparable, if not superior, to that of humans (Narayan 11–12). This declaration is an analytical self-assessment rather than a metaphysical claim. Raja identifies the foundational misrecognition structuring his captivity: those who observe him perceive the sign of the tiger, not the thinking subject inhabiting it. The zoo, like the circus, demands that the animal remain a legible image. William Nelles’s discussion of animal focalization differentiates between animals that remain objects of external description and those granted narrative consciousness within the text, capable of retrospective reflection and interpretation (188–89). Raja’s retrospective self-assessment clearly places him in the second category. What the novel traces is not a behavioural arc but a philosophical one: the movement of a conscious subject through successive misrecognitions toward a reconstructed self-understanding. The misrecognition Raja identifies is thus structural, his opening declaration functions as evidence of the very consciousness that the institutional gaze refuses to acknowledge.

The logic of commodification intensifies when Narayan shifts the narrative to the film-shooting camp, a setting that intensifies the logic of commodification rather than merely relocating it. Shukin's concept of rendering provides the analytical instrument here. Rendering, in Shukin's formulation, simultaneously signifies "the mimetic act of making a copy" and the "industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains" (20). The film set activates both. Raja's body is rendered cinematically into a spectacle for a paying audience, while his submission to human direction reduces his autonomous agency to the raw material of another industry's profit. The shooting camp treats Raja as a technical problem whose unpredictable movement must be scripted and contained. When Raja escapes from the camp, the immediate public response particularly the tailor's response is a demand for his death (Narayan 101). This response crystallizes Raja's commodified existence across both institutional settings: an animal who exceeds the frame of human utility is perceived as a threat, not as a subject. Under India's Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, tigers are classified as Schedule I protected species, and their commercial use in performances is legally prohibited. Yet Narayan's novel reveals, through Raja's own account of the film camp, that legal protection fails to intervene in the material realities of his exploitation. The narrative exposes the limits of statutory language: legal prohibition alone cannot dismantle the structures of animal capitalism that continue to commodify animal life. By presenting Raja as a conscious and reflective subject, Narayan challenges this failure from within the narrative, foregrounding the gap between legal recognition and lived animal experience.

From Captivity to Companionship

The institutional failure to recognize Raja as a subject does not end the argument but generates its next demand. The narrative requires a mode of engagement capable of acknowledging animal subjectivity, and Narayan constructs exactly this in the Master-Raja relationship. The Master is the first human figure in the novel who approaches Raja without expectation of economic return. Narayan records this encounter through Raja's narration, describing the Master's proximity as free of fear, command, or managerial intent (129). Raja's habitual aggression toward human presence dissolves, and this dissolution is not trained compliance; it is a volitional response to a qualitatively different kind of attentiveness. Haraway in *When Species Meet* (2008), argues that companion species are constituted through relations of "becoming with," such that relationality itself becomes the central unit of analysis (25–31). What Narayan suggests is that identity is shaped through relationships rather than existing independently beforehand. The Master becomes the one who lives alongside a tiger; Raja becomes the one who chooses to follow a human. Neither existed as a relational reference for the other before this encounter; each is constituted anew through it. The novel offers evidence of this when Raja registers the dissolution not as trained compliance but as a restructured perception, recalling that at the moment of the Master's approach there was "a haze in which he seemed to exist, a haze that persisted all through our association" (Narayan 129), a phenomenological account of what it means for a tiger to encounter a human whose

presence does not demand submission. The haze marks the dissolution of the defensive vigilance that every prior human encounter had demanded; in the Master's presence, that system of constant threat perception falls away.

