



## Born Free, Chained by the Capitalist: Exploitation of Wildlife in Tania James's *The Tusk that Did the Damage*

Kalsoom Khalid <sup>1</sup> & Sofia Hussain <sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

#### Article History:

##### Received:

May 29, 2026

##### Accepted:

June 26, 2026

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

#### Conflict of interest:

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest and falsification/fabrication of data with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

This paper aims to highlight the oppression of wild animals in Southern India in the wake of late capitalist patriarchal developments. Late capitalism with its exploitative tendencies marginalizes the Third World environment including wild animals. This study focuses on the intricate processes that are involved in transporting illegally procured animal parts from poachers to affluent buyers, involving individuals from diverse backgrounds in the commission and cover-up of the crime. Drawing upon Shiva's "maldevelopment" theory, Karen Emmerman's critique of animal sanctuaries, Catherine Doyle's analysis of captive elephants, and Fleischman's critique of forest policy implementation, this paper delves into the plight of the poached animals and critically analyses the novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage* by Tania James, from an ecofeminist perspective. By drawing insights from ecofeminist theory, this research investigates the exacerbation of animal trafficking in the contemporary Indian society as depicted in the novel *The Tusk That did the Damage*.

**Keywords:** *Human-Wildlife conflict, maldevelopment, late capitalism, exploitation, poaching, animal trafficking*

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer at Government Postgraduate College for Women, Mardan. Email: [kalsoomkhalidn@gmail.com](mailto:kalsoomkhalidn@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad. Email: [sofia.hussain@iiu.edu.pk](mailto:sofia.hussain@iiu.edu.pk)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

## **Introduction**

Wild animals form a substantial part of the natural environment they share with humans and other species. Historically, communities living near wild lands in South Asia coexisted<sup>1</sup> relatively peacefully with animals such as elephants and tigers. The colonial era marked a turning point, transforming this relationship into a serious issue, as colonial capitalist ventures encroached on wild terrain to extract its resources, with the animal populations bearing significant consequences (Wadiwel, 2020, p. xvii). Plumwood (2003) argues that colonialism justified the exploitation of non-European humans and non-human animals alike by characterizing their lands as "spaces, unused, underused or empty" (p. 53). This logic, according to Huggan and Tiffin (2009), produced a human-animal hierarchy that set humans and animals alike against "an externalized natural world," resulting in lasting ecological imbalance (p. 23). Late capitalism has intensified this imbalance by turning wild animals into commodities, a process, this paper examines through an ecofeminist lens. In this context, wild animals are valued less for their intrinsic existence than for their exchange value within the market. Moreover, according to Harvey (2005), free trade operates through freely functioning markets that permit the movement and exchange of commodities across economic spaces, thereby supporting the expansion of capitalist accumulation (p. 64). Thus, animal bodies are reduced to saleable commodities and are incorporated into global circuits of profit and exchange.

Rooted in feminist, ecological, and socialist thought, ecofeminism contends that the subjugation of nature and the marginalization of oppressed groups stem from the same patriarchal logic, making their liberation mutually dependent (Gaard, 1993, p. 1). Applying this framework to South Asia/India, this paper argues that the exploitation of wild animals under late capitalism reflects what Vandana Shiva (1988) calls maldevelopment, a patriarchal mode of development that treats nature, including animals, as passive matter available for appropriation. This dynamic operates through two mechanisms. The first is the captive breeding of animals for profit, where reproductive capacity is directly extracted. The second is the poaching of animals for body parts, where the same logic of passive availability extends to the animal's body even when reproduction is not at stake. While this subject of elephant poaching has been dealt in depth in Wilbur Smith's<sup>2</sup> 1991 novel, *Elephant Song*, Tania James's (2015) novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage* serves as the case study through which this paper examines both mechanisms in a South Asian context.

Neoliberalism refers to the political enterprise that seeks to extend competitive market forces, consolidate market-friendly governance, and promote individual freedom (Jessop, 2012, p. 2). Neoliberal capitalism, this paper argues, rooted in patriarchal structures, has disproportionately burdened the Global South. Operating as the governing logic through which late capitalism reorganizes the

Global South, is an economic system that transforms the region into a supplier of cheap labor and raw materials for the Global North (Arrighi, Silver, & Brewer, 2003, pp. 17–18). This extractive dynamic does not stop at human labor. Animals, as part of the ecosystems of the Global South, are also drawn into networks of commodification to satisfy the demands of Western consumerism. It is precisely this extension of extractive logic to non-human life that Vandana Shiva's (1988) concept of maldevelopment illuminates, situating the exploitation of nature within the same patriarchal structures that subordinate women and colonized peoples.

Late capitalism operates as a patriarchal system that privileges the Global North over the Global South and subjugates nature. Contemporary conservation efforts, ostensibly designed to protect wild animal populations, often embody the same anthropocentric and neoliberal logic they claim to challenge. Drawing on Karen Emmerman's critique of animal sanctuaries and Catherine Doyle's analysis of captive elephants, this paper demonstrates how such conservation measures can paradoxically endanger the very species they aim to protect. Furthermore, legal gaps in wildlife protection frameworks compound this problem, as the Global South's regulatory structures are exploited to serve late capitalist patriarchal interests. Building on Fleischman's critique of forest policy implementation, this paper argues that legal loopholes in wildlife conservation reify animals as extractable resources, reinforcing rather than dismantling existing structures of exploitation.

### **Neoliberal Capitalist Structures and Ecological Maldevelopment**

This paper draws its theoretical insights from interconnections between capitalist patriarchy and the domination of nature. Plumwood (2003) identifies the root of this domination in the human/nature dualism. This hierarchical logic simultaneously subordinates women and the natural world by coding both as passive and available for exploitation (pp. 42–43). Shiva (1988) historicizes this process in the Global South. She argues that development there has become synonymous with Westernization, prioritizing economic growth and productivity at the expense of ecological and social values (p. 4). Shiva terms this approach "maldevelopment" (p. 4). She traces its harmful consequences through projects such as scientific agriculture, scientific animal husbandry, and scientific water management (Shiva, 1988, p. 14). These projects, she argues, have disrupted the balance between genders and between humans and nature, consolidating male dominance over both (p. 14). Collectively, these frameworks reveal that the commodification of wild animals in South Asia is not incidental to late capitalism but rather structural. It is an extension of the same patriarchal logic that has historically transformed nature into an exploitable resource.

