

Anthropocentric Representations of Fauna: A Critique of Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

Sandhya K. Mavelil

Abstract

Human beings often value the nonhuman forms of nature based on their utility and ignore the plight of fauna that struggle for survival in the crowded urban environment. Moreover, the cruelty meted out on animals in many situations by humans add to their misery, provoking ecocritics and deep ecologists to openly speak out against the unjust treatment of the more-than-human-inhabitants of the earth. Animals either play a key role or assume a symbolic presence in many literary texts and are often presented from an anthropocentric point of view. This research paper seeks to comprehend the recurrence of anthropocentric images of fauna in the novel, *Last Man in Tower* (2011) by Aravind Adiga. The author provides glimpses of the ambivalent relationship of humans with fauna in the city and this association is defined by apathy, cruelty, and fear, among others, which could be responsible for the unfair treatment of animals by the characters in the novel.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism; Anthropomorphism; Aravind adiga; Eco-criticism; Nonhuman forms; Urbanization.

The tendency to comprehend and value nonhuman forms in nature merely on the basis of their respective utilitarian purposes to human beings, almost completely ignoring their inherent value, could be pointed out as one of the causes for the disastrous pace of deterioration of nature and species extinction. Moreover, the belief in human superiority, privilege, and merit over the other beings on earth has led to the unfair and disparaging treatment of animals and fellow human beings. In her essay, "Sweet Thames Run Softly . . .," Anita Sharma notes that along with the "so-called industrial growth and urbanization of society . . . lack of due respect for flora and fauna" is also a cause for the fast degradation of the environment (36). During the fag end of the twentieth century when protests and activities

from environmental organizations from all over the world spurted out, demanding a solution for the crisis, ecocritics and deep ecologists joined the scene through their fervent articulation against such staunch anthropocentrism. These evolving human perceptions on the nonhuman world get reflected in literary and cultural texts and often reveal the empathy, indifference, or antipathy towards the well-being of the nonhuman forms in nature. This study seeks to explore Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* (2011) to find out how anthropocentric images persist within literary texts.

Aravind Adiga, the acclaimed author of *The White Tiger* (2008) that won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for the same year, has been honoured with many more accolades including John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize, British Book Awards: Author of the Year, and Commonwealth Writers Prize, for his craftsmanship. According to Stuart Jeffries of *The Guardian*, Adiga analyses "the unbearably poignant torments of the emerging new India" through his novels and *The Last Man in Tower* follows the same intriguing design. Although the main focus is on human greed and homicide, Adiga employs a series of animal images at various junctures of the plot to reflect the subtle intricacies of human nature and to draw the readers' attention towards the train of thoughts and behavioural patterns of the major characters. Although this technique serves as a mode of commentary on the lives of animals in an environment of cruelty from human beings, pollution, heavy traffic, lack of ideal habitats, and challenges faced in procuring food, nonhuman forms in such contexts are reduced to mere carriers of human emotions, often obliterating the grim reality of their hard struggle for existence in the hustling urban environment dominated by humans.

The text, while dealing with the central theme of urbanization and its consequences, also brings to centre stage the extent to which anthropocentric perceptions on the fauna lead to their extreme misery and struggle and this has a decisive impact on the shaping of the readers' understanding and attitude towards nonhuman entities of the environment. The same observation has been made by Sarah E. McFarland and she also points out how nonhuman creatures are presented "as proxies or as objects for human emotional or cognitive projection," in her essay "Animal Studies, Literary Animals, and Yann Martel's *Life of Pie*" and according to her, a "significant number of texts use animal characters for allegorical purposes" and "project anthropomorphically onto their lives" (153). In the novel, the cruel treatment meted out to the ailing stray dog, the hapless chicks of the crow, the dead rat on the road, the lizard killed by Mrs. Puri, the white cat etc., forms only a part of the detrimental effects of the anthropocentric

attitude of the humans as their cruelty is extended to their own kind for the sake of protecting individual financial interests through the murder of the central character, Masterji. Physical torment, death, and the destruction of habitat await most of the fauna represented in the novel, including Masterji whose apartment is finally demolished along with the housing complex.

