

Anthropomorphic Insights: A Study the Subaltern hero with reference  
to *Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!*

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Abstract

Animal characters have fascinated viewers as well as readers in animated as well non-animated films and in fiction. This unfading interest in animal characters have inspired writers and film makers to use anthropomorphism as a tool for breathing life into flora and fauna. One could observe that films and fiction which are anthropomorphic in nature focus on relations between humans and animals as well as between weaker and stronger animals. A hegemonic relationship could be seen emerging among the characters thus making these perfect for post-colonial study. In post-colonialism the element of the 'subaltern' plays a major role. In all of these works the relationship between man and animals as well as stronger

and weaker animals can be analysed through this aspect of 'subalternity' since the latter becomes the subaltern. While analysing a film or fiction of anthropomorphic nature as a subaltern text we cannot ignore Antonio Gramsci's theory of the subaltern since he used this term for referring to all of those groups in society who were suppressed by the ruling class. DreamWorks Pictures' *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* narrates the story of an anthropomorphic wild stallion who saves his herd from being destroyed by the U.S Cavalry. Spirit witnesses two contradictory sides of humans in the form of the Colonel who commands the cavalry and a Lakota Native American, Little Creek, who has been kept in captivity at the cavalry. While the Colonel tries to suppress Spirit by breaking his inner 'spirit' and transforming him into a beast of burden Little Creek teaches him how to harness his unrestricted energy in order to discover his inner strength whereby which he breaks down the supremacy of the Colonel. Thus Spirit symbolises the subaltern hero who ends the oppressive reign of the Colonel and his cavalry upon his herd as well as the Lakota Native settlement.

#### Key words

Post-colonialism, Subaltern, Anthropomorphism

Animal characters have fascinated viewers as well as readers in animated as well non-animated films and in fiction. This unfading interest in animal characters have inspired writers and film makers to use anthropomorphism as a tool for breathing life into flora and fauna. Its use could be traced back to the ages of Aesop and it continues to gain strength as each generation passes up to the present age as exemplified in *Pashu*, the work of one of India's leading mythologists, Devdutt Pattanaik. A scientific and objective approach to animal behaviour helps writers and theorists to anthropomorphise animals better. Thus by attributing anthropomorphic traits they as well as the readers can understand how an animal behaves in its natural surroundings.

The word ‘Anthropomorphism’ originated from the Greek words, *anthrōpos* meaning ‘human’ and *morphē* meaning ‘form’. Anthropomorphism refers to the act of imbuing real or imagined human behaviour to non-human agents. These non-human agents include flora, fauna, non-living objects, forces of nature and abstract elements. Anthropomorphic characters appear frequently not only in fiction but also in mythology and traditional folklores. Philosophers and scholars like Darwin, Freud and Hume have noticed this phenomenon of attributing human characteristics to non-human objects. Man’s interest in animal behaviour could be dated back to the times of Aesop and Aristotle. An ethological approach to animal behaviour enables theorists and writers to anthropomorphise their world better as they can understand how an animal behaves in its natural surroundings. The process of anthropomorphising a non-human agent stems out from our acquisition of knowledge about that agent. According to Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo both cognitive and motivational determinants’ (Epley 866) enable anthropomorphising. For humans knowledge about themselves and their kind are the most readily available source for attribution of traits to non-human agents. Thus by attributing known traits to unknown objects the element of uncertainty gets eliminated. Hence it increases ‘effectance’ (Epley 866), i.e. the ability to interact effectively with the other non-human agents and with the environment. Man’s need to socialise is also a rationale for anthropomorphising non-human agents. Paul Wells in his work *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons and Culture* evaluates the use of animals in cartoons and animation by film makers in order to address topics related to political, religious and social issues. According to him, since anthropomorphic animals embody the traits of both humans as well as animals they can replicate qualities like ‘...gender, race and ethnicity, generation, and identity’ (Wells 3). He also says that ‘...the use of animal personae allows the storyteller to say something that could not be said by talking about humans due to political, religious or social taboos’. (Wells 6) Ethology refers to the scientific study of behaviour of animals. Hence in order to understand an animal the writer or the film maker

needs to explore how an animal behaves in its natural surroundings. For this they will rely on video recordings and other sources. Film makers and animators who create animal characters need to observe the animal they are dealing with very closely. For this, they even visit those places where the particular animal and its species are found most. DreamWorks Animation's *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* is a perfect example of this. The animation technique that has been used is a combination of traditional hand-drawn animation and computer animation. In order to study the natural behaviour and mannerisms of a stallion the crew of DreamWorks purchased a horse and brought it to their studio in California.

Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* is an excellent example which illustrates the elaborate use of anthropomorphism in order to depict the experiences of the Jews during the Nazi Holocaust. Spiegelman's father was a Polish Jew and a holocaust survivor who lived during the time of the Nazi regime. The novel was based upon his father's experiences during the Nazi regime within the concentration camps. Spiegelman projects the experiences of his father through an anthropomorphic perspective by portraying the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats. The rivalry between the Jews and the Nazis have been compared to the analogy of the rivalry between cats and mice. Probably the most apt way of describing the motives of the Nazis would be by comparing them to cats. The relationship between the Nazis and the Jews is portrayed as being a cat and mouse game where the cats become the predators. While portraying the cats and mice in an anthropomorphic manner Spiegelman shows the cats and the mice to be of the same size. This is a deliberate attempt since he does not want the readers to associate with the Nazi ideologies because of the cats' larger size and neither does he want the readers to sympathize with the mice because of their smaller size by thinking that they are weaker.

Various theorists and environmentalists have advocated the importance of anthropomorphism. Charles Darwin considered anthropomorphism a necessity in order to

understand non-human agents. Donald Hebb a specialist in cognitive psychology and neuroscience identified the utilitarian functions of anthropomorphism during his experiments in the laboratory involving chimpanzees. Social disconnection could be seen as a factor for anthropomorphising non-human agents. Just as one experiences thirst and hunger due to the lack of water and food a person can experience isolation due to the lack of human contact. Hence he tends to personify non-human agents in order to interact with them.

One could observe that films and fiction which are anthropomorphic in nature focus on relations between humans and animals as well as between weaker and stronger animals. A hegemonic relationship could be seen emerging among the characters thus making these perfect for post-colonial study. Animation has employed anthropomorphic characters to the fullest. The medium of animation enables inanimate objects and animals to be animated. Cars, planes, crockery and cutlery have all been animated and they have very soon been accepted by all specially the younger generation. Moreover some of the most aged cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Daisy Duck, Tom and Jerry, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Sylvester the cat and Tweety are animals which have been given human traits. As we analyse a film or a fictional piece we could notice that the plot of the story revolves around a web of relationships, be it between humans and anthropomorphic animals or between different species of anthropomorphic animals. The characters either live in co-existence or the weaker group gets suppressed by the stronger group. A few examples would be Walt Disney Pictures' *The Lion King*, where Simba the lion cub is suppressed by his evil uncle Scar who wants to take over the jungle, Pride Rock by killing Simba's father Mufasa, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Animation's *Rio*, where Blu, a timid male Spix's macaw has to face a group of poachers who try to smuggle exotic birds from Rio de Janeiro and DreamWorks Animation's *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* where Spirit, a Kiger Mustang Stallion fights against the U.S Cavalry and gains freedom for his herd as well a tribe of Lakota Native Americans.

In a extensive amount of fiction as well as films of anthropomorphic nature we can see the emergence of power structures. The presence of power structures in society have been deeply analysed by theorists like Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault. Gramsci advocated that trade unions and the ruling political parties formed their ideologies in accordance to the bourgeois power. These ideas were later spread across the public through the media and educational institutions. Thus the ruling class imposed their rules through consent rather than force. Foucault on the other hand advocated that power is everywhere and that man cannot keep himself alienated from the social institutions that have the power. According to him all those institutions that try maintain discipline such as schools, hospitals, prisons and so on are enforcing power over people. Foucault felt that these institutions attacked the individuality of a person and imposed a law upon him which he was expected to follow. Thus his individuality gets destroyed. Gramsci advocated that the dominant bourgeois imposed their power through ideologies upon the public, thus creating a hegemony via the state. According to Gramsci there were two forms of controlling, domination and consent.

The former is the hard and brutal edge of power, more typical of an older order in society. Modern political structures function through the allegiance and incorporation of the controlled. The implication here is of a politic of voluntarism; the ideological strategy is, in fact, one of coercion, persuasion 'hidden' and the cooperation 'one-sided'; what remains is the appearance and experience of voluntarism. Hegemony mediates between the individual and the exercise of choice, and hegemony permeates the structures within which choices are made possible; it alters our knowledge of the world.(Jenks 81)

It was Gramsci who gave hegemony a theoretical framework starting with his magnum opus *Prison Notebooks*. This voluminous piece of work consisted of thirty two notebooks which comprised of 2842 pages. Within each of these books he penned down all of his valuable ideas. Gramsci advocates that hegemonic ideologies are of two types, 'artificial' and

'organic'. The first, 'artificial', consists of ideologies formulated by philosophers and the second, 'organic', consists of ideologies formulated by the common people through their own experiences. They gather these experiences from various sources such as religion and beliefs, education, family and various of media. Thus the dominant group exercises their authority by enforcing their ideologies over the weaker or subordinate group through such sources. According to Gramsci domination happens when we agree to remain oppressed. Even after witnessing social evils such as poverty and famine we merely stand as spectators and keep pondering over our helplessness since we are poor and helpless unlike the rich. Gramsci strongly believed that people could step out of the confines of their economic status and education status and think differently instead of merely accepting the ideas that were imposed upon them by the governing group. Gramsci referred to the proletariat as subaltern. According to him though the subaltern may seem to be docile, humble, naive and ignorant they bear strong memories and experiences. Hence historians have to critically analyse the way in which these experiences have been presented.

