

Rewriting of the Colonial Narrative of the Tiger in R.K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* Charitha M.R.¹ & G.M. Tungesh²

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ABSTRACT:

Animals have always been used by humans to fulfill their needs; in agriculture, as food and for companionship from times immemorial. Fables portraying animals who speak are a part of Indian folklore. The question of animals has been a constant preoccupation in recent times because of the marginalized state of some animals. Eco criticism, Post Humanism and Literary Animal Studies are three emerging interdisciplinary fields of research in World Literature that try to address the issue of rapid destruction of the environment, reconstruction of the animals and the exploitation of animals. In an Eco system where every organism is connected, destruction of one species by the other will evidently result in self-destruction of the entire life on earth. In this light, Human Animal Studies in Literature studies the representation, perception and treatment of non-human animals in works of fiction and non-fiction. This paper traces the origin of maltreatment of the animals that included killing of animals for the sake of entertainment. The paper investigates numerous Shikari narratives or the narratives of hunting expeditions recorded during the colonial times in the city of Bangalore. The paper shows how the perspective changed later because of the awareness that arose about the need to protect the Tigers in the post colonial era. R. K. Narayan's novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* is a fiction that originated in the post colonial times when the call for safeguarding the dying tigers was not loud enough to be heard. R. K. Narayan is said to have consulted the tiger expert Ullas Karanth while writing the novel *A Tiger for Malgudi*. The novel offers a representation of the non-human animal, the tiger, ascribing it human subjectivity. The first person narrative of a tiger in the novel marks the shift from the colonial perception of the Tiger as an animal to be subjugated to Tiger as a being with individual subjectivity.

KEYWORDS:

Human Animal Studies (Has), Shikar Narratives, Colonialism, Anthropomorphism, Eco Criticism.

Introduction

Post-humanism is a way of thinking that propounds an intersection of the human, non-human and the technological world in times of rising ecological awareness and environmental consciousness. Post-humanism studies cultural representations, power relations and discourses that have historically situated humans above other life forms, and in control of them (Nayar, 13). The rapidly growing field of Literary Animal Studies or Human Animal Studies (HAS), as it is now termed, emerged under Post Humanist theory. Just as Eco criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty, xix); Human Animal Studies is the study of the complex entanglement of human and animal lives. Human Animal Studies can be understood as 'the study of the interactions and relationships between human and non-human animals. (De Mello 5)

Jacques Derrida argues that the problem of animals poses a definitional and practical threat to the discourse of humanism, in which authority and autonomy are "attributed to the man rather than to the woman, and to the woman rather than the animal" (Derrida 114). If human sovereignty is decentered what happens to the authority and autonomy of human authorship? Will it be replaced by animal authority and autonomy? For this will inevitably lead to anthropocentrism being replaced by animal-centrism. So, Dominic O Key in his book, *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature* uses the term 'anthroponormativity' rather than anthropocentrism. He says this is necessary because "enduring forms of human domination are not simply centered but rather produced and reproduced as a norm (O' Key Dominic 20). The concept of Anthropocentrism has also been criticised for overlooking the inequalities within the human community. The concern of Human Animal Studies (HAS) is with questions of human agency, the relations between subject and object, non-human animal language, the role and function of animal metaphors and images in literary texts. In the wake of the emergence of Human Animal Studies and its necessity in understanding human animal relationships in the present scenario where we are witness to the mass destruction of the environment, there is a need for such studies in India too.

This paper is an attempt to examine colonial narratives of the Tiger, particularly in Bangalore and how a fiction created years later

marks a shift from the tiger as an object of entertainment to Tiger as a being with animal subjectivity. R. K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1963, originally written in English) was chosen because the writer is from Karnataka and the novel was written based on suggestions about the life and behaviour of the tigers by Ullas Karanth, the tiger expert based in Karnataka. While this text has already been studied from the perspective of philosophy, spirituality, narratives strategies, Eco criticism etc., there has not been any significant study of this text focusing in particular on how it marks a shift from the colonial narratives of the Tiger as a prey in Karnataka. It is surprising that this text embraces and at the same time decenters the idea of Anthropocentrism because this was written in times when Human Animal Studies as a discipline was little known.

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to explore and answer the following questions/themes:

- How is the Tiger depicted in the colonial records, especially in the region of Bangalore?
- What is the subject position of the tiger in these colonial narratives ? Why?
- How does R. K. Narayan's fictional world portray the tiger? What is its position in the narrative?
- How is R. K. Narayan's fictional tiger different from the real tigers of the colonial narratives?

The Invisible Tiger in the Shikari narratives of the colonial era

The Anglo Indian literature is replete with the accounts of hunting expeditions. The accounts of Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson are read even to this day. There is a significant record of such shikar narratives in Bangalore because it was an important British cantonment after the disintegration of Mysore in 1799. Bangalore was then lush green and a home to a rich variety of wildlife, prominently the tiger population.

