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The Price of Being Sacred: Animal Labour, Caste, and the Limits of Freedom in Ari Gautier's *Lakshmi's Secret Diary*

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ABSTRACT :

Religious reverence and animal protection are often assumed to reinforce one another, yet the conditions of an animal's everyday life may contradict the prestige attached to its sacred image. This article examines that contradiction in Ari Gautier's *Lakshmi's Secret Diary* (2024), translated by Sheela Mahadevan. Through a close reading of the temple elephant Lakshmi and the stray dog Tripod Dog Baba, it argues that sacredness operates as a conditional form of recognition: animals are valued when they fulfil human expectations, even as their work, movement, and identities remain subject to external control. Bringing the novel into conversation with Jacques Derrida's critique of the homogeneous category of "the animal," Jason Hribal's account of animal agency and labour, Donna Haraway's relational ethics, and Dinesh Wadiwel's analysis of violence, the discussion considers three interconnected processes: the religious conversion of animal bodies into economic value, the caste-like classification of elephants by occupation, and the risks of choosing freedom outside structures that provide conditional security. Attention to the novel's humorous first-person narration and ambiguous ending shows that Gautier neither idealises captivity nor presents independence as an uncomplicated solution. Instead, the novel distinguishes honouring an animal as a symbol from recognising its embodied needs and capacity to refuse.

Keywords*:* Animality; animal labour; sacredness; elephant captivity; caste; animal agency; Ari Gautier

Introduction

To be worshipped is not necessarily to be free. This paradox shapes Ari Gautier's *Lakshmi's Secret Diary*, in which an elephant receives the reverence of temple visitors while longing to escape the institution that makes her sacred. Lakshmi is decorated, photographed, and asked to bless pilgrims, yet she describes herself as a beggar and measures each day in exhaustion and frustration (Gautier 16–18). Nearby, Tripod Dog Baba, a dog living with a disability, finds security through a reputation for holiness that depends on other people's interpretations of his ordinary behaviour. The two animals occupy apparently different positions: one is a temple worker and the other an opportunistic street philosopher. Their stories nevertheless converge around a difficult question: what happens when the social identity that protects an animal also limits the life it can lead?

The English translation appeared in 2024. In her afterword, Sheela Mahadevan explains that the fictional Lakshmi recalls a real elephant attached to the Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple in Pondicherry, who died in 2022 after a life of temple service (271). This contextual detail matters, but the novel is not documentary testimony. Its talking elephants, chameleon, dog, and flying fish are part of a deliberately fantastic world in which animal narrators expose the contradictions of familiar human institutions. The point is not that the novel provides unmediated access to an actual elephant's thoughts. Rather, its imaginative form allows a temple elephant to question the language of devotion through which her compulsory work is made to appear natural.

Existing approaches in animal studies illuminate different parts of this problem. Derrida challenges the ease with which humans classify diverse beings under the singular label "the animal" (400–01). Hribal argues that histories of animals must take seriously their work and their capacity to influence the conditions of their lives, rather than depicting them only as passive victims (101–02). Haraway describes interspecies relations as situated encounters involving response and responsibility, not abstract benevolence (5–6). Wadiwel further distinguishes the direct injury of animals from the institutional and epistemic arrangements that make their exploitation seem acceptable (29–36). Read together, these arguments suggest that the question is not simply whether Lakshmi is treated kindly. It is who defines her value, who benefits from her presence, and whether she can decline the role through which she is admired.

This article advances the argument that Gautier portrays sacredness as conditional recognition. Temple honours, caste prestige, and public fame appear to elevate the animal, but each honour is attached to a prescribed performance. The novel tests that arrangement through Lakshmi's changing occupations and through Tripod's ascent into and eventual departure from an invented spiritual identity. Its contribution lies in reading devotional practice, labour, and caste-like classification together rather than treating the text solely as an appeal against cruelty. The analysis also attends to the uncertainty of its ending: Lakshmi's attempt to choose a future for herself is neither clearly successful nor safely heroic.

