BRITISH HUNTSWOMEN IN COLONIAL INDIA: IMPERIALISM AND GENDER HIERARCHIES, 1890–1921

VIJAYA RAMADAS MANDALA

Department of History
University of Hyderabad, India

Abstract

This article examines the history of British huntswomen in colonial India, c. 1890–1921. It aims to map the dissemination of the codes of huntswomanship, which came to signify the cultural and political ecology of India, in relation to historical geography and the animal kingdom. This study argues that British women could not have gained such an ideological significance without the active collaboration of indigenous people. In addition, this article contends that British huntswomen's environmentalism and the hunted fauna differed widely from those of male imperial hunters—an important historical development in relation to shikar in India that extant historiography has overlooked. Taking into account the memoirs of Mrs Alan Gardner, Isabel Savory and Mrs W. W. Baillie, this study offers a different reading of the history of huntswomanship in colonial India beyond the male-dominated genre of the imperial hunt. While tiger huntresses existed in the English East India Company period, in the later Raj, more British women successfully transformed big game hunting mores by positioning their practices in the realm of sport. These women conceptualised gender hierarchies and intelligently articulated their views on the hunt, as well as hunting fauna, through a colonial feminist perspective. Finally, the analysis sheds light on the political dimensions of huntswomanship and the implication of gender politics in the context of environment and empire.

Keywords: India, women, hunting, gender, environment, imperialism

This article will explore the semantics of 'huntswomanship' that took place in the British Raj, from 1890 to 1921. With the onset of colonisation, many British women took to hunting adventures across the British Empire. Just why did British women risk their lives by venturing overseas to hunt? The possible answer is that 'huntswomen' who made their debut in the colonial world consciously took to dangerous pursuits of big game hunting in order to overcome the physical and mental restrictions imposed by society. Members of the male fraternity in Victorian Britain were less enthusiastic about women entering the masculine spheres of 'exploration' and adventures in big game hunting in tropical places. Kenneth Czech points out that men in the business of exploration and big game hunting were expected to earn fame and fortune, receiving generous sponsorship and writing

books on their adventures and discoveries, while discounting women's contribution in similar fields.¹ The privileged women who could participate in such adventures were tolerated in the subaltern role of 'wife, guide, or servant', but not as equals.² George Nathaniel Curzon (1859–1925), Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, opined that women's 'sex and training render them equally unfit for exploration, and the genus of professional female globe-trotters ... is one of the horrors of the latter end of the nineteenth century'.³ The then Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), Sir Clements Markham, expressed a similar view. The esteemed institutions such as the RGS and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGC) in Britain denied women entry into their organisations and refused to allow them to undertake any kind of exploration abroad.⁴ When he was in charge towards the end of the nineteenth century, Curzon fiercely opposed the admission of women into RSGC.⁵

Notwithstanding such a hostile climate, many women managed to visit the colonial world either by accompanying their husbands or by making individual visits as explorers or adventure-seekers. Such overseas trips presented them with unfamiliar big game opportunities. Czech points out that the scientific desire for exploration indeed opened up hunting ventures in the natural world: 'Collecting game for science meant understanding the nature and habitat of animals, as well as exhibiting personal courage to shoot animals' of predatory kind and having trophy value.⁶ Taxidermy flourished, and the number of natural and zoological museums in London, and Europe in general, increased thanks to myriads of sportsmen profiting from hunting undertakings in the empire.⁷ It is against this backdrop that this article will examine the contributions of British women in the field of shikar and the Raj, and how gender and imperialism played an important role in mapping the geographies of empire, thereby producing a feminine understanding of the Indian environment.

While the existing historical literature is valuable in throwing light on the presence of British huntswomen in colonial India, it nevertheless stops short of analysing women's hunting practices more closely. This literature was reviewed in a previous article pertaining to British huntswomen, during the period of English East India Company rule in India (1830–45).⁸ Some of the research questions this study will

1 Kenneth Czech, *With Rifle & Petticoat: Women as Big Game Hunters, 1880–1940* (Lanham, MD: Derrydale, 2002), 3–4.

2 *ibid.*, 4.

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*, 3.

5 *ibid.*, 4.

6 *ibid.*, 5.

7 *ibid.*, 4.

8 Vijaya Ramadas Mandala, 'Tiger huntresses in the Company Raj: Environmentalism and exotic imaginings of wildlife, 1830–45', *International Review of Environmental History* 5, no. 2 (2019): 101–2. doi.org/10.22459/IREH.05.02.2019.04.

explore include how and when did the idea of ‘huntswomanship’ emerge in the Indian hunting field; to what extent was the doctrine of imperialism entrenched in the psyche of British huntswomen in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Accordingly, our study will closely examine the following aspects: (a) the idea of ‘huntswomanship’ in colonial India; (b) the physical hardships faced by huntswomen; (c) British women’s construction of the cultural geography of the wild; (d) the political dynamics of huntswomanship in relation to British imperialism in the hunting field; and (e) the critique of pot-shooting and indiscriminate slaughter, from a huntswoman’s point of view. By locating these aspects in the historical milieu, I hope to show how British huntswomen, successfully or otherwise, engaged with the natural ecology of the Orient. This study also considers what their hunting practices would mean in relation to shooting big game species as well as the gender politics of the colonial hunt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such an appraisal will help the reader to appreciate the intimate relationship that existed between human societies—whether coloniser or colonised—and the natural environment in which they lived. It would also map the transformation of such a relationship into a compelling hunting discourse, both ‘imagined’ and ‘real’, based on British women’s experience of venturing into India’s forest interiors and mountain altitudes, and their face-on encounters with wild fauna, including dangerous beasts.

This article aims to offer such an analysis by examining the hunting memoirs of Mrs Alan Gardner (née Nora Beatrice Blyth; hereafter Beatrice Blyth), Isabel Savory and Mrs W. W. Baillie to demonstrate the possibility of reconstructing the history of huntswomanship in colonial India beyond the male-dominated genre of the imperial hunt. A brief note on the existing record about women hunters is necessary to understand the shape of the discourse. I could not find any particular source relating to the social background of the huntswoman Baillie, except that she was economically a well-to-do member of the British community in India. Beatrice Blyth was the eldest daughter of Lord Blyth of Blythwood in Britain, and her husband Alan Gardner was a member of the British Parliament.⁹ Blyth and her husband undertook sporting adventures in northern India in October 1892. Isabel Savory was born in Weybridge, Surrey, in 1869. By 1886, her father, a goldsmith, had a personal estate that was estimated to be worth £114,000, attesting to her wealthy background since childhood.¹⁰ While Baillie was the wife of an ‘Anglo-Indian’ official and resident colonial, Gardner and Savory were wealthy sports tourists who travelled the country for months and years and identified themselves as ‘Anglo-Indian’ (i.e. Britons in India) in their writings. The rationale for choosing the above women as the specific focus of this study is to explore how the intersection

9 Czech, *With Rifle & Petticoat*, 25.

10 Precious McKenzie, *The Right Sort of Woman: Victorian Travel Writers and the Fitness of an Empire* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 85.

of class, race, imperial power and gender privilege transcended the realm of hunting in colonial India. This is warranted, especially given that hunting was recognised as a restricted domain of male Britons on the upper rungs of the colonial ladder.

Referring to gendered negotiations in relation to hunting and colonialism in the late nineteenth century Nilgiris, M. S. S. Pandian writes that Britons in India used hunting to affirm their 'superior self' through the legitimisation of colonialism, where 'self was presented as risk-taking, perseverant' and without fear, epitomised by a superior masculine empire and imperial hunt.¹¹ In colonial India, this was juxtaposed with and contrasted to the native practices of the hunt, which were branded 'utilitarian' and 'effeminate'. Pandian contends that the process of affirming such masculine–feminine/coloniser–colonised differences, in reality, faced much rough weather in the cultural and political ecology of actual practice.¹² Pandian's research illustrates that the alleged 'effeminate' natives exhibited credible deeds of manliness in the hunting expeditions in the Nilgiri Mountains of the Western Ghats. In reality, the process of affirming masculine–feminine/coloniser–colonised differences also reinforces the frailty of the imperial masculine self in colonial hunting episodes, though this was not put in writing or otherwise publicised.

Likewise, in the following pages, we shall explore the historical instances of the asymmetrical power politics played out by a few notable British huntswomen, who orchestrated the notion of imperial femininity in the Indian hunting field as a negotiating strategy contrasting the dominant masculine sphere of the Raj. Moving beyond the paradigm of prominent British women participating in the hunts, our study also will examine to what extent the succeeding generation of British women changed the field of big game hunting, based on their first-hand experiences and their language of the hunt in relation to the hunted fauna. More importantly, notwithstanding the tiger huntresses in the Company Raj, this study intends to examine how the codes of huntswomanship came to the fore within different territories and environments in the last decade of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

Blyth's¹³ letters written while she was out hunting and travelling in northern India are a useful point of entry to examine the scope and extent of British women exercising their role in the hunting field in India. When Blyth travelled to India with her husband in the winter of 1892, her letters to her father unveiled the sporting opportunities that India offered to people like her, and especially her role

11 M. S. S. Pandian, 'Gendered Negotiations: Hunting and Colonialism in the Late 19th Century Nilgiris', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 29, nos 1–2 (1995): 239.

