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Animal Narratives and the Issue of Human Identity

Abstract

One of the most important tenets of Postcolonial criticism is to reject the concept of universalism. The argument here is that the moment universal signification is claimed for a work, it may be immediately assumed that the white, Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted by a sleight of hand to this elevated status. On the other hand all others are correspondingly relegated to subsidiary, marginalized roles. It is well documented that the origin of postcolonial criticism maybe traced to Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth, which vociferously voiced 'cultural resistance' to France's African empire. For Fanon the first step for the colonized people in finding a voice and an identity was to reclaim their own past.

This paper intends to engage with the colonialist representations of the animals that have tended to equate them with natives in the context of racial and gender identity. The paper would lie to suggest that in postcolonial and ethnic writing the case is somewhat different since the animal is understood as a trope that can be used in self-representation. Nevertheless, while postcolonial texts may seem to draw from mythology and folklore and provide the animal with meanings which Euro-American readers may be unfamiliar with, the use of the animal is always embedded in issues of human identity.

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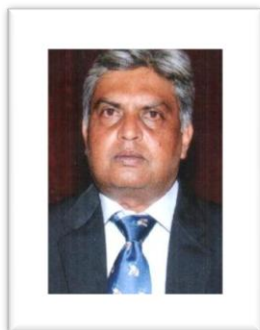

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Introduction

Ever since the emergence of Postcolonial studies, one of the most contested issues that has occupied a lot critical space are the questions concerning humanity and human identity. At the outset the paper would like to suggest that it is not only the racially differentiated subjects who have been excluded from the category of humanity but also animals. And, indeed, the colonialist attitude towards native peoples and animals has often been the same. As an act of understanding, the article will aim to map the representation of the animal which is also at the same time to find out more about the ways in which different forms of human identity have been constructed as dominant and normative.

The paper focuses on two mutually inclusive objectives. First, it will aim to briefly explore the possibilities of postcolonial reading protocols for analyzing animal narratives. However, this brief paper will be more than a mere predetermined application of some theories since the role of the animal is an emphatic one in colonial discourse, not only because of theories of evolution which have been widely used to validate both racism and colonialism, as Nyman argues (Nyman, 3). Thus, the argument that will be presented here is that animal representation is not neutral but can be examined in the context(s) of race, gender, nation and Empire. The second, objective of this paper will be to show how animal narratives, like several other representations of culture, can be seen as ways of re-imagining human identities, rather than stories merely narrating the lives of animals.

The deployment of animal representations in engaging with questions of human identity can be seen at its strongest in the colonial discourse. In the early literature of exploration published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was customary to populate maps and atlases with monsters or other such non-human creatures. In his article on Mercator's "Atlas" (1595), Jose Rabasa observes that this is not only a practical choice owing to insufficient knowledge but it may also be related "to sedimented symbolic associations of topographical regions with the fantastic and the demonic" (10). Of the anthrophagous beasts once thought to inhabit non-European spaces (and also its peripheries), the

most famous are the *Cynocephali*; savage dog-headed creatures purported to devour daring explorers (Hulme 21, Mackentun 54-56). What their existence as products of imagination shows is that the "Other" encountering the colonist traveler journeying into dangerous spaces is a monstrous hybrid resembling the human but equipped with canine teeth ready to bite into ones fleshy. Such views have been reproduced by several travelers following the entry Columbus made in his diary in Cuba in November 1492. "He [Columbus] understood also that, far from there, there were one-eyed men, and that as soon as one was taken, they cut his throat and drank his blood and cut off his genitals" (in Makentun 55).

Import of Biological Sciences for Imperial Governance

In addition to being a part of the fantastical monsters of colonial discourses, there are other, and more recent, ways in which animals have been used to legitimate racist views and to maintain essentialist views of racial difference. The key points here concern the discourses of science in general, and evolution and social Darwinism in particular, which have been used as proof of the alleged superiority and purity of the White European race. As Robert Young has pointed out in Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race, in the nineteenth century the central question in debate on race was whether human beings belonged to one or more species (8). If the latter were the case, the Victorians thought, the non white population of the globe was closer to the apes and monkeys and thus unable to govern itself. Similar views that demote non-Western peoples, their languages and values in order to legitimate colonization and Western rule have often been expressed in colonial discourse, for instance, in the Western philological discourse, analyzed by Edward Said (143-145). In a similar vein, Robert Young pays particular attention to the ways in which Western discourses borrowed from the biological sciences to construct cultural mixing and Hybridity as a form of degeneration endangering Western superiority and rational purity. This is indeed an issue that animal narratives, be they fictions or popular natural histories, have been engaged with. By selecting the animal as its focus, the colonial text may appear to discuss the non-human, although the way in which it constructs the family life of the animal is entirely rooted in discourses and ideologies that we are familiar with in the human sphere.