The illegal wildlife trade is a direct consequence of late capitalism's anthropocentric values and neoliberal policies. Trade liberalization has facilitated the expansion of capital markets across international borders (Steger, 2009, p. 38), creating conditions under which exotic animals, birds, elephant ivory, and

rhinoceros' horns have become high-demand commodities among wealthy consumers in the Global North. Poaching, defined as the illicit buying and selling of wild species and their derivatives in violation of wildlife protection law (Sinha, 2010, p. 29), emerges from this demand as a direct extractive mechanism. Animals and their body parts are thus treated as raw materials, transformed into tradeable products, and trafficked northward through networks sustained by late-capitalist consumption. This process extends the feminization of nature to its most violent expression thereby reducing animal bodies to a status that is not merely exploitable but disposable.

In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the elephant, later named the Gravedigger by villagers, witnesses poachers systematically killing the males of his clan and his mother, who is shot when she moves to defend them (James, 2015). The violence is methodical and extractive. Poachers sever the elephants' trunks to access the ivory, removing the tusks with clinical efficiency, "easy as a fruit" (p. 5), before cutting off his mother's tail. Therefore, the animal body is made passive, available, and disposable in service of commodity extraction. The elephant's reproductive and familial bonds are destroyed not incidentally but as a direct consequence of the logic that assigns monetary value to body parts while treating the living animal as expendable raw material. This incident in the novel exemplifies one dimension of maldevelopment, in which living nature is reduced to an extractable and marketable commodity through systemic violence (Shiva, 1988, p. 4). James's novel highlights this phenomenon in detail and henceforth demonstrates the exploitation of the wildlife by the oppressive capitalist structures operating in India.

The ivory extracted from poached elephants enters global commodity circuits, transformed into luxury objects for affluent consumers in the Global North. Tusks are carved into "jewelry or artwork or as mounted busts," becoming a sought-after symbol of stature and wealth (Anderson & Jooste, 2010, p. 2). James's novel is particularly significant as it explicitly documents this process through Manu's visit to the smuggler Chacko's house, where craftsmen carve tusks into bangles, statues, and figurines, producing "tiny elephants," "bangles smooth and stacked," and "a giant Nataraj with one sleek limb raised, all in ivory" (2015, p. 60). *The Tusk That Did the Damage* extensively records the disguise of smuggled ivory as decorative art that facilitates its movement across international borders, embedding poaching within the same neoliberal trade networks that extract cheap raw materials from the Global South for Northern consumption (2015). The elephant's body, reduced to a passive and disposable entity through the feminization of nature, is thus, fully absorbed into the commodity exchanges of late capitalism.

James's novel not only highlights the commodification of wildlife through poaching but also extends beyond it to the explicit exploitation of reproductive capacity. Chacko, one of the central characters, manages a collection of exotic birds, "feathered in red, yellow, and green," which he sells to wealthy consumers at high

prices (James, 2015, p. 58). When he informs Manu that the birds are intended for “breeding and selling” (2015, p. 58), the novel makes explicit what Oksala (2023) theorizes as the reduction of living bodies to reproductive and economic utility under logics of capitalist extraction (p. 32). The birds are not valued as sentient beings but as biological mechanisms for generating profit, their reproductive capacity extracted and monetized within the same patriarchal logic that Shiva (1988) identifies as maldevelopment (p. 4). This represents the second mechanism which this paper examines in detail, highlighting that where poaching treats the animal body as raw material, captive breeding treats reproductive capacity itself as the extractable resource. In this regard, Shiva (2016) argues that animals are denied subjecthood under patriarchal capitalist policies, which reduces them to raw materials for economic extraction (p. 73). In the novel, James (2015) shows how Chacko enacts precisely this logic as the birds in his possession are confined to a repetitive cycle of breeding, their lives valued only insofar as they generate profit.

When a highly valuable Macaw escapes, Chacko says in desperation “one whole lakh dissolves into blue sky” (James, 2015, p. 59), revealing that his relationship to the birds is purely monetary. The animal is legible to him only as currency, its living body interchangeable with its market value. The logic of commodification further obscures the animal's living reality through what Adams (2014) terms the “absent referent,” a process by which animals are erased as subjects once their bodies are converted into products (p. 66). Just as laborers become alienated from the products they manufacture, animals are separated from the commodities they either produce or are transformed into (Adams, 2014, p. 78). Elephant tusks and tails, severed from living bodies, become decorative artifacts that conceal their origins entirely. Similarly, Chacko's captive birds are reduced to absent referents in their own lives as their suffering and that of their offspring is suppressed within the circuit of breeding and sale. James's novel significantly demonstrates these exploitative practices, whereby the animal body is feminized and extracted, and henceforth it disappears behind its commodity form.

*The Tusk That Did the Damage* is also noteworthy as it highlights how the monetization of wild animals intensifies their physical vulnerability. Karesh and Cook (2005) note that international animal trade facilitates the transmission of harmful pathogens, including bacteria, viruses, and fungi, making trafficked animals particularly susceptible to disease (p. 38). Captivity compounds this vulnerability by concentrating animals in conditions that accelerate transmission. James (2015) depicts through a “diseased-looking parakeet perched alone” in Chacko's cage, its eyes resembling “milky bulging marbles” (p. 59), its body holding “perfectly still, wings folded tight around a tortured heart” (p. 59). When Chacko admits the bird will likely die soon, his indifference indicates that the animal's suffering is entirely suppressed within the logic of profit. When Chacko admits that the bird will likely die soon, his indifference suggests that the animal's suffering is entirely subsumed within the logic of profit. Physical deterioration becomes a

material consequence of marketization, as the animal body is pushed to its limits by the extractive demands of late-capitalist trade.