Method and Conceptual Approach

The article uses close textual analysis of the 2024 English translation, concentrating on scenes in which an animal's social status conflicts with its bodily experience or desired way of life. It treats the novel's caste system as a satirical construction, not as evidence that the experiences of captive elephants are identical to those of human communities subjected to caste oppression. Likewise, it uses the term "animal labour" to identify the work demanded of Lakshmi and the value extracted from it, without claiming that her condition can be translated without remainder into a human employment relation.

Hribal's distinction between an animal as a historical actor and an animal as a static object of compassion is useful here. In his account, agency involves the ability to affect one's own life, while class concerns relationships among animals and the humans who control their activities (102). That distinction directs attention not only to the suffering described by Lakshmi but also to her refusals, calculations, and changing assessments of freedom. Haraway's insistence that humans meet other beings within unevenly constituted relationships supplies a second caution: affection is not enough if it fails to take account of how power shapes an encounter (5–6). These concepts guide the reading, but the argument remains grounded in Gautier's specific narrative choices and the novel's recurrent contrast between public appearance and private experience.

The Devotional Economy of an Elephant's Body

Early in the novel, Lakshmi asks why temple visitors wish to receive blessings from an elephant and imagines how differently they might respond to the bodily proximity of a tiger or lion (Gautier 16). The joke is pointed. Devotional custom treats the elephant's contact as benign, even desirable, while the contact of other animals would be feared. Lakshmi is therefore not encountered as an elephant on her own terms; she is encountered through a prior religious interpretation of what her body is supposed to mean.

The ritual simultaneously creates material value. Visitors place money in her trunk, which she must pass to the keeper, Tokuram; tourists purchase an image of her through photography, while admirers praise the anklet and decorations she did not choose (Gautier 17). Her complaint, "I'm actually a beggar," punctures the apparent distance between sacred service and compulsory earning (17). Although her labour is performed in a religious setting, it includes repetitive bodily actions, long periods of standing, and the transfer of payments to a human intermediary. By the end of the day, she describes aching legs, hunger, and the wish to lie down, contrasting herself with a sleeping dog who seems to possess the freedom simply to rest (18).

Hribal's analysis of animal work is especially relevant because it challenges interpretations in which an animal supplies only background energy or symbolic meaning to human institutions. His discussion of working animals demonstrates how labouring bodies can be subject to regulation, confinement, and demands for efficiency (104). Lakshmi's blessings are not industrial production, but they reveal a comparable separation between the effort performed by an animal and the decisions governing that effort. The money generated by a devotional encounter moves through her trunk without becoming hers to direct.

The novel goes further by showing that even apparently affectionate attention can become a kind of appropriation. Lakshmi objects to people taking hair from her tail to make good-luck ornaments and asks what gives them the right to turn her body into an instrument of fortune (Gautier 16–17). This moment reveals a double conversion: the elephant's body is treated as a sign of divine power and as a source of exchangeable objects. As the sacred image grows more valuable, the individual from whom that value is extracted becomes less visible.

Wadiwel describes epistemic violence as an order of knowledge in which harm to animals may appear normal, necessary, or beneficial (29–36). Lakshmi's experience makes this problem legible in a particular narrative scene. Pilgrims see a blessed elephant where she experiences a regulated body performing for a crowd. Their admiration need not be insincere for it to be inattentive. The point is the mismatch between what the encounter means to its human participants and what it costs the animal who cannot withdraw.

Yet Gautier resists treating every human–elephant relationship as uniformly abusive. Lakshmi recalls the patient care that Chacko Chattan offers her mother Meenakshi, allowing time for bathing and approaching her without the violence Lakshmi associates with other forms of control (Gautier 23–24). This kindness is important because it prevents the analysis from collapsing individual care into institutional domination. At the same time, Meenakshi remains a temple elephant whose working identity is inherited rather than freely chosen. Humane treatment can improve conditions within a system without answering whether its basic demands should continue.

