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When nature ‘punches back’: a new materialist reading of Alice Perrin’s *East of Suez*

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Abstract: Alice Perrin’s *East of Suez* is a collection of short stories set in India. She immediately plunges her readers into an unfamiliar and intense world where nature is not a passive object onto which the human subject can impose its will. Instead, nature is persistently visceral, vibrant, and vital in ways that echo changing perceptions of the natural world, especially in relation to matter and energy, in the *fin de siècle*. These shifts presented a challenge to patriarchal and colonial authority by dismantling dominant dualist ideologies. This article briefly sets out the development of non-dualistic scientific ideas about matter and energy, before outlining how this encouraged alternative approaches to material realities, such as theosophy and yoga philosophy. Finally, I look at Perrin’s *East of Suez* to show how non-dualistic ways of thinking contributed to anti-imperialist ideologies by challenging colonial attitudes to the indigenous environment.

Keywords: New Materialism; Anglo-India; British Empire; Nature; Women’s Colonial Writing; Animals; Alice Perrin; Supernatural

When nature ‘punches back’: a new materialist reading of Alice Perrin’s *East of Suez*

Anglo-Indian writer Alice Perrin begins her 1901 short story collection *East of Suez* with the following description:

Beynon walked down to the edge of the weir and looked out across the Ganges River. The evening air was soft and warm, and heavy with the scent of babool-blossom, for the hot weather was creeping on apace, and already the mangoes had begun to take shape upon the trees, and the brain fever bird's discordant song had risen to its most aggravating pitch. The sun was sinking with angry reluctance behind the low range of rocky hills that shone purple in the distance, and the smooth, gliding waters reflected the broad bars of crimson and yellow with which the sky was streaked. Here and there the monotony of the river was broken by islets of sand, points of sticks and weeds, the floating carcass of some decaying animal, and the hackled backs of the alligators resting as though dead on the long strips of mud. Flights of birds were swaying and soaring homewards, and clouds of saffron-coloured dust along the river-banks told of the cattle being driven back to the villages after their day's grazing in the jungle. (1901, 41)

In this opening scene of "Beynon, of the Irrigation Department", Perrin plunges her readers into a remote Indian landscape, far removed from the Anglicized hill stations depicted in Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1890) and the domestic spaces documented by Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner (1890). The protagonist, Beynon, lives in the small village of Patakari, where he oversees river training and irrigation head-works. Perrin tells us that he stays largely in solitude, surrounded by the natural world, in "a small, thatched bungalow built on a piece of rising ground overlooking the river" (1901, 42-43). The narrative foregrounds this environment, which is evidently seething with energy and agency, but readers are told that "Beynon looked at it all and saw nothing" (42). He thinks only of work. Like many of the colonial figures in this collection, Beynon perceives the indigenous landscape in terms of material resources, potential dangers, and native alterity. For him, nature is something to know, to overcome, and to utilize.

It is tempting to read this juxtaposition of civilizing imperialism with Indian wilderness in terms of a colonial opposition upon which British rule relies. In order to appropriate land, natural resources, and physical labour, colonial discourse iterates binarized ontologies that subjugates indigenous nature to western knowledge. As Vicki Kirby explains, nature has many attendant connotations that, to this day, are used to justify dominant patriarchal and imperial interventions:

Theorists of gender, sexuality, and race, for example, have found that Nature/the body is routinely conflated with woman, the feminine, the primordial, with unruly passion and 'the dark continent'—all signs of a primitive deficiency that requires a more rational and evolved

presence (the masculine/whiteness/heterosexuality/culture and civilization) to control and direct its unruly potential. (2008, 215)

However, *East of Suez* resists the easy demarcations of such colonial binaries. As this article argues, Perrin's short stories present a challenge to patriarchal and imperial narratives that posited the natural and material world as inert and passive, waiting for the active authority of the western human subject.

Alice Perrin was born in India in 1867 to General John Innes Robinson, of the Bengal Cavalry, and Bertha Beidermann Robinson. She was educated in England before marrying Charles Perrin (d. 1931), an engineer in the India Public Works Department, in 1886 and returning to India where they lived for sixteen years. During their time there, because of Charles's work, they lived in many secluded locations; this experience brought Perrin into close contact with rural India and prompted her to write, partly as a way to combat loneliness. Her first literary output, the short story "Caulfield's Crime", was published in 1892 in the *Belgravia Annual*, after which she had a prolific and successful career for forty years. In total, she wrote seventeen novels, mostly based on Anglo-Indian life, and published two collections of short stories that focus on the tensions of colonial encounters.ⁱ

Until recently, analyses of Perrin's short stories have been scant. However, Melissa Edmundson Makala's critical edition of *East of Suez* (2011) alongside her studies of the colonial gothic and women's ghost stories have highlighted an important strand of Perrin's work (Edmundson Makala 2013, 2018). As Edmundson Makala notes, Perrin's short fiction uses the gothic "to comment on the tenuous existence of the British in India" (2011, 23). This article seeks to build on this assertion by showing how Perrin also utilizes contemporary ideas about the agency of the natural world – the environment, animals, and bodies – to challenge binarized imperial and empirical ontologies in ways that anticipate threads of New Materialism. Like Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman, for example, Perrin vividly imagines that "Nature is agentic – it acts, and those acts have consequences for both the human and the non-human world" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 4). Specifically, Perrin shows the full force of this agentic nature which "punches back" at humans who try to conquer and domesticate it (7).

