

Jungle Cats and the Anthropomorphic Ambiguity in the Short

Stories of Ruskin Bond

Sohini Ghosh

Abstract

Human culture has witnessed myriads of attitudes towards the fast vanishing tribe of jungle cats all around the world. Each representation has brought with itself an anthropomorphic appropriation ascertaining the anthropocentric instincts of the human, the possessor of superior culture and of language. Is it truly possible to evade one's unconscious anthropomorphic instincts in the representation of jungle predators? In the light of this question I attempt to analyse in this paper the representation of the wild predator animals, in the short stories of Ruskin Bond.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, representation.

In the past few decades, the world has been witnessing a fast eradication of the ferocious jungle cats from the environment and an equally fast increase in their photographic and artistic representation in the worlds of advertisements, animations, cartoons, photography and literature. While the consumer world has commercialised the animal image to create moods,

popular culture has broken its canine teeth and placed it in the urban drawing rooms among the soft toys for a toddler's play. Characters like Tigger in 'Winnie, the Pooh', Hobbes in 'Calvin and Hobbes', Tigress in 'Kungfu Panda' and many more have emerged who are very different from the actual animal. In literature, allegorical and metaphorical animal characters have lived from the time of Aristotle to George Orwell to Eugene Ionesco. Animals, exhibiting humane qualities of loyalty, laboriousness, guile, cunningness and so on, have peopled narratives from cave paintings to Graphic Novels and have overwhelmed philosophers from Descartes to Derrida. This anthropomorphic world of animals seen as humane, read in terms of human emotions, ethics, and morality, reflects little of the animal world but rather highlights how, if given a chance, a human would easily incorporate the animal into his social world making it uncharacteristic of what it represents. This approach has been looked down upon by critical thinkers like Lorraine Daston and Greg Mitman who in *Thinking with Animals* state—

...to imagine that animals think like humans or to cast animals in human roles is a form of self-centered narcissism: one looks outward to the world and sees only one's own reflection mirrored therein. Considered from a moral standpoint, anthropomorphism sometimes seems dangerously allied to anthropocentrism: humans project their own thoughts and feelings onto other animal species because they egotistically believe themselves to be the center of the universe.

(Daston 3)

An effective way of dealing with human reality, as we see the anthropomorphic world at its best in works like *Animal Farm* by Orwell, impinged on satire and a strong sense of muted protest against humans, is visualising men as animals or animals as men. In contrast to such anthropomorphic treatment of animals, lies another hegemonic approach towards the wild in human cultures of all ages and all spaces which prefers holding on to its wild beastly features through the emotions of sublime terror. Cast out and alienated through such one-dimensional

depictions, which highlight either the non-human or the inhuman qualities of the wild animal, they are seen as potential threats to humanity, a wilderness that must be appropriated, conquered, hunted or avoided altogether. It is as if the establishment of the supremacy of one's beastliness over that of the other must revivify the identity of each. Humans have won many such battles gloriously exhibiting the other's skin, nails, and so on, as acquired trophies, or putting them on display alive in zoos, thus commodifying the wild in every way plausible, in his anthropocentric world. The ferociousness that is often depicted on such templates of representation is but a mirroring of human fear. The real life documentations of Kenneth Anderson, John Henry Patterson, Jim Corbett, etc. are not unknown in this regard where the other emerges as a threatening, malicious villain out to unleash havoc on humanity. Such realistic depictions with their immense knowledge on their subject are often blood curdling thrillers which have played a vital role in fashioning the colonial masculinity taking us back to humane egoistic anthropocentrism. The question then arises of whether it is at all possible to represent the zoocentric world of the jungle cats without the anthropomorphic or anthropocentric assumptions?

This is where Ruskin Bond comes in. Bond, one of the most perceptive writers of the 21st century, is an environmental empath in a very un-didactic, un-flamboyant and quiet manner. The suggestive subtlety of his art in all its simplicity has always touched the long lost primitive sensations to his readers, sensations originating from a stillness, a poise of grandeur, much like that of the forest, oft broken by the sound of a bird or a beast to deepen the silence that must follow after. His semi-autobiographical moorings, and his mastery of the art of storytelling has given a new lease of life to the modern Indian short story. In spite of the diversity of his subjects and themes that we come across in his works, a mesmerised corner in the hearts of his readers is always reserved for his depiction of the jungle cats—tigers, leopards and panthers. The wild is seen by the human eye which is not that of the writer's. There is

always a medium, a narrator, often a young boy, who narrates the story and the readers in looking through the narrative also becomes conscious of the narrator. As a result of this we tend to question the convictions and conjectures of the narrator, a living being in a zoo-centric universe. This strategy almost always strikes an ambiguity between knowing and not knowing, the fantastic and the real, the fiction and the fact, the humane affection and the beastly nonchalance, the hunter and the hunted and it is through this ambiguity that Bond comes much closer to the wild in his stories.