The story of *Last Man in Tower* centres around the tug-of-war between the residents of old buildings in the city and suburbs of Mumbai and the owners of construction companies who seek to demolish old structures to erect new skyscrapers or luxury villas in their place. The unquenchable thirst for money and power leads them to the extent of committing murders, either through ruffians or by conditioning greedy neighbours to commit the crime. The protagonist, Yogesh A. Murthy or Masterji refuses to sell his apartment at Vishram Housing Society to the builder, Dharmen Shah, for a redevelopment project because the building and the surroundings held cherished memories of his late wife and daughter. At this stage, even his son Rohit abandons him emotionally and physically and Masterji is brutally attacked and murdered by his neighbours and friends.

By virtue of their intellectual superiority as a species, human beings have come to control the fate of flora and fauna directly or indirectly and the novel presents a few instances of intentional and insensitive brutalities meted out to the fauna, especially in the challenging urban environment where animals struggle every day for their survival. The pathetic condition of the stray dog that takes shelter at Vishram Society clearly portrays the inferior quality of life led by the fauna in a busy city: "The animal had lost a layer of subcutaneous fat, and its rib cage was monstrously articulated, like the maw of another beast that was consuming it" (50). The dissimilar attitudes of the members of the Society—varying from providing food and water to the animal to showing haste in getting rid of the unwelcome guest and hurting it physically—project the plight of the animal that is forced to depend upon the mercy of humans for sustenance. Lowering the bleeding dog hit by a recklessly driven car into the gutter with the words, "it might pass away in dignity, if not in comfort," only to avoid witnessing its traumatic last moments gives testimony to the hypocrisy of the characters who conveniently decide to thrust the human concept of dignity on the poor animal (337).

Another example for human insensitivity to animal life is the destruction of the crow's nest and the killing of the hatchlings by the secretary of the Society, Ashvin Kothari and the others. The comments made by Mrs San-

geeta Puri in the beginning—"It is just a crow, and we are people"—and after the completion of the deed—"A simple thing, wasn't it?"—bring to light the ingrained anthropocentric assumptions that regard the extermination of a bird family as inconsequential and ignore the inherent value of the species (356-57). Probably, it is the herd mentality that encourages Ramesh Ajwani, the real-estate broker, to callously push the nest out with a long pole and Kothari to crush the head of one of the chicks with his shoe without any hesitation before the mother crow swoops down to save it.

On some occasions, the maltreatment of fauna is quite unintentional, such as the moth that hits the fan at Mr Pinto's apartment, the dead cat on the road, the rat flattened by vehicles etc. because these animals are victims of human inventions and negligence. Dharmen Shah's observation that the dead cat on the road has not been given a fair chance in life and its pulverized head reminding him of an exclamation mark, again reflect the unequal chances of existence extended to the fauna in a city fraught with danger. Usually in such cases, only a few are touched by their deaths, while the majority of humans either ignore them or forget the incident within a short span of time as such animals are often considered worthless, undesirable, or unnecessary.

In the novel, Adiga also presents numerous scenes in which the characters hurt the fauna to let out their anger or frustration and extreme manifestations of such violent outburst result in the ill-treatment of animals. Masterji kicks the sleeping stray dog to vent his anger at his son and daughter-in-law; Mr Puri's son, Ramesh Puri or Ramu who suffers from Down's syndrome, becomes upset at his mother, pokes a rod at a wriggling worm, and cuts it into pieces; and Ajwani who is frustrated at the delay in closing the deal of redeveloping Vishram Society, plays with the white cat near the internet café for some time only to press it down with his shoe, probably owing to his irritation or to warn Ibrahim Kudwa, another resident of the society, of the dire consequences of not signing the documents for sale while the cat curls "itself helplessly around his foot" (270). In such scenes, animals are just victims who suffer for no fault of their own and bear the brunt of negative emotions of the human beings around them. (329). Masterji's father's words on the day of his thread ceremony hint at the cruel tricks played on animals for fun as many kids are not properly counselled about the gravity of such ruthless behaviour: "This means no more climbing of trees for fruits my son. No more stoning dogs my son" (371). His comments also act as a cryptic note on the changes that happen to one's relationship with entities in nature in the journey from childhood to adulthood. Swarnalatha Rangarajan, in *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practi-*

cal Strategies, cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau to point out how animals share the capacity for suffering with human beings and must be considered part of the natural law, which indirectly stresses on the fact that only an empathetic approach to the fauna could reduce such reactions of human beings as described in the novel (22).