12 Pandian, 'Gendered Negotiations', 239.

13 She referred to herself as Mrs Alan Gardner; Czech, *With Rifle & Petticoat*, 25–6.

as a huntswoman—a privilege, much like with the Eden sisters,¹⁴ reserved for only a few European women during this period.¹⁵ As a huntswoman, Blyth was aware of the need for carrying warm clothing in the foothills of the Himalayas, the region famed for hill sport during the heyday of British rule.¹⁶ Her journey from Bombay (Mumbai) to the Himalayas, passing through different territories and environments of varying ‘degrees of cold and heat, from the frost and snow’, required her to carry a considerable assortment of clothing.¹⁷ Savory (discussed above) likewise typified colonial sportswomen by wearing a hat (topi), shirt, hunting coat, woollen gloves and mountain boots, thus leaving behind the prettification of the other ‘Anglo-Indian’ women and adapting her attire to the pressing necessity of moving freely in the forest and facing dangerous animals.¹⁸ One of Savory’s big game hunting illustrations titled ‘With my last barrel I fired’ shows the huntswoman’s outfit she wore when shooting a tiger from the top of a tree near the Godavari basin in the Deccan region.¹⁹ Mary A. Procida’s argument that the sporting environment of the Raj necessitated a change in British women’s attire by ‘modifying their physical appearance to facilitate participation in hunting and other sports’ is persuasive in this context. In a way, the sportswomen’s apparel simply redefined women’s notions of ‘femininity and gender difference’, and thus did not abandon it.²⁰

During her hunting journeys, Blyth acknowledged the indispensable role of the native head shikari, on whom depended the Britons’ comfort in the camp, as well as all prospects of bagging game. He was a combination of the ‘major-domo and courier, and in addition commandant of the twenty-five or thirty coolies who carry the baggage’.²¹ Czech also points out that the colonial huntswoman’s ‘trust in her shikaris [hunters] grew with familiarity and their trust in her shooting prowess’.²² This compels the reader to appreciate the exchange of the local knowledge systems of hunting and the whereabouts of the haunts and habitats of flora and fauna. It was reciprocated in a situation where a huntress was expected to demonstrate her mastery of the use of the gun in bringing down the game, thus impressing her native servants

14 Eden sisters refer to Emily Eden and Fanny Eden who were sisters of the Earl of Auckland, the Governor-General of India between 1836 and 1842. Both Eden sisters accompanied their brother to India in 1836, and spent many years in Calcutta and the Bengal Presidency. Their experience in India comprises participation in many tiger shooting expeditions, descriptions of India’s big game animals and the country’s flora and fauna, which took place between 1836 and 1842. See Janet Dunbar, *Golden Interlude – The Edens in India 1836–1842* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1956).

15 Alan Gardner, *Rifle and Spear with the Rajpoots: Being the Narrative of a Winter’s Travel and Sport in Northern India* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1895), see Preface.

16 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 11.

17 *ibid.*, 12–13.

18 Isabel Savory, *A Sportswoman in India: Personal Adventures and Experiences of Travel in Known and Unknown India* (London: Hutchinson, 1900), 139.

19 *ibid.*, 266.

20 Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 143.

21 *ibid.*, 33.

22 Czech, *With Rifle & Petticoat*, 55.

and spectators in the vicinity, and concluding the outcome of a hunt on a successful note. An underlying aspect behind such effective organisation of colonial big game hunting expeditions comprised the native servants and shikari helpers.

It would suffice to say that the participation of indigenous guides and informants, and their knowledge, constituted the critical apparatus that the British women appropriated for the successful completion of their hunting missions, even though native assistants were not the intended targets or audience for their shikar triumphs. Shafqat Hussain's study 'Forms of Predation: Tiger and Markhor Hunting in Colonial Governance' offers direct insight into Britons' ambivalent attitude towards the exploitation of native servants in the hunts in the Kashmir state of India, because it contradicted the codes of sportsmanship and principles of Britons' enlightened governance.²³ As Hussain explains, though *begar* or 'forced labour of local people' was meant for bureaucratic works of the Kashmir state and British Raj officials, in reality, it became a mandatory requirement for hunting expeditions of British sportsmen in the northern hill region, i.e. Kashmir.²⁴ While the British officials as well as the sportsmen were hesitant in using *begar* for their works and hunting expeditions, they accepted the fact that the system was too 'oppressive'.²⁵ There were points of tension too. A colonial officer, W. Lawrence, reported that native servants who did not engage in *begar*, because it entailed service away from their homes for two or three months, had cruel punishment meted out to them by government officials.²⁶ Such frequent affrays annoyed the British since they violated the 'liberal political principles upon which the wide discourse of governance was based in which the British recognised their Indian subjects to possess some political rights'.²⁷ It was estimated that towards the end of the nineteenth century 'more than half the population of Kashmir of 840,000 was eligible to provide *begar*'.²⁸ This is germane to our study as the natives employed on Blyth's and Baillie's hunting expeditions in the Himalayas could have been part of this manipulative system. Though British huntswomen did not say much about them, they nevertheless utilised such services in their shikar expeditions.

As a huntswoman, Blyth made several observations regarding the art of stalking and shooting sambar (the largest species of deer in the subcontinent). According to her, 'there is a charm in stalking the wild animal' because, in the jungles of India, sambar is found wild and is notoriously secretive, in contrast to the stags of the Scottish forests.²⁹ While wind direction is paramount to the bagging of a sambar

23 Shafqat Hussain, 'Forms of Predation: Tiger and Markhor Hunting in Colonial Governance', *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 5 (2012): 1212–38.

24 Hussain, 'Forms of Predation', 1229, 1214.

25 *ibid.*, 1231.

26 *ibid.*, 1229.

27 *ibid.*, 1231.

28 *ibid.*, 1229.

29 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 50.

or deer, the vastness of the Indian forest enabled a hunter to approach the animal unhindered. The difficulty of big game hunting in India was echoed when Blyth pointed out that 'there is no gillie [sic] to observe that you will drive the beast on to a neighbour's forest', as in Scotland. According to her, stalking stag as an art was far superior in Scotland, whereas in colonial India one could 'circumvent the stag on the ground which renders a scientific stalk possible'.³⁰ What Blyth is implying here is that in India the stags lived in a forest, not only by name but in reality in 'an endless wilderness' that offered an exciting chance for sport, in contrast to the highland hunting moors in Britain.³¹ The sambar's appearance during early morning and before nightfall, when the animal would come out to feed near its favourite haunts, was considered the exact moment for a huntswoman to get a fair shot. Blyth accordingly observed that 'with patience and luck this may succeed, but it can hardly be called real sport'.³² The implication here is that the 'true sport' could be found in the wilderness of India, where animals are found in an untamed state. Tracking an animal in its natural habitat in India thus obliged a huntswoman to sit unwearingly for many hours stalking, not to lose nerve or sight, before shooting the animal. This masculine aspect or trait was something considered not suitable for British women in the nineteenth-century political practice of sport.³³

The above account elucidates Blyth's interpretation of the historical practice of stag hunting in mapping out its complex topography and the sporting possibility of gaining an exotic trophy. The sambar was valued for the size of its antlers, and characteristics such as its swiftness and adaptability. Sambar could run in the mountain habitats with long and high bounds, clearing obstacles or rapidly ascending steep slopes with high and low jumping. The latter part of the nineteenth century also witnessed the proliferation of hunters seeking animal trophies of a specific kind, emulating the popularity of stag hunts in Victorian Britain. It is the trophy value of horns and secretive habitat of the sambar that made its pursuit daunting. A sportswoman required knowledge of topography and climatic conditions, as well as great patience and intelligence to track the animal's whereabouts. The territorial implication of hunting stags is noteworthy too. The language of sport used by Blyth tells of the expansion of control and access to land and resources by British women (the likes of her and other sportswomen in the British Raj). Such females engaged in hunting through their articulation of colonial knowledge applied to wild animals and their environments (for example, in this context, Scottish and Indian deer, and their territorial distinctions). This manner of building colonial political ecology, it could be argued, was a by-product of British utilitarian principles. Such ideological underpinnings of colonial environmentalism aided the British huntswomen in bringing a certain narrative of order out of chaos, which was embedded within

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.*

a local ecological system, whether in India or other parts of the colonial world. In the above account of Blyth's, the interplay and position of sambar hunting gets central attention in reading imperial interactions with animals (non-human realms) and how it developed further into a conscious act of sport by the later nineteenth century. Such an inventive tradition of the articulation of sport in relation to British huntswomen's practices implies the flourishing of colonial modernity on the fringe of empire. Besides, the embodied historical geographies of stag hunting at the height of empire also delineate spatiotemporal territorialisation in the interwoven histories of Britain and India.