James maps the hierarchy and documents how poaching operates not as an isolated act but as a stratified network linking hunters, middlemen, and elite consumers across international markets. Anderson and Jooste (2010) describe this as a chain functioning at multiple levels, from hunters who obtain tusks and horns to brokers who smuggle and sell them to wealthy buyers (p. 3). When Forest Officer Samina Hakim, in *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, visits Jayan's home and refuses his wife Leela's request for immunity, she reveals the structural logic sustaining the trade, saying, "these poachers dwell at the bottom of the ladder; they get scraps. Throwing one in jail is of no more consequence than plucking a mushroom" (2015, p. 148). Hakim's words underscore the expendability of individual poachers like Jayan within a system driven by demand from wealthy consumers in the Global North. Jayan kills elephants and removes their tusks, passing them to a driver who functions as a middleman, while Chacko, acting as a broker, converts them into objects of trade. This chain makes each participant replaceable, ensuring the network's survival even when its lowest-ranking members are apprehended.

James's novel, thereby explicitly exposes that, driven by demand from wealthy consumers in the Global North, the Global South becomes a source of poached animal parts feeding transnational criminal networks. The trade in wildlife resembles the organized trafficking of drugs, minerals, and arms, with elephant tusks and rhino horns functioning as highly sought-after commodities within these illegal circuits (Anderson & Jooste, 2010, p. 3). Powerful and well-connected criminal organizations facilitate the transcontinental transportation of rare animals, their body parts, and specific plant species across international borders (McConnell, 2015, p. 36). James (2015) situates this trade within South Asia through Jayan's involvement in an "ivory route" to Dubai (p. 147), tracing the movement of poached ivory from Indian forests into affluent Gulf markets. Chacko further reveals the reach of this network when he remarks that he would harvest bird feathers for profit if they fetched a substantial sum in China (p. 59). The ease with which animal bodies and their derivatives move across borders reflects the same extractive logic that Shiva (1988) identifies in maldevelopment, wherein the natural resources of the Global South are systematically funneled toward the consumption demands of wealthier markets (p. 4). *The Tusk that Did the Damage* reveals the systematic and intricates mechanisms through which natural resources are extracted and transported to more affluent global markets.

James's novel is also noteworthy for its detailed depiction of the violence elephants are subjected to, for profit gains. The violence of poaching extends to its most extreme form as the elephants are killed or mutilated solely for their tusks. *The Tusk That Did the Damage* documents how the forest officer, Hakim, discovers an elephant with only "the tusks cut out" but still breathing (James, 2015, p. 46). A

photograph she shows Jayan's wife Leela reveals a poached elephant whose face has become "a cavity yawning wide," exposing torn flesh and bone (p. 146). Jayan shoots elephants with such force that one "died sitting up" (p. 146). These images enact what Adams (2014) theorizes as the absent referent in its most explicit form, in which the living animal is reduced to the single part that holds commodity value while its suffering and subjecthood are entirely suppressed in service of extraction (p. 66). The body that remains after the tusks are removed, is discarded, indicating that under late capitalist logic the animal exists only insofar as it can be converted into profit.

*The Tusk That Did the Damage* is also a manifestation of James's deep observation and understanding of the elephants and the mechanics of their matriarchal clans. It documents that elephants, are highly social animals organized into clans typically led by a matriarch. In this regard, Bates et al. (2008) establish that elephants form large social networks with hierarchical organization and those individual deaths, reverberate across the clan as elephants actively respond to the loss of their conspecifics (p. 545). In James's (2015) novel, the mother elephant comes to defend the adolescent males from the poachers. Marking her as a threat, the poachers kill her to access the tusks without obstruction, eliminating the female leader whose presence sustains the clan's social cohesion. The consequences of this violence against elephants are analyzed by McComb et al. (2001) who confirm that the removal of matriarchs massively disrupts elephant herds and undermines conservation efforts (p. 494). Poaching thus does not merely extract individual bodies but destroys the social fabric that enables elephant survival.

The destructive reach of poaching extends beyond its intended targets. The Environmental Investigation Agency (2016) documents that the hunting of totoaba for their swim bladders has driven vaquitas, a marine cetacean species, to the brink of extinction as unintended casualties of the same extractive logic (p. 15). *The Tusk That Did the Damage* highlights this pattern in the South Asian context when Jayan and his fellow poachers kill a monkey for food during their mission. Neither the matriarch nor the monkey is the intended commodity, yet both are killed as obstacles or resources encountered along the way. This indiscriminate destruction reveals that late capitalist extractive logic consumes whatever living nature stands in the path of profit, regardless of whether it was the intended target. James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* is a significant novel as it draws particular attention to the complex and intertwining processes of the late capitalist structures that exploit, commodify, and excessively harm the wildlife in the South Asian context.

### **Deforestation and the Establishment of Wild Life Parks and Sanctuaries**

Late capitalism, as mentioned earlier, devastates the Global South's environment by exploiting and converting its natural resources into extractable commodities. Sharma (2003) documents that illegal mining of luxury materials, including diamonds and soapstone, takes place within wildlife reserves and sanctuaries, threatening animal populations through deforestation and water

contamination (p. 176). *The Tusk That Did the Damage* also highlights how trade liberalization policies have intensified these activities, as Ravi's revelations in the novel expose the Forest Department's complicity in permitting foreign companies to mine within the wildlife park, even as villagers who depend on forest resources for survival are banned from entering. Kushwaha and Hazarika (2004) establish that deforestation causes habitat fragmentation, loss of corridors, and escalating human-elephant conflict in India (p. 1448). James (2015) captures this through the Gravedigger's perception of land once dense with bamboo, now "patched with green and gold farms" (p. 191). This exemplifies what Shiva (1988) labels as maldevelopment, whereby ecological complexity is systematically replaced with landscapes of extraction (p. 4). James's novel explicitly records the devastation of natural habitats which not only harms the wildlife but also the inhabitants in these lands.

