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Relocating Animal in the Trope of Wilderness: A Comparative Study of *Bear* and *The Whale Caller*

Subodh Mahato*

Abstract: The theme of wilderness is not a recent phenomenon in English literature as it was invigorated by American transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau and before him by romantic poets like Wordsworth and Shelley by focusing on nature and landscape. The non-human animal, being an integral part of the wilderness, however, remained outcasts in the discourse of wilderness until writers like Marian Engel and Zakes Mda took up the pen about them especially in the texts, *Bear* (1972) and *The Whale Caller* (2005), respectively. The animals mentioned here are not pet or domestic in the hand of human beings. Rather, they have an integral role in constituting wilderness and also a positive impact, like a wilderness, on human beings who seek and yearn to be with nature. Thus, obviously, another aspect that is highlighted in these texts is the subjectivity of non-human animal instead of relegation to the background of human beings or to be read as mere allegories. When we read these two texts, we counter certain differences, which may be opposing or may have created ripples among readers, with our conventional thinking about wilderness but with these, a new vista has emerged in this trope. This paper will focus on the idea how these elements or experiments from these two writers in these two texts particularly, differ as well as establish new approaches and dimensions to our attachment with wilderness and also to the emerging field, human-animal studies.

Keywords: Wilderness, Nature, Animal, Subjectivity, Human-Animal Studies

Over the years, animals have been one of the most valuable companions of human beings in this world. To the human-world, the animal generally meant, at least till the recent past, a species of furs,

feathers or scales and which is perceived in the human mind either as fierce or as meek. Encouraged by the claim of the seventeenth-century philosopher, Rene Descartes, lack of language and reason is said to be the primary factor for calling them a 'complex machine'. Though views have changed in the last two decades with the literatures being produced in countries like South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, keeping in mind the significant roles of animals upon human lives. So far in our literature, most of the instances of the relationship between the human and non-human evolve through either pet or domestic animals. For instance, Anna Sewell's classic, *Black Beauty* (1877) is an autobiography of a domestic horse who is tortured in a society of Victorian England. When we look at the literature of Africa and particularly of South Africa, we find that dog is an important animal in their history and literature. It becomes more prominent during the apartheid and post-apartheid movement. Dogs are even thought to be into the social order where they function with the identities of their human masters.

Almost in all the literary works of J. M. Coetzee, a dog is a central character. There are many works based on zoo-animals. *Life of Pi* (2001) tells a story of survival of a royal Bengal tiger, who is initially kept in a zoo, and a human protagonist together. But the same thing can't be said about the animals that live in the wild. The term 'wild' comes from the word 'wilderness' which signifies those inhabitants who live in nature which is undisturbed and untainted by the human civilisation. Among others, the way Canadian literature has nurtured the theme of wilderness is quite unique because first of all, the powerful presence of Canadian North or Prairie region and secondly, it also includes the non-human animal along with diverse flora, dense forests, lofty cliffs and vast lush green landscapes of North. The influence of wilderness is instrumental in Canadian literature as well as in discovering the Canadian identity as we find in Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) and *Surfacing* (1972). Place of animals also comes inevitably if we discuss wilderness in Canadian literature. Animals, depicted in the Canadian literature, are different from the animals depicted in other literatures. Atwood mocks in her poem, 'Animals in that Country', that the animals have faces of people in the literature of other countries where characteristic features are depicted artificially than the original nature of animals. But she asserts that 'they have the faces of no-one' but of themselves. The two texts which are intended to be

discussed in this paper are *Bear* (1972), written by Canadian author, Marian Engel and *The Whale Caller* (2005) by South African writer Zakes Mda, to deal with the issue of wilderness.

Animal and Wilderness:

In the novel, *Bear*, the difference with the other texts which deal with wilderness is that its protagonist is a male bear and he has a soothing influence upon a human character, Lou. Lou is a female librarian who was working in a library in Toronto. Later on, she is sent to a remote island in the Canadian North country to catalogue the estate of Colonel Cary who has left his property and its contents to the library as a bequest. After spending some days there, a transformation in Lou's character takes place—from an urban woman to a woman who adores and is attached with the relentlessly authentic influence of wilderness. The locale of the novel is a secluded island known as Cary's island and the surrounding was "hectic with new green...little islands floated innocently on the waves, rocked by bell-buoys." (Engel 8). In the house in which she is going to stay is a large octagonal house with many windows and doors, numberless books and a non-human in the form of a forlorn elder bear. The initial impression of this environment to Lou is 'strange' but gradually it turns out to be "as joyfully Elizabethan and exotic". (Engel 18).

