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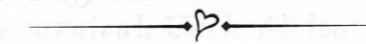
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## SEVEN

# ATROCITIES AGAINST ANIMALS, ANIMAL RIGHTS AND LOVE PORTRAYED IN WATER FOR ELEPHANTS: A STUDY



**Ms. Majida Mol**

**Fourth Semester M.A. English**

**K.A.H.M Unity Women's College, Manjeri**

&

**Dr. Shahina Mol A. K.**

**Assistant Professor & Head, P.G. Department of English**

**K.A.H.M. Unity Women's College, Manjeri**

**Abstract :** The human - animal relationship was a matter of interest to philosophers, biologists, theologians and scholars in various disciplines. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Rene Descartes perceived animals as machine like (Descartes 59-62). Scholars engage with questions about notions of 'animality', 'animalisation' or 'becoming animal', to understand human made representation of cultural ideas about 'the animal' and 'the human', by employing various theoretical perspectives including theoretical purview of animal studies. Those who engage in animal studies seek to define human animal relations as designed by our knowledge of them. As an

interdisciplinary subject, animal studies exist at the intersection of a number of different fields of studies. Animal studies developed out of the animal liberation movement and was grounded in ethical questions about coexistence with other species: whether it is moral to eat animals, to do scientific research on animals for human benefits, human-animal coexistence, representations of animal world in the culture and literature and the like. While scrutinising this association, it is a requisite to examine the psychological aspect of inflicting pain on animals. "A number of criminological studies have shown that around a third to a half of all sexual murderers have abused animals during childhood and/or adolescence" (Griffiths). By shifting focus towards the manifold roles of animals, the flourishing field of Animal Studies is transforming the way one reads literature. It is an interdisciplinary field of humanities and social sciences. The inquisition of animals in modern literature has been a fundamental element in the development of Animal Studies. Focusing on fictional works in order to analyse the attitude of humans toward other creatures and to methodologically and theoretically question it, has only recently begun. The embodiment of the question of atrocities towards animals in circuses, love for animals, gratitude and animal rights are studied in this chapter with reference to *Water for Animals* by Sara Gruen.

**Keywords:** Animal Studies, Animal Rights, Human- animal coexistence, animal representation.

"In today's social, political, and cultural context, it seems particularly urgent to put the question of the animal on the agenda", says Eugenio Bolongaro in his article "Calvino's encounter with the animal: anthropomorphism, cognition and ethics in Palomar" (Bolongaro 105). The first idea that critics come across while examining animals in literature is 'Anthropomorphism'. Representing animals in literature is not a recently developed practice. One of the oldest and most popular narrative genres in literature is fables. Animal characters are the central feature of fables. Western poetry is almost unimaginable without animal metaphors and imagery. Anthropomorphism can cause the audience to have an inaccurate understanding of the natural world which animals inhabit. "There is also a distortion between the reality of an animal's behaviour, and what occurs in wildlife, versus what is portrayed in literature, films and cartoons" (Galloway). This chapter focuses on the vicious treatment of animals, especially the elephant, Rosie in the fictional novel *Water for Elephants* written by Sara Gruen. It also looks at the aspects of animal love, rights of animals etc as portrayed in the novel. Elephant is the most exploited animal in the world. *Water for Elephants* should be the impetus for bringing an end to the use of animals in entertainment activities. As the book predominantly depicts the maltreatment of animals, it is appropriate to analyse it on the grounds of animal rights theory and since it is an environmental issue, it can also be subjected to an ecocritical analysis too.

*Water for Elephants*, written by Sara Gruen, is an internationally acclaimed novel presented as the reminiscences of an old man, Jacob, about his experiences with a circus where he witnessed the brutalities inflicted on people and animals alike. The protagonist Jacob is the moral centre of the novel. He perceives and wherever possible, prevents those cruelties and finally, he saves the elephant, Rosie from a grinding fate. *Water for Elephants* won the Book Sense' Book of the Year Award in 2007, came up on the New York Times Best Seller list and was

adapted into a major movie too. Many of the characters and incidents in the novel are based on true events that are drawn from Sara Gruen's extensive research on travelling circuses of the 1930s. Her style of writing encourages the readers to get involved in the story.