Bond's stories essentially decentralise the human by paradigmatically shifting the narratives to focus on the beast. This happens by establishing the animal as a living being with an appetite and with the instincts of fear of the unknown. Dispersed through all the predator narratives are casual references to food. 'A Tiger in the House' at the outset mentions a lavish dinner of the Grandfather: "The dinner was very good, as Grandfather admitted afterwards; it was not often that one saw hot-water plates, finger glasses and seven or eight courses in a tent in the jungle!" (Bond 143) which is subtly juxtaposed by the ever changing diet of the tiger cub Timothy, as it goes through various revisions in the domestic environment of the grandfather's house. He was given milk at first in a feeding bottle which was soon replaced by "raw mutton and cod liver oil, to be followed later by a more tempting diet of pigeons and rabbits" and this again went through changes as the narrator suggests how he was eating hens at night and was up to trailing neighbour's pets and even the cook Mahmoud. The eight courses of the grandfather's dinner are perfectly balanced with Timothy's craving for the eighth item on the list, as the grandmother suggests, Mahmoud. Both the man and the animal in the story are brought on the same plane with reference to an appetite for a sumptuous dinner, thus decentralising man to the definition of an animal with an appetite.

In 'Panther's Moon', Bishnu eats two chapattis with butter oil and drinks a glass of hot sweet tea and takes two more with some curry for his lunch, before he leaves for school. At the

school he finds his teacher Mr. Nautiyal who didn't have his breakfast, in a bad mood, which significantly improves after his lunch. The immediate point of comparison, though never explicitly mentioned but must strike a reader, is the state of the panther roaming in the vicinity with a bullet in his leg, which cannot hunt and eat the animals of the forest anymore and is on the verge of becoming a man-eater. The explanation to the desperation of all creatures who must survive on food is subtly suggested as the story ends with Bishnu exclaiming, "You don't know how hungry a man gets, walking five miles to reach home". In killing the panther, Bishnu is now a hero, a 'man', yet, he remains animal in his panther-like appetite which must be satisfied.

Again in 'Tiger Tiger Burning Bright', there are vivid descriptions of the quest for food. Ramu and Shyam pull out water lily roots for a "delicious nourishing dish". The hen's eggs are coveted by rats, mongooses as well as Ramu and a small hare is the meal for the tiger as well as the eagle. Due to a dearth of food in the animal world, the tiger switches to attacking buffaloes for which he is hunted down by the rural folk. His meal of a dead buffalo after days of no food is cut short by the villagers in the same manner the leopard leaves his meal half eaten on the arrival of the hunters in the jungle in the story named "The Leopard". It is the quest for food that transforms an animal into a beast, hunters adding to its irritability and desperation. When Sarru claims, 'Well, I hope we don't have any more man-eaters for some time,' Bishnu replies, 'We should be safe as long as a shikari doesn't wound another panther' (Bond 455) What Bishnu and Sarru, as children, realise is something the villagers may never realise for they continue to think that the animal was possessed by an evil spirit. This denial of its appetite is much like the denial of its right to live.

Another thematic element that must be mentioned is Bond's depiction of fear, both in the human and the non-human, or to put it in another way, in the animal and the non-animal. A vivid example can be found in the story 'The Tunnel' where finding a leopard lighted up by

the torch in the darkness of a tunnel, both Ranji and Kishen Singh shout out loud out of fear in turn scaring the leopard which misinterprets the echo of the voices thinking a lot of men are out to get him. Paradoxically it is this fear that saves the lives of not only the man and the boy, but also of the leopard. In 'A Tiger in the House', the first reaction that Timothy the tiger cub has, arriving at its new house, is fear. It is visibly afraid of the puppy, his supposed companion. He "darted back with a spring if it came too near. He would make absurd dashes with his large forepaws and then retreat to a ridiculously safe distance. Finally, he allowed the puppy to crawl on his back and rest there." (Bond 144) The reaction of the leopard in the story of the same name at seeing an unarmed man in the jungle is described in a wonderful sense of thrill by the narrator— "He was not looking towards me but had his head thrust attentively forward, in the direction of the ravine. Yet he must have sensed my presence, because he slowly turned his head and looked down at me. He seemed a little puzzled at my presence there." (Bond 259). This seeming puzzlement of the animal, as recorded by the narrator, is also counterpointed by a baffling sense of puzzlement of the narrator in more than one incident. Soon, he convinces his readers of a haunting sense of being followed by the animal. His conjectures on how the feelings of estrangement and familiarity between the two were mutual as both were afraid but curious of each other, are ridden with ambiguity for it is impossible to know the leopard's mind. Coming in close proximity to one another on a deserted hill, where the narrator becomes aware of the scent of the leopard and is convinced that the latter must be aware of him too, the narrator seems overwhelmed— "I like to think that he was there, that he knew me, and that he acknowledged my visit in the friendliest way: by ignoring me altogether" (Bond 263). The danger, of this anthropomorphic aporia of defining the other's 'friendliest way', lies on an unquestionable precondition of emotional connection between the two which must be culturally determined. The implausibility of such a connection with the leopard on the cultural space is itself there in the narrator's use of the words, 'I like to think' and not I think. This assumed