Blyth's itinerary with her husband and the rest of the hunting party, including native shikaris and other assistants, necessitated setting off before sunrise, around 2 am, to the Kashmir maharaja's preserve, a 10-mile ride across the valley, on the opposite hills. With the aid of lanterns, the party pushed along the mountain track at a good pace on the back of ponies, keeping up with the native shikaris' long strides, reaching the foothills where animals such as the black bear and barasingha (swamp or marsh deer; *Rucervus duvaucelii*) were to be found.³⁴ Blyth's huntswomanship skills were significant for her time, given that not many British women dared to venture into the rugged terrain and risky mountain ranges at the highest altitudes in search of the Himalayan sport.³⁵ In British women's hunting lore in colonial India, the study of animal behaviour and its physiology became crucial in relation to the hunted fauna to justify its killing as worthy of sport.

Like male hunters, Blyth did not fear the pursuit of the Himalayan hill game, because such trails necessitated her to climb dangerous tor steepes and ravines. Despite the fact that her native shikaris 'occasionally slipped up or tumbled over stones hidden in the darkness', Blyth managed to reach the location of the anticipated hunting operation.³⁶ These instances illuminate the kind of physical stamina required by a huntswoman in the pursuit of hill game. Blyth's field notes also reveal the pitfalls of big game expeditions. For example, in colonial India many beaters or coolies were often severely wounded when they were in the process of driving the game towards the hunter or huntress. Often such men accidentally got attacked or killed by the predatory animals.³⁷

Another aspect of Blyth's hunting discourse was the weather factor, as her outings in northern India took place in the winter season. On one of her hunting trips, walking in the snow became difficult for her hunting party. Everything was 'frozen' and her native shikari assistant warned that if there were to be a heavy snowfall

34 *ibid.*, 51.

35 *ibid.*, 53, 57–63.

36 *ibid.*, 66.

37 *ibid.*, 62.

they would not be able to cross the hill pass at all.³⁸ The high-altitude tors of the Himalayas, with its difficult topography, prevented the ponies from climbing any further. Consequently, they were sent back. The hunting party that was left behind reached the peak on foot.³⁹

Once while trailing tahr (Himalayan chamois; *Hemitragus jemlahicus*), Blyth aptly described the difficulty of hill sport as a tough, enduring ordeal in climbing an extremely steep hill.⁴⁰ Such physically testing hill sport required tremendous stamina in the quest for the virile and dangerous nature of big game hunting in the colonial world. This instance of hill sport in the mountains and the role of historical geography could extend our debate on gender and imperialism in relation to parallel developments taking place in Britain around this time. Melanie Tebbutt's study on 'Rambling and Manly Identity' in Derbyshire's Dark Peak in the Peak District of England from the 1880s to the 1920s elucidates how walking in this particular topography and the moorland area contributed to a localised sense of spatiality, which was influenced by regional and national discourses that also testified the broader social and cultural undercurrents of gender and class.⁴¹ She refers in particular to G. H. B. Ward (1876–1957), who was popularly known in the Peak District as the 'King of Ramblers'. Through his writings, Ward created a movement to gain public access to moorlands and he himself was a pioneer of walking 'on and around outlawed Kinder Scout'.⁴² It is noteworthy that women were not allowed in the walkers' club until 1904, even though some were elected on an honorary basis.⁴³ Ward considered women to be 'second-class walkers'. Besides, walking in the Derbyshire peaks was denied to English women until the early twentieth century.

This historical development is germane in relation to Blyth's spatial temporality in her hill-shikar adventures in the high altitudes of the Himalayas in the 1890s, as she was able to exert her physical prowess in climbing dangerous mountains. It is quite puzzling though that British men's discourse on imperialism and masculinity in colonial India does not speak of restraining women's involvement in big game hunts. Besides, it does not offer a clue (or one is yet to be found) regarding their silence on the question of female participation in imperialism. The privilege allowed to Blyth under the ruling-race sanction offers a contrasting example of how her ability as a huntswoman helped her to overcome gender barriers in the imperial situation. In the empire, this was not questioned due to colonial protocol and etiquette, at

38 *ibid.*, 67.

39 *ibid.*, 68.

40 *ibid.*, 105.

41 Melanie Tebbutt, 'Rambling and Manly Identity in Derbyshire's Dark Peak, 1880s–1920s', *Historical Journal* 49, no. 4 (2006): 1125.

42 *ibid.*, 1130.

43 *Ibid.*, 1136–7.

least in the hunting realm and other colonial procedures. Hence, Blyth prevailed over her female counterparts in Britain on the question of spatiality in the hills that British ramblers such as G. H. B. Ward asserted only belonged to males in England.

Unlike the majority of her women contemporaries, Blyth embarked on hill sport and shot wild bears. However, she could not shoot the Himalayan stags, though she pursued them in difficult terrains and environments. Thus, dangerous big game pursuits during this period were not the exclusive domain of male hunters, but women too could participate in the quest for exploration and hill-shikar, a sub-variety of big game hunting in the hills thus far overlooked in the extant historical scholarship.

Besides, Blyth's colonial privilege afforded many opportunities to join and converse with Indian princely rulers of the Rajputana states, and even to display her shooting prowess in their presence. For example, when she reached the kingdom of Chamba in the foothills of the Himalayas, she was able to experience the maharaja's hospitality. There she came across a pond with several tame and wild ducks, the latter being migratory species that visited the region in winter.⁴⁴ Blyth found the maharaja's palace rooms filled with pictures of native life, including 'long processions of soldiers, horses, and elephants, or shooting scenes, with peculiarly ferocious-looking tigers'.⁴⁵ On one occasion, Blyth shot a leopard in the presence of the maharaja and the gathered public, which offers an interesting insight into the internal dynamics of symbolic hunts in the princely states. For a British woman to establish her credentials to claim 'imperial race' privilege, on such occasions it seems she was expected to demonstrate her markswomanship skills. When the maharaja of Chamba and his brother Bhurie Singh invited Blyth and her husband to a public gathering in the capital, the episode was described thus:

The Maharaja handed me a rifle, and begged that I would take the first shot. It was a nervous moment for an inexperienced markswoman [like me] before so many spectators, but he would not hear of a refusal [from me]. The cord was pulled and the leopard bounded out, then crouched seemingly level with the ground, and glared round, gnashing his teeth and lashing his tail, evidently hesitating which direction to take. I fired, and they all politely declared he was hit [i.e. despite it seems Blyth being initially unsure of having hit the leopard].⁴⁶

Afterwards, watched by horrified spectators, the leopard with a roar slouched away in the direction of the hills. The maharaja, his brother and Blyth's husband fired their shots at the leopard in quick succession, and then the animal 'rolled over motionless'.⁴⁷ The vindictiveness involved in shooting a carnivore was supplanted

⁴⁴ Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 123.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

by the rituals of protocol and public spectacle. It is unsurprising that British women were accorded such an honour by their Indian princely hosts for the reason of colonial protocol; such friendly occasions no doubt at times, as Blyth's experience would seemingly suggest, also provided a platform for British women to demonstrate their 'markswomanship' skills in front of an enthusiastic crowd. Later Blyth affirms: 'part of my bullet, a little .450, was found in his [leopard's] body, so I had the satisfaction of knowing that I really had not missed'.⁴⁸

It is a well-known fact that sport in India was the social glue for diplomatic and military activities, linking princely states to the Raj. Blyth's participation in the aforesaid public business of the hunt, on the other hand, exemplifies the licence allowed to British women thus far in the context of gender and imperialism. Such occasions also reinforce the shelving of serious political affairs or tensions between the princely rulers and the British. Blyth's adherence to the colonial protocol underscores the British involvement in the shared political ideology of shikar. Besides, it could be seen as a sustained process in the construction of a reciprocal colonial representation through big game feats in a carefully chosen public platform. As Julie Hughes points out, the colonial hunt did not emerge from a simple dichotomy of British or Indian, nor did colonisers and Indian princes knowingly and unknowingly create 'a single colonial vision of [the] hunt'.⁴⁹ Rather, it was dialogic, making 'an ongoing production of innumerable conversations—public and private, official and informal', which consisted of a wide range of actors and varying colonial contexts that produced *multiple* spheres of knowledge.⁵⁰ I emphasise such dialogic production as we have figured out in the case of Blyth discussed above. Even though Hughes' book frames hunting as predominantly 'martial' and 'masculine' in colonial India, which is true, our study has evinced that British women contravened such gender barriers under the guise of an imperial agreement.

One criticism directed at British women argues that they were simply appropriating a (British) male discourse of hunting in the later Raj. This study disagrees with such a view, because the British huntswomen's bioconservation discourse of shikar differed widely in its textual and allegorical practices. For example, a wild boar hunt or a stag hunt in relation to geography and climate, or an intellectual lament for one's proclivity to shoot a tiger but inability to do so, as has been elucidated in the case studies of Blyth, Savory and Baillie. Their environmental mindfulness of big game hunting shows the distinctive nature of huntswomen's philosophy and practice. This indeed constitutes a subversive characteristic about women's participation in hunting during the later nineteenth century, which can be ascribed to the colonial making of multiple spheres of knowledge; on the politics of the hunt, feminist perspectives

48 *ibid.*, 129.

