

### UNDERSTANDING THE ‘ANIMAL’: A STUDY OF SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH SHORT FICTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANIMAL STUDIES

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#### ABSTRACT

*Of late, various academic disciplines have turned themselves towards the study of non-human entities especially the animal form, the ‘othered’ species. Serious Studies have been undertaken in the present context to bring to the fore front ethical consciousness, philosophical currents and thereby delve into arousing humane approach and human consciousness towards the animal form. The hierarchical categorization of living forms, the binary divide as human/nonhuman has been a subject of deep thought and study through the lens of Post-structuralism and Deconstruction schools of critical thought. Derrida’s recent work on the Animals adds to the new engaging school of studies pertaining to Animals in particular. The ‘question of animal’ is getting new attention in the discipline of Humanities under ecological or environmental criticism. In literature, animals have been extensively used in children’s literature to appeal and bring in moral consciousness among children. In Indian Literature, Panchatantra and Jataka tales allure the readers. In adult literature, it served the purpose to bring in humour, satire, imagery and symbolic use. Animal metaphors, symbols and imagery are prevalent in literature through the ages; especially in stream of consciousness technique of narration such symbols are largely used to portray the inner mind sets of the characters. Anita Desai’s texts in Indian English writings is one such example. Although animals were used as a mechanism for characterization, narration and plot, they were not given enough space in literature as a living entity. They served as literary animals and much thought was not given to their emotions and their presence as individual entities of life. Recent studies have therefore given attention to how animals get marginalized and are represented in literature and taken up studies to speak for them. This paper examines the portrayal of animals in Indian English short fiction. The paper involves in the study of representation of animal figures in Indian literature and then moves to a reflection of ethical and moral perspectives and examining the question of ‘being an animal’ or ‘the question of the animal’.*

**Keywords:** Animal, Animal Studies, Indian Fiction, Animality, Other

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The art of storytelling is an ancient practice in Indian social and cultural milieu. Indian literature takes pride in its oral and folk narratives, master narratives as the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, legends, mythologies, tales, fables that embody both the human and non-human forms in the plot and characterization. All these stories somewhere suggest telling us that we live in a world where the human and the animals, birds etc are interdependent and are part of the larger framework of this ecosystem. In literature, Stories depicting animal characters and having dialogues were used for moralistic purpose, especially in children's literature. These stories are appealing to children for their form, characterisation, simple language and moralistic approach. For example, *Panchatantra* is one of the best stories written for children in Indian Literature. . In a fable, fox is cunning, crow is clever, dog is faithful and so on but in realistic representation, they become characters.

Animals and birds act as characters but not really as protagonists. They are used as metaphors, symbols and imagery to represent various dimensions of life. Animals are extensively used in fantasy literature, in children literature and in western poetic discourse as a part of metaphors and imagery, something very suggestive and ponder about. The Romantic writers for example in western literature made extensive use of nature, animals and birds in their poetic expression. They were symbols of admiration for their forms, beauty and aesthetic appeal. So is in Indian literature. Even when Torru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu talked about natural entities in their works, it was out of adoration at the form and beauty and the sensual appeal and charm they had. When animals are used as allegoric forms, they represent human types and attributes. For example, the dog is faithful, the wolf or fox as cunning, the cat is curious or the dove representing softness and love. Writers have always made ample use of symbols, motifs, images drawn from nature. The psychological ordeals of humans are represented through these nonhuman forms especially in the stream of consciousness novels where human characters are less in number. They also represent allegory of a human trait. Western Texts like *Volpone*, *The Fire on the Mountain* represent the connection between human and the animal form. In science fiction, humans do encounter animals and other forms as part of necessity.

A recent body of research has emerged wherein 'questions concerning animals' are 'at the center of critical inquiry' (Calarco 2). Studying animals has been a mainstay of scientific disciplines for centuries, but "cultural animal studies" began to take off when theorists like Carol Adams, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida started talking and writing about ethical care and consciousness about animals and human relationships with animals. Multiple ways of reading animals or animal texts comes under this discipline. There is a kind of (re)evaluation towards animal studies in literature. With the arrival of the eminent French philosopher and theorist Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* in English translation in 2008, the field has gained academic interest and attention. This paper makes a humble attempt to apply some contemporary discourses to the chosen text especially those of Jacques Derrida to understand the nexus between animal and human relation and 'constructed' ideologies.

