

Animal Studies: A Post-Modern Analysis of Animals in Literature and Popular Culture

Maria Pratibha Da Cruz

Assistant Professor, Department of English Fr. Agnel College, Goa University

Abstract: Nonviolence or *ahimsa* on our plates is the ethical principle of responsible eating that holds the key to unleashing a green revolution, one that's humanity's only chance, probably its last—at survival. It has its Sanskrit roots in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in India, as well as in Taoism in the Far East, with its Ying and Yang principle of harmonious coexistence. It finds resonance today in the philosophical belief of Ethical Veganism.

Going by the premise that Literature and Philosophy complement each other, where literature provides the question without the answer and philosophy the answer without the question, it is possible to trace a correlation between the portrayal of animals on the page and their treatment in the cage.

Literary classics, fables, and folk tales portrayed animals as adorable specimens of loyalty, compassion, selflessness, and innocence. Conversely, Disney's goats were marinated into *rogan gosh*, or Ellen De Generes-inspired *Dory* ended up filleted, grilled, and smoked.

However, the conscience of the world was shaken when the animal narratives in literature changed, and animal farming was exposed through insightful commentaries fraught with cruelty and brutality. Two seminal works that changed the nature of the discourse—Mark Hawthorne's *Bleating Hearts* (2013) and Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* (1992); will be spotlighted. Nevertheless, Animal Activism is not restricted to literature alone. It echoes in movies, discourses, and popular culture. Finally, this human-animal equation in Literary Animal studies will be examined within the framework of Posthumanism.

Keywords: Animal Studies, Ethical Veganism, Popular culture, Post Humanism

Introduction

Traditional literature, from the classics to mythology, from fables to fiction, is replete with tales and testimonies of loyalty, compassion, selflessness, innocence, and pure love portrayed by and through animals. We love to read about these endearing creatures. We are bewitched by their charms, in awe of their adventures and yet will hesitate not to don that sable collared jacket, with the subtle whiff of musk emanating, and head off for the fine promise of haute cuisine with caviar and foie gras on offer.

Dominant man and his greed have distorted power dynamics in the natural world of evolution. Man, considered its finest specimen, is thus both empowered and emaciated in the process. He is empowered to exploit animals for food, hunt for sport, mutilate them for medicine, breed them in captivity, keep them as working companions... In the process, he has also emaciated himself through the possibility of multi-species extinction and its cascading effect on our planet.

A compelling reason for this is human exceptionalism. In a paper titled 'Political Ecology, Development, and Human Exceptionalism,' the researcher writes about preferential treatment provided to humans as they "deserve a standard of care that exceeds that of other beings, and that the instrumental use of other beings is acceptable in the pursuit of human wellbeing. Of course, this human circle of care need not necessarily involve causing harm to other beings, but neither does it preclude harming other creatures in the service of human excellence and wellbeing" (Srinivas 125).

Nevertheless, the narrative in literature is evolving, and this paper spotlights two seminal works that changed the nature of the discourse-Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* (1992) and Mark Hawthorne's *Bleating Hearts* (2013). In the former, an anthropomorphic work, animals speak up, speak out and speak back. The latter is a hard-hitting testimony of man's abject cruelty towards animals. These twists in the tale place the beasts in positions of power and prestige and permit them to speak back in Literature and Popular Culture. This has resulted in an eclectic multiverse where animals have found their voice and are rewriting their own stories. This paper traces their resilient journey in the portrayal of animals in literature and popular culture.

Mythology and Animals

Argos and Dharma are two enduring examples from ancient literary texts that find unique ways of expression. In Homer's epic poem *Odyssey*, we have Argos, a magnificent dog, a formidable hunter, and a symbol of loyalty who waited for 20 years looking after Odysseus's family in his absence. On his master's return to Ithaca disguised as a beggar, the dog is by then "lying neglected on a pile of cow manure, infested with fleas, old and very tired." However, he manages to "drop his ears and wag his tail," and as Odysseus, his master, enters his hall, Argos dies (Orienna-Poetry).

Similar tales can be found at the beginning and end of the revered Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, as Abhishek Joshi wrote in Dogwithblog. The opening scene of the *Mahabharata* involves an audacious questioning by the mother of a dog who complains about the unjust treatment meted out to her son by King Janmejaya and his brothers. This serves "as a powerful reminder that every being has the right to protest against injustice, regardless of their status" (Joshi, dogwithblog.in).