The transformation enacted through this encounter extends beyond interspecies affiliation toward a critique of anthropocentric ontology. Narayan is deliberate in showing that the Master's own subjectivity undergoes substantive revision through his bond with Raja. The Master progressively relinquishes household obligations, social roles, and material attachments in direct proportion to the deepening of their companionship (Narayan 139 - 140). This pattern is precisely what Haraway theorizes in her argument that companion species inhabit "the implosion of nature and culture in the relentlessly historically specific, joint lives...bonded in significant otherness" (16). The significant otherness that structures the Master-Raja relationship is not dissolved through familiarity; it is actively maintained as the condition of the bond's integrity. Each remains irreducibly other to the other, and their relationship is sustained by that irreducibility rather than despite it. Haraway's framework refuses the sentimental register of unconditional love or anthropomorphic projection; companionship, in her formulation, is a demanding ethical practice of attention to difference. The Wildlife Institute of India has documented field conditions in which tigers exhibit habituated, non-aggressive proximity to specific individuals within forest buffer zones. The voluntary interspecies proximity Narayan narrates is corroborated by the novel's own sustained documentation: "All day long I lay across the entrance of his shelter. It was enough for me that I was near him" (Narayan 136).

The bond between the Master and Raja proposes an alternative ontological framework that retroactively exposes the structural violence of the instrumental logic traced in the preceding section. Narayan marks this shift through Raja's behavioural transformation across the novel's plot. By its closing movement, Raja has abandoned predatory and territorial behaviour entirely, resting near the Master with an equanimity that no coercive regime produced. This transformation does not follow from conditioning; it follows from a reconstructed self-understanding that the relationship with the Master has catalysed. The most explicit textual evidence of this appears in the exchange in which the Master describes the divine as "a source of power and strength," while Raja conceives of God as "an enormous tiger, spanning the earth and the sky" (Narayan 136- 37). Narayan stages this as a moment of conscious philosophical divergence rather than behavioural compliance, as Raja articulates a theological self-conception, actively identifies his species-form with the absolute, and receives the Master's correction (that both human and tiger project conditioned images of the divine that fall short of the divine in its fullness) as a proposition his consciousness engages rather than merely undergoes. Raja's subsequent equanimity is therefore not the product of habituation or restraint but the cognitive aftermath of a philosophical encounter that his capacity for reflection has genuinely absorbed.

The asymmetry inherent in this companionship the Master guides, instructs, and initiates while Raja receives and follows, raises the question of whether the relationship substitutes spiritual subjugation for coercive control.

From the Middle Ages to the modern era, Christianity and its traditional institution, the Catholic Church, have profoundly shaped Europe's cultural traditions, social norms, and political structures, leaving a lasting influence on public and private life, including human-animal relationships across the continent show more. (Potocka et al. 1033)

The novel's answer is embedded in Raja's retrospective voice: he had accepted his advice (Narayan 136). Volitional acceptance, affirmed by a narrator who commands the story's entire temporal span, distinguishes this encounter from every coercive regime that preceded it. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 and the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 share a foundational logic of protective legislation that governs animal bodies without recognizing animal subjectivity, deploying legal language as a performance of care that leaves the instrumental conditions of animal life structurally intact. The companionship Narayan narrates operates in the space that statutory language cannot reach. With companionship supplanting commodification as the organizing framework of the human-animal relationship, the argument calls for grounding in the cultural and philosophical traditions within which this alternative logic is rooted.

Ahimsa and Vedantic Non-Dualism

The space that statutory language cannot reach is precisely the terrain that Indian philosophical traditions have historically inhabited. Vedantic non-dualism, centred on the doctrine of Atman the individual self-understood in Advaita philosophy as ultimately identical with Brahman, the universal ground of being and consciousness posits that one undivided consciousness pervades all forms of life, rendering the boundary between human and animal ontologically provisional rather than absolute. Narayan draws the Master's renunciatory practice directly from this framework. "Moreover, the moral foundations of Authority and Care were the main predictors. Mediation analysis with both dimensions of animal mind as mediators revealed that only perception of the experience dimension plays a mediatory role between moral foundations and acceptance of instrumental violence against animals" (Potocka and Bielecki 825).