New Materialism emerged at the start of the twenty-first century as an interdisciplinary approach that resists the ongoing dualism of critical and cultural theory. It seeks to overturn the

late-twentieth-century's emphasis on language and representation by bringing us back to the body, to nature, and to the material, while also paying attention to the immaterial, the mind, the political. It cuts across traditional dichotomies including nature/culture, human/non-human, animate/inanimate, and mind/matter with profoundly ethical intentions. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost put it:

What is at stake here is nothing less than a challenge to some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency, but also regarding its material practices such as the ways we labour on, exploit and interact with nature. (2010, 4)

Such challenges to these “basic assumptions” about human primacy and agency previously emerged on the fringes of Victorian culture and society, and yet this has not fully been explored in the colonial context or in terms of imperial ideologies. This article therefore offers a new reading of Anglo-Indian literature by drawing upon New Materialist theories to elucidate the presence of non-dualist ontologies in the Indian subcontinent. First, I will outline contemporary ideas on matter and materialisms and spiritualism and the supernatural, then I will discuss Perrin's writing of nature, bodies, and animals.

Matter and materialisms

Coole and Frost explain, in the “Introduction” to *New Materialisms*, that in the seventeenth century, Rene Descartes defined matter as a “corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and thickness, as extended, uniform and inert”; consequently, in the West, “modern ideas about nature saw it as quantifiable and measurable, suitable for Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics” (2010, 7). European scientists generally believed that human subjects could know, master, and manipulate passive objects through mechanical and empirical science. They understood that solid particles of matter were coherent and discrete, and that matter could only act upon an encounter with an external force. Furthermore, in this cultural climate, mind and matter existed separately and stably, a distinction that established a hierarchy between human beings (as agentic subjects) and the rest of the material world (as inert objects). As Coole and Frost state, “The Cartesian-Newtonian understanding of matter thereby yields a conceptual and practical domination of nature as well as a specifically modern attitude or ethos of subjectivist potency” (2010, 8).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Newtonian mechanical laws continued to exert influence. Many scientists sought to validate these laws by increasingly accurate empirical measurements. In 1803, John Dalton postulated that all matter was composed of indivisible and indestructible atoms, too small to be visible with available instruments, but each with a constant mass and figure. Similarly, the discovery of the laws of thermodynamics supported the Newtonian worldview in which the chaotic physical phenomena of everyday life could be rendered predictable by translation into mathematical equations dealing with mass and force (Bhattacharya 2017, 201).

There was also, as Michel Foucault outlines, an epistemological drive to acquire knowledge and power over the material world through classifying and cataloguing it (Foucault 1970). Sara Mills argues that this enterprise contributed to colonial practices as apparently objective scientific discourses, of aesthetics, taxonomy, and nomenclature, exerted control over foreign landscapes in part by knowing and naming, but also by enclosing and owning (1994, 41). Mary Louise Pratt explains that natural history was constituted in and through language and that this knowledge was transmitted to the public sphere through many different forms of writing; journalism and travel accounts, for example, were central agents in legitimating scientific authority and its global project of knowing the world (2008, 29). Furthermore, as LeAnn Richardson demonstrates, Victorian popular literature contributed to a sense of western authority over the natural world “by demonstrating the superiority of the British male through his victories over “savage” landscapes, animals and peoples” (2006, 1).

Simultaneously, however, other forms of knowledge, speculative and imaginative, emerged and challenged the Cartesian ontologies that facilitated the anthropocentric mastery of nature. Ironically, the empirical studies of the nineteenth century had exposed gaps in scientific knowledge and increased awareness of unexplained observations and materially elusive phenomena like waves, particles, heat, light, electricity, and magnetism. These discoveries heightened beliefs in the existence of unseen agencies at work in the world.

In 1827 Robert Brown observed that matter was not inert, that it was comprised of small active particles, and in 1874 John Tyndall expressed dissatisfaction with the explanations of mechanical materialism. He stated in his Belfast Address that so-called vulgar materialism ignored the “manifestation of a Power absolutely inscrutable to the intellect of man in the world of nature” (as quoted in Lightman 2011).ⁱⁱ The precise source or nature of this “power”, variously described as ether, force, energy, was the subject of great debate. As Coole and Frost explain: “Although

physics began with ordinary objects, it developed as a science of forces and movements that are less obviously material yet from which matter is inseparable” (2010, 11). Over the course of the nineteenth century, it became understood that matter was not discrete and subject only to external forces; it was also invisible, indeterminate and had its own source of energy. Consequently, the work of James Clerk Maxwell, William Thomson, and Max Planck paved the way for the foundations of modern dialectical physics; that is, theories of relativity and quantum physics (Kragh 2014, 453).