The Indian epic also ends with another tale of justice involving a dog. It highlights the Pandava's pilgrimage to their final resting place after renouncing their kingdom. Yudhisthira, followed by Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, Draupadi and a dog, make this arduous journey to Meru hill, and only Yudhisthira and his faithful dog prevail till the end. When brave Yudhisthira was invited to "ascend to heaven" minus the gaunt Indian pariah, he is said to have remarked thus to Indra, "The dog was my faithful companion, and I cannot abandon it... if it does not deserve to go to heaven, then neither do I." Eventually, Dharma, the loyal dog, and his master ascend into heaven (Joshi, dogwithblog.in).

Greco-Roman philosophers have different perspectives, often varying from the ancient epics. Plato made a case for no meat based on a desire for peace and a cry to stay away from an excessive lifestyle. In the writings of Pythagoras, we can also trace a vegetarian legacy based on the belief that animals, just like humans, have souls. However, meat-eating was widely prevalent, with Aristotle justifying it by ranking 'irrational' animals far below the Great Chain of Being.

In Rome, Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Plutarch advocated the delights of vegetarianism, yet as psychologist Richard Ryder put it, “meat eating was a status symbol, and animals were often cooked alive; pigs were skewered alive on hot spits to improve the taste.” (Animal Revolution, 2000)

Wendy Doniger, a Distinguished Service Professor at the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, states that in India, too, meat was consumed: “Vedic Indians generally ate the castrated steers, but they would eat the female of the species during rituals or when welcoming a guest or a person of high status” (2017). It was in the fourth century B.C. that the practice of vegetarianism spread among the Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus.

Animal Activism

Philosophers and their philosophies adorned books in libraries, but in the slaughterhouses, it was a different reality, where animals were reduced to beings with no personhood – nameless, voiceless units of production. The cause is Man’s flawed understanding, which places the supposedly autonomous rational humans at the centre of everything. A concept that is deeply rooted in Humanism and Anthropocentrism.

Animal Activists attempt to bring forth a realisation that we humans are but one strand in the web of life. They seek to restore Human-Animal power equations and advocate for an interconnected, responsible living—where all species live, thrive, and coexist harmoniously in the cosmos. The members of the Green Brigade consist of a group of opinionated, optimistic, thinking, and caring people with a heroic objective to save the world by changing the way the world thinks, writes, eats, and lives. Today, they can be found everywhere—on social media, at concerts, on TV, on TED, and in the fields of cinema, music, and literature.

This is also the crux of what activist-author Daniel Quinn delineates in his intriguing novel *Ishmael* (1992). This “thoughtful, fearlessly low-key novel” (The New York Book Review) is, in effect, a work of one with “an earnest desire to save the world.” (Ishmael 1).

Gone are the days when humans alone had agency and control. In this work, there is a switch—the gorilla talks, soothes, teases, amuses, and most importantly, he teaches man: “My subject

is: *captivity*” (Ishmael 1992, 27). He follows a curriculum, maintains a lesson plan, knows when to stop his class, provides homework if required and promotes critical thinking through his barrage of insightful questions to his human pupil. The student, who doubles up as the nameless narrator, has much ground to cover, for it is a known fact that we humans “have an impoverished understanding of the animals we share the planet with” (Bleating Hearts 18).

The telepathic lessons unfold as per the teacher’s roadmap, and the gorilla, who speaks with his eyes, begins imparting his wisdom—starting with an intriguing riddle or koan (Ishmael 9): “With Man gone, / Will there / Be Hope / For Gorilla?” He introduces the discerning student to “the voice of Mother Culture humming in the background, telling her story repeatedly ...” (Ishmael 39). He then divides people as civilised and primitive but uses the neutral labels of “Takers and Leavers” (Ishmael 40).

Animal Studies can trace occasional spokespersons in literature when writers hailed nature and advocated for humanely understanding all living forms. Take, for instance, an early vegetarian celebrity, Frankenstein, who advocated for a vegetarian diet: “My food is not that of man. I do not destroy the Lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment” (Frankenstein 121). In *Sensitive Plant*, P.B. Shelly argued that “all killing insects and gnawing worms/And things of obscene and unlovely forms,” have a natural role in the ecosystem, which requires understanding rather than destruction (Sensitive Plant 155-156).