Cultural texts have also connected animals and race in representing evolutionary apprehensions. An example of this can be seen in Susan Bernstein, who in her article "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution and the Genre Question" makes an extensive study of British popular fiction from the 1860s in the context of Charles Darwin's thinking. She points out that the period's scientific debates over descent, taxonomy and biological inheritance entered its cultural narratives and created "hybrid characters whose physical variance and social mutability complicate their assignment to familiar biological and social categories" (Nyman, 6).Bernstein's study also shows that in Victorian magazine fiction, it is the ape in particular, as an alleged link between the human and the animal worlds, that figures significantly. She points that the ape's uninhabited sexuality was mapped onto the working-class female characters in such texts as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862 – 63). Another critic Tim Youngs too has shown with particular reference to ape narratives in the late nineteenth century, the use of the figure of the ape combining "social with racial savagery" as a means of exclusion serves social needs: "To balance brutish behavior on an inheritance which we cannot always suppress is to allow for the identification of certain people in our society (at different times, the working classes, immigrants, sexually active women) as more bestial than others" in Nyman, 7). Clearly, the implication is that the animal is "Other" not merely because of its non-human status but the trope is deployed to engage with the questions of race, sex and gender that pose threats to the maintenance of naturalized social hierarchies. (Nyman, 7)

The associated role of the animal as bringing about a disruption in the maintenance of the colonial (and masculine) order can also be seen in several animal narratives. These from Elsa Martinelli's three little elephants that badger the protagonist John Wayne in the movie *Hatari* (dir. Howard Hanks, USA 1962) to the more recent horror films such as *Arachnophobia* (dir. Frank Marshall, USA 1990) and *Eight Legged Freaks* (dir. Ellory Elkayem, USA 2002). Probably this is more clear in the representation of a relatively harmless fish like the shark in the movie *Jaws* (Dir. Steven Spielberg, USA 1975) and its sequels which have only served to damaged reception of these fishes which are represented as bloodthirsty, rapacious and savagely vengeful.

Ownership over 'Territory' and 'Mind'

With particular reference to the culture of colonization, Jopi Nyman in his interesting book, Postcolonial Animal Tale from Kipling to Coetzee, makes a typical reference to the short story "Karenga's Jumbo" written by Ndege and Blackwood's Magazine in 1964. Set in Kenya in the 1950s, the story is narrated from the perspective of an adolescent white colonial boy, who tells of the death of his mentor Karenga, an old Kikuyu, in a battle against an old bull elephant. Though the battle seems to be between culture and nature, the story is discussed here because it explores entirely human issues, namely territorial rights and race relations in colonial East Africa. The first paragraph of the story shows that the elephant trespasses into a territory not his own:

> Every year when the rains started the old bull came down from the forest and made his way to the sambas near the river. Every year he came to the fence-line and every year he curled his powerful trunk round one of the cedar fence poles and pulled it clean out of the ground. Stepping ponderously across the now flattened wire he moved slowly and purposefully into the hundred acres of lucern. There he would stay, a

strange picture of prehistoric domesticity. We were never able to get him out, and after a while, we gave up trying. All of us that is, except Karenga. (in Nyman, 7 - 8)

Not only is the elephant trespassing on the colonial settler's field but it shows resistance to colonial rule by reclaiming the territory. As a sign of this, the bull pulls out the fence post that marks off colonized space. Unlike the old and reliable Karenga, Jumbo comes from the lawless wilderness and reminds the colonizer of his fragile and fallible position, which links the narrative with decolonization and the need to reflect on political rights and roles. In Jumbo, African nature (coded here as prehistory) shows that it has not been tamed by culture and western ideologies, unlike the farm laborers. Yet the colonizers hold of this space is prone to disruption, and the extent of the conflict is evident in the story's references to on-going liberation struggles: "In these troubled days the sound of gunfire usually indicated man-man attack. The blackmen turned their faces impassively towards me, awaiting my decision "(Blackwood's Magazine, 1964, 234). Unlike Karenga and other reliable men, Jumbo stands for the undomesticated that is to be expelled should the Colonialist Project come true. This interpretation is substantiated by the final sentence of the story: "The old bull never did return".

As another sign of the boundary breaking, postcolonial animal writing may also subvert dominant and racist discourses, and thus participate in the definition of contemporary identities in situations of unequal power relations. This can be seen in the way in which the Black British writer Patrick Wilmot re-adapts the Powellian rhetoric of immigrants as vermins in his short story "The Train to Walthamstow" (2001). Set in the London underground, the story uses the perspective of a migrating rodent family to present a critique of racism peculiar in contemporary Britain. Ronnie the Rat who has just moved with his family to the Victoria Line platform at King's Cross, witnesses the violent death of a young Afro-Caribbean male looking for the right train. The young mans position is paralleled with that of Ronnie, as the existence of both of them threatens the two white racist women figuring in the story, Ena Powell and Eva Brown (can more ironically horrible names be imagined?), For them, the immigrant inquiring about the Walthamstow train is the embodiment of the headlines of racist tabloid reporting:

> Ena and Eva were appalled, their English blood boiled, they had never been so insulted: just imagine, this big colored rapist approaching them on a crowded platform, in broad daylight, making lewd, suggestive remarks, wanting to have it off. Although they hadn't understood a word he said, the body language of these people was obvious, all–too–obvious–sex, crime, government hand-outs- made so clear from the oversexed smell of his thick sweat, his bloodshot eyes, leering, outsized mouth, twitching ears, enormous grabby hands, Lennox Lewis lunch-box, Fatima Whitbread pecs. Not that they looked at the monkey, mind you. God forbid! (in Nyman, 10)

