



An Overview of Literary Animal Studies in India with Special Reference to South Indian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The question of animal in literary texts and its relationship with humans is a matter of concern in the present world; a world that feeds upon the ever growing meat industry and simultaneously pushes the habitats of the wild animals to the brink of destruction. Human Animal Studies or Literary Animal Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of study in India and abroad that chooses to acknowledge and address the above concerns. With the emergence of the concept of Post humanism that decentered the human who had long enjoyed his position at the center of humanist and colonial thoughts, the concern for the otherwise indistinct presence of the non-human animal began to resurface. The west built its theory of Literary Animal studies on the discourses of Locke, Derrida, Baudrillard, Berger and the like to understand the human animal relations and their ideological implications on existent anthropocentrism of the times. Literary animal studies in India draws from the western concept of Human Animals studies, but goes back to the pre- colonial times of Sanskrit texts and Buddhist tales that respected animal sentience and non- injury of non-

human animals. The change in the treatment of animals in India came after the advent of Islamic rule and the British who set up slaughter houses. Today the detriment living condition of farm animals, the growing meat industry and the large scale destruction of natural habitats of wild animals are issues greatly intertwined with Human Animal Studies. There is a large consensus among scholars of Human animal studies that the human animal relationship as represented in literature is also a reflection of broader social cultural forces. This paper examines the origin and development of the field of Literary Animal Studies in India with special reference to the emergence of the larger field of Human Animal Studies (HAS) as a literary theory. This paper also intends to review the critical analysis undertaken in the sphere of human animal studies in works of fiction in India with particular focus on the works of South Indian writers. The relationship between the fictional representations of Animals and the influence of broader social cultural forces in mainstream literary works of Indian writers from Orwell to Adiga is also undertaken.

Origin and development of Human Animal Studies

John Locke, the father of liberalism and enlightenment in his essay ‘Essay Concerning Human Understanding’ (1690) acknowledges that other creatures such as birds, also have perception to “retain ideas in their memories, and use them for patterns”(Locke, 1690). This was written when humanism-the idea of human at the centre was at its peak, when Descartes famously argued that animals were ‘machines’ without souls or reason. In the 19th century, with industrialization, the increased use of animals for agriculture, transport and entertainment increased and so did the suffering. Organised animal rights movement began in the 19th century with the founding of the society for the prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1824. Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859) marked a significant shift in the perception of animals by emphasizing the shared ancestry of humans and non-human apes.

In the mid-20th century, Animal rights became a major philosophical and ethical issue through Peter Singer’s 1975 book *Animal Liberation*. Peter Singer’s work was based on the principles of Bentham’s utilitarianism, but radically includes animal interests and characteristics, that are ‘sentience’ and ‘suffering (Singer, 1975, 9). Singer’s principle of equality compels us to count the interests of a

suffering being equally with the 'like suffering' of any other being (9). Sympathetic representations of animals made way into literature. Although works like *Charlotte's Web* (E B White 1952), *Black Beauty* (Anna Sewell, 1877), *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling, 1894), *Animal Farm* (George Orwell, 1945) portrayed animals as sentient beings, they were largely treated as books for young adults and kids.

In the late 20th century, Animal Studies rose as a discipline with the critical discourses of John Berger, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and Martin Heidegger at its base. John Berger, in his essay, '*Why Look at Animals?*' (1980) examines the evolution of human relationship with animals. The reduction of the animal, which has a theoretical as well as economic history, is part of the same process as that by which men have been reduced to isolated productive and consuming units (Berger, 1980, 11). While Berger saw the plight and treatment of animals as the irredeemable product of capitalism, Derrida examines the 'question of the animal' and says that the problem of the animal poses threats to the discourse of humanism. He says that the Animal with a capital 'A' defined by way of difference to the 'human' is the primary means whereby the animal/human dualism has been reinforced (Derrida 2008, 400). Although Martin Heidegger's discourse on animals and animality critiques human chauvinism, his work ultimately remains dogmatically anthropocentric (Matthew, 200, 34).

With the advent of the theory of Post humanism in the 21st century that studies "cultural representations, power relations and discourses that have historically situated the human above other life forms, and in control of them" (Nayar, 2014, 13), the question of animal became paramount. Critical post humanism drew upon the discipline of monster studies and animal studies. While monster studies demonstrates how particular forms of life such as the disabled, the insane or differently embodied, that do not fit the norms of the human are deemed monstrous and consigned to the categories of freaks, non-humans or the inhuman" (Nayar, 2014, pg 111). Animal Studies shows how the animal as a life form is the constant other to the human. Critical Post humanism studied the ways human is centered in history. Cary Wolfe's works *Animal Rites* (2003) and *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) focus on the material and representational aspects of both animal studies and monster studies that are intricately connected.