In response to the devastating impact of industrialization and human encroachment on wildlife populations, governments across the Global South have established protected areas, wildlife sanctuaries, and nature reserves. India's conservation programs, including Project Tiger 1973 and Project Elephant 1992, reflect this effort to sustain threatened animal populations, and are mirrored in the *The Tusk That Did the Damage* through the existence of Kavanar Wildlife Park. However, Marquardt et al. (2023) note that such measures frequently contend with competing developmental projects, transforming conservation into a new tool of oppression for indigenous communities and non-human animals alike (p. 1). The decimation of tigers in the Sariska Tiger Reserve demonstrates that protection does not guarantee survival (Reddy, 2008). Indigenous communities have fared no better, as thousands were displaced from the Sundarbans and prohibited from entering tiger reserve premises (Jalais, 2005, pp. 1757–1762). Drawing on Emmerman's critique of animal sanctuaries and Doyle's analysis of captive elephants, this paper argues that such conservation measures paradoxically endanger the species they are designed to protect, subordinating wildlife to the same anthropocentric and neoliberal logic they seek to challenge.

In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the narrator Mani Mathai recounts that the inhabitants of Manaloor village relied on the surrounding forest for honey and firewood. Once the forest was designated the Kavanar Wildlife Park, villagers were forbidden from entering it. This prohibition disregarded their longstanding relationship with the land. As Mani notes, the villagers believed they deserved "some say over the lands where they'd been harvesting firewood and honey long before Queen Victoria was in diapers" (James, 2015, p. 42). This dispossession reflects what Shiva (1988) identifies as maldevelopment. Conservation policies, imposed from above, sever indigenous communities from their centuries-old means of livelihood. They substitute the indigenous ecological knowledge with externally driven frameworks of resource management.

James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* also documents that the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries, while intended to protect vulnerable animal populations, exposes them to further harm. In this regard, Emmerman (2014) argues that sanctuaries undermine the rehabilitation of animal populations (p. 217). Furthermore, Doyle (2017) also contends that they fail to replicate natural forest environments, leaving elephants ill-equipped to survive once released back into the wild (p. 47). In the like vein, Bradshaw et al. (2005) establish that elephants develop within matriarchal societies where elder females known as allomothers provide survival, protection, and guidance (p. 807). Poaching disrupts these hierarchies, leaving younger elephants without the maternal structures that sustain them. James (2015) in the *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, highlights this phenomenon, through the Gravedigger, who cannot overcome the memories of his family even within the sanctuary, imagining "the tusker tossing water" and "his mother spraying him in the mouth" during a supervised swim (p. 25). The sanctuary offers physical refuge but cannot restore the matriarchal social fabric that poaching has destroyed. This, henceforth, suggests that capitalist exploitation operates not only through the extraction of bodies but also through the erasure of the relational structures that sustain life.

*The Tusk That Did the Damage* is an important ecological novel, as it depicts in detail how captivity in sanctuaries aggravates the psychological harm already inflicted by poaching. Commenting on this phenomenon, Emmerman (2014) argues that sanctuaries cannot fulfill the species-specific requirements of the animals they house, generating boredom, stress, and human-controlled behavior (p. 221). Similarly, Marino et al. (2009) establish that captivity intensifies mental trauma among animals (p. 27). James (2015) portrays this aspect through the Gravedigger's failed attempts to communicate with fellow elephants in the enclosure, whose silence makes them feel "less than strangers, not even the same kind" (p. 26), thereby showing that the social bonds that define elephant life in the wild are severed in captivity. Emma and Teddy's visit to the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre reveals an orphaned elephant calf named Dev playing with a soccer ball, stripped of the behavioral learning that elephant calves acquire within matriarchal family structures (p. 41). Deprived of these structures, sanctuary-raised elephants struggle to survive independently upon release. The sanctuary thus reproduces the logic of maldevelopment, replacing the relational complexity of natural life with managed, human-controlled existence.

James's novel is also noteworthy as it highlights the psychological impact of sanctuaries on animals' development. It shows that animals in sanctuaries are subjected to the constant human gaze, generating agitation, and discomfort. In this regards, Doyle (2017) documents that persistent human presence and activity disturb animals in captivity (p. 64), a dynamic, that Emmerman (2014) connects to the objectifying experience of zoos and circuses where animals are reduced to spectacle (p. 224). In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the Old Man, one of the Gravedigger's keepers, recalls his father Appachen's observation that "the Sanctuary

was hardly an improvement, with its camera-crazy tourists" (James, 2015, p. 28). James's fiction, therefore, records how the animal body, already extracted and confined, is further positioned as an object of human entertainment, extending processes of objectification into the domain of the public gaze.

James's novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage* also showcases how physical violence exacerbates the psychological harm inflicted on animals in sanctuaries. Regarding violence against animals, Doyle (2017) documents that implements are used to strike elephants, "exerting control through fear and pain" (pp. 64–65). In the novel, the Old Man beats the Gravedigger with a stick across multiple parts of his body to enforce obedience (James, 2015, p. 24). When captive animals respond to this treatment by exhibiting instinctive behaviors, they face further punishment. In the novel, Romeo chains the Gravedigger tightly and strikes him behind the ears, under the tail, and along his belly with such intensity that the animal struggles to breathe (James, 2015, p. 164). Romeo's declaration that "we break the animals" (p. 164) articulates a logic of domination whereby living beings are subdued, controlled, and stripped of their instincts to serve human ends. As Johanna Oksala (2023) argues, systems of domination operate through the instrumentalization of life, reducing living beings to resources for external purposes (p. 32). Therefore, James's novel exemplifies in detail the intertwined processes of animal exploitation and manipulation that sustain the logic of late-capitalist structures.