49 Julie E. Hughes, *Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 8.

50 *ibid.*, 8.

of the hunt, cultural ecology of India, historical geography and India's animal zones. According to Pramod K. Nayar, 'The white woman remained "superior" to the natives by virtue of her race, even if she was, in terms of her gender, relegated to a secondary position in the empire's scheme of things'.⁵¹ And yet, the recreational interlude of shikar narrowed the rigid stratification among the ruling elite. Hunting was a cultural and political alignment that provided an amiable platform, despite occasional tensions, by governing the socialisation between the class of Englishmen and women and the social status of Indians (i.e. princes, the wealthy zamindars and merchants) they interacted with.⁵²

Thus in a way, British women characterised imperialism in the colonial peripheries by showing their big game shooting skills better than the women in Victorian Britain, whose gender roles in metropolitan circumstances did not augur well for the likelihood of such freedom and privilege.⁵³ Angela Thomsell's work *Hunting Africa: British Sport, African Knowledge and the Nature of Empire* is significant in this context. As she points out, the 'ability of women to participate in big game hunting without risking or having to defend their femininity offers a critical perspective for re-evaluating the masculinity celebrated through ... big game hunting and the contemporary appeal of the sport'.⁵⁴ Unless we explore the role of women in the hunting field, the construction of all the traits and actions relating to big game hunting in Africa (or in India) will continue to be considered and examined as an archetypical feat of imperial manliness. As an alternative, Thomsell offers a framework that considers that women hunters, too, demonstrate these attributes in terms of 'imperial femininity'.⁵⁵ Her book discusses these instances in the context of colonial Africa in relation to the big game hunting tradition and the emergence of sportswomen in early twentieth century. I would suggest that such developments were reinforced with much more vigour and can be traced back to the days of the Company Raj. Indeed, our discussion thus far on the subject of huntswomen in colonial India has elaborated upon this notion of 'imperial femininity' in relation to 'hunting practices' in detail. I would suggest that the manner in which gender and imperialism played out on the hunting field produced new types of colonial knowledge systems and codes of huntswomanship on the peripheries of empire.

51 Pramod K. Nayar, *Days of the Raj: Life and Leisure in British India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), 211.

52 *ibid.*, 210.

53 This is worth noting as Procida also observes that for British women in the Indian empire an independent professional career was unavailable, but empire also equally opened up the possibilities for 'the development of "unfeminine" interest that would have been limited or unavailable in Britain, particularly in the realm of (big game) sports'. See Mary A. Procida, 'Good Sports and Right Sorts: Guns, Gender, and Imperialism in British India', *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 465.

54 Angela Thomsell, *Hunting Africa: British Sport, African Knowledge and the Nature of Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

55 *ibid.*

For example, Blyth utilised opportunities for practising pig-sticking as well as actively participating in panther hunts and riding along with her husband in the Rajputana kingdoms of north-west India. On one occasion, Blyth joined the maharaja of Jaipur's meet for pig-sticking in an area of grassy wilderness 8 miles from Jaipur city. At this place, wild boars took shelter during the daytime in the arroyos and the broken ground near the river. At night these animals would 'come out to feed on grain placed for them in the rid[e]able grassland'.⁵⁶ The pig-stickers were expected to be on the ground before sunrise to catch and chase the boars, after they had fed on the grain and were about to return to their haunts. Blyth and her husband, on the backs of horses, holding spears in hand, came across a group of wild boars heading towards grassland jungle cover. In the fierce pig-sticking battle that followed, the couple, along with the rest of the hunting party, galloped after and speared one wild boar after another, killing up to five animals in total. We have to acknowledge that shooting a wild boar with a gun was strictly proscribed in the later British Raj. Instead, pig-sticking became a high-class elite diversion, where 'horse riding', 'horsemastership' and skill in handling the spear in the chase became signifiers of this peculiar and dangerous sport.

Referring to one of these encounters with a wild boar that chased her horse, Blyth admitted her lack of courage to face up to the ferocity of the animal.⁵⁷ In her own account, the huntswoman-versus-wild-predator metaphor was juxtaposed with the reality of the huntswoman not showing up to fight, emphasising the cruel underpinnings of the big game world in colonial India. In the case of Fanny Eden's friend Mrs Cockerell during the 1830s East India Company rule, this too became apparent, if only the other way around, as she was evidently challenging a tiger for not showing up to fight, as discussed in my earlier article.⁵⁸ In the sporting language of Blyth, the characteristics of facing a 'challenge', 'bravery' and 'combative spirit' were ascribed to the furious wild boar, thus even disrupting the hierarchy of the huntress and the prey.

In this context, Callum McKenzie instances the Revd Andrew Clark in Victorian Britain, a chief contributor to *Baily's Magazine*, the foremost sporting periodical during this period, on matters pertaining to hunting from 1861 to 1887.⁵⁹ Clark fiercely opposed women's entry to the hunting field. According to him, 'Women, who hunted, *were not women*'.⁶⁰ Warning women not to partake in hunting pursuits, Clark went on to say that '[t]here is nothing so disagreeable, nothing so distasteful to men, especially hard-riding men, or true sportsmen, as a horsey female. How far

56 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 268.

57 *ibid.*, 271.

58 Mandala, 'Tiger huntresses in the Company Raj'.

59 Callum McKenzie, "'Sadly Neglected"—Hunting and Gendered Identities: A Study in Gender Construction', in *Modern Sport: The Global Obsession*, ed. Boria Majumdar and Fan Hong (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 554.

60 Emphasis in the original: *ibid.*

is woman fulfilling her mission by adopting the attributes of the other sex?⁶¹ It is worth considering two aspects in this context. First, the fact that Clark objected to women taking part in hunting would suggest that it was indeed happening. Second, even if he did object, there is no available evidence that his objections resulted in women being prohibited from hunting. What we can infer from this discussion is that female sporting activity was often criticised in Victorian Britain, but nevertheless continued. The dominant male society in Britain agreed with such reiterated views. We can substantiate such a claim by reference to the widespread patronage and regular subscriptions *Baily's Magazine* received in Victorian Britain.⁶² This includes hunting and sporting clubs across England during later part of the nineteenth century. Their argument was not only the physical liability women had to face up to, but also the 'delicacy' of the female body that was seen as a perpetual hindrance to riding. The male critics further observed that women faced risks to their fragile physique. In the words of *Baily's Magazine* in the 1890s a 'first-rate horsewoman' could never equal 'a first-class horseman', because women do not have a muscular body or physical stamina like men do.⁶³

Such physical, cultural and sociopolitical barriers imposed by Victorian society in Britain were comfortably disregarded in the colonies—for example, in India. British women in the empire responded to the critique of their hunting by men by taking their embodied personas to the hunting field as well as by articulating their experience through huntswomanship codes. For example, Blyth and Savory by riding on horseback actively participated in very dangerous colonial pursuits such as pig-sticking or the wild boar chase. Savory advised other sportswomen on the safe handling of bamboo spears while pig-sticking riding side-saddle, and the precautions a woman ought to take against a wounded leopard, if it were to cross her path. Although riding side-saddle is a form of equestrian sport, in the case of big game hunting in India, spearing the animal on horseback warranted 'horsemastership' and handling the spear with precision against retaliating wild boar. Thus Savory prided herself riding on side-saddle in the sport of pig-sticking in the Punjab region.⁶⁴ In this way, she provoked her readers that she could ride side-saddle in dangerous pursuits such as pig-sticking in India, thus separating the perilous nature of big game hunting from that of equestrian sport in Victorian Britain.

