[Review] Yamini Narayanan. *Mother Cow, Mother India: A Multispecies Politics of Dairy in India.* Stanford University Press, 2023. 424 pp

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Mother Cow, Mother India is one of the single most significant texts written in the field of critical animal studies. My principal concern about the book is that it may be read too narrowly. I worry that the audience for this text might be limited to scholars focused solely on animal protection within India. While such a conclusion would still be valuable – given that the text highlights important reforms in Indian society to benefit both animals and marginalized people – this narrow focus would ultimately be a loss. Therefore, my review will emphasize the important and broader implications of this text for animal liberation.

The first lesson the text offers is the intrinsic violence inherent in the production and consumption of all dairy products. The essential question posed by this book is simply, how is it that a country – India – where it is illegal to kill cows, is also the world's largest exporter of beef? The answer to this question is complex, but at least part of it lies in the violence that is inherent in the dairy industry. As Narayanan writes, '[i]t is impossible to be the world's largest dairy farm without being among the world's bovine slaughterhouses. It is impossible to sustain dairying, an industry which requires continuous impregnation and breeding of ever-larger numbers of animals, without slaughtering "useless" males and "spent" females' (44). Therefore, the first point that this text teaches is the broader movement toward animal liberation which is the unavoidable violence still present in vegetarianism. Often, vegetarians believe they are avoiding violence against animals because they do not eat 'meat'. I am very sympathetic to this view, as I myself was a vegetarian for twelve years

before transitioning to veganism. However, the simple truth, as rigorously documented by Narayanan, is that the consumption of dairy products sustains the same violence as the eating of meat. Again, as Narayanan writes, 'The dairy industry is a slaughter industry, no less than the beef industry, and India has the largest dairy herd in the world' (43). As Narayanan highlights, the fact is that India has the highest percentage of vegetarians in the world and is still the largest exporter of beef. Dairy production is not, nor can it ever become, nonviolent; it is violence, only more concealed.

The second important contribution of the text for animal activists is its engagement with the theme of sexual violence and the impossibility of 'humane' meat. As Narayanan documents throughout her book, it is impossible for any farm to exist that does not directly engage in sexual violence. This is doubly true for milk production, where only the constant forced impregnation of cows can yield ever greater quantities of milk. Not only does this reality exist, but mothers and their calves must also be kept separated because the baby cows cannot be allowed to drink their mother's milk. Indeed, the most gripping passages of the entire text are those in which Narayanan herself interrupts the operations of these dairy farms to try to foster some connection between the forcibly impregnated mothers and their forcibly removed children. As Narayanan movingly writes:

> Waves of helplessness washed over me; I reached out and tried to scratch the sides of her jaw. But this mother was not interested in my weak gestures, and she tried to back away in distress, snorting and breathing heavily. Even against the charge of anthropomorphism, I could have no doubt that every fierce and fruitless pull against her harness and her wild-eyed gaze said to me, 'Get me out of here. I want my baby.' (109)

Relatedly, Narayanan's text also serves as a compelling refutation of the rhetoric of 'humane' or 'compassionately' raised meat or dairy. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Narayanan's entire book is her study of *gaushalas* – supposed cow sanctuaries where, in theory, cows can be 'retired' to live out the rest of their lives comfortably after years of having been exploited. As she examines the single oldest example of animal welfarism, she

writes, '*Gaushalas* can perhaps be most accurately regarded as one of the oldest spaces of animal welfarism, a discourse maintains that it is possible to exploit animals "humanely," "compassionately," or indeed, "reverentially"' (147). However, as Narayanan documents, even though the *gaushalas* repeatedly claim to care about the cows under their supervision, the actual reality remains one of exploitation and violence. As such, Narayanan makes clear that the rhetoric of care, compassion, and even veneration of animals makes no difference to the animals themselves in speciesist economic systems that own and profit from their continued exploitation. Such exploitation, Narayanan would have us understand, is intrinsic to the very system of animal ownership itself.

The third point that Narayanan's scholarship elucidates is the way that dairy can go 'hand in hand' with the rhetoric of hypernationalism and racial supremacy (182). Narayanan specifically references the historical and contemporary linkages between milk consumption and white supremacy, writing, 'whether neo-Hindutva or Neo-Nazi as in the Americas' alt-right, lactate meant for newborn cows has become weaponized to construct a racially "pure" nation for humans of Aryan descent' (182). Narayanan also highlights the ways in which dairy consumption is tied to nation-building throughout India, including how only certain animals are even considered to be animals – so-called 'Jersey cows' are not viewed as cows, and buffalo, whom Indians also exploit for dairy, are likewise not seen as deserving protection. Thus, Narayanan documents the way that an articulation of care for certain animals can operate hand in hand with indifference or lack of care for others. Often, this articulation of care is less about the animals themselves and more about how these animals are symbolized in the broader culture and society. Ultimately, the use of these animal symbols, and the consumption of dairy in particular, has – and continues to have – an historical linkage to colonialism, hypernationalism, and racial supremacy based on troubling articulations of whiteness and purity. What is so uniquely helpful about Narayanan's text is

the way she documents that, far from the claim that veganism is a colonialist imposition, it is – when understood and advocated for correctly – an inherently anti-colonialist practice. Indeed, perhaps Narayanan's most radical, but also most important claim, is that veganism does not support colonialism; it intrinsically opposes it.

In short, *Mother Cow, Mother India* is an engaging and important work that should be read by everyone concerned with animal liberation. It convincingly critiques the ineffectiveness of reformism and argues for a clear intersectional approach in order to produce truly revolutionary change.