Kelly Hurley (1996), Barri J. Gold (2010), and Emily Alder (2020) have shown how these nineteenth-century formulations about matter and energy were part of wider cultural conversations. Reciprocal interactions between science and literature meant that writers and artists, as well as scientists, explored the alternatives to a Newtonian world dominated by forms and forces (Gold 2010, 14). For some, the increased attention to unseen agencies led to an interest in alternative spiritualities; Patrick Brantlinger explains:

Impelled by scientific materialism, the search for new sources of faith led many Victorians to telepathy, seances, and psychic research. It also led to the far reaches of the Empire, where strange gods and ‘unspeakable rites’ still had their millions of devotees. (1994, 228)

This was especially true for those outside mainstream scientific spheres who believed that arcane Indian philosophies intersected with new strands of nineteenth-century materialism in ways that resisted dualist ontologies. Writers of English and Indian origin brought together science and spirituality and challenged the British civilizing mission with its anthropocentric exploitation of nature.

Spiritualism and the supernatural

It has been well documented by Janet Oppenheim (1985) and Patrick Brantlinger (1994) that the late nineteenth century saw a rising interest in spiritualism, the occult, and eastern religions. For Gary Lachman, this trend emerged as an antidote to “the sense of meaninglessness created by the increasing dominance of materialist science” (2014, 613). However, as Alder notes, there were strands within the new sciences that offered imaginative possibilities: the idea that the cosmos is powered by something beyond human knowledge, to which humans are irrelevant, and which is

manifest in forms that can, at best, be only partially known on a normal sensory empirical level, was not unlike the theories endorsed by psychical research and alternative spiritualist practices (2020, 195). Hence, the Theosophical Society explicitly stated an interest in “the study of religion, philosophy and science” and in “the investigation of the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man” (Lachman, 614). The Society placed such interests alongside a desire to form a “nucleus of universal brotherhood” regardless of race, sex, or creed (Lachman, 614). By thinking across western and eastern discourses, scientific and spiritual beliefs, theosophy generated genuine non-sectarian cooperation and discourse between intellectuals across the globe.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another transnational movement that brought together east and west, science and spirituality, with ethical and anti-imperialist ideals of universal unity was nineteenth-century yoga. Swami Vivekananda’s English translations of ancient yoga texts articulated ideas about an eternal oneness whereby everything in nature is made of the same visible and invisible elements of matter and energy. He states in *Raja Yoga*: “Physically this universe is one; there is no difference between the sun and you” (1901, 35). To elucidate this further, he uses the language of contemporary physics: “We are all comprised of the same matter (akasa) and energy (prana)” (31).

Evidently, like contemporary New Materialists, some late-Victorian individuals challenged dualist ontologies, questioned empiricist modes of representation and knowing, and sought ethical lived practices. These ideas resonated in the colonies because of the visible repercussions of imperial and empirical ideas about nature and matter. Hence Perrin’s stories highlight the consequences of imperial attitudes that do not take account of the power and agency of the natural world, and she explores the potential for unseen forces to challenge the hierarchical distinctions between the human and non-human world. It is not known whether Perrin engaged specifically with theosophy, yoga, or contemporary physics, but her openness to alternative ontologies that challenged post-Enlightenment values of rationality and objectivity is evident from her occasional engagement with the spiritualists.^{iv} Furthermore, her writing resonates with a holistic view of the world that emerged through the seemingly disparate disciplines of natural sciences, physics, yoga philosophy, and spiritualism.

Alice Perrin

Contemporary reviews of Perrin's work were largely positive, and there was particularly high praise for the short stories; she was commended for her realistic depictions of India, her criticisms of Anglo-Indian life, and her awareness of the problems of Empire (Edmundson Makala 2011, 12). Yet her work has been largely forgotten, partly because of the poor reputation acquired by Anglo-Indian fiction more generally when the British Empire declined in the first half of the twentieth century. Bhupal Singh's *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction* (1934) provided a rather damning overview, especially of women's writing:

Most of the modern Anglo-Indian novels are written by women. Most of them show little sense of style, are poor in characterization and plot construction, and occasionally suffer from a propagandist tendency. (4)

Singh acknowledges the craft of Perrin's short stories but he finds her to be lacking in relation to Rudyard Kipling (86). Kipling was already famous by the time Perrin published *East of Suez* in 1901, and so the comparisons were perhaps inevitable. From this point forward though, through the mid-century, both Kipling and Perrin suffered from a general backlash against colonial writers, especially those who supported the Empire. Then, in the 1970s, imperial revivalist R. C. Churchill recuperated Kipling while simultaneously erasing Perrin and her female peers from his revised edition of *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Edmundson Makala 2011, 18-19). Subsequently, patriarchal bias in the late twentieth century ensured that Kipling's stories of military life and colonial conflict endured as the definitive expression of the Anglo-Indian experience.

Benita Parry's study of colonial literature, *Delusions and Discoveries: India and the British Imagination* (1972) devotes two out of seven chapters to women writers. She reserves one chapter for a serious discussion of Flora Annie Steel, while taking together the popular novels of Perrin, I. A. R. Wylie, Bithia Mary Croker, F. E. Penny, and Maud Diver. Parry sees their romantic fiction as aesthetically redundant because of a seemingly generic interest in marriage and family and as politically uninteresting because they largely espoused imperial ideas (1972, 70-100).^v She considers briefly the stories in *East of Suez* and finds that India emerges as "a place of vast mysteries and intense horrors" (74).