Quinn’s depiction of a half-ton silver-back thinking gorilla involved in a Socratic conversation with man certainly added a new dimension of understanding. The animals speak back, toppling existing power equations and settling for a natural rhythm that augurs well for our World, our planet.

Page-Cage Connection

When the animals on the page were harmless, the more significant the chance they were harmed. The same with the reel-real equation. For instance, cinematic tales of Tintin’s optimistic sidekick Snowy, the beloved horse Misty of Chincoteague, or Wilbur, the adorable piglet who thrives on slop, have captured our screens and imagination as epitomes of morality, compassion, integrity,

and unconditional love. It is the same with endearing cinematic depictions of endangered replicas of penguins (*Toy Story*), deer (*Bambi*), and dragons (*How to Train a Dragon*).

Their reality, too, was far removed from any such romanticised filmic depictions. In the book *Eating Animals*, while delving into the animal-to-edible transformations, Jonathan Safran Foer documents the business model: “Factory farmers calculate how close to death they can keep the animals without killing them... How quickly can they be made to grow, how tightly can they be packed, how much or little can they eat, how sick can they get without dying” (Bleating Hearts 23).

What comes to mind immediately is chickens and the way they are treated. Hawthorne states that while in the 1950s, chickens were slaughtered after 84 days, “today’s birds are slaughtered at about 40 days with a live weight of approximately 2 kilograms. Their bodies are abnormally large, but they are still babies who chirp as they head to slaughter” (Bleating Hearts 26).

Hawthorne is fearless in travelling to the darkest recesses of animal suffering and showing it as it is. “I expected death,” he wrote as he unearthed a repugnant reality, “I did not anticipate extreme disregard for sentient life.” Indeed, caged animals were depicted differently on pages and on the big screen. They were reduced to “biological automata” (Coetzee 34) with no personhood, insignificant beings - nameless, voiceless. No wonder we are amid the sixth mass extinction, with 150 species going extinct daily.

Supremacy of Man

In a telepathic communication with Ishmael (the non-human gorilla teacher), the narrator (a human being) is asked to narrate the myth about creation. During the ensuing discussion, astonishing facts emerge: “For many millions of centuries, the life of the world was merely microorganisms floating helplessly in a chemical broth.” They were followed by vertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and finally man. The narrator adds, “When man finally arrived, creation came to an end, because its objective had been reached. There was nothing left to create.” Furthermore, herein lies the fatal fallacy. Quinn questions the logic of the creation process ending with man’s appearance. Ishmael clarifies philosophically: “the universe went on as before; the planet went on as before. Man’s

appearance caused no more stir than the appearance of jellyfish. It follows that man is not the pinnacle or the climax of the whole cosmic drama of creation” (Ishmael 60).

Live and Let Live

Daniel Quinn’s *Ishmael* won him the prestigious Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, awarded to literary works that offer solutions, and he also won “a legion of followers or ishmaelists,” (Romero 306), all of whom shared his “earnest desire to save the world.” (Ishmael 1992, 1) Students looking out for teachers were captivated by Quinn’s unique perspective and his lessons, especially on being Leavers, not Takers, Dwellers, or Exploiters.

The premise of the Taker story is that the world belongs to man, while the premise of the Leaver story is that man belongs to the world. The author deep dives into the essentials of this classification. Leavers date back to 3,000,000 B.C. They follow a peacekeeping law that promotes order and diversity. This law led to evolution, to the emergence of the club-finned fish, of amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals right up to *Homo sapiens sapiens*—all of whom followed the law. The problem arose when “one branch of the family of *Homo sapiens sapiens* said, ‘Man is exempt from this law.’

This resulted in Takers which date back to 8000 BC. They are believed to “cling with fanatical tenacity to the specialness of man.” It is not any surprise that these advanced people are prone to crime, mental illness, suicide, and drug addictions, for they have stopped evolving and growing. The Leavers are the Noble Savages, the indigenous people whose close connect with Mother Nature ensures their wonderful mental health” (Ishmael 1992, 155). The land they live on in the present and leave on to the future is pristine. They are the Leavers, the Dwellers who are in sync with the rumbling and rhythm of Mother Earth.