Of late, there is a twist in the way the animals are studied and are represented in various disciplines. Animal studies as an interdisciplinary study is a new emerging study, engaging us with various questions of representations of these non-human forms. Animal studies engage with questions about notions of "animality," "animalization," or "becoming animal," to

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understand human-made representations of and cultural ideas about "the animal" and what it is to be human by employing various theoretical perspectives, including feminism, Marxist theory and queer theory. 'The question of animal' is getting new attention in the discipline of Humanities under ecological or environmental criticism. In today's critical discussion, much talk and involvement goes for gender studies, the marginalized groups, the subalterns, the Dalits, class and caste divide and the question of identity. How much is the non-human forms, the subject of attention? Who speaks for these non-human forms; the living forms that are misrepresented and 'othered'. Contemporary field of studies has taken to question for the animal and reason from the ethical point of view. Jacques Derrida's latest work in 2006 explores the gap between human, inhuman, post-human and considers the question of the animal making it a central subject of discussion. A vast number of literatures use animals to narrate various aspects but do not look from the ethical perspective. The ethical issues are raised by the connections between man and animals. With new contribution in phenomenology, anthropology, cultural studies and animal studies, animals have received due attention. In literary studies still the question of the animal has taken fewer places and needs more space in literature. In literary studies, however, the question of the animal is still struggling to find its place, though the recent conference at Cornell University on "The Literary Animal" (held on February 8-9, 2008) might herald a welcome change. Derrida in his treatise refuses to use the word animal and brings to notice the violence done to animals and the commonality of the term 'animal' used for all species- earthworms to chimpanzee and constituting it a homogeneous set. He therefore invent the word 'animot' representing the extreme diversity of animals that "the animal" erases. Derrida looks at the manner in which philosophers have discussed animals in the past, Derrida points out the othering of the animals and the ethical implications of this othering.

Literature can be a best possible discourse in sensitization and bringing to the surface animal related issues and be more ethically sensitive. Hence this paper attempts to explore the said subject in Indian literature with particular focus on short fiction. The paper seeks to examine how the animals in the short fiction get portrayed, is their voices and concerns represented and does the select texts show shift in human attitude, norms, and practices towards animals and arouse humane and ethical consciousness. The article examines the portrayal of animals in Indian short fiction. The paper involves in the study of representation of animal figures in literature and then moves to a reflection of ethical and moral perspectives and examining the question of 'being an animal' or 'the question of the animal'. Much talk goes into the identity politics of women, children, class, caste, religion, Dalits and the subalterns but very less attention is given to animals. This 'othered species' is the topic of my discussion. Animal studies in literature and interdisciplinary subjects is a new area of exploration.

For the purpose of study, three texts from Indian Literature have been taken: Sivasankaran Pillai's *The Flood*, R K Narayan's *The Horse and two goats*, Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*. Except for R K Narayan's work, the other two chosen texts are translated into English from the regional literature. Rasipuram Krishanswami Narayan, shortly known as R. K. Narayan was one of the best known Indian English writers who lived until 2001 and was well known for crafting the fictional town 'Malgudi' as Thomas Hardy in western literature did with 'Wessex'. Some of his famous works include *Swami and his Friends* (1935), *The English Teacher* (1945), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The vender of Sweets* (1967) and so on and

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a number of short stories. His works are known for portraying human eccentricities with subtle humour and satire with an ironical twist. Everyday life of middle class men and women was his subject of exploration. His collection of short stories titled 'A Horse and two Goats and Other Stories' appeared in 1970. The story revolves around the pathetic condition of poor Muni and his wife in a small village who once took pride in having a flock of forty sheep and goats which now came down to two and landed in poverty with no children even to take care. Muni's wife has the upper hand in the family who somehow manages to cook something to keep both of them alive. The horse in the story is a high statue made of 'clay, baked, burnt and brightly coloured'. The man made horse is described as

“The horse itself was said to have been as white as a dhobi-washed sheet, and had had on its back a cover of pure brocade of red –and-black lace, matching the multi-coloured sash around the waist of the warrior. But none in the village remembered the splendour as no one noticed its existence. Even Muni, who spent all his waking hours at its foot, never bothered to look up” (*A Horse and two Goats* 136).