In anthropomorphic fiction as well as films the relationship between man and animals as well as stronger and weaker animals can be analysed through the aspect of 'subalternity'. The former tries to impose his power upon the latter thus making the latter the subaltern. While analysing a film or fiction of anthropomorphic nature as a subaltern text we cannot ignore Antonio Gramsci's theory of the subaltern since he used this term for referring to all of those groups in society who were suppressed by the ruling class.

*Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* was an animated western-drama film which was produced by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by DreamWorks Pictures in 2002. The film narrates the story of a Kiger Mustang stallion named Spirit. The story is set in American west of the 19<sup>th</sup> century before the United States of America was being officially formed. Spirit the protagonist is born to a herd of wild horses. He grows up to become the leader. He considers

it as his duty to keep the herd safe from external forces. One night he sees a light coming from a distance. He becomes curious and wants to know about the source. Thus he ventures into a camp where he finds, to his dismay, many horses tied up and kept restrained. He sees some humans too sleeping around a campfire. They are the people who have kept the horses in captivity. Seeing Spirit they become awe-struck and they decide to capture him. They chase him and succeed in capturing him. They take him to a U.S cavalry post.

The cavalry is led by a colonel. As Spirit enters the post he sees many other horses like himself who are enslaved. He gets confused and scared. He is unaware of the feeling of being held captive. The colonel observes that Spirit is an adamant horse who refuses to be controlled by all of the other soldiers. Hence he orders his men to tie Spirit up to a post for the next three days without providing him food or water. One day a Lakota Native American named Little Creek is captured and is brought to the post. Little Creek is a human counterpart of Spirit. He too has been captured and brought to the post without his consent. He too is left hungry and thirsty for days together so that he admits defeat. Little Creek gets attracted to Spirit. He tries to become friends with him. Spirit hesitates to befriend him as his experience with human interaction has been really bitter.

On the third day the colonel decides to test him. However after many desperate attempts to control him he gets thrown off. Enraged by Spirit's obstinate attitude he decides to shoot him down. Meanwhile, Little Creek manages to catch hold of a knife which one the soldiers leave on the ground. Just when the colonel pulls the trigger of his pistol in order to kill Spirit Little Creek frees himself and he saves Spirit. Following this he and Spirit gallop off, breaking the barricades and the shed where the other horses have been tied. Thus Spirit and Little Creek free themselves along with the other horses from captivity. Little Creek takes Spirit along with him to his camp. On his way to the camp he meets two other natives and Rain, a mare who lives in the camp. Rain has been living in the camp for a long time and she accustomed to the way of life over there. Spirit gets attracted to Rain. However he cannot understand how

she can be so comfortable among them. Little Creek tries to tame him but he too fails like the colonel. So he decides to tie him up with Rain. When Spirit tries to run away Rain refuses to move. Thus she takes him around with her and she shows him the world within the camp through her perspective. As the days pass by Spirit becomes fond of Little Creek.

One day the colonel decides to attack the Lakota native settlements. Spirit and Little Creek see the troop approaching. A fight ensues and Rain gets shot by a gun. She along with Little Creek fall into a nearby river. Spirit realises that they will be caught. Hence he diverts the colonel's attention, thereby getting caught. He is chained and deported in a wagon along with plenty of other horses to a site where the Transcontinental railroad is being built. Spirit along with many other horses have been brought over there in order to help pull logs and to do other menial jobs. They get tied one behind the other and are ordered to pull a steam locomotive. Spirit realizes that the railroad will intrude into his homeland. Hence he decides to ruin the plan of the cavalry. He manages to break open all of the chains of all of the horses. Thus they get set free. However, since there are no horses to support the wagons one of the engines start rolling off. The wagon comes crashing against the cavalry's cabin. All of the crew run away. The entire cabin catches fire. Luckily, Spirit survives. As he runs away Little Creek joins him. Little Creek had left his village in order to save Spirit.