The hunting of Tiger was a popular sport in Bangalore according to the writings of Francis Buchanan. Col Walter in 'My Indian Journal' 1864 records tigers spearing as an event of public amusement. Sanderson G P's account of his life with the wild animals mentions that rewards were granted by the government for killing leopards and tigers. Kenneth

Anderson mentions tiger hunting in old Mysore till late 1950s and 60s.

In the large Corpus of non fictional narratives of the Tiger, it is seen as a prey that is to be killed and as a threat to human existence. Fictional accounts of the Tiger too show Tiger shooting as an organised sport. David Walker, who served in the British army from 1932 to 1936, in his novel *Harry Black* (1956) portrays Tiger as a compelling character to be conquered and killed. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1899) regards Sher Khan The Tiger as the only untrust worthy creature to be defeated. The colonial narrative poses a threat to the very existence of the fierce wild cat. It was the Britishers who in a way legitimised hunting of the Tigers by offering rewards for killing them and pushing them towards invisibility as a species. Animal subjectivity and agency is unheard of in colonial narratives of the past.

Animal Subjectivity and the Animal voice in R. K. Narayan's A Tiger for Malgudi.

RK Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* is distinct in portraying a Tiger as the chief protagonist in the narrative. The act of making the tiger a first person narrator is an attempt at dispelling the otherwise anthropocentric discourses of the time. It marks a radical shift from the otherwise colonial perspective of the animal as the other with no agency of its own. As Narayan himself confesses in the introduction to his novel, the idea of making a tiger the narrator originated when he read the report of hermit being accompanied by a harmless and peace loving tiger in Kumbh Mela. He also justifies the choice of a tiger as the central character of the novel:

“Man in his snugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also process ego, values, outlook and the ability to communicate though they may be incapable of audible speech. Man assumes he is all important, that all else in creation exists only for his sport, amusement, comfort or nourishment. I wish to examine what the result would be if I made a tiger the central character in a novel.” (Narayan 7-8)

The novel begins with the account of the life of an animal; that of a tiger and the dominant life he lead in the jungle. Later when the tigress and the cubs have gone missing the tiger is compelled to move to the village to find its mate. When the tiger realises that the tigress and its cubs are killed, he feels miserable. The writer voices the anguish and the

inner turmoil of the Tiger at this phase but in doing so, he is made to talk and think like humans

I cried in anguish and desperation—but silenced myself and crouched unobtrusively when I noticed far off in the valley down below a line of men passing, pulling and pushing an open cart on which were laid out the cubs and their mother. (Narayan 23)

Most of the animal language that the Tiger speaks here is anthropomorphic: a term popularized by Mary Midgley. According to Mary Midgley the term has only recently been extended to ‘cover the attribution of some human qualities to non-human animals’. [Midgley 125]. We understand the world in human terms because we are human. Once the Tiger has entered the human world; the writer cannot help but make it speak in human language. The Tiger has also come out and cannot go back into the jungle. Then, the tiger is trapped and taken into The Circus by Captain, the Grand Malgudi Circus ringmaster. The tiger is given a human name— Raja. Gradually, the process of taming the tiger and the consequent process of training it for Circus performances begins. The tiger is unwilling to undergo the process of taming and training not only because it is harsh but also because the tiger fails to make sense of the human language. Thomas A Sebeok in his book *Zoosemiotics* calls the process of taming as a systematic reduction of flight distance achieved by conscious manipulation of the animal code (Sebeok 197). This, he says, is followed by a purely synchronic process of training with the degree of emotional intensity coupling the interactions.

The Tiger Raja undergoes intense emotional turmoil when it is punished by the captain with isolation and starvation for not being able to comprehend the human language. The process of taming and training is confronted with some degree of resistance and anxiety by the Tiger in Naryan’s fiction. The fact that the animal in Narayan’s world is able to express and oscillate in a language accords it an agency. The animal subjectivity that emerges out of the narrative accords a new position to the otherwise unheard voice of the animals across history.

Anthropocentrism and Decentering Anthropocentrism

The animals in Colonial narratives are the voiceless others that have yielded to human subjugation. Such narratives mirror the anthropocentrism that existed during the times. The animals are depicted and treated as

sources of human entertainment, devoid of subjectivity and agency. It is a world where the human is reinstated at the centre. R. K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* decenters the conception of the human at the centre by according subjectivity and animal agency to the tiger. It however proceeds and ends with a human, whom the tiger calls master, a sadhu, taking away the tiger to the foot of a hill and transforming him to a spiritual being. Both the Tiger and the Sadhu here seem to comprehend each other although they don't converse in a human language. The Sadhu becomes a guide for the spiritual awakening of a non-human animal; the Tiger who is otherwise either shunned or feared by the human world.

Conclusion

R. K. Narayan creates a unique space for human and non-human relations in the fictional world that goes beyond the troops of anthropocentrism. R. K. Narayan has tried to construct the impressions of non-human animal minds in a human language and marks a radical shift from the colonial narratives where the animal other goes unheard. Since we are all prisoners of human language, Narayan too reinstates human language as he thinks he challenges it. The portrayal of the human and the non-human in the novel is inevitably one of conflict of authority, agency, language and also subversion.

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