An American passes by and comes in contact with Muni who introduces himself as the owner of the two goats that were grazing. The American in fact is captivated with the 'marvellous' structure of the horse. Muni speaks in the regional language and the American, his English, both unable to comprehend the other. The American wants to buy the statue thinking Muni as the owner of it. There is absolute miscommunication between the two as the languages they communicate cannot be decoded and lack of a translator. Muni thinks that the American was making an offer for the goats. As soon as money is placed in his hands, he escapes leaving the goats and saying: “Carry them off after I get out of sight, otherwise they will never follow you, but only me even if I am travelling on the path to Yama Loka”

The horse becomes a symbol of saviour of the poor Muni although he is not aware of it. According to Muni one day the horse would come to life in Kali Yuga and punish all the wrong doers. Although Narayan's short story doesn't seem to have any moralistic purpose in writing this tale, its simplicity, realism and engagement with the reader is noteworthy and he is known for this trait. But the story can be re-read and analysed through the contemporary discourses on animal studies. The underlying theme is incomprehension—Communication gap between an illiterate rustic and a modern pragmatic foreigner from New York. The title has a nonlife (horse) and life (goats) suggesting of the clash or binary divide of the west and east, the west supposed to be modernised and the east, in the rustic form. The animals in the story have less to tell and share. Although, the life of Muni purely depends upon the two goats, the only property he has yet much is not spoken about this life giving life. Human attitude towards the naïve animal is shown. Muni talks in length various aspects to the foreigner though he is unsure what the other person has understood, but no talk really happens about the goats. He thinks that he has won a great fortune by giving off the goats to the American. There is no sense of belonging and concern for the other species, the animal. In fact, the non-human, the statue of horse is being talked about, its beauty, pose and so on. Muni is does not show affection for his goats but proposes that the horse may come to life one day and save mankind. The human-animal relation is strange. It seems animals are more inclined towards humans but humans just ignore and 'other' them. They use them for their benefits but do not look at them as a counterpart on this planet. The last scene in the story tell it all. Muni says to his wife that he has got the money by selling the goats to a red man. But

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then both hear: Hardly had these words left his lips when they heard bleating outside. She opened the door and saw the two goats at her door.

The bond between human and the animal is not too strong. Traditionally, the story is read from cultural divide, east/west encounters and so, but not reading through the lens of animals. Though, the title has animals in it, thematically it is not about the animals. But literary analysis and contemporary discourse has much to say. This paper is an attempt in that.

The next text taken for analysis is Sivasankaran Pillai's *The Flood*. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912 to 1999) was a novelist and short story writer of Malayalam language. He has written forty novels and more than six hundred short stories in Malayalam language which have been translated and published in many other languages including English. His central focus was the oppressed and marginalized class of his society. As the title suggests, the story is about a flood situation in Kerala where the protagonist, a pariah named Chennan manages to escape the situation but forgets to save his dog. The story opens with a description of a temple and the rise of water level up to the deity's bust. The narrative has two plots; the first is Chennan's escapade with his pregnant wife, four kids, a cat when his master has fled him leaving him alone, the second part depicts the agony and despair of the dog that was left behind by his master, Chennan. Chennan makes some temporary arrangement to avoid the waters and waits for a boat to rescue. There is recurring image of boat in the narrative which is very suggestive. Boats as symbols are suggestive of hope, rescue and survival. Chennan and the dog look up for the boats to come. But when it comes, Chennan with all his dependents escapes, forgetting the dog. The dog gets stranded in the situation. The master/slave binary and opposition are apparent here. The master who is said to have upper hand and power ignores the other, so does it happen with Chennan when his master flees and with the dog when his master ignores him. The power nexus between master and the slave is something to ponder and one is reminded about the same in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

When we consider the text from the point of animal studies, the text no doubt voices for a more humane and considerate treatment to the animals. An animal that was a companion and a support mechanism to a human cannot be ignored whatsoever the situation may be. The animal cannot be thought as an 'animal' and 'othered'. As a reader, our sympathy goes for the dog rather than Chennan though both suffer in the given situation. Excerpts from the text would validate this.