Caste, Occupation, and the Inheritance of Destiny

Lakshmi explains that elephants possess an elaborate caste system. Gajahramans serve temples, Gajatryas are associated with warfare, Gajasyas carry out economic work, Gajasudras perform strenuous forestry labour, and Gajavasis live in the wild (Gautier 19–20). The classification openly resembles human social hierarchy, but its logic becomes most revealing when occupations are presented as inherited identities. Elephants are valued not only for what they do but for the status assigned to the work they are expected to continue doing.

Meenakshi believes her daughter should be trained for temple service and thus preserve a respected family tradition (Gautier 19, 25). Lakshmi, however, responds to the prospect with anxiety rather than pride. She imagines a future confined to a temple, endlessly blessing visitors, and asserts that the expectation of following a predetermined path is incompatible with the life she wants (27–28). Her objection is not principally that her caste receives insufficient honour. It is that a prestigious designation becomes coercive when it is allowed to determine her future in advance.

An argument with Manmath at the training institution makes the ideological conflict explicit. He points to Lakshmi's food, comfort, and worship as proof that she has little to complain about (Gautier 39). She replies that comfort cannot substitute for the ability to choose how one lives (40). The disagreement exposes two competing definitions of well-being. Manmath measures a good life according to the security and recognition supplied by the collective order; Lakshmi measures it partly according to the possibility of refusing that order. Neither character is unaware of the

appeal of material comfort. The dispute concerns whether comfort can justify the loss of individual discretion.

Manmath's account of changing elephant occupations also weakens the claim that caste expresses a fixed natural order. Former warrior elephants, he explains, are redirected into other kinds of service when the institutions supporting their status decline (Gautier 37–38). What looks like inherited destiny is therefore responsive to shifts in human need. The hierarchy presents itself as traditional and stable, but its practical organisation changes as the usefulness of particular forms of animal labour changes.

The novel's satire should be read carefully. Human caste oppression has histories and social consequences that cannot be reproduced by simply assigning caste names to elephants. Gautier's device instead brings into view the justificatory language of hereditary role, prestige, and duty. Lakshmi's opposition turns on the question of consent: even a role described as valuable or honourable becomes oppressive when the individual cannot reject it. Her criticism of karma as a rationale for an unjust arrangement sharpens the satire by showing how explanations of fate can discourage resistance to social conditions (Gautier 40).

Scars, Resistance, and the Uncertainty of Freedom

When Lakshmi ventures into the forest, she discovers that her temple upbringing can be read on her body. Veeran recognises the marks left by chains on her legs and the smell of incense and camphor associated with her training (Gautier 58). These details are more persuasive than an abstract declaration that she is captive. Even while temporarily beyond the reach of her keepers, she carries material signs of confinement. Her identity has been made visible through marks and habits that she did not select.

Veeran's story introduces a different conception of elephant community. The Gajarastas trace their history through forced labour, flight, and the decision to establish a place for elephants who have escaped human control (Gautier 68–77). Their collective commitment is expressed in the willingness to welcome newcomers regardless of caste or creed (77). Against the hierarchy of occupational worth, they propose a relationship grounded in shared vulnerability and mutual protection.

The forest, however, is not represented as an uncomplicated paradise. Lakshmi observes elephants whose previous experiences in captivity continue to affect their movements and behaviour, including one survivor of circus life who struggles to recover from trauma (Gautier 79–80). Freedom from chains does not erase the bodily and emotional consequences of a controlled existence. Veeran himself remarks on wounds that persist beyond the visible scars left by restraints (60).

Hribal's insistence upon identifying animals as actors rather than merely counting their suffering is helpful in interpreting this sequence (102–03). The Gajarastas do not only endure historical violence; they alter their circumstances through escape and collective organisation. At the same time, Lakshmi's hesitation about joining them complicates the language of liberation. Although she envies their autonomy, the uncertainty of a new life frightens her (Gautier 83–85). Choice includes risk, and an individual trained for dependence may find even desired independence difficult to inhabit.

This hesitation is not a failure of Lakshmi's courage. It is evidence that the novel refuses the easy equation of captivity with material comfort and wilderness with happiness. Gautier presents freedom as a condition requiring knowledge, relationships, and viable means of survival. The Gajarastas offer solidarity, but Lakshmi must still decide whether that form of life is hers to pursue.