Racism to Create the Inferior 'Other'

The story's crude antique of racism is taken further as the whole crowd appears to push the man over the edge, onto the tracks just as the train arrives at the station. The most humane character in the story is of course its feeling, non-human protagonist "Ronnie the rat was not human; he was against man traps, poisons, electric prods and other unlike instruments of torture and extermination. But days like tested his rarity beyond limits" [(10)]

It appears that the application of the trope of the animal in postcolonial discourse bears resemblance to that of child studied recently by Bill Ashcroft. In the chapter "Primitive and Wingless: The Colonial Subject as Child" in his book On Post-Colonial futures :Transformations of Colonial Culture, Ashcroft assesses the role of child in colonial and post colonial culture to distinguish between an imperialist and post colonial understanding of the figure. Locating the development of childhood historically in the manner proposed by Phillipe Aries, Ashcroft comes to suggest that both childhood 43and colonialism are products of modernity: "The strategies of surveillance, correction and instruction which lie at the heart of the child's education transfer effortlessly into disciplinary enterprise of empire" (39).

Yet this trope, like that of the animal, is a flexible one. The primitive childlike native can be pitted against the imperial boy entering the colonial space with the intention of fulfilling what Ashcroft calls his "unlimited potential" *(4).* In this discussion of Colonial texts ranging from Charles Kingsley to H.Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, Ashcraft argues that such a representation of Colonial lands as unformed and child like blank spaces justifies imperialism, recasting it as a form of paternalism *(On Post-Colonial Futures,41)*- and in addition to the lands, their human and animal inhabitants are subjected to Colonial rule and education in a wide sense. To counter such a view, Ashcroft arranges, postcolonial narratives have constructed a different image of the child, not a reversal but an appropriation: the child is someone who uses the educational opportunities provided by imperial rule to resist naturalized ideologies of race and nation. Drawing on Jo-Ann Wallace's essay "De-Scribing *The Water-Babies* : 'The child' in Post-Colonial Theory", Ashcroft finds a particularly striking example of this in a classroom scene in Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Wingless". In this story a Colonial Child-subject to be educated encounters Charles Kingsley's imperial narrative *The Water-Babies* (1863), As Wallace claims, Kincaid comes to question Kingsley's rhetoric of interpellation: who is the"you' referred to in the (177).

Ashcroft's reading of the Post Colonial Child-Subject as a critique of the allegedly universal subject of (Western) modernity is related to the recent concerns of feminist, eco critical and Post Colonial theories, feminist theorists in particular have suggested that the unified and rational subject able to autonomous action is a Cultural fiction peculiar to

western individualism, and its celebration in canonized narratives of the modern era from Goethe's *Faust* to Baudelaire a sign of the gendering of modernity (Felski 1-3)- This autonomous subject is that of Cartesian thought, able to distinguish between subject and object, as well as between mind and body, constructing an autonomous-and masculine-subject separate from its others, including women and nature (Lloyd ; Connell, 186-187)-It is Rene' Descartes' emphasis on Reason and rational that came to define the boundaries of being human since the latter is only available to human beings. As Neil Badmington points out, Cartesian thinking is based on the centrality of "Reason [that] not only grants the subject the power of judgment; it also helps 'us' to tell the difference between the human and the non-human" (3). Since the emergence of Marxist, feminist and post modernist theories, the unfired subject of Reason has melted into the air and the idea of a human essence seriously questioned (see Davies). It has been replaced with a generally accepted idea of the constructed ness and situated ness of the subject that is constituted through social relations and language. In feminist theory, for example, the multiplicity of subject positions can be seen in the antique of liberal feminism presented by feminists of colour, who have criticized its status as a predominantly white middle-class discourse that privileges and masks as universal a particular conception of 'woman' Madsen, *Feminist Theory* 213-38; Spivak 268-80). Post Colonial theory, on the other hand, argues that it is historical and Culture-specific construction of the subject that shows the Euro centricity of theories allegedly universal. For instance, the Centrality of the values of individualism is in stark contrast with the privileging of communality by many non-western peoples.

Conclusion

Indeed, it is this issue of humanity that is of special importance to this paper: it is not only the racially differentiated subjects who have been excluded from the category of humanity but also animals. And, indeed, the colonialist attitude towards native peoples and animals has been the same. For example, nineteenth century American exploration narrative mentioned in Alec Brownlon's paper of Adirondack wolf defined both Native Americans and wolves as vermins (150). Hence it may be argued that in its emphasis on the significance of autonomy, the modern subject has both distanced itself from other people and nature and objectified them. It is here the paths of feminism, eco criticism and post colonial studies meet. In their own ways, these three approaches seek to counter the claims of a Eurocentric modernity that promotes a masculinist world view and aims at dominance at the expense of those it has made its others: women, animals and indigenous peoples. Therefore, to map out the representation of the animal is at the same time to find out more about the ways in which different forms of human identity have been constructed as dominant and normative.

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