Post Humanism

As natural disasters increase in frequency and intensity, the connections between ourselves, our food choices, and our environment become more apparent. It also becomes imperative to deconstruct Mother Culture’s story of humanity, with Quinn’s “manifesto for a more sustainable form of living

that he calls New Tribalism” as our guide. To deconstruct, we turn to Derrida and his relation to the Other, as he “extends the proposition of unconditional hospitality towards the Other.” (Derrida 2008) Deconstruction is about disassociation, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and difference in relation to the Other.

Philosopher Donna Haraway foresees a post-human future, “when species meet,” and when humans finally make room for non-human things within the scope of our moral concern. “Post human ethics, therefore, encourage us to think outside of the interests of our own species, be less narcissistic in our conception of the world, and to take the interests and rights of things that are different to us seriously.” (Haraway 2018) Post Humanism departs from the philosophy of the Humanism, involves a re-thinking of what it means to be human, bids to stop human privileging and advocates for a more inclusive approach for all living beings.

Popular Culture

Literature has found an ally in Popular culture, and together, they are on a mission to stir a restive people living on the brink of annihilation. Kids today have been weaned on TV shows that simulate the real-life phenomenon of metamorphosis, or young music enthusiasts who have their famous singers vent their anxiety over Climate Change. Take, for instance, select performances of Taylor Swift (Wildest Dreams), SZA (Good Days) and Billie Eilish (Lost Cause) at the Global Citizen Festival 2022. Mention must also be made of Ted speaker-activist Melanie Joy, who is noted for her work in Carnism (which is the opposite of vegetarianism), especially her interesting discourse titled, “Why we love dogs, eat pigs and wear cows?”

Another earlier influence in the 1990s was the Seattle-based grunge band Pearl Jam. The songwriter Eddie Vedder admitted that the book *Ishmael* has significantly influenced the album Yield (1998) and one song, ‘Do the Evolution’ in particular. The lyrics presented below make it “a powerful statement about humanity’s impact on the planet” (McKenna, 2023).

Do the Evolution

Woo...

I'm ahead, I'm a man
I'm the first mammal to wear pants, yeah
I'm at peace with my lust
I can kill 'cause in god I trust, yeah
It's evolution, baby, yeah
I'm at peace, I'm the man
Buying stocks on the day of the crash, yeah
On the loose, I'm a truck
All the rolling hills, I'll flatten 'em out, yeah
It's herd behavior, uh huh
It's evolution, baby, good
Admire me, admire my home
Admire my son, he's my clone
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
This land is mine, this land is free
I'll do what I want but irresponsibly
It's evolution, baby, uh
I'm a thief, I'm a liar
There's my church, I sing in the choir
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Admire me, admire my home
Admire my son, admire my clones
'Cause we know, appetite for a nightly feast
Those ignorant Indians got nothin' on me
Nothin', why?

Because it's evolution, baby
I am ahead, I am advanced
I am the first mammal to make plans, yeah
I crawled the earth, but now I'm higher
2010, watch it go to fire
It's evolution, baby*, ugh
It's evolution, baby
Ah, do the evolution
Come on, come on, come on

(*Italics bold used for emphasis)

The powerful lyrics make this upbeat rock number an anthem, for all who care about our planet's future. Pearl Jam, an alternative rock group, is known for tackling issues like climate change, income inequality, political polarisation, and man's dominance at the expense of nature. Vedder, the songwriter and Stone Gossard, the lead, rhythm, and bass guitarist, use emotion and urgency to drive home their vision, which is echoed in the accompanying music video. The video, directed by comic book artist Todd McFarlane, begins with an ape-like figure evolving into a human being, wearing a suit and a tie, and eventually becoming a skeletal figure wearing a crown and existing in a bleak world. "The imagery," writes McKenna, "is meant to represent the de-evolution of humanity." The group's commitment is ongoing. For instance, Pearl Jam's latest music video, 'Retrograde' (2022), featured none other than Greta Thunberg, Sweden's youth environmental icon.