More recently, Edmundson Makala argued that Anglo-Indian women's short stories are more subversive than those of their male counterparts:

[W]omen are more critical of the white/European presence in colonial regions. Their fiction is more concerned with the weaknesses and flaws inherent within the colonial system (and within the colonizer) and how the colonizers themselves ultimately experience suffering and loss, rather than prosperity, while residing in the colonial space. (2018, 8).

Edmundson goes on to explain that these narratives, written at the peak of the Empire, frequently use gothic modes to reveal hidden (female) experiences of colonialism; for her, the stories emphasize fear and anxiety through the colonial subject's struggle between the familiar/unfamiliar, the natural/supernatural, and the domestic/indigenous world (9).^{vi} The short story form, without the need for narrative closure, encapsulates the tensions of colonial life by using the supernatural to trouble the authority and control of British rule. In particular, as seen in the following analysis of a selection of stories, Perrin offers a critique of British imperial attitudes towards the material world: nature, animals, and bodies.

Nature

For the most part, Perrin's colonial protagonists ascribe to a dualism that sees India in terms of a passive object awaiting transformation by the western subject. They participate in what Donna J. Haraway identifies as "nature's constitution as 'other' in histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and class domination of many kinds" (2008, 157). Yet, at the same time, Perrin shows her readers the fallacy of such views. She provides alternative ideas about the material world by dismantling the damaging boundaries between self and other, subject and object, natural and supernatural; and by showing nature itself to be energetic, chaotic, interactive, and agentic, she challenges dominant imperialist structures and prefigures New Materialist drives to "find another relationship to nature besides reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia" (Haraway 2008, 158).

Perrin refuses to "background" nature in ways described by Val Plumwood (1993, 4). Her Indian landscape pervades the stories to such an extent that it, too, should be considered a character (Edmundson Makala 2011, 22). And she realizes nature's agency through grammatical constructions that situate it as an active subject: the sun burns (Perrin 1901, 67), dust storms swirl (130), pariah dogs howl (115), and brain fever birds cry (107). In this intense and vital world, human characters are subordinate to non-human forces.

As seen at the start of this article, *East of Suez* opens with an intense description of a remote area by the river Ganges where Beynon stands, seemingly impervious to the world around him. Like Perrin's husband, Beynon's job is with the India Public Works Department, the Civil Service branch responsible for building roads, developing waterways and drainage systems, and constructing railways. Essentially, this department manipulated the landscape for the benefit of British colonizers. Beynon, for example, had supervised the building of a weir, a process that thoroughly disturbed the rural space:

[T]he air had resounded with the hum of machinery, rumble of trucks, beating of hammers, and the turmoil of a mighty construction that had made eminent engineers of some men, invalidated others, and killed more than one or two from exposure and overwork. (Perrin 1901, 42)

Perrin lays bare the brutality of imperial construction before telling readers of the individual sacrifices made by Beynon. His colonial duties have enforced for him a life of isolation and emotional detachment, and this compounds his disinterest in the natural landscape. He barely seems to notice the "scorching west winds" or the "whirled up clouds of hot, cooper-coloured dust" (46); that is, until he develops feelings for his friend's wife, Kitty Messenger.

The Messengers come to stay with Beynon after their marriage and the lonely irrigation manager becomes increasingly infatuated with Kitty, not least because she is the first woman to spend time with him in many years. While Jack Messenger ties up matters at the indigo factory where he had previously worked, Kitty encourages Beynon to enjoy the world outside. They take strolls through the nearby gardens and row a boat "on the swirling river in the warm evening air" (Perrin 1901, 51). On the Messengers' final evening, Beynon and Kitty take one last leisurely outing during which they encounter a Gussein's funeral and witness the poignant ritual whereby Hindu priests place the body into a boat-shaped basket and launch it into the river for the dead man's final journey. It is a rather peaceful scene until one of snub-nosed alligators pulls the corpse under the water.

The next morning, the Messengers leave for their new station and Beynon becomes acutely aware of the emptiness of his life in Patakari. He resolves to become more active in the world around him. He buys a new wardrobe, reads new books, and, two months later, he visits the Messengers in their new home. Upon arrival, he discovers their marriage is in danger. Beynon's

feelings for Kitty prompt him to save the relationship and save her from ruin, even though this means he must return to the remote station alone and unfulfilled. The narrative clearly approves of this course of action, presenting Beynon as morally upstanding, gentlemanly, and dutiful. Yet Perrin also shows that his repression of feelings for the sake of imperial propriety does not entirely work.^{vii} When Beynon reaches home, he falls ill and walks deliriously to the weir; there he falls into the river and is devoured by the awaiting alligators. It is an ill-fated and tragic trajectory for this sympathetic character who dies sick and alone, a victim of natural causes and the collateral damage of colonial rule.

Beynon's death seems somewhat inevitable through the narrative's repeated references to the river and the constantly circulating alligators; these reiterations intermittently remind readers that the weir, as a symbol of colonial exploitation, cannot wholly control the river's natural vitality. Furthermore, Perrin shows that Beynon's complicity with practices that use the river as a resource for extraction and entertainment is clearly at odds with indigenous perspectives that see the river as an active subject, rather than a passive object. When Beynon's watchman, Bewani, speaks of "Mother Gunga", he evokes the maternal Ganga, Hindu goddess of purification and forgiveness, who "seldom gives back what she takes" (Perrin 1901, 65).