Speaking of pig-sticking, the sportswoman Savory opined that 'India, and India alone, is the land of pig-sticking'. This peculiar sport 'stood the test of time better than any of her rivals'.⁶⁵ Savory's reference to pig-sticking as being 'better than

61 *ibid.*

62 M. L. Biscotti, *British Sporting Periodicals: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 11–12.

63 McKenzie, "‘Sadly Neglected’", 554.

64 McKenzie, *The Right Sort of Woman*, 95.

65 Savory, *A Sportswoman in India*, 32.

her rivals' is interesting as it underscores her attempt to feminise a pursuit known in colonial India as a violent chase of wild pigs or wild boars, involving horse-riding and horsemastership, and using combative skills with a spear rather than a gun. Because of such characteristics, the 'Anglo-Indian' sporting fraternity held the view that pig-sticking was not only more 'scientific' in terms of testing one's physical fitness and nerve, but also a more dangerous sport than tiger shooting.⁶⁶ Savory writes that pig-sticking is *always* wildly exciting, involving features such as breakneck galloping and the battle between a huntress and a wild boar. Due to these peculiar characteristics and the uncertain nature of the chase itself, the wild boar was described as 'royal, fraught with danger'.⁶⁷ Savory also warned the nascent huntswomen to train in the art of horse-riding and horsemastership, as chasing wild boar was dangerous, and instances did occur where 'riders [fell] off their horses when jumping over walls and water'.⁶⁸ After a harrowing chase involving a wild boar passing through mangroves, a village and sugar cane fields, Savory eulogised the wounded boar as 'bravest of the brave' and commended its 'devilish' and uncompromising temper.⁶⁹ Choosing a wild beast worthy of violent sport is one factor that justified the imperial canon of huntswomanship. Precious McKenzie points out that a peculiar romantic tension existed in regard to the figure of the wild boar in the imagination of the huntswoman in colonial India. Thus, Savory, in characterising the wild boar as 'savage and noble, beautiful and awe-inspiring', unsurprisingly invokes the metaphor that the heroic Indian boar embodied the very characteristics of the Indian rebels themselves (who had opposed British rule).⁷⁰

While Savory admitted that tackling a wounded boar on foot involved greater risk, she believed that a greater number of (British) lives had been lost to the tiger than to the wild boar, attesting to the dangers involved in both tiger shooting and pig-sticking pursuits.⁷¹ Both tiger and wild boar hunts involved lurking danger to the life of a huntsman or a huntswoman on many occasions. As more and more woodland territories opened up for Britons, the pursuit of predatory tigers and wild boars smoothed the transition of 'the countryside to the rule of law and the improvement of welfare only by instantiating the hunter himself as kingly potentate, the personification of sovereign force'.⁷² Thus, Savory proclaimed, despite the thrill of the chase, these animals offered a spatial temporality across the ecosystem of India. Unlike Savory, Blyth candidly admitted that she did not succeed in shooting any sambar, to her native shikari's 'disgust', nor did she level the fighting spirit

66 *ibid.*, 29.

67 McKenzie, *The Right Sort of Woman*, 95.

68 *ibid.*

69 *ibid.*

70 *ibid.*, 96.

71 Savory, *A Sportswoman in India*, 29–30.

72 Anand S. Pandian, 'Predatory Care: The Imperial Hunt in Mughal and British India', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 14, no. 1 (2001): 88.

against a furious wild boar.⁷³ Thus, a British woman's big game adventures in colonial India encompassed both successes and failures, underlain by a self-imposed moral framework of huntswomanship, subtly almost elevating her to the status of the codes of the later nineteenth-century imperial hunters.

While we do not know the exact date of the emergence of sporting codes among huntswomen in colonial India, a closer reading of the women's writings discussed in this article would suggest that such regulatory codes were contextualised in the later part of the nineteenth century. In British women's writings, animals such as leopard, wild boar and tiger became a personal focus of colonial imaginations and desires, often symbolising the huntswoman's aura in relation to the animal they hunted. Though animal agency was justified on the premise of colonial adventure and territorial acquisition, the spatiotemporal and embodied practice of the hunt also indicates a closer reading of natural history is possible by rendering interest in the ways in which huntswomen's objectives were accomplished, and often remain unaccomplished (for example, in the case of Blyth and Baillie). Thus, the subtleties of gender and ecology explored in this study illuminate how British huntswomen, animals and the physical environment produced an entity that consisted of highly complicated interrelationships.

The above discussion, focusing on the representations of wild animals portrayed in the accounts of huntswomen, further shows how the competing gender dynamics restructured femininity in the context of environment and empire. Recent scholarship has shown that the culture of masculinity was integral to the empire, and was an important component in defining the historical and social contexts of colonial lives in the British Raj. John Tosh has argued that manliness as a 'cultural representation of masculinity rather than a description of actual life' should be seen as a code of 'empire building'.⁷⁴ For Britons in India, hunting was one of the crucial components in realising these colonial goals. As such, big game hunting offered a perfect site for the reaffirmation of British imperial identity and masculine virtues, and came to be governed by a series of both formal and informal regulatory codes that shaped the outlook of the hunting fraternity. Their importance lay not just in moulding the public face of the Raj, but in maintaining strict internal hierarchies within the ruling community. Confrontation with 'wild' and 'dangerous' carnivores such as the man-eating tiger or leopard, and the wild boar, further reinforced the discernment of the pursuit and masculine virtue among the colonisers. Thus, for Britons in India, hunting codes and practices came to play a critical role in maintaining order and authority, while symbolising imperial power. However, in this article I made an effort to show this gendered sanction of big game hunting was a cognisant and layered one. The idea of 'imperial femininity' in the case of Savory

73 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 292–93, 295.

74 John Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994): 181, 197.

and Blyth appropriated the same symbolic power structure of the hunt, through chasing and shooting ferocious animals such as wild boar, tigers and panthers in the case of Baillie. Unlike the Company Raj, by the turn of the twentieth century, such kind of huntswomanship semantics and their discursive practices gained prominence in contrast to the imperial masculinity of British hunters, and questioned their exclusive claim to the cultural geographies of empire.

There is also another aspect to a huntswoman's life in colonial India: the production of knowledge of the immediate environment in relation to the changing panorama of the Indian countryside. Blyth, like a typical huntswoman of the period, vividly described her hunting party as a little 'imperial show' wherever they marched through the Indian jungles. Her husband and their native shikaris carrying rifles hung 'themselves with every hunting-knife, telescope, field-glass and other shooting appliance', and with this escort accompanied the chuprassies, making an 'imposing little show' to the villagers in the countryside.⁷⁵ In addition, she also witnessed how a number of isolated railway stations away from Calcutta on the way to the United Provinces and in north-west India encountered the problem of tigers in the vicinity, terrifying the stationmasters. As Britons were gradually assuming their role as tiger hunters, a Bengali stationmaster polemically drew a metaphor likening the Gardner couple (Alan Gardner and Beatrice Blyth) with India's big cat.⁷⁶ The stationmaster was referring to the couple requiring a berth reservation for the next inbound train, but equally was suggesting that British hunters too were 'troublemakers' no less than tigers. In the later part of the nineteenth century, the railway system under British rule expanded across Indian forest territories. Prima facie, the ones who roamed in such peripheral areas were the British hunters and (until that time) tigers—competing to gain control over forest zones. While the former were European arrivals in search of sport, the latter's forest habitat and the existence of its species now came under serious threat with the onset of colonisation and the rise of big game shooting. Besides, Blyth's imperial identity was drawn into a metaphor of how Britons and Indian wild animals were symmetrically juxtaposed in the narrative of the station master.

Blyth's pursuit of urial (a horned mountain sheep with a red fur coat) and doe (deer species) shooting also necessitated her encamping on the edge of the foothills of the Himalayas. This part of the Himalayas is covered with ridges of low hills, where the terrain is cut into long narrow abysses with dangerous precipices, 'some hundred feet deep, looking as if they had been slashed with a razor out of the solid ground'.⁷⁷ The hunter in the pursuit of game had to climb 'in and out' of 20 or 30 of these precipices to reach the peaks.⁷⁸ Thence followed a urial hunt. Blyth held the

75 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 136.

76 *ibid.*, 147.

77 *ibid.*, 167.

78 *ibid.*

view that, with fair-minded shooting, urial numbers would not seriously decrease.⁷⁹ Because these animals possessed excellent eyesight, any suspicious object, however far in the distance, would alert them to escape quickly. Unlike the Himalayan ibex or the markhor, the urial was known to be sensitive even to a 'whiff of tainted air', and this kept them always vigilant.⁸⁰ Blyth acknowledged that for any British sportsman or sportswoman, the ground the urial frequented was hard to approach without noise. For that reason, they were most difficult of wild animals 'to shoot fairly'.⁸¹ On one occasion, Blyth followed the pursuit with her husband and stalked the urial for three days, but shot nothing.⁸² What is interesting in Blyth's semantics of hill-shikar is the dissimilarity between a British huntswoman's anthropomorphic observation of the hunted fauna and the British hunters' sporting language of 'masculine triumph' in shooting big predatory carnivores in heroic attempts, the latter disregarding other wild animals they could not shoot.

Contrary to nineteenth-century British hunters' discourse, Blyth asserted that the non-predatory species such as deer, sambar and the Himalayan wild goats possessed an escape instinct inherent in their thinking, whenever an individual or a group of hunters approached to shoot them. From this discussion, it is possible to infer that many imperial hunters might have had disappointments in their big game shoots on numerous occasions, but they never reported them openly, or publicised such failures in their writings (whereas Blyth and other huntswomen did). Indeed, this aspect demonstrates the colonial dynamics of the high-stakes politics and economics invested in the sport of big game hunting in India in relation to the British huntsmen's reputation, as opposed to the huntswomen, who were numerically far less in the field.

One of the significant characteristics of British huntswomen's thinking was their disapproval of indiscriminate shooting, both by European and by native hunters in colonial India. Given this perspective, Hussain suggested that game laws did not exist in early 1890 in Kashmir, whereas the codes governing fair hunting practices were more of a choice among gentlemen within the British hunting community.⁸³ Hussain writes that Britons' adherence to fair sporting practices in the Indian empire was due to the influence of liberal and utilitarian principles derived from Britain and Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁴ I argue that such

79 *ibid.*, 167–8.