Fame, Sanctity, and the Reassignment of Value

Lakshmi's movement into cinema appears to offer a break from the religious roles determined by birth. Yet the film industry evaluates her through the same prestige it seems to replace. Her association with temple service restricts the roles she can take, and a producer finds an acceptable solution in casting her in religious productions (Gautier 135–38). Her body moves into a commercial entertainment economy without escaping the symbolic identity that previously governed her work.

The episode reveals that sacredness can circulate across institutions. In the temple, it makes Lakshmi a desirable source of blessings; in cinema, it makes her appropriate for particular performances. Her rising fame gives her pleasure, and she increasingly identifies with her status as a recognised performer (Gautier 138–40). This is an important complication: the novel does not suggest that animals always stand outside the systems that classify them. Lakshmi, too, can enjoy admiration and become invested in the role it confirms.

When the demand for her work fades, however, she can be sold and returned to temple service (Gautier 140–42). Fame changes the audience, but it does not change her fundamental dependence on decisions made by others. Her career demonstrates how quickly a celebrated living being can be redefined in terms of utility. The continuity between temple labour and film labour is not that both institutions are identical; it is that both attach the value of the animal to what she can provide for human spectators.

Tripod Dog Baba arrives at sacred status from the opposite direction. Unlike Lakshmi, he begins without an inherited religious position. He recounts hunger and insecurity on the streets before he becomes associated with a spiritual identity (Gautier 163–66, 229–33). When a Gurkha watchman publicly honours him, an audience assembles around an act initially remarkable for its novelty. Offerings and devotional gestures gradually transform the dog's social standing (229–35). The reputation grows through repetition: people behave as though he is holy, and their behaviour supplies further evidence of that holiness.

What is especially revealing is how ordinary animal behaviour becomes readable as a spiritual achievement. Sitting still can resemble meditation; apparent indifference can be mistaken for superior detachment. Tripod benefits from these interpretations, receiving food and safety, but he also learns to preserve the stories on which his public identity depends. He acknowledges that some accounts of his spiritual life were invented by Mira (Gautier 243– 44). His holiness becomes a collaborative fiction, maintained by followers and rewarded by the surrounding community.

This fiction has an economic dimension. A nearby shopkeeper is pleased by the prospect that the two sacred animals might attract more people toward his business (Gautier 245–46). Their religious prestige is therefore valuable beyond the immediate circle of devotees. Like Lakshmi's blessings, Tripod's reputation contributes to the traffic and trade surrounding the temple.

Derrida argues that the singular category of "the animal" conceals the plurality of living beings and the authority claimed by humans in

naming them (400–01, 408–09). Gautier stages a related problem at a smaller scale: the individual dog is hidden beneath the public label of guru, just as Lakshmi is hidden beneath the image of temple elephant. Naming an animal sacred may distinguish it from ordinary animals, but such distinction does not necessarily create knowledge of the creature whose life is being named.

The Diary as Counter-Testimony: Voice, Humour, and Limits

The novel's first-person narration is essential to its critical force. Pilgrims see Lakshmi giving blessings; readers hear her describe aching feet, anger, and the hope for another life (Gautier 17–18). This gap creates irony without requiring an external narrator to condemn the devotees. Lakshmi's jokes about elaborate rituals and human superstition do the critical work themselves (16–17).

The device also raises a problem: Lakshmi uses a recognisably human language of caste, freedom, paid work, and personal ambition. Her voice is a literary construction, not proof that a real elephant would conceptualise these experiences in identical terms. Yet it would miss the force of the narrative to dismiss that construction as mere anthropomorphism. Gautier uses a deliberately human-readable voice to disturb the human assumption that animals lack meaningful perspectives. This tension recalls Derrida's concern with the authority through which humans decide who may speak or respond (400–01).