Contemporary works on human animal studies are exceptionally diverse and have drawn from the fields of ethology, biology, anthropology and various other sciences. Scholars like Dona Haraway, Cary Wolfe, Jacqueline J H Lichtenstein, John Simmons, Philip Armstrong are a few notable names in the field of Human Animal Studies. The question of animal cognition and agency, legal recognition of animal rights, animal testing, treatment of farm animals, wildlife conservation are some issues that are being examined in contemporary animal studies.

Human Animal Studies in India

Though Human Animal Studies in India is a relatively unexplored interdisciplinary area that is blossoming under the western post humanist discourses, the relationship between humans and animals can be traced back to ancient Sanskrit and Buddhist texts. Animals were the centre of religious iconography with each deity associated with specific animals. The ancient Indian texts, such as Mahabharata and Ramayana often incorporated animals as metaphors for virtues and vices.

Animals were part of fables- Panchatantra series, where animals were featured in mythology with magical capacities and even in narratives like the Jataka tales (the story of Buddha's previous lives), animals are the key characters. The Indian Tradition has always respected animal sentience and non-injury towards them. Indian literature is replete with injunction on the importance of compassion and non-killing of animals (Krishna, 2017).

With the advent of Islamic rule in north India, the situation changed owing to the fact that the rulers were meat eaters. But many Moghul and Islamic rulers also banned cow slaughter (Krishna, 2010). But a great change came with the arrival of the British. The first Slaughterhouse of India was built in Calcutta by Robert Clive, the then governor of Bengal in 1760. The British rewarded people for hunting down wild animals. Greater rewards were given for killing or capturing cubs (Rangarajan, 2005). During British colonial rule in India (from the mid-18th century to 1947), animals were often depicted in literature, religious texts, and colonial scientific discourse. The British tended to treat animals in India through a European lens, focusing on exoticism, conservation, and exploitation.

A whole bunch of books termed Shikari narratives by hunters like Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson are centered around the experiences of hunters and their hunting expeditions. George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant (1920), The Hanging (1931) were both written in a Colonial India where hunting was a standard recreation for British officials. Kipling's famous The Jungle Book (1894) is also read as an account of Mowgli (a colonizer) usurping the rule of Sherkhan (the native). Post-independence Indian writers began to explore themes of animal representation in literature. The works of writers like R.K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond feature animals in nuanced ways, reflecting the evolving relationship between humans and animals in modern India. The focus of early post-colonial literary works was not directly on animal rights, but rather on how animals were used in cultural and philosophical contexts. With the rise of postmodernism and postcolonial studies in India, the study of animals became more nuanced. Authors, philosophers, and anthropologists began to explore how animals were portrayed in literature, media, and folklore. Indian philosophers like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath

Tagore, and others have had views on non-violence (ahimsa) and the treatment of animals, which have been critical to understanding the ethics of human-animal interactions in India.

The environmental movement in India, particularly after the 1970s, also contributed to the rise of animal studies. The Chipko movement (1973), for example, raised awareness about ecological concerns, and the Project Tiger initiative (1973) highlighted the need for preserving endangered species. These movements influenced academic discourse, where scholars began to engage with the cultural, ecological, and ethical dimensions of animals in Indian society. Indian scholars have also examined how colonialism shaped human-animal relations in the subcontinent. Colonial rule disrupted indigenous practices and imposed Western ideas of human superiority over animals. These scholars argue that a postcolonial approach to animal studies in India must address these historical legacies while rediscovering indigenous animal ethics.

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The field of animal studies is thus growing, driven by both traditional ideas of non-violence and modern concerns about ecology, animal welfare, and justice. When it comes to works of fiction that contained animal characters, the studies from the perspective of animal agency, decentering anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism were very few.

‘Everywhere Animals Appear’ is a thesis by Jason Sandhar that provides a detailed critical analysis of animal Representations in Indian fiction from the colonial regime to the post-colonial times. However Sandhar takes up a few notable works of Rudyard Kipling, Tania James, Bhanu Kapil, Amitabh and Arjun Dangle. Sandhar shows how literary representations of animals in these works disrupt and reimagine the totalizing logic of species boundaries against the state’s hegemonic control over humans through its legislative and economic mechanism.

Dominic O’Key in the book, ‘Creaturely forms in Contemporary Literature’ is an analysis of the interrelation of literary form and species difference in a time of staggering animal death (O’Key. 4). He takes up the work of W G Sebald (1944-2000), J M Coetzee (1940-) and Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) to examine how not just the human, but non human too has been colonized, dominated and exploited across modernity (O’Key, 5). He examines Mahasweta Devi’s work to see how her works call into

question the sovereign subject of postcolonial development through plotted encounters with indigenous communities and non-human life.

SuvadipSinha's 'Non-Human Animals in an Indian World (2022) studies the relationships between human and non-human animals in Indian fictional worlds. There have been numerous other studies on anthropocentrism and the representation of animals in Indian English poetry and in the works of mainstream authors like George Orwell, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Ruskin Bond, ArvindAdiga, VaikomMuhammedBasheer, R K Narayan, PerumalMurugan, Mahasweta Devi and Tania James. But apart from short papers in journals, there has not been any significant comparative or critical reading done on animal representations, particularly in South Indian fiction.