80 *ibid.*, 168.

81 *ibid.*

82 *ibid.*

83 Shafqat Hussain, 'Sports-hunting, Fairness and Colonial Identity: Collaboration and Subversion in the Northwestern Frontier Region of the British Indian Empire', *Conservation & Society* 8, no. 2 (2010): 116.

84 *ibid.*, 117. As Hussain points out, 'fairness could only be conceived in this way because of a wider social context in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which liberal ideas, based on justice, equality and fairness, became popular. I am not claiming to show how these liberal ideas actually infiltrated into the minds of the sportsmen, rather I am making an assertion that a look into the making of the fair hunting code, say for ibex and markhor, could illuminate the influence of liberal thoughts on it'.

liberal ideals and the discourse in practice were reserved only for males in Britain until the early twentieth century. Throughout this study, we have seen how women were harshly judged for their involvement in hunting activities in Victorian Britain, which violates the principles of liberalism and enterprise that was publicised in the empire. What would be significant is how women in the empire evinced such ideals in terms of disseminating hunting practices and their expression of sporting codes in governing the cultural ecology of the Raj and its animal kingdoms. It is a parallel concept of fair play that women such as Blyth and Savory enunciated in the cultural geography of India.

For example, Blyth criticised the diminishing numbers of urial, which were otherwise known to be 'dreadfully wild'.⁸⁵ This horned wild sheep was so much shot in the later part of the nineteenth century that at the sight of a man, even from miles away, they were seen 'galloping off'.⁸⁶ At this time, Blyth was referring to people in the Nurpur region of Himachal Pradesh in the foothills of the Himalayas, where every small village or hamlet had at least one or two local men in the possession of matchlock guns, who took up the profession of shooting wild mountain goat or Himalayan tahr, fawn (young tahr) and other wild fauna with no conservationist conscience towards species sustenance.⁸⁷ During the hot season, when water was in short supply, the local hunters would sit up all night near the water streams and ponds that had not dried up and would wait to chance upon urial and tahr to shoot when they came to drink.⁸⁸ Local village hunters often killed 10 or 12 tahr at one sitting during their hunts. Blyth lamented that unless the female tahr were to be protected, there would be a danger of the extinction of this species due to the widespread activity of poaching or illegal hunting.⁸⁹ The rationale behind articulating such an ethical sporting code in Blyth's semantics of shikar was to elevate her huntswomanship credentials, while belittling the indigenous people because the latter lacked the knowledge of fair shooting practices. It could be argued that Blyth was one of the early proponents of conservationist thinking among the sportswomen of later nineteenth-century India. While advocating that the necessary protection must be ensured for the Himalayan wild sheep and goat species, her thinking differed widely from the other hunter-preservationists of the time. Based on her local knowledge of cultural geography, Blyth believed somehow these animals possessed a natural instinct to escape the onslaught of hunters and their indiscriminate shooting practices. She echoed such environmental thinking as necessary for the continuation of the future sport of hunting.

85 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 167.

86 *ibid.*

87 *ibid.*

88 *ibid.*

89 *ibid.*

The huntress-preservationist thinking among British women discussed above was significant for its time. First, it tells the story of how British women positioned themselves in the realm of big game hunting and the complex ways in which humans and wild animals were categorised in relation to the cultural and political ecology of India. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert observe that across the colonial world, European hunters (or huntswomen) placed different animals into varying categories according to their impression of the species, their usefulness, their domesticity or untamed state, and their predatory or non-predatory physiognomies.⁹⁰ This categorisation can be interpreted as ‘contested orderings’ where animals were assigned to particular places and spaces.⁹¹ The writings of Blyth, Savory and Baillie examined in this article clearly illustrate how the spatiality of human–animal classifications took place in different territories and environments in colonial India, including the difficult Himalayan geography. Like the discourse of imperial hunters in the colonial period examined by James Ryan, the British huntswomen’s semantics of hunting and environmentalism too were permeated with human–animal relations that were ‘mediated by a range of cultural practices and formed through a spectrum of spatial settings and processes’.⁹² Thus, the British huntswomen’s ecological understanding of empire, their construction of ‘wilderness’ and the ‘ferocious’ nature of predatory and non-predatory big game species, and of forest woodlands and hill topographies were defined as a ‘space outside of human civilisation, forged through discourse of hunting’. Such kinds of ecological insinuations inform the reader about the diverse kinds of relations that existed between the colonisers, the subject populace and the historical geography of the natural world.⁹³

Another aspect to consider in this regard is the history of displacement and usurpation that colonialism and big game hunting brought to the lives of the local communities. Thus, Blyth criticised the local inhabitants for shooting wild animals for the pot: ‘Naturally they (the urial) are the first victims of the pot-hunter’.⁹⁴ She referred to the barasingha or twelve-horned swamp deer, one of the larger deer species in India, which were shot in such a numbers in the mountain valleys that game laws were put in force to protect the species from the 1890s onwards.⁹⁵ Blyth observed that the hinds as well as stags were killed ‘in and out of season’.⁹⁶ In the winter, a number of them were frequently mobbed to death in the snow by the Himalayan villagers.⁹⁷ Subsequently, the new game regulations prohibited shooting

90 Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, eds, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies and Human–Animal Relations* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6–9.

91 *ibid.*, 9.

92 *ibid.*: see Chapter 10 by James R. Ryan, “‘Hunting with the Camera’: Photography, Wildlife and Colonialism in Africa”, 205.

93 *ibid.*

94 Gardner, *Rifle and Spear*, 167.

95 *ibid.*, 49.

96 *ibid.*

97 *ibid.*

the hinds by instituting a close and open season, and banning the sale of deer horns and skins in the winter months by proclaiming them 'illegal'.⁹⁸ Thus for British women in colonial India, huntswomanship encompassed shooting wild animals as fair sport with regard to species sustenance. The advent of colonial game laws simultaneously representing huntress-preservationist thinking, as elaborated by Blyth, also underscores the governing ideologies of the Raj, appropriating cultural geographies and ecologies of India during the 1890s.

Likewise in the late 1890s, Blyth's successor Savory, out on her expedition to shoot tigers in the Godavari River basin in the Deccan plateau, blamed the native shikaris for pot-shooting. However, she confessed that big cats such as tiger or panther, and animals such as bear, had never been shot by them, thus substantiating the aspect of British monopolisation of dangerous pursuits in the Indian forest territories during this historical phase.

In Mysore there are strict game laws, but in Central India there are none, and the native village *shikaris* are rapidly ruining the country. These *shikaris* shoot simply for food; and as they kill hinds, does, young, etc., indiscriminately, [as a result] there are no deer left [for the continuation of 'sport' of hunting]. They avoid tigers, panthers, and bears, as a rule, partly because their guns would seldom kill them and they themselves would run the considerable risk, partly because these animals are of little use for eating purposes.⁹⁹

The above information offers direct insight into the colonial forces at work with reference to how British huntswomen critically needed the local people to validate their imperial credibility. It also underscores the British huntswoman's 'protector/benefactor' role in the fabricated display of conservation thinking, pronouncing her control over magnificent beasts like tiger, while deliberately casting indigenous hunts as poor and utilitarian. Employing native shikaris and helpers in big hunts and taking their assistance in shooting dangerous carnivores also underlines the British sportswomen's ability to diminish the agency of Indians in their own forest topographies. In so justifying their hunts in rational semantics, the British women (much like the British men) successfully depended on law and legislation, on the one hand, to disarm the village and tribal populace, and technological advantage of firearms and codes to govern hunting practices, on the other.

As Nicolas Proctor, in his study on the southern settlers in colonial North America in the antebellum era (c. 1820–60) points out, the ideas emerging out of high-end hunting culture demonstrate how white hunters, while economically appropriating the hunting exploits of meat, hides and furs, had also equally 'used the hunt to

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Savory, *A Sportswoman in India*, 279.

communicate ideas of gender, race, class, masculinity, and community'.¹⁰⁰ Hunting was also used as a mechanism by white hunters to display their capacity 'for mastery over women, blacks, and the natural world'.¹⁰¹ In a further effort to distinguish themselves as noble sportsmen, many members of the white elite began redefining previously acceptable methods such as 'baiting, ground shooting and sitting ducks as the unsporting work of slaves and poor whites'.¹⁰² This aspect is germane in the context of the later nineteenth-century colonial India, because such ideas too were prevalent among British huntswomen—for example, in Savory's articulation of sportswomanship. While being critical of native shikaris' shooting for subsistence, she never spoke a word against fellow British hunters bringing down large game for sport and commercial profit. Such a dichotomy between coloniser and colonised demonstrates the political gradation of British enterprise at stake in the big game hunting world. In contrast to the subjugation of women in North America by the male white settler community, the huntswomen in the British Raj offers an example of female participation in dangerous pursuits. These women in India, unlike their North American counterparts, also began to endorse the colonial ideology of dominance over the native other in their hunting discourse. While slavery was a part of white masculine hunting culture in antebellum-era North America, provisional service characterised the beaters and coolies in colonial India. The helpers in India assisted the British sahib and memsahib when they were paid well, but retained their relative freedom soon after the completion of a hunt, in addition to liberty in their personal lives.