Conclusion

Today, popular culture, specifically the music industry, proactively educates the youth about animal rights, climate change and safeguarding the environment. Hence, they are targeting a younger demographic. With performers like Billie Eilish, Aurora, Choke, Lil Dicky, and Acerbic Wit lending their voices and might towards this cause, it is the teen who is targeted, and that augurs well for our tomorrow.

However, the biggest gain in this crusade to save the planet is our changing food habits. Today, vegetarianism and veganism are catching on for all the right reasons. According to French author Alphonse de Lamartine: “One does not have one heart for Man and one for animals. One has a heart or one does not.” Veganism is about compassion and responsible eating choices that impact our mind, body, and world (Lamartine 2023). With around 40% of Indians being vegetarian and only 10% of our population vegan, it could be argued that this lifestyle favours the developed nations who can afford pricey avocados and sourdough toast. Let us set aside this elitist micro view, especially since this paper is not advocating for veganism.

Nevertheless, when an estimated 88 million worldwide have chosen veganism as a way of life, it helps reduce our carbon footprint from food. Livestock’s Long Shadow, in a study, stated that the environmental impact of reduced livestock production would result in a drastic drop in methane from belching/farting cows; lowered gases released from animal manure; reduced oil burned while taking their carcasses to the marketplace; saving of electricity and gas needed to cool and cook meat; energy saved from ploughing and harvesting fields that grow crops that feed animals or water that meets their needs.

Therefore, adding responsible food choices with *ahimsa* on the plate, will prove to be a game changer. A holy trilogy of fiction, pop culture and food could work in tandem as a catalyst to save our planet from peril. We must heed Quinn’s plea to his students: “to teach a hundred... and inspire each of them to teach a hundred. That’s how it’s always done” (Ishmael 1992, 268).

Works Cited and Consulted

Coetzee, John M, and Amy Gutmann. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton UP, 2001.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Fordham UP, 2008.

Doniger, Wendy. "Hinduism and Its Complicated History with Cows (and People Who Eat Them)."

The Conversation, 17 July 2017, theconversation.com/hinduism-and-its-complicated-history-with-cows-and-people-who-eat-them-80586#. Accessed 25 Oct. 2023.

Hawthorne, Mark. *Bleating Hearts*. John Hunt Publishing, 2013.

Jam, Pearl. *Do the Evolution*. 1998.

McKenna, Brad. "The Meaning behind the Song: Do the Evolution by Pearl Jam." *Old Time Music*,

12 Aug. 2023, oldtimemusic.com/the-meaning-behind-the-song-do-the-evolution-by-pearl-jam/. Accessed 25 Oct. 2023.

Oriana. "Oriana-Poetry: Argos recognizes Odysseus." *Oriana-Poetry*, 25 July 2010, Oriana

poetry.blogspot.com/2010/07/argos-recognizes-odysseus.html. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.

Quinn, Daniel. *Ishmael*. Bantam Books, 1992.

Ryder, Richard D. *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes towards Speciesism*. Berg, 2000.

Srinivasan, Krithika, and Rajesh Kasturirangan. "Political Ecology, Development, and Human Exceptionalism." *Geoforum*, vol. 75, Oct. 2016, pp. 125–28,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.07.011>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Sensitive Plant*. 1898.

Steinfeld, Henning. *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. Rome, Food

and Agriculture Organization of The United Nations, 2006.

"Story of Yudhisthira's Dog-Tale from Mahabharat." *Dogwithblog.in*, 27 Aug.

2014, dogwithblog.in/story-of-yudhisthira-dog-mahabharat/. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.

The Ethics Centre. "Ethics Explainer: What Is Post-Humanism?" *THE ETHICS CENTRE*, 22 Feb.

2018, ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-post-humanism/.

"Veganism Is Compassion - GenV." <https://Genv.org/>, 7 Nov. 2021, [genv.org/veganism-is-compassion/](https://Genv.org/veganism-is-compassion/).

Accessed 25 Oct. 2023.

Villanueva Romero, Diana. "The Animal Teacher in Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael*." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, no. 22, 2018, pp. 305–325, <https://doi.org/10.12795/ren.2018.i22.13>.

Accessed 31 Oct. 2019.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Frankenstein Mary Shelley*. Best American Life Institute, 2010.