### **Neoliberal Structures and Commodification of Animals**

*The Tusk That Did the Damage* also brings to limelight how neoliberal policies extend the commodification of animals beyond poaching into the direct exploitation of their bodies for labor. Regarding the commodification of animals, Rivera (2014) argues that a captive animal's "body, effort, labor, psychological response, or physical presence is used by a captor for his benefit" (p. 249). In a similar vein, Doyle (2014) documents that captive elephants across Asia are employed in the logging industry for timber operations (p. 48). Similarly, Ghosh (2005) notes that elephants, accustomed to forest terrain, find urban environments and hard road surfaces immensely challenging, and are frequently chained in enclosed spaces with no room to move (p. 28). In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the Gravedigger's experience reflects this particular aspect precisely. Purchased by Elephant Sabu, the owner of the elephants, for logging and festival performances, he is confined to a cramped quarter described as "a pitch-black cavern, and every which way was a wall" (James, 2015, p. 86). This confinement depicts what Rivera (2014) identifies as captive exploitation, wherein the animal body is made perpetually available for human use regardless of the animal's physical or psychological condition (p. 249). The animals, henceforth, are deprived of their natural habitat, subjected to severe violence, and exploited by capitalist structures, which causes irreversible damage to the wildlife and the overall natural environment.

In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the commodification of the Gravedigger intensifies through his forced participation in festival performances. Locked in double anklets with “a heavy gold thidambu” placed on his back (James, 2015, p. 89), his movements are restricted to manage the distress that human crowds provoke in elephants. His keeper carries a stick to enforce compliance, compelling him to “stand and obey” (p. 89). Following the elephant Parthasarathi’s death, the Gravedigger is made to perform twice as frequently to compensate for his owner’s financial losses. His exhaustion and deteriorating condition are disregarded as Elephant Sabu prioritizes recovering his investment. Thus, James’s novel explicitly portrays the animal body as an instrument of profit whose well-being is entirely subordinated to the demands of late-capitalist accumulation.

James’s *The Tusk That Did the Damage* further records how late capitalism’s anthropocentric logic extends to the suppression of animals’ natural behaviors. It is a particularly significant novel, as it depicts in details, the psychological impact of removal of animals from their natural habitats. Male elephants undergo musth, a period of heightened reproductive hormones and increased aggression (Doyle, 2014, p. 41). In natural environments, the presence of older bulls regulates the behavior of younger males (Slotow et al., 2000, p. 425). In captivity, the absence of elder males intensifies this aggression, resulting in violent behavior toward other animals including rhinoceroses (Slotow et al., 2000, pp. 425–426). In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, had the Gravedigger remained in the wild, elder males would have guided him through crucial behavioral developments including charging, retreating, mating, and managing musth (James, 2015, p. 156). Instead, captivity strips him of these formative structures, leaving him without the social guidance that would have regulated his instincts. The suppression of musth and the punishment of instinctive behavior reveal that captivity does not merely confine the animal body but seeks to remake it entirely, subordinating natural life to the behavioral expectations of human control.

In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, James portrays how the Gravedigger is chained tightly between trees by his pappans, or caretakers, who throw him food from a distance to avoid direct contact (James, 2015, p. 156). Animals in captivity are also subjected to chemical manipulation to regulate and control their behavior. In this regard, Lohan (2002) documents that amphetamines are administered to elephants in the illegal logging industry to compel them to cover long distances (p. 134). The Old Man similarly reveals that pappans secretly add opium to elephants’ food to suppress aggression during musth (James, 2015, p. 161). *The Tusk That Did the Damage* therefore clearly highlights how physical restraint and chemical manipulation together expose the extent to which late-capitalist exploitation seeks not only to extract animal labor but also to remake the animal body entirely in service of human control.

James’s novel also documents that the transportation of elephants poses significant risks to their lives as their size and physiology make them acutely vulnerable during relocation, yet the demands of late capitalist trade and

performance circuits require their constant movement. In the novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the elephant Parthasarathi dies when an intoxicated driver brakes suddenly, causing the elephant's head to strike the truck's cab (James, 2015). His death illustrates that the commodification of elephants reduces their lives to expendability, absorbed as acceptable losses within the logic of profit.

The novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage* also highlights that the trauma experienced in captivity during formative years manifests as aggression in adulthood. In this regard, Bradshaw et al. (2005) establish that exposure to traumatic situations at a young age disrupts right brain development, producing vulnerability to post-traumatic stress disorder and susceptibility to violent behavior (p. 807). The Gravedigger, in *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, embodies this trajectory. Haunted by the loss of his family and later by the absence of Parthasarathi, he strikes his trunk against a lorry in an outburst of grief and agitation (James, 2015). As punishment, his keepers starve him to drain his energy. When Romeo jerks his chain without warning, the Gravedigger erupts, striking Romeo with his trunk and causing him to fall (James, 2015). The Old Man recognizes that exhaustion and accumulated trauma have driven the animal to its breaking point. This cycle of provocation and punishment reveals the destructive consequences of domination, wherein the animal's natural responses to suffering are met not with care but with further coercion and control.

James' *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, further projects that late capitalist policies transform places of supposed shelter into sites of captivity, producing sustained physical and psychological harm. In the novel, the Gravedigger's trajectory reveals this pattern. The scent of liquor and pineapple triggers memories of his mother's killing, igniting his recognition of Romeo as a former poacher (James, 2015, p. 189). His accumulated trauma culminates in violence as he crushes Romeo, kills the Old Man and Mani Mathai, and flees into the forest where he attacks his own conspecifics (James, 2015). His aggression is not instinctive but produced, a direct consequence of the exploitation inflicted upon him. Thus, James's novel documents in detail how the oppression of nature under late capitalism does not merely harm individual animals; it destabilizes entire ecosystems, as the violence exercised upon one body ripples outward into the broader web of natural life.