The fauna such as bees, wasps, rats etc. are often regarded by the urban inhabitants as a menace, an inconvenience, or a threat and the human conception of a pleasant ambience is one that is devoid of such animals and insects. In the novel, there are references to experts who are hired to get rid of such fauna. A recurring image in the text is that of the rat, probably because rats are commonly found in an urban environment like Mumbai. Ajwani is seen kicking a rat that is hiding under the table of a restaurant and Masterji complains to his friend Mr Albert Pinto at a restaurant, "I don't like competing for my food with animals" (68) and goes on to explain the different kinds of rats, how there are "six rats for every human in the city," and how they spread plague (69). Masterji takes into account only the trouble caused to humans whereas rats and the other fauna struggle to live in a hostile environment. Shah's physician, Dr Nayak, is even bothered by the mere sight of two sea hawks fighting with each other and comments that they are a nuisance and should be shot down.

The huge quantity of waste materials accumulated in urban areas is not often segregated and disposed properly and scientifically with minimum impact on the environment and this poses a major threat to the health of the fauna. For example, the hogs seen in the marshy rubbish pit-where Mary, the cleaning lady, empties the trash cans from Vishram Society every day- are prone to consuming plastic or other toxic or harmful substances thrown into the pit (141). The huge spider web with bits of plastic and trinkets sticking to it is also a visual display of the accumulation of unwanted substances in the habitat of the fauna over a period of time. The web is eventually destroyed when the security booth that housed it is demolished along with the rest of the apartment complex and this symbolises the desecration and final annihilation of habitats.

Some species of the fauna have been used as symbols for negative emotions for a long time and the presence of such animals often causes anxiety because human beings feel threatened around them. For example, the ubiquitous fear of snakes from pre-historic time accounts for their representation as ominous symbols and in *Last Man in Tower*, the recurrent image of "a long black snake" (207) refers to the imminent danger lurking over Masterji ever since he refused to sign the documents for sale. Ram

Khare, the security guard, uses the expression to warn Masterji about the untrustworthy neighbours and later the snake is referred to as slithering on Masterji's body only to leave him after his determination to be strong. This process of symbolizing the fauna for undesirable emotions or experiences obfuscates their natural traits, stressing only what humans think of them.

Similarly, a deep-seated fear or feeling of repulsion towards certain species of the fauna leads to their decimation or evasion, while those that look delicate and beautiful have better chances of gaining human regard. In his essay, "Ranking, Yes, but the Inherent Value Is the Same: An Answer to William C. French," the eminent Norwegian deep ecologist Arne Naess confesses how he is more lenient towards butterflies and makes an effort to help them in the cold climate while letting many other kinds of insects perish in the snow (548-49). In *Last Man in Tower*, Mrs Georgina Rego, owing to her fear for crawling creatures, urges neighbours and even her office staff to kill lizards and spiders. It could be noted that she is not appeased by the removal of the harmless lizard and when Mrs Puri is about to throw it out of the window, she urges, "Its tail will fall off! You must kill it!" (181). Later, Ajwani, traumatized by the thoughts related to the murder of Masterji, notices a fellow passenger in the train, "stout, thick-browed" and "massively lipped" like a lizard. He imagines the man changing into Shah, whom he loathes and fears and he rushes towards the door for fresh air and vomits (380).

Humans exploit the fauna for utilitarian needs, be it for transportation, food, agriculture, or pleasure and some of these animals are discarded the moment their use is over. Often they are not fed properly and they struggle to cope with the traffic and heat in the crowded cities. The silvery horse carriages and the white horse mentioned in the novel are used to provide joy rides for a fee and many people earn a living through such practices. In such cases, a relationship beyond the one that is based on financial gain is rare and probably that is why Shah is a little taken aback observing the boy bonding with the white horse. A businessman such as Shah can only treat the horse as a piece of artefact of momentary enjoyment and not as something worthy of a relationship. Similarly, the cow standing near a tea shop has no other option but to breathe in the polluted air and to be of use to human beings: "The cow chewed on grass and jackfruit rinds. Round-bellied and big-eyed, aglow with health: it sucked in diesel and exhaust fumes, particulate matter and sulphur dioxide, and churned them in its four stomachs, creaming good milk out of bad air and bacterial water" (286-87).