Nevertheless, huntswomen such as Blyth, Savory and others evidently disrupted the gender hierarchies in colonial India, as they began to articulate the notion of huntswomanship, insisting on the protection of wild species, especially of the non-predatory kind, for the continuation of the sport of hunting. Indeed, such elements of hunting should be considered in the light of 'feminine ideals', and this particular aspect of British women assuming imperial huntswomanship roles also reflects their dominance over native shikaris, and the hunting knowledge they had of the Indian marginal landscapes.

A story of a tiger huntress: Lore of a different kind

This final section examines another huntswoman in colonial India, W. W. Baillie, not only because her shikar exploits took place during the first two decades of the early twentieth century, but also since a different symbolism signified her hunts. Baillie's book *Days and Nights of Shikar* (1921) offers a narrative about a big game

100 Nicolas W. Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 6, 50, 56.

101 *ibid.*, 50.

102 *ibid.*, 23.

huntswoman of a different kind, who had shot predatory animals such as tiger, panther and bison across the jungles of northern, western, central and southern India.¹⁰³ Baillie's hunting technique consisted in sitting up on a *machan* (a timber platform on top of a tree) for many nights and eventually shooting a tiger:

I wasted many more good nights, that I might have spent better in sleep, in vain attempts. I did manage to shoot one tiger in a beat. He came slowly, creeping on, dragging himself along the ground and trying to look as if he were not there. I was up in a *machan* and, as I put up my rifle and shifted my position, a branch of the tree caught my big pith helmet and knocked it off my head. It went rattling down with a clatter among the dry leaves. The tiger stopped and looked and then glanced up and saw me. His stopping gave me a good chance of a shot. He rolled over, got up, and only went a few yards further, when he died.¹⁰⁴

Much like other British huntswomen, Baillie went out with parties 'tiger-beating, under really favourable circumstances, the beat sometimes arranged by an Indian prince, sometimes by a sahib' in places where tigers were most likely to be found.¹⁰⁵ However, her real woman-shikari experience came to the fore when she began to go out hunting on her own; her first individual hunting experience was realised in shooting a panther.¹⁰⁶ Subsequently, Baillie befriended wild Bhil tribes in the forest region of Gujarat, shooting 'troublesome' panthers with their assistance.¹⁰⁷

Virtually unaided by any British male counterpart, Baillie's hunting practices also exemplify the realistic picture of the adversity faced by the typical big game hunting community, and on the question of stoicism and philosophical lament—aspects that were not widely discussed in nineteenth-century colonial hunting accounts, or in the later period. Perhaps male hunters did not feel troubled by such hardships in the hyper-masculine military world of the British Raj. For example, when hunting in the Himalayan region of Chamba (located in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh), Baillie described the situation of her hunting party, including the native servants, thus:

It rained for 94 hours without a break. The *shikaris* and coolies had a miserable time. They tried to creep under the big rock where there was a little shelter, but water was streaming down the face of it and dripped on to them; they were drenched and cold and wretched ... it was impossible to move; the streams were swollen, the water fall a roaring torrent, and the track we should have to follow impassable.¹⁰⁸

We waited until midday in hopes of finer weather, but the rain was as heavy as ever; so we made a start, walking on a very slippery ledge, over long rank grass and undergrowth, which made the falling soft and pleasant; and we all slipped and fell

103 W. W. Baillie, *Days and Nights of Shikar* (London: John Lane, 1921).

104 *ibid.*, 2.

105 *ibid.*, 1.

106 *ibid.*, 1, 3.

107 *ibid.*, 9–12.

108 *ibid.*, 33–4.

many times. The falling was wet too, but, as we were soaked through in the first five minutes, that made very little difference. Crossing a stream, one of the coolies fell with his load on the brink of a precipice, but was just saved by the next man, who caught him and pulled him up. He cut his foot badly.¹⁰⁹

The above information underlines the stoic experience of a British huntress in the face of an adverse hostile environment and testing topography. It also speaks about the relationship between Baillie's native servants and spatial temporality, and her mastership of the hunt, which became regularised and formalised by the turn of the early twentieth century.

Baillie's writing about the above-mentioned hunting episodes of tiger and panther hunts, embracing taxing hill-shikar adventures, found a growing domestic readership back in Britain, if not a majority readership (at least for the women's hunting genre) in India. In dominating India's royal beast and documenting her other exploits in a sequence of accounts of her hunting repertoire, Baillie was invoking a sense of a chivalrous huntswoman facade in the Raj. This facade was also based on the classic paradigm of bravery and exploration in the forest interiors of India and in the high altitudes of the Himalayas, with a twist of stoicism, and on her admiration of the intellectual adherence to the shikari movement and its governing codes.

In the Belgaum district of Karnataka State, Baillie claimed she had killed a tiger with one cartridge.¹¹⁰ The carcass of the tiger was carried back to the camp and the nearby village, and the denouement of the hunting party was described in the following manner:

The coolies cut down poles, which they tied together, to carry the tiger back to [the] camp, and all these preparations took some time. As it was nearly dark [Baillie] rode back to camp and sent out a lantern. About ten o'clock [at night] the tiger was brought in on his stretcher by ten or twelve men amid great shouting and yelling, while the remainder carried flaming torches which they waved round him [the tiger]. A goat had to be given to the village to be sacrificed to Devi [the local goddess, on account of the successful completion of the hunting expedition].¹¹¹

What we can see in the above report is Baillie's huntswomanship aura, as found in the hunting expeditions undertaken by her male counterparts, but also disrupting gender and imperialism in the hyper-masculine world of the big game field in India, even feminising the forest field and rural countryside alike. In addition, the 'camp' and the 'village' were carefully orchestrated as public arenas that provided the *raison d'être* to show off her tiger-hunting prowess as an excellent shot in the presence of the village populace, while acknowledging their rituals in a token manner. Incorporating local rituals after a successful hunt was crucial to making authority

109 *ibid.*, 34–5.

110 *ibid.*, 50.

111 *ibid.*, 51.

and broadcasting a worthy deed to the public. Baillie repeated a similar sort of tiger-hunting episode in the Central Provinces amidst much joyous celebration from the onlooking villagers, the women in particular.¹¹²

Drawing on Thompsell's work, one can argue that such an active involvement of British huntswomen in the ecological peripheries of the empire confirms the extension of colonial control over the 'interior'. This study begs the reader to reconsider the leading notion of 'the image of the interior as an untamed frontier wherein British men could prove their mettle'.¹¹³ It further reinforces the notion of the 'interior' as a distinctive and essentially primitive place, helping to 'preserve it as a space of regeneration for white masculinity'.¹¹⁴ The case studies of Baillie and others demonstrate that there were notable huntswomen in colonial India who reinforced the idea of 'imperial femininity' through their tiger shooting and other shikar accomplishments. These women shaped an alternative spatial temporality in the interior by taming the environment and its topography (hitherto considered the exclusive domain of British huntsmen).

Writing on the embodied historical geographies of hunting and colonial natural history, and the unsettling aspect of spatial and temporal territorialisation in colonial and post-colonial historical geographies, Jamie Lorimer and Sarah Whatmore argued that hunting involved 'an embodied performance with a diverse array of audiences'.¹¹⁵ They refer to John MacKenzie's assertion that the colonial hunt constituted a classic model for the culture of British imperialism. Hunting was not only a marker of civilisation, but also encompassed an ethos and characteristics that colonisers were expected to uphold in different territories and environments of the empire.¹¹⁶ Like sport and sportsmen, it was believed in the colonial world that hunting and hunters required they 'be respected and admired by subordinate social classes (and races)'.¹¹⁷ This belief was paraded in a meticulous performance in Baillie's hunting experience, as outlined above, honouring the local religious traditions and rituals with her *mai-baap* (paternalistic) demonstration, by concluding the tiger hunt in her chosen style. If we pay close attention to how this practice was received by the local onlookers, to whom it was directed in Baillie's case, it was figuratively fulfilled. Lorimer and Whatmore describe such hunts as the performance of civilisation and refinement of colonial power.¹¹⁸

112 *ibid.*, 142–4.

113 Thompsell, *Hunting Africa*.

114 *ibid.*

115 Jamie Lorimer and Sarah Whatmore, 'After the "King of Beasts": Samuel Baker and the Embodied Historical Geographies of Elephant Hunting in Mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon', *Journal of Historical Geography* 35, no. 4 (2009): 681.

116 *ibid.*

117 *ibid.*

118 *ibid.*, 681.