### **Legislation Regarding Wildlife Protection in India**

The Indian Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 represents the primary legislative framework for wildlife conservation in India. Its foundations, however, stem from colonial rather than indigenous approaches to natural resource management. Pathak and Kothari (1998) trace contemporary conservation efforts to nineteenth century colonialism. Colonial administrators imposed a capital and commerce-oriented system of resource management on India. This reorganized forests into Reserved Forests and Protected Forests under a centralized Forest

Department (p. 2603). This colonial inheritance has produced significant gaps in wildlife protection. Kumar (2024) documents that inadequate enforcement of existing laws by authorities leaves wildlife persistently vulnerable to exploitation (p. 214). Building on Fleischman's critique of forest policy implementation, this paper argues that these legal gaps do not merely reflect administrative failure; they systematically serve the interests of late capitalist patriarchy, reifying animals as extractable resources rather than subjects deserving legal protection.

Regarding, such practices, Fleischman (2015) documents that forest officials exploit their positions, undermining conservation efforts and inflicting lasting damage on biodiversity and the local communities that depend on forests for survival (p. 153). The involvement of forest department members in elephant poaching points to their structural complicity in wildlife crime. Anderson and Jooste (2010) note that the substantial profits generated by illegal wildlife trade attract powerful individuals capable of compromising law enforcement agencies including police and military (p. 2). Fleischman further establishes that retail corruption is pervasive in India, defined as "bribery in exchange for services or to escape punishment" (2015, p. 159). James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* (2015) exposes this corruption through Chacko, who continues to hunt elephants using an expired license and secures the complicity of forest officials through gifts including a pair of tusks for the former Divisional Range Officer P. K. Kurian. Animal populations thus continue to decline, not despite legal frameworks, but through their systematic subversion, as late capitalist patriarchal interests penetrate the very institutions designed to resist them.

*The Tusk That Did the Damage* also records that the forest officials further obstruct conservation efforts by tampering with evidence, revealing that wildlife law functions less as protection and more as performance. In the novel, filmmakers Emma and Teddy travel to Sitamala village to document an elephant killed by a single gunshot. As veterinarian Dr. Ravi Verma conducts the postmortem, Divisional Range Officer Samina Hakim arrives and confers with him in a whisper. The doctor initially claims the bullet cannot be recovered, only to admit under Emma's questioning that it was retrieved (James, 2015). This contradiction exposes deliberate suppression of evidence by those entrusted with enforcement. A parallel act of manipulation occurs when villagers protest the killing of a boy named Manu, alleging that a bullet was planted in his pocket to falsely implicate him in poaching. This interchangeability between an elephant's case and a human child's, reveals that the same logic of disposability extends across species lines. James's novel henceforth reiterates Fleischman's (2015) argument that institutional corruption is endemic to wildlife law enforcement in India, thus describes a structural condition, wherein both human and non-human lives become equally expendable to those who hold power.

James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* also highlights how conservation policies in the Global South are often shaped by bureaucracies and governments dominated by affluent interests, with little regard for the tribal communities, or

Adivasis, who live on the forest's periphery and depend on its resources for survival. In this regard, Jena (1994) notes that India's 1952 forest policy claimed to serve "national needs" while disregarding the livelihoods of local people who depended on the forest (p. 2767). The Wildlife Protection Act extends this exclusion by designating wildlife interests as part of the "national interest," relegating local communities' needs to secondary status (Jena, 1994, p. 2768). This exclusionary structure persists despite the fact that Adivasi communities possess generations of indigenous ecological knowledge that could meaningfully strengthen conservation efforts. Their marginalization aligns with Vandana Shiva's concept of maldevelopment, wherein policies marketed as protective ultimately dispossess the very communities whose practices have sustained the ecosystem. James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* embodies this dispossession through Manu's own account. He recalls that his people "had been walking the forest before it took that fussy name" (2015, p. 10). Manu further notes that current legal frameworks now restrict his community from gathering fruit and firewood they have relied on for generations. Local communities and non-human-animals are thus marginalized by the same late capitalist logic, dispossessed of the land and resources that have historically sustained them both.

James's novel is noteworthy as it documents how forest officials further enable wildlife and environmental crimes by abusing their institutional power. Fleischman (2015) establishes that officials frequently exploit their positions for personal benefit while failing to enforce existing laws (p. 162). Manu observes that this selective enforcement extends to logging, as laws turn a blind eye to forest officials and timber companies extracting valuable resources including rosewood, eucalyptus, and teak (James, 2015, p. 10). This pattern is evident when villagers of Manaloor protest the Forest Department's decision to grant logging subsidies to Shankar Timber Company, whose commercial-scale operations devastate the local environment. The department justifies this by claiming a colonial-era right to the forest, extending colonial logic into the present and treating natural resources as assets for elite extraction rather than as a shared ecological inheritance. The villagers counter this claim by insisting that their use of the forest predates colonial rule itself, holding Divisional Officer Samina Hakim responsible for authorizing the company's access (James, 2015, p. 42). This contrast reveals two fundamentally different relationships to the forest. Local communities extract minimal resources without disrupting the ecosystem, while the timber company's late capitalist logic of commercial extraction inflicts lasting environmental damage and threatens local wildlife populations.

In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the Forest Department's hypocrisy becomes explicit when Officer Hakim blames villagers for seeking licenses to use forest resources for profit, while defending the department's own permissive stance toward corporate exploitation. Hakim insists the department "cannot allow unregulated removal of timber and degradation of the forest," permitting

companies to operate only when their activity serves “the public interest” (James, 2015, p. 97). Yet she simultaneously admits that villagers were never consulted before the company received permission to log. This double standard, as portrayed in *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, exposes a system that restricts subsistence-level resource use by communities who have relied on the forest for generations. At the same time, it authorizes industrial-scale extraction that inflicts lasting environmental damage on the forest, its wildlife, and surrounding human populations alike.