Reading the plot of the novel, one can see that, it is told as a progression of recollections by Jacob Jankowski, a 93-year-elderly lonely person who lives in a nursing home. Jacob is told what to eat and what to do in the nursing home. As the memories unfold, in the narration, Jacob is a 23-year-old Polish American getting ready for his end of the year tests as a Cornell University veterinary student. But he gets the shocking news that his parents passed away in an accident. Jacob's dad was a veterinarian and Jacob had planned to join his training. At the point when Jacob discovers that his parents' home has been sold to pay for his education, he suffers a breakdown and leaves his Ivy League school just before his graduation. In the night, he hops on a train, a circus train belonging to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. In the train he gets to know Camel, an elderly person and circus veteran, who convinces his companions not to throw Jacob off the train and encourages him, finding him odd jobs to do. When the proprietor of the carnival, Uncle Al, learns of his preparation as a vet, he is employed to take care of the animals in circus. This leads Jacob to share quarters with a dwarf man named Walter (who is known as Kinko) and his pet dog, Queenie. August, in the circus company is the Equestrian Director, and a merciless man who abuses the individuals around him and furthermore, abuses the animals in his care, particularly Rosie, the new elephant. August at the same time is gregarious, liberal and friendly.

Jacob meanwhile builds up a guarded relationship with August yet begins to fall in love with his wife, Marlana. August becomes suspicious of their relationship and beats both his wife and Jacob. Marlana leaves August and stays in a lodge when she isn't performing in the circus. One can read that, Uncle Al advises Jacob that August is a suspicious schizophrenic and gives Jacob an undermining ultimatum: unite August and Marlana again as a couple, or else both he and Camel will be red-lighted.

A couple of days after, Jacob finds that August has attempted to see Marlana, so he visits her at the hotel and solaces her. They sleep together, declaring their love for each other. Marlana returns to perform and keeps on meeting with Jacob secretly. She does not permit August to be close to her which rankles Uncle Al. She likewise finds out that she is pregnant.

One night Jacob climbs the train from one compartment to the next while the train is moving, bouncing to August's room with a knife between his teeth. He intended to slaughter August, but retreats and comes back, leaving the knife on August's pillow. But his room is vacant with just Queenie waiting for him. Jacob realizes that Walter and Camel have been red lighted, as he was warned, if he had been in August's room. Afterwards, a few red-lighted circus labourers come back to discharge the animals, causing chaos during a presentation. As frenzy and disorder continue, Rosie, the elephant who suffered August's brutality, takes a stake and drives it into August's head. His body is crushed in the stampede with just Jacob as a witness. The circus is closed down and in no time thereafter, Uncle Al's body is found with a temporary garrotte around his neck. Marlana and Jacob leave, taking numerous tortured animals with them,

including Rosie, Queenie and Marlina's horses. They start a new life, joining Ringling's Circus. Later Jacob turns into the veterinarian at Chicago's Brookfield Zoo and they settle in the Windy City, as a family.

Memory is oscillating in the novel while Jacob reveals his journey of life. Back in the nursing home, Jacob is sitting tight for one of his children to come and take him to watch circus. It is revealed that Jacob and Marlina married and had five children. A few years before Jacob was admitted into the nursing home after Marlina died. Distressingly, Jacob realizes that nobody is coming to take him after all, so he slips out of the nursing home himself and advances towards the circus that has set up beside the home. He meets the chief of the circus; a benevolent man called Charlie and asks to be permitted to remain with the circus, selling tickets. Charlie approves and Jacob has faith in his heart that he has finally come home. He feels that he belongs. The book is related to the issue of animal rights as it contains numerous instances of brutalities on animals, especially that on elephant Rosie. Since this is an environmental issue, Ecocriticism one of the theoretical arrays to critically engage with the problem in *Water for Elephants*. Since 1970, people have been campaigning for 'Animal Rights', in order to prevent the ill-treatment of animals. This proselytises the belief that animals as occupants of this world, are as important as that of human beings. Peter Wilson believes that animals have the right to live free of sufferings (Roleff 18). Scientists have not been able to find any fundamental difference between humans and animals. The only difference is in degree, not of kind. So, it is absolutely illogical to believe in a morality that treats humans and animals in fundamentally different ways. It is impossible to draw an absolute line between them, but this doesn't mean that every animal should be granted every human rights. It is clear that rights dealing with living in a society and constitutional type protections are not applicable to animals. Rights that need to be considered are the rights to life, liberty and freedom from torture. "Rights are an amorphous human concept developed within a culture and differ considerably, depending on the culture and society, and only defined and upheld within the laws and social conventions of a particular society" (Roleff 105). This definition of rights implies that everything, including humans and animals possess their own rights and this depend on the culture and society to which they belong. There are two major problems with the common difference between animals and humans, put forth to justify the denial of basic rights, that is, intelligence. First, all humans are not smarter than all non-humans. It reads that, Koko, a gorilla which has been taught sign language, has taken several IQ tests. She scores around an IQ of 80. The average IQ of humans is 100, a mere 20 points higher. "In order to exclude Koko, are people willing to also exclude mildly retarded or even severely retarded humans, allowing them to be used for food and medical experiment? Certainly not" (Roleff 21), says Roleff commenting on the basic rights of humans and animals.