Hurley perceives this vitality of nature, a common trope in *fin de siècle* fiction, as a hostile force that threatens to draw in and engulf the human subject; she argues that this stems from a wider anxiety generated by scientific discourses on matter about the nature of human identity. For Hurley, as the vegetable and animal species acquire sentience, "the human" loses its particularity and begins to lose meaningfulness (1996, 61). Sentient nature is also the subject of Elizabeth Chang's discussion of fringe fictions in which carnivorous plants fight back against resource extraction and exploitation; she argues that these plants were awarded agency not by virtue of their perceived suffering, but through fantasies of the suffering they could inflict (2017, 85-86). However, Perrin is less concerned about the stability of human subjectivity than the repercussions of nature's agency, especially for those characters who refuse to acknowledge its power. While this is evident throughout the collection, it is perhaps most violently realized in her animal stories.

Animals

Edmundson Makala points out that at least half of the stories in *East of Suez* feature animals as central plot devices:

These animals, in turn, either directly or indirectly cause the deaths of characters, and their presence highlights the failures of the perceived safe space of the domestic colonial home as well as the wild unpredictability of the Indian outdoors. (2018, 158)

Perrin's wild animals also show the foolishness of imperial and imperious men who insist upon their ability to master the world around them. The collection is populated with irate, arrogant, and authoritative figures, such as the "tenacious, truth-loving, somewhat harsh" Major Kenwithin (1901, 78), the "dictatorial and opinionated" John Orchard (99), the "sulky, bad-tempered" Caulfield (125) and the "hot, irritated and angry" Colonel Wingate (68). Their urge to control and to dominate has terrible repercussions for themselves and others, especially in Perrin's hunting stories, "The White Tiger", "Caulfield's Crime", and "The Tiger Charm". In all three tales, the hunter becomes the hunted.

"The Tiger Charm" immediately follows Beynon's story, and it too begins by foregrounding a vivid, visceral landscape:

The sun, the sky, the burning, dusty atmosphere, and the waving sea of tall yellow grass seemed molten into one blinding blaze of pitiless heat to the aching vision of little Mrs Wingate. In spite of blue goggles, pith sun-hat and enormous umbrella, she felt as though she were being slowly roasted alive, for the month was May, and she and her husband were perched on the back of an elephant, traversing a large tract of jungle at the foot of the Himalayas. (Perrin 1901, 67)

Nature here is potentially hostile, but the knowing tone and narrative details ("for the month was May") imply that the Wingates' foolish disregard for the season is the real problem. Specifically, as it becomes clear, the bullish Colonel Wingate is the driving force of the expedition. He intimidates his wife, Netta, and his fervent enjoyment of hunting exemplifies his wider propensity for power and violence (68).

By the end of the nineteenth century, hunting was an integral part of the male colonial experience. Mary Procida shows how it framed many of the important social and recreational undertakings of the imperial community (2002, 145). Hunting was also a literary trope which served as a metaphor for Empire. As Harriet Ritvo observes, the connection between the dominance of colonial others and animals is direct and obvious (1987, 254). Colonial adventure narratives usually celebrated imperial hypermasculinity through successful hunting stories (see for

example, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, 1885). But, in *East of Suez*, Perrin overturns this trope by refusing to relegate the animal to the position of metaphor existing only in relation to human will and representation. Instead, the stories argue for the respect and understanding of non-human others as evinced by Mahomed Bux, the mahout accompanying the Wingates and Captain Jim Bastable on their excursion.

On this hunting expedition, Netta is travelling with Captain Bastable on his howdah when they suffer an accident which fatally injures the mahout. Netta stays with Mahomed Bux during his final hours and in gratitude he offers her a small silver amulet and some advice:

Do not be afraid, mem-sahib. Those who fear should never go to the jungle. So if thou seest a tiger, be bold, be bold; call him 'uncle' and show him the tiger-charm. Then he will turn away and harm thee not—. (Perrin 1901, 71)

He explains that the charm is a family heirloom that has protected generations of men from the tiger tooth, and Netta thanks the mahout in the nearest Hindustani equivalent for "Thank you" before he dies.

When Netta and Captain Bastable finally make it back to their camp, Colonel Wingate is drunk and in a jealous rage. He suspects Bastable and Netta of having an affair and entices Bastable to join him immediately on another hunting trip. Netta is fearful of her husband's intentions and gives Bastable the amulet to protect him from at least one source of danger. The two men then proceed on foot into the jungle and climb a tree where they await their prey. When the tiger appears, Wingate attempts to throw Bastable in its path, but his plan backfires and he falls within reach of the tiger's jaws. The animal snatches Wingate and carries him into the jungle. Bastable, stunned and bleeding, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket only to find the silver amulet, "the tiger charm" (Perrin 1901, 76). Perrin closes the story with these words, refusing to clarify whether Bastable's survival is due to natural or supernatural forces.

Perrin allows readers to accept that the indigenous supernatural supports Netta's sympathetic behaviour and that the protective charm offers real and benevolent protection. But the story also allows for the possibility that Wingate's fate is entirely natural, that he simply happened to fall closest to the tiger. Either way, Wingate's violent and domineering attitude is shown to be dangerous and fallacious because there are non-human forces at work in the world, natural or supernatural, that the imperial man cannot control.