The legal system's failure extends to its strikingly low conviction rate for serious wildlife offenses, including poaching. A study by the Wildlife Protection Society of India identifies judicial delays as a fundamental flaw of the Wildlife Protection Act (Sanghar, 2000, p. 115). Poachers convicted of crimes against elephants and tigers frequently receive minimal fines and are granted bail, while the Forest Department lacks adequate authority to curb the resulting rise in timber smuggling and wildlife poaching (p. 115). Jayan's case in the *The Tusk That Did the Damage* exemplifies this leniency. Accused of killing fifty-six elephants, he initially expects Chacko to secure his bail as he had on two prior occasions. When Chacko does not intervene, Jayan receives only a four-year sentence, a punishment strikingly disproportionate to the scale of his crimes. This leniency suggests that the legal system, far from protecting wildlife, operates as a permissive structure within which late capitalist extraction can continue with minimal consequence.

James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* highlights that the system's failure extends to the chronic under-resourcing of forest guards tasked with combating poaching. Regarding this situation, Rangarajan et al. (2010) have informed India's Ministry of Environment and Forests that lower-ranking forest officers lack adequate training to confront highly skilled, heavily armed poachers (p. 92). Schug (2000) attributes this persistent inadequacy to what he terms “forest bureaucracy,” wherein entrenched hierarchies and bureaucratic structures obstruct meaningful reform of forest administration (p. 230). *The Tusk That Did the Damage* exemplifies this dysfunction through Vasu and Soman, two poorly equipped forest guards Emma and Teddy encounter in the field. Emma notices one guard's shoelaces tied “haphazardly, woven through random holes and wrapped threefold around the ankles so they wouldn't slip off” (James, 2015, p. 99), prompting her to wonder “what did a poacher have to fear from a guy with oversized camo shoes and putty lumps for brows?” (p. 99). The guards' physical unpreparedness is not incidental but symptomatic, a visible consequence of the bureaucratic neglect that leaves frontline enforcement structurally incapable of confronting the scale of organized poaching. Moreover, Vasu's own admission, in *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, reinforces this portrait of institutional failure. He tells Emma he has fired his weapon only “once or twice,” and never “directly at the poacher” (p. 99), citing fear of media scrutiny, human rights investigations, and job loss as barriers to decisive action. While guards like Vasu bear the practical risks and legal exposure of fieldwork, officers occupying the department's upper hierarchy, such as Samina Hakim, remain

insulated from accountability despite their own negligence and abuse of power. By portraying this asymmetry, *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, reveals the patriarchal structures underlying wildlife law enforcement in India, wherein power and protection flow upward while risk and blame are displaced onto those with the least authority to resist them. The novel explicitly records these organized corrupt practices that benefit those who are at the upper edge of the capitalist hierarchy, while those towards the bottom bear the brunt of such exploitation. Henceforth, James's novel significantly contributes towards exposing the various intertwining forces at the grassroots level, from the loopholes in the legal framework to the prevalent unethical practices that tremendously harm the overall environmental wellbeing in general and the wildlife in general particular.

### **The Unfinished Cost of Maldevelopment**

This paper highlights that the exploitation of wild animals in South Asia, as depicted in Tania James's (2015) novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, reflects what Shiva (1988) identifies as the destructive consequences of maldevelopment under late capitalism. Through two interrelated mechanisms, captive breeding and poaching, animals are reduced to passive matter available for extraction, while their reproductive capacities and bodies are converted into commodities for profit. Neoliberal trade policies further exacerbate this exploitation by facilitating both the poaching of wild animals and the global trafficking of their derivatives. Conservation efforts intended to counter this exploitation, including wildlife sanctuaries, frequently fail to provide genuine protection. The Gravedigger's deteriorating condition within the sanctuary demonstrates that captivity reproduces rather than resolves the harm inflicted by poaching. Legal frameworks reinforce this failure because outdated legislation and entrenched institutional hierarchies leave wildlife persistently vulnerable to exploitation. These findings confirm Shiva's (1988) argument that maldevelopment renders both nature and the marginalized communities dependent on it expendable within structures of profit. The novel's South Asian setting significantly illustrates that this pattern, while locally specific, reflects a broader global condition in which late capitalism continues to extract from, commodify, and consume the natural world. It therefore suggests a pressing need to address these accelerating processes, which, if left unchecked, may result in irreversible environmental damage in the near future.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article, and that the data presented have not been fabricated or falsified.

**Funding:** This research did not receive any specific grant or financial support from public, commercial, or not-for profit funding agencies.

**Participant Consent:** The authors confirm that Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was duly maintained.

**Data Fabrication/Falsification Statement:** The authors declare that no data have been fabricated, falsified, or manipulated in this study.

**Copyright:** Copyright (c) 2026 Kalsoom Khalid & Sofia Hussain

## References

- Anderson, B., & Jooste, J. (2014). Wildlife poaching: Africa's surging trafficking threat. *Africa Security Brief*, 28, 1–8. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26844?seq=1>
- Arrighi, G., Silver, B. J., & Brewer, B. D. (2003). Industrial convergence, globalization, and the persistence of the North-South divide. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 38(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686319>
- Bates, L. A., Poole, J. H., & Byrne, R. W. (2008). Elephant cognition. *Current Biology*, 18(13), R544–R546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2008.04.019>
- Bradshaw, G. A., Schore, A. N., Brown, J. L., Poole, J. H., & Moss, C. J. (2005). Elephant breakdown: Social trauma. *Nature*, 433(7028), 807. <https://www.nature.com/articles/433807a>
- Castree, N. (2003). Commodifying what nature? *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(3), 273–297. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph4280a>
- Doyle, C. (2014). Captive elephants. In L. Gruen (Ed.), *The ethics of captivity* (pp. 38–56). Oxford University Press.
- Doyle, C. (2017). Captive wildlife sanctuaries: Definition, ethical considerations and public perception. *Animal Studies Journal*, 6(2), 55–85. University of Wollongong. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol6/iss2/5>
- Emmerman, K. S. (2014). Sanctuary, not remedy: The problem of captivity and the need for moral repair. In L. Gruen (Ed.), *The ethics of captivity* (pp. 213–230). Oxford University Press.
- Environmental Investigation Agency. (2016). *Collateral damage: How illegal trade in totoaba swi bladders is driving the vaquita to extinction*. <https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/EIA-Collateral-Damage-FINAL-mr>
- Fleischman, F. (2015). Understanding India's forest bureaucracy: A review. *Regional Environmental Change*, 16(1), 153–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-015-0844-8>
- Gaard, G. (1993). Introduction. In G. Gaard (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp. 1–12). Temple University Press