The Master's progressive disengagement from household identity and social obligation is not ascetic withdrawal; it is the enactment of a Vedantic ethics that cannot, by its own internal logic, exclude the tiger from the sphere of moral recognition. The *Bhagavad Gītā's* teaching that the realized person perceives the same spiritual essence across all beings (5.18), seeing with equal vision a learned *brāhmaṇa*, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and an outcaste, provides a philosophical framework for understanding the Master's comportment toward Raja throughout their shared journey (Narayan 137). Narayan encodes this premise not merely as theme but as formal architecture: by making the tiger the first-person narrator, the

novel structurally enacts the equal vision *Gita* 5.18 prescribes, drawing the reader into a nonhuman subjectivity in a way that forecloses hierarchical distancing at the level of form itself. Ahimsa, as the behavioural expression of this non-dualist premise, commits the practitioner to refusing injury toward any being in whom that same consciousness is recognized. Scholarly work in South Asian religious ethics establishes that ahimsa in its classical articulation extends moral consideration to all sentient life. This ethical orientation is reflected in the *Mahābhārata's* well-known formulation as *ahimsa paramo dharmah* (“nonviolence is the highest moral virtue”) (Klostermaier, 228–30). India’s National Tiger Conservation Authority recorded 3,167 tigers in the 2022 census (NTCA 2023), yet conservation policy evaluates tiger lives through biodiversity metrics rather than any vocabulary of intrinsic worth, confirming the institutional distance from Vedantic thought.

Through the conceit of reincarnation, Ying Chen reprises the narrative representation of animals in Ahimsa (2023), giving voice to a rat, fly and snake. She reveals their mutual connection with “le Maître” in their past life, an enlightened being who is revealed to be Mahatma Gandhi and who lived and preached according to “ahimsa”, the principle of pacificism, compassion and respect for all living things. The individual stories of the creatures’ respective relationships with “le Maître” are interspersed with his teachings of non-violence and cooperation alongside an ecocritical discourse on urban expansion, environmental damage, climate change and the disappearance of species (Silvester 1).

The Advaita Vedānta tradition, articulated in the *Mandukya Upanishad* and systematically developed in *Gauḍapāda's Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*, holds that the individual self is ultimately identical with Brahman, the universal ground of being (Mandukya Upanishad 2, 7; Gauḍapāda 2.32, 3.31). This ontological identification carries a direct ethical consequence. If the self-dwelling in the tiger and the self-dwelling in the ascetic is one and the same substance, then the instrumentalization of the tiger’s body constitutes a violation of the human’s own deepest identity.

Non-killing is a strong normative morality in Buddhism and Jainism, but in the case of Vedic religion before Hinduism, it is a difficult concept to define as normative ethics. The main contents of the Vedic origin theory are dealt with in turn, focusing on the non-killing of animal sacrifices (pasubandha) in the Brahmana texts, a hermeneutical Vedic literature. (Young 39)

Narayan makes this consequence structurally visible through the arc of the Master’s transformation. As the novel advances, the Master’s continued presence beside Raja is progressively stripped of any residual managerial or spiritual purpose; it becomes pure accompaniment, a form of being-with that acknowledges the tiger as an end in itself (Narayan 150). Haraway’s formulation that companion species are bound in co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating (Haraway 16) resonates here, though the Vedantic tradition arrives at this position from an entirely different epistemological direction. It asserts that the self’s recognition of its own universality is inseparable from its recognition of the other’s

inviolability. The *Chandogya Upanishad's* formulation *tat tvam asi*, “that thou art” (6.8.7), provides the philosophical syntax for this recognition. Some readings of *A Tiger for Malgudi* interpret Raja’s transformation through Hindu concepts of karmic continuity and spiritual rebirth, situating the tiger’s ethical development within a broader metaphysical framework of transmigration across lifetimes.

The present analysis advances the more demanding claim that Raja’s transformation occurs within a single life through volitional philosophical engagement a reading that only the Vedantic framework sustains, because it alone accommodates conscious animal interiority as its premise rather than its conclusion. Research on human–large felid contact under non-coercive conditions indicates measurable changes in relational behaviour, findings that resonate with the transformation Narayan registers in Raja’s own testimony: “This phase of life I found elevating: the change churning internally was still felt by me, but did not bother me now as it did at the beginning” (Narayan 138).