explanation of the 'encounter' is also a choice of how he would like to interpret an event, thus confirming a sense of ambiguity residing within the frames of the unknown and unknowable. 'It was his trust I wanted and I think he gave it to me', he says. The desire of the human and its ambiguous quenching in terms of the animal is a departure from his previous claim "...I had not come to take anything from the forest" making him fall on the same line with the hunters who have come for leopard skin, a transaction. Even in negating a transaction the narrator unconsciously indulges in one and in deciding to make the 'encounter' sublime in its impossibility, he makes the death of the animal tragically tangible. The ending of the story too is a conjecture where the narrator, in the process of analysing an animal with the excesses of human emotions is losing himself in an overwhelming sense of guilt for perhaps making the leopard 'too confident and too careless'—"But did the leopard, trusting one man, make the mistake of bestowing his trust on others? Did I, by casting out all fear—my own fear and the leopard's protective fear—leave him defenceless?" (Bond 263). The story is not so much about the tragic end of the leopard as it is the tragedy of the narrator who had chosen to establish a humanitarian and social relation with the animal, a kind starkly missing in the people of his own clan. This is the tragedy of the narrator who feels at the end how all the trust of the birds and beasts in the jungle that he had acquired, is all lost now. His conscious attempt to be different from his clan, makes him neither belong to his community nor to the jungle for everywhere there remains a breach of trust. The cerebral quality of the entire endeavour, of his quest to discover an Eden for himself, to live in communion with a predator, is itself a deviation from jungle life, where he cannot belong yet can pretend to bring out the vulnerability of the animal in empathetic ways.

Fear is generated into the jungle through the source of the human irrespective of what an individual 'he' is like, for 'the smell of one human is like the smell of any other'. Bond reiterates how the fear in them is not the fear of death— "It is only man, with his imagination

and his fear of the hereafter, who is afraid of dying. In the jungle it is different. Sudden death appears at intervals. Wild creatures do not have to think about it... is only a fleeting incident soon forgotten by the survivors.” (Bond 269) A completely different human being, in relation with a tiger, is the Grandfather in ‘A Tiger in the House’ who negates the claim of the narrator in ‘The Leopard’ that the smell of one human is like that of another. The Grandfather’s is a primitive parental approach of care and concern, a sort of motherliness, not out to preach an exemplary man in saving Timothy from the jungle, nor overwhelmed by curiosity, out to establish a friendship of ignoring each other. Visiting another full grown tiger in the zoo, mistaking him for his Timothy, the Grandfather hardly notices any difference between the two and unknowingly hugs the ‘very dangerous’ animal through the zoo bars and even lets him lick his hands like a dog for what seems like an eternity. It is the primitive sense of love that binds the new tiger from the hills to the old man. The tiger reciprocates the love of the old man, making the latter mistrust the words of the keeper that Timothy had died of pneumonia two months back. Fear of utter disbelief and horror becomes the character of the keeper, which makes him an outsider and out of communion with the man and the animal. The emotive factors become mutual every time, for fear breeds fear, love breeds love, leading to a mirroring of each element in a macrocosmic manner. Again, it is also man and man alone who tries to bestow affection on the animal as one does in ‘The Tunnel’—“‘It was a leopard you saw’, said the watchman. ‘My leopard.’” (Bond 254). Encounters of a human and a man-eating animal in stories like ‘A Tiger in the Tunnel’ and ‘Panther’s Moon’ mark a deviation as man takes up the macrocosmic fear into his society while the sure and swift animal lurks in darkness ready to pounce unfailingly on the hunted.

There is a submerged satire on human hunters in almost all the predator stories by Bond. In almost all the stories they fail to hunt down their tiger. The hunters seem alien to the rural areas, characterised by their foreign looks, strangeness of their manners, their fashionable way

of spending money and their readiness to fire almost at anything in the forest. The sheer futility of the sport of hunting of a fashionable class of the human race is lampooned as their failure in spite of vows of manhood, is shifted to “the weather, the poor quality of cartridges, the quantity of rum they had drunk, and the perversity of the tiger” (Bond 275). An interesting story in this regard is ‘Copperfield in the Jungle’ where the young boy’s claim of witnessing a big leopard hunting a dog is laughed at by disappointed hunters—“Too imaginative for his age”, said Uncle Henry, “comes from reading too much I suppose.” (*Tigers Forever* 31).