Victoria Margree interprets the story as a call for a more benign form of colonialism (2019, 123). Arguably though, Perrin directs this need for benevolence at the natural world. She shows the positive potential of characters like Netta and Mahomed Bux who attend to the animals and the indigenous environment and yet remain open to the possibility of other unexplained forces which work in and through the material world. In this way, the story blurs the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural through its use of Indian belief systems that were not entirely at odds with some of the new scientific discoveries that were still finding their full expression. Alder explains:

The word 'supernatural' poses a problem in the *fin de siècle* context because the premise of such stories is often closely linked to spiritualist and occult discourses that understood all phenomena as 'natural', just sometimes governed by laws we do not yet understand. (2020, 7)

Ultimately, Alder states, "One culture's supernatural may be another culture's natural" (15). This is certainly the case in Perrin's stories which speak to the existence of phenomena that cannot be wholly explained by European epistemologies but that attest to the possibilities of new scientific discoveries and alternative spiritualities. As Perrin knew from life in India, the material world is much more than a passive social construction, and she prompts readers to redefine their relationships with the non-human, if only to avoid serious physical repercussions.

Bodies

Physical retribution is the subject of "The Fakir's Island", another story which blurs the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. This is, for Parry, "the regulation tale of India's weird ascetics" in which Perrin exoticizes the dark and mysterious rituals of Indian religions (1972, 75). Yet, the story also warns against such exoticization as Perrin demonstrates the physical consequences of colonial perspectives that do not take account of the material realities of indigenous life and the immaterial vitality of the unseen world.

E. M. Collingham states that "The British experience of India was intensely physical" (2001, 1). She explains that the British were afflicted from the moment they set sail: by seasickness on the voyage out, by itching unsightly mosquito bites, and by torturous prickly heat that caused painful boils. Their senses were assaulted by heat, dust, dirt, noise, and smells, and the effects of this came as quite a shock to the British body, usually conceived as a closed entity, separate from

its environment (Collingham 2001, 1). To guard against these powerful sensations, Collingham explains that the British practiced modes of self-regulation and self-restraint; they used British clothing and Anglicized bungalows to place an affective wall between their bodies, the bodies of others and the surrounding environment (5). Perrin, however, shows the futility of such practices. In her stories, all bodies are embroiled with and affected by the environment. In “The Fakir’s Island”, for example, Mona Selwyn, a “fair, fresh English girl” who recently arrived in India to keep house for her uncle, contracts smallpox; consequently, her body becomes literally and permanently marked by an infectious disease ambiguously transmitted by either natural infection or a supernatural curse (Perrin 1901, 133).

At the beginning of the story, Mona sees pilgrims gathering along the river Ganges for Khoom Mela and is immediately fascinated by the “sea of humanity” before her (133). She espouses rather intolerant views of the pilgrims’ traditions and complains about the noise, the smells, and the dust (134). She is also rather intolerant of Captain Robertson, “a steadfast, honest, self-reliant soldier”, who takes a different view of the scene before them (133). The pilgrims evoke for him thoughts of India’s ancient civilization and he expresses admiration for the intensity of their faith. His appreciation of the native practices makes him one of the more likeable British men in the collection and exposes Mona’s narrow-mindedness.

Robertson tells Mona of fascinating religious rituals taking place on a nearby island where the Fakirs reside during the festival celebrations. She expresses a kind of morbid fascination and determines to go to the island despite Captain Robertson’s disapproval and his refusal to accompany her. Mona seizes the opportunity to make Robertson jealous and enlists the help of nearby gentleman, Mr Kerr, who agrees to take her to the island. The next morning, Mona and Kerr travel by boat along “Mother Ganga” to the Fakirs’ Island where morning ablutions are taking place. Mona is at once fascinated and repelled by the sight of foreign bodies. Almost immediately she becomes aware of her status as an outsider and an intruder. When an old Fakir with a withered arm and a five-legged cow comes towards her, she understands that this is not a picturesque scene that can be observed from a distance and that her presence is disruptive to the religious pilgrims. The Fakir approaches, seeking alms, and is followed by a crowd of squalid half-naked beggars with a range of corporeal diseases and deformities: elephantitis, leprosy, smallpox. As the baying crowd presses closer to Mona, “whinging”, “cringing”, “crawling”, “stretching”, “dragging”, and “pressing”, Kerr knocks the Fakir’s begging bowl to the ground (Perrin 1901, 136-137). The Fakir

immediately turns to Mona, points to the mumbling mass of maimed and blind beggars and issues a terrible curse: “Before ten suns have set thy beauty will be gone – thou wilt be as those –” (137).

Perrin’s grotesque descriptions of the beggars undoubtedly reiterate stereotypes of India’s dark and mysterious religious rituals, but the narrative also calls into question Mona’s behaviour. She comes to realize that she was a “silly, vain, frivolous little fool” and that she should have heeded Robertson’s advice (Perrin 1901, 138). Furthermore, as Robertson discovers two months later, Mona contracted smallpox on the island and has been left “badly marked” (138). Perrin leaves it for readers to decide whether the disease was caused by natural infection through proximity to the beggars or by the Fakir’s mystical powers. Both interpretations, however, warn against seeing India as a fixed exotic space available for aesthetic entertainment and colonial appropriation; in *East of Suez*, India is always a living, breathing, moving space with unseen forces and energies beyond colonial control. Perrin also suggests that the physically weak, i.e. women and children, are more likely to suffer as a result and she castigates the dominant imperial men who refuse to find alternative ways of being and knowing. John Orchard, in “A Man’s Theory”, is one such man.