Taken together, the analysis reveals that *A Tiger for Malgudi* constitutes an intervention in Animal Studies that Western theoretical formations alone may not adequately account for. Vedantic non-dualism offers an interpretive vocabulary that complicates dominant Euro-American approaches to animal subjectivity. Shukin argues that “discourses and technologies of biopower hinge on the species divide,” understood as “the zoo-ontological production of species difference as a strategically ambivalent rather than absolute line” (11). Narayan’s novel confronts this production at its ontological root. The Vedantic dissolution of species difference through the doctrine of *Ātman* does not merely propose an ethical alternative to animal capital; it exposes the metaphysical arbitrariness upon which animal capital’s entire structure depends. While Cary Wolfe in *Animal Rites* challenges the species divide through Derridean deconstruction, and Huggan and Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* examines its entanglement with colonial power, Vedantic non-dualism dissolves the ontological basis of species hierarchy itself. The narrative movement from Raja’s commodified existence to his freely chosen proximity to the Master enacts, in novelistic form, the philosophical journey from ignorance of universal selfhood to its recognition. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960) addresses animal suffering primarily through regulatory prohibitions on cruelty, without explicitly recognizing animal consciousness or intrinsic moral subjectivity (sec. 11). The Indian philosophical tradition Narayan draws from refuses that regulatory reduction. Any adequate ethics of the human-animal relation, it asserts, must begin not from the human subject’s choice to extend care but from the prior recognition that the self being cared for is one’s own. That assertion is the novel’s most distinctive contribution to Animal Studies.

Conclusion

A Tiger for Malgudi constitutes a rare literary event, one in which the formal decision to grant the tiger the first-person retrospective voice is itself the argument. This reading has traced how that decision simultaneously does the work that

Shukin's animal capital critique, Haraway's companion species model, and Vedantic non-dualism each demand in different registers. Raja's movement from commodified spectacle to volitional companion is anchored textually in the novel (Narayan 136–37), where he actively engages a philosophical proposition about divinity rather than passively undergoing conditioning. The equanimity recorded in the closing chapters (Narayan 136, 138) is not a trained response but the cognitive residue of a genuinely philosophical encounter.

The charge of anthropomorphism, which any animal narrator invites, is not an objection to be rebutted but a risk Narayan deliberately incurs. His preface (7) signals that endowing an animal with interiority is the only narrative strategy capable of exposing the anthropocentrism that would deny it. The counter to anthropomorphism is not the removal of animal consciousness from the text but its insistence, with full awareness of its own provisionality. Narayan's fictional move is precisely to imagine what a being on the threshold of that *avidya*, enabled by the Master's teaching, would look like from within. The question of whether the Master's guidance replicates colonial mentorship in spiritual guise finds its rebuttal in the same formal decision: colonial authority proceeds by erasing the colonized subject's interiority; Narayan's text proceeds by insisting on Raja's. The ecocritical objection—that Vedantic abstraction evades the novel's material ecological stakes—is addressed by the analysis itself. The abstraction does not retreat from the material world; rather, it provides the only philosophical framework within which Raja's body, under whip, in cage, beside the forest spring, can acquire ethical meaning rather than remaining mere resource.

That Vedantic non-dualism should provide the philosophical architecture for this imagining is the novel's most distinctive contribution to Animal Studies, locating interspecies recognition not in Western rights discourse or utilitarian ethics but in the metaphysical claim that the self-capable of recognizing another is, at its deepest level, that other. For animal welfare discourse in contemporary India, the analysis suggests that rights-based and regulatory frameworks that reach animal bodies but not animal consciousness replicate the institutional logic the novel exposes; a genuinely adequate ethical vocabulary would require the recognition of animal interiority that the Vedantic tradition, in its foundational premises if not always its classical applications, makes philosophically available. Future scholarship in postcolonial Animal Studies would benefit from extending this inquiry to Buddhist and Jain literary traditions, where analogous philosophical resources await the same sustained critical attention.

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