*"No one took notice of the dog who was still sniffing around in the western end of the hut."*

*"When the dog eventually returned to the spot on the roof from which the family had made its escape, the boat was far away. The animal began to run around frantically on the roof, sniffing here and there, whining all the while" (The Flood 64).*

References to other living creatures like crocodile, ants, frogs, crow, flies, snakes and repeated image of carcass floating on the water gives a feeling of the after effects of a flood situation. The appearance of the boat is also indicated there leaving hope for the dog, the chances of survival. Third time when a boat arrives with robbers who take chance to steal Chennan's bananas, the dog makes a frantic effort to rescue his master's property.

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“It attacked him immediately and sank its teeth into his leg. Howling in agony, the man jumped back into the boat while his companions took hold of an oar and brought it crashing down on the dog’s head. The animal yelped, and retreated” (67).

This shows that the dog is still faithful to its master although its master had abandoned it. The longing to be rescued is at its peak. A few passages taken from the text reveal the dog’s plight and despair.

‘Look, a dog,’ one of the men said. The dog began to whimper in a peculiar key—it was almost as though it was responding to the compassion in the man’s voice.’ Let it be,’ said the second man. The dog whimpered, opened and closed its mouth, it seemed as though it was praying to the men to rescue it. It tried twice to jump into the boat, and was rebuffed both times. The boat began to move away from the house. The dog howled. It was heart-rending. One of the men looked back. ‘Ayyooo...’ The sound wasn’t from either of the men but the dog. ‘Ayyooo...’ It was an exhausted, pitiful sound. It was almost as if the animal was bidding goodbye to the world. The men did not look back again. The boat drew steadily away, and the dog remained where it was on the roof, watching it go. Its moaning and the expression on its face seemed to say that it would love human beings no more. The boat disappeared from sight (66).

When the waters recede, Chennan comes back only to see the carcass of the dog floating in the receding waters. But no emotion of his revealed. The inhuman attitude of humans towards animals comes to light in this text. The dog represents the idea of faith, trust and companionship to humans. The human insensitivity towards the animal is something that needs to be relooked. The text echoes for human and ethical consciousness for other beings on earth. The human/animal constructed divide in the hierarchal framework is called into question. The idea of Man as the rational being and has a superior form and the animal considered irrational and hence subdued is thrown into challenge. The animal in the text has more humane approach towards humanity. The deliberate shift in the narrative is a shift from the tale of human suffering to animal suffering. The text problematizes the human/animal divide and the relationships we have with them. The text surfaces the psychological dimensions of the dog rather than Chennan. It voices for the animals. Here the animal is not a literary animal nor used as a metaphor or allegory but a real animal, a living soul. The text gives enough space for the animal, its voice is clearly heard by the readers.

Another text taken for study is Perumal Murugan’s *Poonachi*. Perumal Murugan is a Tamil writer who is best known for works like *One Part Woman* bringing him to the notice of non-Tamil readers. He is a star in contemporary Tamil literature and garnered critical acclaims and recognition. Many of his works reveal tenderness towards animals. *Poonachi* or the story of a black goat was published in 2016. The story has a rural setting where an old couple own a pitch black baby goat. The couple call the goat *Poonachi*. Like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, *Poonachi* brings the sense of Anthromorphism in the narrative bringing in the analogy of human suffering and predicament. The old couple takes utmost care of the young one and the story is the tale of the rise of the goat to the adult stage. The text is about the animal world, their sexuality and also an ironic comment on the play of power, subjugation determined by class, caste or color in the society. The narrative is the tale of animal and human world. The story of *Poonachi* depicts the stark reality of animal suffering and abuse in the hands of

human who exploit them for their materialistic benefits. ‘*Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat*’, says N. Kalyan Raman in the Translator’s Note ‘is not a novel meant for the children’. He considers it as the first Tamil novel about animals written for adult readers. Poonachi comes from a good breed and is able to produce seven babies. The bond between Poonachi and the old woman is notable.