R K Narayan's *A Tiger For Malgudi*, *The Man Eater of Malgudi* are significant works of fiction that surprisingly decenter the idea of anthropocentrism. Narayan is said to have consulted the notable tiger expert UllasKaranth in writing the novel *A Tiger for Malgudi*. AngshumanKar's article *Narayan's a Tiger for Malgudi and Ecocriticism* reads the novel as an anthropocentric text that also has a serious concern for wildlife. He also discusses the inadequacy of human language in conveying animal emotions.

D W Atkinson's *A Tiger for Malgudi: A New Way of Expressing an Old Theme* is an essay that says that *A Tiger for Malgudi* is a work of fiction that exhibits human shortcomings through a Tiger's eyes. It is also a philosophical reading of the novel more than being a literal one.

Raj Kumar Mishra's article titled *Dislocating Anthropocentrism: R K Narayan's A Tiger for Malgudi* sees Narayan as a savior who saves the environment from a huge economical disaster. It only identifies anthropocentric viewpoints and says how Narayan is against it in his writing.

Raja of Narayan: A Colonial Tiger or a Nation is an article by ReyhanOzerTaniyan that reads the novel as a colonial narrative and the story of a nation through the life story of the animal-Tiger. He reads it as a critique of colonial power and Hindu spirituality.

A Wild's Humanity: Human Perspective of a Tiger in R K Narayan's A Tiger for Malgudi is a reading of the text as a fable that stresses the concepts of self-realization and love. It is a humanist approach and a narration from the perspective of the human even though told by a Tiger according to Dr. P Sudhalakshmi.

The article *A Tiger for Malgudi: Allotropy and Congruity* by Joseph A Dupras reads the novel as a spiritual journey of an animal and a human. He interprets the simultaneous existence of the animal and the human in a wilder world to attain spiritual progress.

Debilina Maiti's *Life Place of Malgudi: The Bioregional Imagination, Bioregional Ecocriticism and Eco-Cosmopolitanism in the Post Colonialism in the Postcolonial Texts of R K Narayan* studies the influence of nature on a colonial and post colonial Indian society as represented in Malgudi. It focuses on the Eco critical translation of the narratives to establish the liaison between humankind and nature as reflected in subaltern literature.

Amandeep Rana's *No World Without Pain* is an article that highlights physical suffering and pain and its role in the works of R K Narayan. Although it is about physical pain in general it doesn't focus in particular on treatment of animals and the agony of the animals as a specific area of attention. There are no significant works on Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* from the perspective of Animal Studies that choose to examine the representations of animals and the way they decenter the concept of anthropocentrism in the texts.

The Story of a Black Goat or Poonachi by Perumal Murugan is also a significant text in South Indian fiction that features a domesticated animal as a character. But there are no significant critical works on it from the perspective of animal studies.

Shweta Sharada's article *Animal Abuse and Violence in Perumal Murugan's Poonachi* is a critical reading of the novel that focuses on the cruelty meted out to animals at the hands of humans.

Human Animal Relations in Presented in Perumal Murugan's Black Goat by K Ishwarya is an article more about Human interaction with environment and its implications rather than about the representations of animals in fiction.

Ravinder Kumar in his article *Celebrating Fragmentations: A Folkloric Perspective on Perumal Murugan's Poonachi* reads the novel as a folkloric response to living and dying and the necessity of tenderness and sensitivity in order to survive.

Inevitable Lives: Connecting Animals, Caste, Gender and the Environment in Perumal Murugan's The Story of a Goat is an article by Nandini Thiyagarajan reads animals as a subject and subjected to human politics. It is a reading that shows how an animal's life is woven with caste, gender and environment around it.

Tania James' *The Tusk that Did the Damage* is also a prominent South Indian fiction that is being studied from the perspective of animal studies. *Within or Outside the Boundaries; Exploring the Intricacies of Human-Elephant Relationship in Tania James' Novel The Tusk that did the Damage* is an article by Moumita Bala and Smriti Singh that studies the nuances of Human Animal Relationships. It studies animals and their role as powerful subjects in the wild spaces and attempts to understand how breaching of boundaries occur.

Jason Sandhar's *Everywhere Animals: Species, Race and the State in Literature from the Raj to Global India* also studies Tania James's *The Tusk that did the Damage* is a reading that focuses on state's imposition of species boundary and how the writer's representational strategy offers an alternative to it. Although there are a number of critical attempts at reading fictions of South India from anthropocentric perspective, there are no large significant studies, with comparative study as a method, from the broader view of animal agency, communication and the role of sociocultural forces in framing the identities of animals. There are also no significant studies on the unreal animals and the effect it has on human perception in general through their diverse representations in South Indian fiction. There is a large scope for research and interpretation in the field of Animal Studies in India that intersect with the issues of living condition of farm animals, meat industry, the destruction of habitats of wild lives and the treatment of animals in general.

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