- Ghosh, R. (2005). *Gods in chains*. Foundation Books.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2015). *Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Jalais, A. (2005). Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When tigers became 'citizens', refugees 'tiger-food'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(17), 1757–1762. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4416535>
- James, T. (2015). *The tusk that did the damage*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Jena, N. R. (1994). People, wildlife and wildlife protection act. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29(42), 2767–2768. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4401914>
- Jessop, B. (2012). Neoliberalism. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of globalization*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470670590.wbeog422>
- Karesh, W. B., & Cook, R. A. (2005). The human-animal link. *Foreign Affairs*, 84(4), 38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20034419>
- Kumar, A. (2024). Legal frameworks for wildlife conservation in India: Challenges and solutions. *International Journal of Civil Law and Legal Research*, 4(1), 212–216.
- Kushwaha, S. P. S., & Hazarika, R. (2004). Assessment of habitat loss in Kameng and Sonitpur elephant reserves. *Current Science*, 87(10), 1447–1453. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24109487>
- Lohanan, R. (2002). The elephant situation in Thailand and a plea for co-operation. In I. Baker & M.
- Marino, L., Bradshaw, G., & Malamud, R. (2009, March–April). The captivity industry: The reality of zoos and aquariums. *Best Friends Magazine*. <http://www.all-creatures.org/articles/ar-captivity-industry.pdf>
- Kashio (Eds.), *Giants on our hands: Proceedings of the international workshop on the domesticate Asian elephant, Bangkok, Thailand, 5–10 February 2001* (pp. 231–238). FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.fao.org/3/ado31e/ado31e0r.htm#bm27>
- Marquardt, J., Fünfgeld, A., & Elsässer, J. P. (2023). Institutionalizing climate change mitigation in the global south: Current trends and future research. *Earth System Governance*, 15, 100163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2022.100163>

- McComb, K., Moss, C., Durant, S. M., Baker, L., & Sayialel, S. (2001). Matriarchs as repositories of social knowledge in African elephants. *Science*, 292(5516), 491–494. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1057895>
- McConnell, T. (2015). The end for elephants? *Earth Island Journal*, 30(2), 30–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43883733>
- Mountfort, G. (1973). Saving the tiger. *Oryx*, 12(2), 109–112. doi:10.1017/S0030605300011157
- Pathak, N., & Kothari, A. (1998). Sharing benefits of wildlife conservation with local communities: Legal implications. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(40), 2603–2610. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407244>
- Oksala, J. K. (2023). *Feminism, capitalism, and ecology*. Northwestern University Press.
- Plumwood, V. (2003). Decolonizing relationships with nature. In W. H. Adams & M. Mulligan (Eds.), *Decolonizing nature: Strategies for conservation in a post-colonial era* (pp. 51–78). Earthscan.
- Problem animal. (n.d.). *Law insider*. <http://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/problem-animal>
- Rangarajan, M., Desai, A., Sukumar, R., Easa, P. S., Menon, V., Vincent, S., Ganguly, S., Talukdar, B. K., Singh, B., Mudappa, D., Chowdhary, S., & Prasad, A. N. (2010). *Gajah: Securing the future for elephants in India* (The report of the Elephant Task Force). Ministry of Environment and Forests. <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/2697>
- Reddy, G. V. (2008). Lessons from two local extinctions: Sariska and Kailadevi (Ranthambhore) in Rajasthan, India. *Conservation and Society*, 6(3), 256–262. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26392940>
- Rivera, L. (2014). Coercion and captivity. In L. Gruen (Ed.), *The ethics of captivity* (pp. 248–269). Oxford University Press.
- Schug, D. M. (2000). The bureaucratisation of forest management in India. *Environment and History*, 6(2), 229–242. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734000129342299>
- Sharma, D. C. (2003). Illegal mining in India threatens wildlife habitat. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 1(4), 176. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3868052>
- Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology and survival in India*. Zed Books.
- Shiva, V. (2016). *Stolen harvest: The hijacking of the global food supply*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Singhar, A. S. (2000). Laws for protection of wildlife in India: Need for awareness towards implementation and effectiveness. *The Indian Forester*, 128(10), 1113–1118.

<http://www.indianforester.co.in/index.php/indianforester/article/view/2648>

Sinha, S. (2010). *Handbook of wildlife law enforcement in India*. Natraj Publishers.

Slotow, R., van Dyk, G., Poole, J., Page, B., & Klocke, A. (2000). Older bull elephants control young males. *Nature*, 408(6811), 425–426.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/35044191>

Steger, M. (2009). *Globalization: A very short introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Wadiwel, D. (2020). Foreword. In K. S. Montford & C. Taylor (Eds.), *Colonialism and animality: Anti-colonial perspectives in critical animal studies* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Wood, A. L. (2012). 'Killing the elephant': Murderous beasts and the thrill of retribution, 1885–1930. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11(3), 405–444. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537781412000266>

---

<sup>1</sup> See also, Vieira, P. (2025). Pluribiological Cosmopolitanism and More-than-Human Societies. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, 23(1), 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.52015/numlji.v23i1.301>

<sup>2</sup> Wilbur Smith was a highly acclaimed South African-British author of historical fiction and epic adventure novels. Known as the “Master of Adventure,” he published over 49 books, selling more than 120 million copies worldwide. His stories are celebrated for their meticulous research and grand, sweeping tales of African history, hunting, and war.