‘Every night Poonachi told the old woman everything that had happened that day in the pasture’ (*Poonachi* 65).

Although the couple adore the goat, but as humans they control and exercise their ownership. Poonachi’s love for a male goat is unnoticed and suffers the pain of separation. She sees a friend of hers being butchered for meat and stands still with pain.

*‘Unable to look at those eyes or look away, Poonachi stood still, feeling a great emptiness within. As she watched one who had always run with them being reduced gradually to a few portions of meat, she asked herself seriously, Why should I live anymore?’ (98).*

She is forced to mate with an old ram and when she delivers the seven kids, all of them is sold for a high price. She again suffers the separation from her kids but the couple buy gold in ecstasy and the old woman thanks Poonachi for ‘her gift’. The old woman ‘thought of them as gifts from Poonachi and caressed her that night with great affection. The old couple was so overwhelmed by their own good fortune that they were unable to sleep. Grief-stricken at having lost all her kids at one stroke, Poonachi couldn’t sleep either’ (141).

She litters seven kids again. The couple ‘use’ the goat for milk, for sacrifice and butchery. Her third pregnancy coincides with famine, the couple suffer and blame Poonachi for it and decide to slaughter her for meat. Poonachi loses her battle for existence from the tyrannical ownership.

The text brings to limelight the cruelty imposed on animal, the loss of ethical and moral consciousness and the greed and inhuman practices of human for their selfish wants. The text questions the idea of animal identity and their marginalized position in the human dominant world. The human/animal divide, the power/powerless dichotomy is clearly visible and the text is a voice against these inhumane, immoral tendencies towards the ‘othered species’. As the translator N. Kalyan Raman summarises, this book, probably the first Tamil novel about animals written for adult readers, “makes us reflect on our own responses to hegemony and enslavement, selflessness and appetite, resistance and resignation, living and dying”. Marginalization, power dichotomy, subalternity and subordination are all associated with inferior rank; humans and animals as well. Whereas in humans there is an act of resistance but animals have no voice of resistance and are subdued always.

In all the three text chosen for study, it is clearly visible that animals have more considerate attitude towards their fellow human beings but it is the human who do not possess humane attributes and behave unethically. There is an interdependency between humans and animals but seldom it is recognized and more so ever humans tend to mistreat them and lack to notice the pain and suffering of the animals. According to Derrida, Animal beings have been misunderstood and must be re-examined. There should be a shift in perception. “No one can

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deny the suffering, fear or panic, the terror or fright that humans witness in certain animals” (*The Animal* 396). In fact, philosopher Matthew Calarco argues that the ‘question of violence and compassion toward animals has, in a certain sense, become one of the leading questions of our age’ (*The Question of the Animal* 2).

### Conclusion:

A re reading of the chosen texts from the point of view Animal studies opens up vistas of new learning, perception and consciousness. Meanings proliferate through multiple readings, thus making text a dynamic form and not just a static container of messages. So does these chosen texts. The study emphasizes the need to rethink and problematize the nexus between the human and animal relationships. Some of the pertinent questions that this paper seeks to address through the light of Derrida’s philosophy are the question of animal representation in Indian literary texts and how far these texts are successful in arousing the animal consciousness within us. These texts are, no doubt, successful in arousing our interest in the animals as individual living subject. Re-examination of animal consciousness and moving from human consciousness to nonhuman consciousness need to be addressed and understood. Reorienting ourselves to the perception towards animals is also imperative. Text decentres the central status of human and choses to bring in human consciousness. Present academic climate has enforced a kind of reading that asks to re-evaluate and re-examine the othered species.

As the translator N Kalyan Raman summarises, this book, probably the first Tamil novel about animals written for adult readers, “makes us reflect on our own responses to hegemony and enslavement, selflessness and appetite, resistance and resignation, living and dying”.

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