The last story worth mentioning in this regard is the story ‘Eyes of the Cat’, without which the essay will remain incomplete. The story is a splendid example of how in a metaphorical manner, the animal and the non-animal are bound in a body overcharged with blinding red, sinewy and canine rage. The mythical story of the metamorphosis of the human into an animal on a full moon day in a wolverine fashion, is adopted here with symbolic accentuations as the village girl Binya, a victim of racism and poverty, gets transformed into a leopard to avenge her insult by her schoolteacher. The fantasy elements in the story create a mythical tiger in a folkloric fashion, making Binya special, almost superhuman. What becomes very poignant as is reiterated in the title are the visual elements in the story starting with the eyes of the girl ‘flecked with gold when the sun was on them’ turning red with anger. The brilliance of the eyes, refer to an illuminating consciousness of an untamed spirit within. We enter a complete state of suspension of disbelief as we visually witness the metamorphosis—

Refusing her dinner, she went straight to her small room and flung the window open. Moonbeams crept over the window sill and over her arms which were already covered with golden hair. Her strong nails had shredded the rotten wood of the window sill. Tail wishing and ears pricked, the tawny leopard came swiftly out of the window, crossed the open field behind the house, and melted into the shadows. (Bond 600)

And soon we have a real picture of a hunter full of surety and confidence, bereft of stealth or weary trailing of the hunted—“the leopard had sprung at her throat, broken her neck, and dragged her into the bushes” (Bond 601). The story re-establishes the primitive notion of the human being essentially an animal with the natural instincts of hunger, fear, self-preservation and revenge, uniting the two different entities much like ‘shewing the two contrary states of the human soul’ where every emotion is justified from its own placement striking a balance between all creatures great and small irrespective of all the humane attempts at categorising and dissecting the populace into various linguistic compartments.

Bond’s predators, though depicted by human narrators placed in the anthropocentric space, in a language which itself is anthropomorphic, reflect a natural wilderness in its ambiguity which is un-tangible and un-definable and must be narrated in terms of such ambiguities as is exemplified in the poem ‘Thought Fox’ by Ted Hughes. To adults in the Bond stories, the tigers, the panthers and the leopards are forces of evil spirits and must be fought or hunted down, but to the more perceptive young children like Tembu, Ranji, Ramu, Shyam, Bishnu and so on they are living non-humans whose actions are equally justifiable on the zoocentric terrain. Though regarded as a children’s writer, Ruskin Bond, has always appealed to readers of all ages through these stories. His predator stories are like critiques of the human world wherein exist attitudes and approaches of all sorts. They are also reminders of the impossibility of grasping the real, much in the same fashion in which Adela Quested in *The Passage to India* wanting to experience ‘real’ India amid all the din and threats, later in the book realises, in the Lacanian manner, that the real does not exist.

Works Cited:

- Bond, Ruskin. 'A Tiger in the House', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India. 1996. pp. 143-146.
- . 'Copperfield in the Jungle', *Ruskin Bond, Tigers Forever, Poems and Stories*, Ratna Sagar, Delhi, 1996. pp. 31-36.
- . 'Eyes of the Cat', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India. 1996. pp. 599-601.
- . 'Panther's Moon', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India. 1996. pp. 433-456.
- . 'The Leopard', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India. 1996. pp. 258-263.
- . 'The Tunnel', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India, 1996. pp. 252-257.
- . 'The Tiger in the Tunnel', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India. 1996. pp. 332-336.
- . 'Tiger Tiger Burning Bright', *Ruskin Bond, Collected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, India. 1996. pp. 264-285.
- Datson, Lorraine and Mitman, Gregg ed., *Thinking with Animals, New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005. pp. 3-4.

About the Author

Sohini Ghosh is a State Aided College Teacher (SACT) in the Department of English of Mrinalini Datta Mahavidyalaya, Birati, Kolkata, with ten years of teaching experience at the same place. After Graduating from Lady Brabourne College with English Honours, she had

completed her Masters from Presidency College in the year 2009. She has specialised in Children's Literature and she completed her M.phil from Rabindra Bharati University, her area of research being Comics and Graphic Novels. She has qualified NET in 2019. She has also been teaching Communicative English at British Institutes as a Guest Lecturer since 2016. Her special areas of interest are Children's Literature, Graphic Novels, Indian Theatre and Victorian literature. Apart from being a literary enthusiast she is also interested in writing poetry and in musical performances.