The colonial huntswoman Savory as an embodiment of independent feminist hunting culture is relevant in this context. Likewise, Barbara T. Gates aptly points out that Savory intended her hunting memoir to encourage women to participate and experience the thrill of big game hunting.¹¹⁹ Savory believed that 'it is [the] highlands of India which are specially connected in the mind with tigers and tiger shooting'.¹²⁰ She called for nascent women adherents to embark on the journey of big cat hunting and face the dangers involved in such adventures. Overcoming the adversity of the tropical climate is recommended for the huntswomen embarking on adventures in India.¹²¹ In order to achieve this acclimatisation, Savory advised that women needed to be physically strong to spend around eight weeks for a tiger shoot in the jungle, 'and a high price has to be paid because it is worth it'.¹²² Unlike Savory, who shot tigers along with fellow European sportsmen as part of a hunting group, the case study of Baillie attempted to show that many of her big game exploits took place virtually unaccompanied by any British male counterpart. Thus her shikar expeditions did not involve their presence. Hence, Baillie's tiger hunting successes with the local people in the Central Provinces and her panther shoots among the Bhil tribal community in the Gujarat illuminate the inimitable nature of her distinctive huntswoman persona. In that sense, Baillie's image and her hunting genre differ from Blyth's and Savory's. However, it also extends her role as the defender of British imperialism by symbolising the image of shikar and the Raj. The tiger carcass after each of her hunts was purportedly carried out to the camp and village, and then carefully publicised as evidence of her dexterity as a huntswoman to the assembled crowd of villagers. Such an image invokes the metaphor of 'the huntress and the tiger' as a motivating force in confirming British imperial credibility to the rural populace.

One of Baillie's huntswomanship skills that would distinguish her from her female counterparts was that she herself used to undertake the task of the measurement of the skins of wild animals she had shot.¹²³ She also later commissioned an Indian (Hindu) taxidermist in the Bombay Presidency 'for setting up heads', for 'curing and dressing skins', and for having 'animals mounted and set-up, with whole body' using the carcasses of tiger, lion and panther, as well as other wild animals.¹²⁴ All these related aspects elucidate the sophisticated nature of Baillie's huntswomanship enterprise, positioning her big game exploits in the realm of 'elite sport'.

119 Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 203.

120 *ibid.*

121 *ibid.*

122 *ibid.*

123 Baillie, *Days and Nights of Shikar*, 57.

124 *ibid.*, 57–9.

Baillie's sporting ethos is significant for her time, in that she candidly admitted many instances of her failures in the hunting field, which reveals her genuine appreciation for big game pursuits in general. According to her, without such hunting quests, she could not have imagined any fulfilment in her life. In chapter XV of her work, entitled 'Failures', she writes:

I went again a year or two later to shoot in the Central Provinces, or to try to shoot I should say, as everything I did went wrong and there was nothing but disappointments and disasters, though I *saw* some tigers; in fact, things went so badly for me that I wrote some sad verses on grief and disaster which I set to (banjo) music, in a very minor key and sang Adagio, molto lamentoso, con-all-the expression-I-could-put-into-it when feeling at my lowest.¹²⁵

In a way, successes and failures in the forest field typified the relatively privileged huntswomanship careers of Blyth and Baillie, which point to the emergence of a different big game hunting genre and its practices, beyond the male-dominant worldview of hunting. As the historian Czech points out, in 1914 Baillie was given the singular honour of being the 'only woman' represented among the dozens of big game personalities featured in the folio-sized publication *British Sports and Sportsmen: Big Game Hunting and Angling*.¹²⁶ After returning to London at the age of 65, she wrote and published her book *Days and Nights of Shikar* in 1921.¹²⁷

Finally, it is worth noting that there were other British women who played noteworthy roles behind the scenes that shaped the culture of hunting as 'sport'. For example, a Mrs Leech in the Ootacamund Hunt in the Nilgiris was appointed as a woman kennel superintendent in 1909. The Ootacamund Hunt claimed that theirs was the only sporting club that boasted 'a woman kennel superintendent' at the dawn of early twentieth century in south-western India. Leech was described as exemplary in the performance of her duties:

a more devoted and careful official could not be found anywhere. Having served under such undoubtedly good huntsmen as Captain Heseltine, Palmer, and Meyrick, she has acquired a great knowledge of hounds, and in all cases of sickness or accidents she nurses with unflinching devotion.¹²⁸

Hence, it was not only big game huntswomen such as Blyth, Savory and Baillie but also other British women playing subsidiary roles in colonial India that warrant historical consideration. Women such as Leech were successful in the preparation of English and native foxhounds for chasing wild animals for the Ootacamund Hunt

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, 221.

¹²⁶ Czech, *With Rifle & Petticoat*, 56.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Arnold Wright, ed., *Southern India: Its History, People, Commerce, and Industrial Resources* [first published 1914] (New Delhi and Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 2004), 425.

in the Nilgiri Hills of the Western Ghats in southern India. This ignored aspect of history illuminates the fact that a woman like Leech, if not others, was often at the forefront of hunting clubs in discharging their duties of hound management.

The historical instances of huntswomanship found in the examples of Blyth, Savory and Baillie demonstrate the argument that the symbolic alignment of big game hunting, imperial masculinity and colonial domination was in reality neither predictably all-male nor exclusively monopolistic. Instead, gender and imperialism in relation to environmental history examined in this article would suggest how forms of colonial access, redefining the interior and the subtext of hunting narratives were successfully navigated by British women in different situations. It underlines their lived realities and the feminine articulation of big game hunting practices, thus necessitating a different understanding of the political, social and cultural dynamics of gender and empire. Precious McKenzie observes that even though British women were not allowed to hold positions in the colonial administration, 'women who hunted earned a unique role themselves in the Empire ... Sports for women flourished in India because British women did not usually participate in philanthropy and democratic political activism', but they shaped the political dynamics of the Raj through outdoor sports such as hunting.¹²⁹

Conclusion

To conclude, this study has explored an important arena in the colonial history of hunting, and took as its subject matter the exclusive domain of male imperial hunters. A critical analysis of the history of huntswomen offers instances of women undertaking the 'unfeminine pursuits' of riding, hunting and shooting while announcing their shikar experiences through their writings and letters, which illuminate the history of the emergence of huntswoman culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India. While British huntswomen were undoubtedly very few in number, importantly, the present article has shown that, in their role as sportswomen, Mrs Alan Gardner (Beatrice Blyth), Isabel Savory and Mrs W. W. Baillie were able to surpass the limits of their female and male counterparts in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. By virtue of the imperial race prerogative and having affluent backgrounds, these women created the codes of huntswomanship and the governing relations in relation to shikar and the Raj. In addition, they also outfoxed their male hunting assistants, exploiting their knowledge of topography and the whereabouts of the haunts and habitats of the forest fauna, and arrogating such indigenous information systems to their women's hunting lore. In this way, they established their credibility as imperial women carrying rifles and dispatching even fearsome animals such as tigers, leopards and wild boars. Based on such unusual

129 McKenzie, *The Right Sort of Woman*, 87.

shikar feats, the British huntswomen successfully disrupted gender hierarchies both in relation to their British and Indian male counterparts, prompting the historical memory that they too played a distinctive role as 'huntswomen' on the fringes of empire, as well as taming the interior and their forest adversaries (i.e. wild beasts).

The analysis presented in this article sheds light on the importance of examining the forms of hunts practised by British women in the later Raj. Our study has elucidated how hunting operated under the umbrella of imperialism in colonial India and accentuated its practice as an ideal and sacred satisfaction in overcoming the dominance of the natural world. Such big game ventures were not available for women in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The women's hunting discourse also demonstrates how hinterland ecologies were consciously incorporated into dominant modes of animal categories and hunting rituals. British huntswomen created their notions of fair play and codes governing hunting practices by diminishing the agency of native hunters and other local groups. The animals' agency was crucial to the ability to make statements about the category of hunted fauna and the perilous nature of historical geography in colonial India, on which British women based their claim to 'huntswomanship' credentials. In reinforcing such ideologies and practices that were at play, the British women were calculatedly making statements about themselves as members of the empire (imperial fabric), but with a twist of feminism and feministic ideals of the hunt.

Our discussion in this article illuminated such female hunters in India who contested the dominant male discourse; in particular, the fierce and reproachful lobby groups such as the men in Victorian Britain, the RGS and the RSGC, followed by the dominant British sporting press and their odious attitudes against women's participation in hunts. This was a parallel development that occurred in Britain and in India. Taking a gun in hand, on their own or followed by native hunting assistants, arguably the British huntswomen successfully performed their role as the defenders of imperialism in the cultural and political ecology of India. As we have seen, Mrs Gardner (Nora Beatrice Blyth), Isabel Savory and Mrs W. W. Baillie reconfigured spatial temporality (for women) with reference to historical geography and the animal kingdom by situating their hunts in word and practice. Besides, the political rendezvous with Indian princes through shikar pursuits enabled them to reinforce gender distinctions in relation to imperialism. In doing so, the British huntswomen successfully contested the limitations of female participation (imposed by the male-dominant Victorian society) by partaking in big game pursuits in colonial India.

Dedication

I dedicate this article to my mother; it was under her parental resilience and nice food at home in Vizag that I was able to write this and the earlier article, and complete all the necessary revisions.

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