In the novel, on many occasions, human emotions and behaviour are projected on to the fauna and anthropocentric elucidations are given for their natural behaviour. Many such responses are part of their natural instincts and not connected with human sentiments, unlike what the characters of the novel assume. When Mrs Puri and her son Ramu listen to a bird singing, they feel that the notes of its song are “long and sharp like a needled thread, as if it were darning some torn corner of the world” (209). In the same way, as observed by Masterji, the “restless silhouette of the bird” at night and the wild movements of a small bird thrashing about in the compound represent his own agitation (280). Some of the interpretations evoke a favourable reaction from human beings while others prove to be detrimental to the existence of the fauna. In his essay, “Industrial Society, Postmodernity, and Ecological Sustainability,” Arne Naess observes:

Animals, plants, and some nonliving things may be experienced as evil or good. They may be experienced as arrogant, proud, innocent, self-domineering or humble, sheepish, crestfallen, and so on . . . some traits of animals are real and objective attributes, others are said to be *projected* onto the animals. They are merely subjective. (581-82)

For Shah, hawks are emblems of power and they inspire him to succeed in the world of cut-throat competition for acquiring land and building skyscrapers. On the other hand, the “early morning cat” repeatedly referred to in the novel, is portrayed as a menace to the residents of Vishram Society and also to the cleaning lady, Mary. “The main aim of the cat . . . was to make sure there was no privacy in the building” as it “prowled the waste bins that the residents left out in the morning for Mary to collect, in the process spilling beans, bones, and whisky bottles alike” (21). In reality, the cat is only searching for food in the waste bins and does not have anything to do with the human concept of privacy. At Mrs Rego’s apartment, the lizard is described as “a monarch of his species” and its natural instinct of seizing a dragonfly is described in detail to romanticize the dragon fly, describing it as a stunning and exotic insect, and to portray the lizard as an unkind ruler hunting an innocent and beautiful prey (181). This depiction indirectly justifies Mrs Rego’s fear for the species and also Mrs Puri’s killing it. Likewise, a lizard is described as “staring at you with fat, envious eyes” (85) and envy is predominantly a human emotion, which, in this situation, is thrust upon the animal.

The pieces of cooked fish present an uncanny vision of Masterji on the plate, cut into pieces and peppered, and Shah is unable to eat the dish.

He immediately commands Giri, his cook, to throw it away. He knows that Masterji would be harmed in the near future and if possible he would like to avoid it. The crab served at the restaurant, on the other hand, is a reminder of good fortune for Shah. Although the waiter is ready to carve out the flesh from the hard shell of the crab and bring it in a plate, Shah prefers to crack open the shell with his teeth and suck out the flesh: "He wanted to feel he was eating a thing that had been breathing just an hour ago: wanted to feel, once again, the extraordinary good fortune of being one of those still alive" (171). As far as Ajwani is concerned, crabs represent a free life, devoid of the stress and tension associated with humans and as he gets more and more embroiled in the dilemma of committing a murder, he recognizes that he merely desires to live among the crabs near the ocean (380). Thus, the crabs and the fish mirror the current states of mind of Shah and Ajwani.

In the case of animals that have been appropriated for human pleasure as in the case of pets, generally docile, tame, or domesticated fauna are chosen on the basis of certain qualities like beauty, friendly nature, capability for providing entertainment etc. The comforts given to them are all based on anthropocentric assumptions and they are provided with habitats that are chosen by their masters. Often placed in the toxic urban context, they frequently go through vaccinations, grooming, and even surgeries, which are not natural for them. Artificially flavoured food items laced with chemicals are given to them in the frequency and quantity decided by humans and the handlers are not often equipped to gauge their needs, pain, or comfort. Shanmugham indirectly hints at the subjugation of pets and also at the way in which pets are encouraged to perform tricks in return for treats. He compares himself with a dog when he is extremely disheartened at his boss Shah's indifference after he worked hard to close the deal with the members of Vishram Society. He laments that even a dog who chases a stick for his master receives a pat on his head. On another occasion, a South Indian restaurant is described where "framed photographs of furry foreign dogs" (156) are put up on the walls, clearly reflecting the affinity of humans to foreign breeds of fauna which are often considered exotic. Such breeds are forced to live in distant places where the climatic conditions and food do not suit them.

There are references to Sylvester, Pintos' pet dog and when it dies the housing society even allows them to bury it in the compound. Later, Mr Pinto tries to save a squealing puppy in the gutter from other dogs that attack it because he is reminded of Sylvester. However, not all pets are showered with such affection and care and a few owners abandon them

mercilessly when they find it difficult to take care of them. There are instances where urban dwellers and organizations rescue animals to provide rehabilitation and care. However, the natural needs of such fauna are not completely met as in the case of the stray dog at Vishram Society that is fed with *chana* or chickpeas every day.