A high achiever in the Indian Civil Service, Orchard is “well-read, clear-headed, and far-seeing” and, importantly, a “prig of the first water” (Perrin 1901, 99). As seen here and in other stories, Perrin suggests that the colonial attitudes required for success in the Empire are the same traits that subjugate and sublimate the natural world. Once married, John is sent to “one of the hottest and driest stations in Northern India” (101). He refuses to acknowledge the material realities of this new environment and denies its effect on the British body, even when his wife, Mary, gives birth and her physical health begins to flag. Orchard continues to believe that self-restraint and domestic discipline can withstand the climate and prevent physical decline. He also claims that babies should not be nursed when they cry at night because parents must “Get the child into good habits from the beginning” in order to lay “an excellent moral foundation” (102). In this respect, he echoes the advice of Anglo-Indian child-rearing manuals that proclaimed a need for routine and discipline from the outset (Steel and Gardiner 1890, 164). However, as I have stated elsewhere, primers and manuals often insisted on the ideal rather than the reality (Agnew 2017, 87). In actual fact, as Perrin shows, the body’s material experiences cannot be overwritten by imperial ideologies. The child continues to suffer, and Mary’s health continues to decline as their physical bodies become sites of conflict upon which Orchard exerts his inexorable will; he won’t

use wet grass screens to cool the air, he won't allow Mary to comfort the baby, and he dismisses her concerns when she sees a rat in the nursery.

One night, as the child lies alone, the cries intensify. Mary knows instinctively that this is an expression of pain and runs to the bedroom. Orchard hears a scream and a crash and follows her to the nursery:

He fetched a lamp from the hall, and saw his wife lying on the floor by the cradle, a huddled unconscious heap. He held the light aloft and peered into the little bed. The baby's face was white and still, the tiny fists clenched. From the child's neck a narrow red stream trickled across the sheet, and on the pillow, hesitating whether to go or stay, and with its head and paws dyed crimson, sat a large grey rat. (Perrin 1901, 103)

It is a shocking image that speaks to fears about India as a dark and dangerous threat to British domestic values. Indeed, Edmundson Makala reads the rat as a source of gothic horror (2018, 168). Arguably, though, the catastrophe is not caused simply by the indigenous animal but by the unbending will of the imperial male. Orchard's actions, his refusal to listen to others, his disrespect for the environment, and his dismissal of Mary's concerns all contribute to this terrible tragedy. *East of Suez* is full of these colonial figures who similarly exemplify what Jane Bennett refers to as "human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (2010, ix). Such destructive fantasies are not necessarily evinced in wide-scale imperial projects like the railways or mining, they are equally evident in the small remote corners of the Empire, where the British colonizers erect their homes and ignore their surroundings.

Perrin writes predominantly about British lives in remote English bungalows, and she shows how indigenous nature resists these man-made structures that disrupt local human and non-human life. Unlike the imperial memoirs of colonial wives that describe extensive efforts to keep the indigenous world at bay by Anglicizing their domestic spaces, Perrin denies her characters any kind of enclosed sanctuary as she blurs the boundary between colonized and uncolonized spaces. Animals, heat, dust, noise, insects, and disease reclaim the landscape by crossing over the domestic threshold, and this comes to an acute climax in "The Biscobra", the final story in the collection.

In “The Biscobra”, the Kreys are a young married couple, new to India, and assigned to a small rural station. Upon arrival they discover that their new home already has non-human residents:

The thatched roof needed renewing, the walls, seemed to be composed of mud and white ants, and nails driven into them disappeared and were no more seen. Wasps had made their dwelling in corners, and sparrows had built in the fireplaces, owls of all sizes lived in a state of sleepy serenity along the beams of the verandah, and mysterious creatures ran to and from with sharp, pattering feet over the loose, discoloured ceiling cloths. (Perrin 1901, 167)

Perrin emphasizes the lively matter of the house itself through the dynamic walls of mud and ants and the animals that dwell in every nook and cranny. Mrs Krey “hated” animals and she “waged untiring war” against those gathered in her home with the help of their old servant, Beni (167). It is an unending battle and, as the weather grows hot, Mrs Krey becomes tired and nervous. One evening, the Kreys find Beni attempting to dislodge a biscobra from the thatch over the verandah. In the colonial memoirs mentioned above, the verandah was often a troubling interstitial space; being neither inside nor outside the home, it undermined the clear physical and ideological separation of subject and object, self and other, home and world (Agnew 2017, 35). This is also made very clear in Perrin’s story as the biscobra and other animals lay claim to this ambivalent space.