Another thematic concept observed in the light of the novel is animal's rights for protection. It's a fact that torture is the intentional infliction of pain and suffering. But the suffering from pain is not different for smart and dumb people. So, it is rubbish to believe that the suffering of a dog is different or less important than that of humans just because the dog can't understand mathematics or humane discourses. Novel underlines the fact that using 'intelligence' as a requirement for possessing right to life, liberty and freedom is irrelevant.

Many moral principles and ideals have been proposed over the centuries, including justice, freedom, equality and brotherhood. But I regard these as mere stepping-stones to the ultimate good, which is happiness and happiness, is made easier by freedom from all forms of pain or suffering. Indeed, if you think about it carefully you can see that the reason why these ideals are considered important is that people have believed that they are essential to the banishing of suffering. In fact, they do sometimes have this result, but not always (Roleff 25)

As it Roleff observes above, freedom is a common factor among rights of any living being. People today are more concerned about the economy rather than the environment. The novel, *Water for Elephants* is set in the 1930s during the Great Depression of America. Many people were suffering during this time. Travelling circuses were one of the best ways to earn money for survival. Lower class people preferred this to keep themselves alive. They were continuously exploited for commercial benefit. The condition of animals was even worse. It is clear that the primary needs of non-domesticated animals cannot be met through the living offered by circuses. They are permanently detached from their habitat. Dogs and horses are tamed well for circuses. But they are not given sufficient medical care when they get sick, instead tried to get rid of them as soon as possible. The horse Silver Star, in the novel encounters a similar fate.

I, round the corner just as Pete slits the throat of a decrepit grey horse. The horse screams as blood shoots six feet from the gaping hole in its neck. "Jesus Christ!" I yelp, taking a step backward. The horse's heart slows, and the spurts weaken. Eventually the horse drops to his knees and crashes forward. It scrapes the ground with its front hooves and then falls still. Its eyes are open wide. A lake of dark blood spreads from its neck. Pete glances up at me, still leaning over the twitching animal" (Gruen 139-140)

The pathetic condition of the horse of the novel depicted by Gruen, reminds us of the cruelty towards animals in circuses. Circus captivity is horrible for wild animals. It seems that the worst affected are elephants, lions, tigers and bears. Most of the time, they are confined to cages where they either pace up and down or stay still for hours. Some surveys conclude that on average, wild animals spend just one to nine percent of their time training, and the rest confined to cages, wagons or enclosures typically covering a quarter the area recommended for zoos (Coghlan). They might be the stars of the show, but elephants, lions and tigers are the wild animals least suited to live in a circus. In Gruen's book, this condition is distinctly portrayed.

Even with the benefit of full water troughs and a cross-breeze, the animals are in a heat-induced stupor. The zebras, giraffes and other hay burners remain on their feet but with their necks extended and eyes half-closed. Even the yak is motionless, despite the flies that buzz mercilessly around his ears and eyes. Gruen, further paints the wretched conditions faced by animals through the words of Jacob.

I swat a few away, but they land again immediately. It's hopeless. The polar bear lies on his stomach, head and snout stretched in front of him. In repose he looks harmless- cuddly even, with most of his bulk concentrated in the lower third of the body. He takes a deep, halting breath and then exhales a long, rumbling groan. Poor thing. I doubt the temperature in the Arctic ever climbs anywhere close to this. The orangutan lies flat on her back, arms and legs spread out. She turns her head to look at me, blinking mournfully as though apologizing for not making more of an effort. The cats lie on their sides, perfectly still, their eyes not quite closed. If it weren't for the steady rise and fall of their rib cages, I might think they were dead (Gruen 122).

Travelling is also not very good for these animals. Studies shows that concentrations of the stress hormone cortisol in saliva from circus tigers remain abnormal up to six days after transport, and up to twelve days in tigers who have never travelled before.