Another mode of entertainment and education involving animals is through aquariums and zoological parks or zoos. In his seminal work, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting*, Ashton Nichols discusses the history of exhibiting animals, plants, and even human beings in imperialist countries. He draws attention to heartless methods followed in the past such as keeping a carnivorous animal hungry for days only to deliver the spectacular scene of the animal attacking a prey brutally in front of an eager audience. Although he realizes that zoos provide opportunities of learning and serve “to preserve the lives and genetic inheritance of threatened species” (161), he agrees to the fact that “captive wild organisms . . . represent a form of control over the natural world” (153). In *Last Man in Tower*, Masterji takes his grandson to Byculla Zoo and promises to take him to the aquarium. Many cages in the zoo are smelly, filthy, and revolting, and the animals are deprived of a healthy habitat. Later, at an expensive restaurant where Shah dines, the manager proudly points out a shark among the other fish. In this case, the fish are taken out of their natural habitat, held in small enclosures as showpieces, and provided with artificial food. According to Robert Mullan and Garry Marvin in *Zoo Culture: The Book about Watching People Watch Animals*: “Denied access to their natural habitat these animals become marginalized from their wild nature and begin to lose access to the mentalities and behaviours appropriate there” (29). These instances underscore the need to move away from anthropocentrism so that the fauna in zoos and aquariums are provided with at least an adequate environment that fulfils their natural needs.

Some scenes in *Last Man in Tower* depict how humans connect with nonhuman forms, especially when the former go through traumatic events and yearn for consolation and support. Some of these relationships achieve symbiosis and fulfil the need for mutual support and companionship especially in the case of those who lead a secluded life. Masterji learns to leave the stray dog alone once he is cornered by his neighbours and languishes in loneliness and the dog also seems to reciprocate the feelings. He also tries to share his troubles with a cow and develops a bond with the animal because he has no one else to discuss his worries with: “Drawn by the magnetism of so much ruddy health, the old man put his fingers

to its shit-caked belly. The living organs of the animal vibrated into him, saying: all this power in me is power in you too. *I have done good to others. I was a teacher for thirty four years*" (286-87).

Other reasons for such associations include pleasure, curiosity, or genuine love for the fauna as exhibited by the people who throng Sewri in Mumbai to watch the migratory flemingoes every year, whereas the bright-coloured flamingoes etched in Kothari's joyful childhood memories are presented as a precious legacy of his blissful past. However, it can be observed that the birds of vibrant hues capture human attention while those considered unappealing are often ignored. Apart from the above mentioned occasions, the novel carries animal images as part of a strategy to foreshadow the fate of characters in the novel. For instance, the life of the stray dog runs parallel to that of Masterji; the rooster is "clucking like a warning spirit" (154); and the red moth flitting across Masterji's hand is "a particle of air trying to warn him about something" (297). Similarly, the reactions of the residents of Vishram Society while destroying the crow's nest reflect their roles in Masterji's murder. The entire text of *Last Man in Tower* is replete with animals and animal images and displays events that include unjust, harsh, and insensitive treatment of the fauna, highlighting them with occasional contrasting episodes of genuine affection for the same. The reader could reasonably doubt whether the author unintentionally takes recourse to stereotypical images of the fauna that reflect specific human emotions and qualities conventionally associated with certain animals.

An anthropocentric perspective that considers human beings as superior to other forms on earth leads to unjust, cruel, or indifferent treatment of the fauna. In her essay, "The Land and Language of Desire," Sueellen Campbell quotes John Muir, "Why . . . should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?" and stresses the challenge of comprehending how "humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures (animals, plants, bacteria, rocks, rivers) but simply equal to everything else in the natural world" (128). Especially in the tough urban environment, as depicted in the novel, they are already under immense stress amidst pollution, traffic, and other causes such as habitat destruction owing to the construction of massive buildings by developers, which is one of the main themes of the novel. Their requirements, potential, and intentions are quite different from those of human beings and these aspects need to be taken into account while interacting with the fauna. As Josh A. Weinstein points out in the essay, "Humility from the Ground Up," "feelings of humility toward animals and the earth" and an

attitude to recognize “even the lowliest of insects as potentially family members or friends from a past life” would contribute to the harmony and balance on this planet.

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