The exoticism can be found as the novel progresses. Both Lou and the bear befriend themselves and they come close to each other. These two incongruous souls dance together with the music. They go to the river which flows near the house and swims playfully after going naked by rising beyond the border between two species, human and non-human animal:

She knew now that she loved him. She loved him with such extravagance that the rest of the world had turned into a meaningless knot, except for the landscape, which remained outside them, neutral, having its own orgasms of summer weather. '...She knew now that she loved him, loved him with a clean passion she had never felt before.' (Engel 101)

Common people like Homer come to this house only for doing the duty of care-taker. He has no interest as to him, the bear is nothing but a "wild critter" and the whole house is uninteresting "fucking institute" (Engel: 93). One day, when Lou asks him to come along with his wife, he replies that she doesn't like him going to the island as she thinks that it's haunted or something of 'a bad influence'. So, this is the sheer

ignorance of persons who dwell in of civilisation. But Lou desires different 'home' for her solace and peace. She asserts to herself as well as to the readers how much she feels the bliss in spending time with the bear in this secluded 'treasure-trove' island. In the next few chapters, we notice the intimate friendship between Lou and Homer who eventually asks her to make love with him. But, she denies any further development though she knows within that some kind of emotional dependence has been brewing up between these two. Actually, she has fallen in love with the bear more than any human being. Maybe it is because of her torrid experience of past with the Director of the institute where she worked before coming to this place.

At that time she was in a hell of mind having anxieties and worries. She felt drab and lonely and the world seemed lifeless until she reaches this island. Here she finds a new lease of life after coming into the lap of wilderness and the presence of the bear who is also a part of this wilderness only enhances her happiness and wishes to lead a joyful life. However, questions may arise that as the bear is a pet of Colonel Cary or he lives a life locked in the big house, should he be included under the umbrella of wilderness? The answer must be yes. Because, though the bear was being kept by Colonel Cary, the owner of the house, he died long before and left the bear in the house in the hand of his 100-year-old wife, Lucy. Lucy (incidentally or intentionally the namesake of Wordsworth's nature girl) is not the woman who can be vigilant for the bear. One day, Homer, the servant of the house, says to Lou: "It's there, and it belongs to the place." (Engel 16).

This suggests the timelessness of the bear, which is not a 'toy bear', not a 'Pooh bear', not an 'airlines Koala bear' but a 'real bear', in the context of the novel and thus it also belongs to the 'sublime' mystery of wilderness. Another vital point the author tries to say that there was a depth in him "she could not reach, could not probe and with her intellectual fingers destroy"(Engel 34), just like a human's incapability to reach the depth of wilderness. The presence of the bear, who is a male, pervades the whole novel as he does to the consciousness of the human protagonist. He also allows her to make vital connections with her own hidden nature and with the natural world outside herself. Thus with the companionship of the bear, She pushes to the "demarcation line between humanity and nature or animality". (Howells 109)

In the course of the novel, Lou becomes so obsessed with the bear that they are engaged in oral sex several times. After several vain attempts to ignite the bear with erotic gestures, once Lou goes down on

all fours in front of the bear in animal posture and then the climactic moment of the novel comes when the bear reaches out one great paw and rips the skin on her back. The blood comes running down her back. That wilderness is essentially savage and brutal, though not red in tooth and claw here, is clearly stated through the bear. This may well be the truth and symbolic that the human being can't taint the sanctity and purity of wilderness or nature with carnal desires or materialistic pleasures rather they get revitalised after entering into the domain of pure wilderness. So, the bloody act done by the bear is not at all harmful rather it has deep healing power for "those who are tired of moral and material pollution of the city". (Garrard 66). Also, the blood in the novel may be compared to the blood which oozes out of the mother's forehead and falls on the child in the novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913), which symbolically suggests the bond of blood between mother and son. Significantly, after the assault by the bear, the female protagonist does not lose the awe for him as she thinks him as "lover, God or friend". She feels as if this is a holy communion between them, between a human and the savage yet beautiful wilderness. The savagery and beauty at the same time, of wilderness, is reflected in the writing of famous twentieth-century critic, Edward Abbey:

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamour and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. ...To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still 'intact, individual, separate.' (Abbey 6)

If we look at the novel, *The Whale Caller*, a glimpse of wilderness can be easily found. The look of Sharisha, the female whale, reminds Whale Caller, human protagonist, about the Three Sisters Hills of the Karoo. Actually, Three Sisters Hills are the three distinctly shaped hills in Africa and thus the idea of vast landscape or wilderness is established here.