The biscobra is a reptile, also known as a monitor lizard, that is usually found in India’s rural areas, especially forested land, and it is notoriously shy of humans. Nonetheless, in the nineteenth century, it had a terrible reputation as a dangerous and evil creature. As H. F. Hutchinson writes in 1879, biscobras had an almost mythical status among the local Indian people (553). Beni clearly holds such beliefs, but Mr Krey abruptly renounces these supernatural fears with rational information recently gleaned from a book (Perrin 1901, 171). Mrs Krey remains fearful and crosses the verandah holding a lantern. But the light disturbs the nearby nocturnal creatures and a family of bats swoop in and out, owls begin to chatter, and finally the biscobra reluctantly falls from its hiding space:

There was a slight scratching sound directly overhead, as of claws clinging to woodwork, a faint hiss, and the next moment flapping and turning in the air, the green, scaly body of a large

biscobra fell heavily on to Mrs Krey's shoulder, where it hung for one hideous second, and then dropped with a thud on to the stone verandah floor. (171)

That night, Perrin tells us, "death came to the little thatched bungalow" (171). Mrs Krey gives birth prematurely and then dies, followed a few days later by her baby. Not long after, a grief-stricken Krey leaves the station and Beni becomes caretaker of the cemetery so that he can remain with the mother and child.

On the anniversary of his wife's death, Krey returns to the station for the first time. Grief has taken a physical toll: "his health had broken down, his nerves shattered, and he looked ten years older than his age" (Perrin 1901, 172). Beni, who is also in poor health, explains that a young biscobra, living in a hole at the grave, is the reincarnated Krey baby. For Beni, the British child's spirit or energy has taken a different material form and he treats this new body with care, feeding it daily with fresh milk. Again, Krey dismisses such indigenous superstitions, but when a biscobra emerges from a hole by the grave, he beats it to death with a "cry of horror, rage and madness" (175). The seeming possibility of reincarnation and the horror of his own reaction destabilizes Krey's world view so completely that he entirely breaks down, and Perrin describes him as an Englishman "from whose eyes the light of understanding had gone for ever" (175). It is a powerful closing image that emphasizes the need to reach beyond rational empirical knowledge to find sympathetic and empathetic ways to live. It speaks to an ethical concern that Alder identifies in *fin de siecle* weird fiction more generally:

The stories recognize that human agency and certainty about the present or the future are limited and provisional – which might be a frightening state to confront but it is at core a desirable, ethical position to take in a frightening world, now as then. (2020, 4)

In the Indian subcontinent, there was clearly an acknowledgement of empirical limitations and a drive to find alternative ways to think about humanity's relationship to the natural world. The theosophists believed that there was no such thing as dead matter (Bhattacharya 2017, 199). Yoga practitioners explained that everything in the universe was comprised of the same energy and matter. And Perrin wrote stories in which she challenged imperial dualisms that underpinned colonial relations. This nexus of alternative ideologies was located on the intellectual and geographical fringes of the late nineteenth century, and it was ultimately outweighed at the time

by dominant imperial discourses. In the early twenty-first century, however, New Materialist thinkers are returning to the ethical and ecological principles of unity in and with the universe.

The idea that humans are *of* the world, rather than separate to it, that we are all made from the same stuff – atoms, quarks, particle streams, or matter-energy – and that we are subject to the same forces potentially reconfigures the relationships between humans and the rest of the planet. As Bennett states, “This same-stuff claim, this insinuation that deep down everything is connected and irreducible to a simple substrate, resonates with an *ecological sensibility*” (2010, xi). This ecological sensibility can be felt throughout Perrin’s short stories. Perrin understands all too clearly the need for interaction, empathy, and union with our environment because the disunity and discord in her contemporary world cause chaos and catastrophe. This echoes twenty-first century concerns as we face an increasing awareness that we are of this world, not apart from it, and that our actions within the environment have far-reaching implications and consequences. Consequently, as Haraway puts it, “No longer able to sustain the fictions of being either subjects or objects, all the partners in the potent conversations that constitute nature must find a new ground for making meaning together” (2008, 70). One way of doing this is, as Bennett argues, by thinking of the vitality and vibrancy of matter, so that we might develop greener forms of human culture (ix).

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ⁱ I am grateful to Melissa Edmundson Makala for providing this biographical information about Perrin (2011, 7-8).

ⁱⁱ Tyndall's presidential address to The British Association for the Advancement of Science was in Belfast in 1874. It was a notorious event due to controversies over his expression of materialism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theosophist Annie Besant later became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. She also supported Vivekananda's spiritual teachings and practices. Sumangala Bhattacharya's chapter on "The Victorian Occult Atom: Annie Besant and Clairvoyant Atomic Research" discusses Besant's use of clairvoyant meditation practices, inspired by Indian yogic traditions, to determine the structure of the atom. She argues that Besant's methodologies and research challenge post-Enlightenment scientific values of rationality and objectivity

^{iv} Edmundson Makala notes that Perrin was well known among the Spiritualists of the early twentieth century (2001, 11)

^v Later studies by Alison Sainsbury and Julia Kuehn have shown that these domestic novels are often more complicated than this (Sainsbury 1996; Kuehn 2013).

^{vi} Victoria Margee also focuses on Perrin's use of supernatural; however, she argues that "where critique of Anglo-Indian behaviour is at work in Perrin's tales, this seems to serve the purpose of recalling the British to an awareness of the conduct befitting them as India's rulers, not as a critique of imperial rule *per se*" (2019, 116).

^{vii} Throughout the collection, sublimated desires resurface in the form of dreams and fevers. For example, in an 'An Eastern Echo', Meg's repressed sexual desires surface in a kind of dream.