The chameleon's distress after losing his tail further unsettles the idea that visible anatomy yields a stable identity. His anxiety about how other creatures recognise him turns bodily difference into a question of social classification rather than a simple biological fact (Gautier 88–90). Tripod's injured body produces another set of interpretations, from vulnerability to holiness. Neither figure is reducible to the physical difference through which others first perceive him. The novel's world is populated not by one undifferentiated animality but by lives shaped by distinct bodies and histories.

The most consequential exchange between Lakshmi and Tripod occurs during the storm. Lakshmi says that temple visitors fail to notice her grief even while they eagerly seek blessings. She imagines family, offspring, movement, and companionship as possibilities denied to her by the labour of sacred service (Gautier 253). Tripod gradually recognises that he has mistaken her public importance for happiness (255–56). Their conversation offers a form of interspecies attention absent from the pilgrims' relationship with Lakshmi. It is not a blessing but an encounter in which another being begins to revise a settled assumption.

Haraway's emphasis on response rather than abstract affection clarifies this episode. Interspecies relations become ethically significant when beings are attended to in their particular circumstances, not only valued through general ideals about animals (5–6). The novel offers no perfect model of such responsiveness. Tripod is often selfish, and Lakshmi initially judges him as idle. The importance of their friendship is that their judgments change in response to each other's experiences.

The Cost of Truth and an Unresolved Ending

After their conversation, Tripod considers giving up the spiritual persona that has protected him. Lakshmi insists, "One always has a choice," even as the future available to her becomes increasingly uncertain (Gautier 257). The assertion is central to her resistance, but the epilogue tests its limits.

During the storm's aftermath, Lakshmi considers two paths: provoking a confrontation in which she might be killed, or escaping during a future visit to a reserve (Gautier 260–61). The first is not a simple expression of self-determination. It demonstrates how few nonviolent means of refusal she believes are available to her. Her threatened violence is frightening precisely because captivity has narrowed her imagination of what an exit might look like. Wadiwel's account of institutional violence helps explain why injury and resistance cannot be interpreted entirely apart from the systems that make an individual animal's continued obedience the expected norm (29–36).

Tripod's decision ends tragically. After abandoning his guru identity and returning to ordinary street life, he is struck by a vehicle. Lakshmi recognises him by the damaged leg that once made him so distinctive (Gautier 266–68). The contrast is brutal: spiritual imposture had offered relative security, whereas his return to a more ordinary existence exposes him to lethal danger. Yet the novel does not imply that falsehood is morally preferable to freedom. It shows instead that authenticity and survival can become incompatible under unequal conditions.

Lakshmi's own ending is similarly resistant to consolation. During a procession, she pushes against a vehicle and raises her trunk in a final salute to Ganesh (Gautier 269). The reader is not told exactly what follows. Her gesture may be understood as an assertion of refusal, but it is also a desperate act that risks injury and possible death. The ambiguity matters. Gautier does not simply free the elephant through a final imaginative escape and thereby cancel the accumulated contradictions of the narrative. The ending leaves readers with the violence of a situation in which being heard as an individual appears to require a catastrophic interruption of the role others expect her to perform.

Conclusion

Lakshmi's Secret Diary asks readers to distinguish the honour attached to an animal from the conditions of that animal's life. Lakshmi is valued as a religious figure, a performer, and an object of public admiration, yet each form of value depends on her continued usefulness within arrangements she did not choose. The elephant caste hierarchy translates occupational expectations into inherited identities; the Gajarastas offer an alternative based on collective freedom; the cinema episode exposes the transferability of sacred prestige into commercial value. Tripod Dog Baba's fabricated holiness shows the other side of the arrangement: recognition can provide vital protection, but it does so by requiring the animal to inhabit an identity made meaningful by others.

The novel is most compelling where it refuses easy moral distinctions. Individual care exists within captivity; freedom carries uncertainty; and public devotion may coexist with genuine affection as well as economic interest. Its animal narrators do not provide transparent access to nonhuman consciousness, but they make the contradictions of human-centred systems more difficult to ignore. The question that remains is not whether animals should be admired. It is whether admiration can become an ethical relationship when animals lack meaningful opportunities to rest, move, resist, and live beyond the roles through which humans have learned to value them.

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