The imagery of 'Nakedness':

In the genre of wilderness, the imagery of nakedness is vital and quintessential. If we look at Derrida, he said a lot about the 'nakedness' of animals who are also an important part of the wilderness. He said:

In principle, with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself. Clothing would be proper to man, one of the 'properties' of man. ...the animal,

therefore, is not naked because it is naked. It doesn't feel its own nudity. There is no nudity 'in nature'. There is only sentiment, the affect, the (conscious or unconscious) experience of existing in nakedness. (Derrida 5)

Wilderness advocates the escape of the primal nature of our mind, which is in stark contrast with the alienated 'civilised' mind. In the novel *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood shows us that when the female protagonist came in the wild forest in search of her father, ultimately she has found her own self. She strips off herself and runs naked like an animal. She eats unwashed plants and lives in a burrow. Here, this nakedness symbolizes the immersion of the human beings with the original, naked wilderness which is pure and authentic. It leads towards rebirth and regeneration shedding one's frail-self. There are profound examples of the purity of nakedness in *Bear*. At one place:

It was too hot to work upstairs. She lay naked, panting, wanting to be near her lover, wanting to offer him her two breasts and her womb, almost believing that he could impregnate her with the twin heroes that would save her tribe. ...they swam in the still, black water. They did not play. They were serious that night. They swam in circles around each other, very solemnly. Then they went to the shore, and instead of shaking himself on her, he lay beside her and licked the water from her body while she, on her back, let the stars fall, one, two, fourteen, a million, it seemed falling on her, ready to burn her. (Engel 105)

The imageries of dance, swimming etc portray the amorous mindset of character who is burning in the desire of getting self-less love. This is quite evident in the novel *The Whale Caller* too. The protagonists in this novel are two human beings, Whale Caller and Saluni, and a large female whale, Sharisha. Saluni is a female drunkard who is in love with the Whale Caller. Whale Caller is also a lover but his love is meant for Sharisha, the female Southern whale. The theme of wilderness is very much prominent in this novel in the sense that Sharisha, being a creature of the ocean, is a component of nature. Though love between her and Whale Caller is reciprocal but he can't come in close body contact with her, just like the male bear and Lou in *Bear*. We can say that in both cases, nature remains 'unconquered'. In

the beginning, we locate whale caller (who has no other name in the world and thus it suggests his preoccupation with the whale) in sea beach, aloof from the other whale-criers and whale-watchers. Mda says:

He didn't call whales in order to kill them. Eating them would be tantamount to cannibalism. He called them because they gave him joy and he gave them as much in return. And if he could help it, he preferred to call them when he was alone, so as to have intimate moments with them. He was not a showman, but a lover. (Mda 2006: 14)

In the beginning, he is seen in a tattered tuxedo, spending his days on the cliffs of the small coastal town of Hermanus by blowing his kelp horn to the whales particularly to Sharisha. Sharisha is also capable of responding and returning the animal 'gaze'. In response, she lobs repeatedly to the sound of kelp-horn played by Whale Caller. And this response makes him "breathing more and more heavily" and invigorated when he returns back home (page no). Here the writer also uses the image of 'ejaculation', like the image of 'orgasm' in *Bear*. Whale Caller grows jealous when the female whale is surrounded by the male whales also becomes restless when there is no view of the whale. Now, this jealousy or excitement is not between the two humans rather between a human and a responsive non-human. Besides, words like 'orgasm', 'ejaculation', 'salvation', used by the human protagonist for non-human signify that the interconnectedness between human and the nonhuman world.

In *Bear*, Lou involves in a sexual relationship with the Director of the institute and also with Homer. Such is the obsession for the male bear that the whimsical relationships with fellow humans are totally void of the kind of love she wants. There is no passion. In the same way, in *The Whale Caller*, the male protagonist indulges in relationship with Saluni, the female character, but he can't reciprocate as much he can with the whale even in imagination. Sex between human and nonhuman characters in both the novels never takes place but the yearning of human protagonists for it is highly suggestive of the obsession to be immersed in the wilderness in order to reinvigorate own selves.

The idea of wilderness is sacramental to the human world in many ways. It has the power to renew humanity. The sublime nature of it always fills humanity with positive and soothing vibes. From the discussion of the two texts in this article, it can be said that the role of nonhuman animals in strengthening the idea of wilderness and

understanding the concept of nature is indispensable, quite contrast to Judaeo-Christian and the Pastoral concepts. With the emergence of New Literature in countries like Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, the value of nonhuman animals is stated clearly, like never before. Animals with their touches make the human world more humane in a continual process of reshaping and we can relate them with us more than the other constituents of wilderness. In this way, non-human animals can be termed as a new avatar of Nature and wilderness.

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**Research Scholar
Department of English
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India
subodhz.mahato@gmail.com*