While perusing the plight of elephants, it is evident that they are often kept in conditions rigorously different from their natural habitat. They are exceptionally social creatures who, in nature, live in matriarchal groups, scavenge for new vegetation, play, wash in streams, travel thirty miles every day and are dynamic for eighteen hours. In circuses, they are shackled for twelve to thirteen hours per day when not performing, in areas from just seven to twelve square meters. Wild elephants spend forty to seventy-five percent of their time for feeding. Here elephants become obese through inactivity and develop rheumatoid disorders, as well as joint and hernia problems due to unnatural positions during performances. The pressure of bondage can likewise prompt regenerative issues. Physical punishment has always been the standard training method for animals in circus. Elephants are beaten, shocked and whipped to make them perform tricks that actually make no sense to them.

Sara Gruen presents a very realistic depiction of this cruelty in her novel.

"At first Rosie bellowed and whimpered. When she progressed to squealing and shrieking, many of the men turned away, unable to take any more. One of them ran for Earl, who entered the menagerie and hauled August out of by his armpits. He kicked and struggled like a madman even as Earl dragged him across the lot and up the stairs into the privilege car. The remaining men found Rosie lying on her side, quivering, her foot still chained to a stake" (Gruen 223). Elephants used in circuses to entertain people do not stand on their heads, jump across hurdles and balance on cycles because they want to. They do these absurd and difficult tricks because they are afraid of the consequences of not performing so. Government doesn't monitor the training sessions and the elephant handlers become cautious in the public.

Former Ringling Bros employees reported that elephants were routinely abused and violently beaten with bull hooks. Archele Hundley, who was an animal trainer with Ringling Bros., says that she worked with the company for three months and quit after she allegedly saw a handler ram a bull hook into an elephant's ear for refusing to lie down (PETA). Those elephants suffer as Rosie in the novel. Circus cruelty is not the thing of the past. *Water for Elephants* contribute

a unique opportunity to inform the world that the kind of cruelty depicted in the book still goes on.

"For the ecocritic, nature really exists... actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (Barry251). From this very definition it is clear that every action of human beings in this earth will affect all human and non-human beings alike, based on the nature of the action. Over the last few decades, most of the environmentally conscious literary works have chosen to exhibit a rejection of anthropocentric, or human- centred perspectives in favour of a more eco centric, or earth- centred view. "The holistic ideal of ecocentrism considers humanity not as living alongside the non-human, but rather as living among the non-human" (Batty 3). A brief historical fact of an environmental literature is appropriate to be mentioned here, as novels like *Water for Elephants* are a small subset of a much larger eco-literary movement. Since the 1960s there is an increase in the publication of eco cultural productions. This increase corresponds to creating an understanding of ecological importance and awareness on disasters. Literature of the time, as it always, responds to the contemporary concerns. Environmental literature doesn't simply portray the ecological issues of the contemporary world but offers prescriptive rules on how one should react to these issues too.

Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants* is a best example of a novel that promotes environmental awareness through anthropomorphised animals as characters. The elephant protagonist in the book embodies many human characteristics. By foregrounding both similarities and dissimilarities between circus animals and humans, author deconstructs the human- animal binary. The book reacts to the significant environmental concerns of its time; however, every piece of writing use different techniques to approach its ecological concerns, all of them delineate fantastical universes in which the procedures and social orders dismiss anthropocentrism and present things in an ecocentric perspective.

Anthropomorphism is a typical figure of speech in children's literature. In Richard Adam's children's novel, *Water ship Down*, Adams created a group of human-like characters with which he analyses many aspects of human society, including the anthropocentric tendencies. Similarly, in *Water for Elephants*, though it doesn't belong to the genre of children's literature, the novel begins violently, proceeds into weird situations and towards the end, highlights the inherent value of animals. The novel highlights the fact that they deserve rights and consideration as humans or any other living beings. Environmental literature doesn't simply portray the ecological worries of the contemporary world yet additionally offers coercive rules on how one should react to this issue. In *Water for Elephants*, the plot is built on a circus in which everything is superficially delightful, energizing, yet underneath there is pain. August beats Rosie to stroll on sign. He also beats Marlana to get her to do what he needs. Jacob suffers when he attempts to safeguard the people whom he cherishes, and hence suffers more when he is restricted from doing so. The most significant moment in the book is when Marlana performs with Rosie for the first time. She wounds herself terribly, but the crowd only sees the enchanted tumbling pass and smooth encounter with the elephant. So not only animals but humans too suffer amid their struggle to please the audience. Depicting such human characters in literature is a shift from the conservative system. The novel sheds light on seeing the world

not only from an anthropocentric perspective but from an earth centred and animal centred view point opening more vistas for animal studies in an interdisciplinary way with a literary purview. Sara Gruen's book endeavours to ingrain an ecocentric point of view among its readers to stop further devastation of the Earth's biological systems and keep up an inhabitable domain.

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