The colonel gets enraged and he decides to capture Spirit and Little Creek. So he and his men chase both of them all the way to the Grand Canyon. When they reach the peak of one of the cliffs they make a huge leap towards an opposite cliff. It is a do or die situation because if they do not take this risk they will once again get caught by the colonel. They, successfully cross over to the other side. The colonel and his men are forced to accept defeat. The colonel prohibits his men from shooting Spirit and he humbly accepts defeat thus showing respect towards Spirit. Spirit and Little Creek return to the Lakota village. Spirit realizes that Rain is still alive and healthy. Little Creek allows Spirit to return to his homeland where his entire family is staying. Rain also joins him. Spirit, hesitantly, returns as he has grown really close

to his human friend. The movie ends with both of the horses uniting with the rest of the herd. Thus Spirit once again becomes the alpha male of the herd.

Most of the anthropomorphic characters in the film are horses. Other animals appear only for a brief period. Jeffrey Katzenberg, the producer says,

This is as far as I'm concerned, a redesign, a rebuild and a reinvention of traditional animation. The goal for this movie was to create a film that uses what is unique about traditional animation but creates a world and an environment that audiences now expect and have seen in 3-D movies, and I believe that marrying the best of those two worlds together will create a new kind of animation. It's not traditional any more. It's not digital. So I've been calling it 'tradigital'. (*Spirit: The Stallion of the Cimarron*)

The narrative technique used in the film is different from other anthropomorphic animation films. In other films we see the anthropomorphic animals dress, move their lips and often move around in human-like environments. However, in this film neither does Spirit, nor does any of the stallions or other animals move their lips in order to voice out their feelings. Instead they communicate with each other through neighs and facial expressions and also through their body language. Music plays a crucial part in the film. The songs have been composed by Hans Zimmer and have been sung by Bryan Adams. The lyrics of each song have been carefully penned down so that they serve as the voice of Spirit. We could notice that Spirit's emotions are voiced out through the songs. Hence in the film, both Matt Damon as well as Bryan Adams serve as the voices for Spirit. Zimmer composes two types of background scores for the film, the first being lyrical where Spirit's emotions are voiced out by Adams and the second being non-lyrical where his feelings are expressed through actions. As we analyse the film through an anthropomorphic perspective the lyrics serve as a good source for study since we can understand his thought process through these songs. The story has been presented in a bildungsroman style whereby he starts his journey as a foal, later

growing up to become the leader of the herd, followed by his experiences as a captive within the cavalry, later on entering another human society, i.e. the camp of the Lakota Natives where he witnesses another aspect of humans. Following this he goes on to free all of the other horses who have been held captive in order to build the rail road and finally he wins freedom as well as respect for himself and Little Creek from the colonel and his men thus emerging as the undisputable hero of the story. We can analyse this film through a post-colonial angle too since Spirit presents a perfect example of a subaltern who has been oppressed by humans, i.e. the colonel and his men. The film narrates Spirit's experiences of being suppressed and how he frees himself as well as his kind, thereby reinstating his lost identity.

James Baxter, Spirit's animator took a lot of care in order to make the character believable. In order to give the right expressions he took the freedom to manipulate the features of Spirit. For example, the use of eyebrows is quite significant in all of the horses. In reality horses do not have eyebrows. However, since the characters need to portray a myriad of emotions the animators took the liberty in order to manipulate the physical features of the horses.

The story is set in 'old west' America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at a time when the U.S army was fighting against the original natives of America in order to establish their hold over there. The story begins with Spirit introducing us to his world.

The story that I want to tell you cannot be found in a book. They say that the history of the West was written from the saddle of a horse. But it's never been told from the heart of one, not till now. I was born in this place that would come to be called the Old West but to my kind the land was ageless. It had no beginning and no end- no boundary between earth and sky. Like the wind in the buffalo grass we belonged here. We would always belong here. They say that the mustang is the spirit of the west. Whether that West was won or lost in the end you'll have to decide for yourself, but the story I want to tell you

is true. I was there and I remember I remember the sun and the sky and the wind calling my name in a time when wild horses ran free. (*Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*)

Spirit's words inspire the viewer to analyse the film through the eyes of a stallion. The name 'Spirit' is metaphorical for the persona of the protagonist. In spite of facing difficult situations he never accepts defeat. He doesn't allow his inner spirit to bow down in front of suppression.

As mentioned before, the lyrics of the songs in the film play a seminal role in understanding Spirit closely. The opening song 'Here I am' portrays Spirit's feeling as a young foal. Each line brims with enthusiasm, curiosity and a feeling of security.

Here I am this is me

There's no where else on earth I'd rather be

Here I am it's just me and you

Tonight we make our dreams come true

It's a new world it's a new start

It's alive with the beating of young hearts

It's a new day it's a new plan

I've been waiting for you

Here I am...

Here we are we've just begun

And after all this time our time has come

Ya here we are still going strong

Right here in the place where we belong

It's a new world it's a new start

It's alive with the beating of young hearts

It's a new day it's a new plan

I've been waiting for you

Here I am

(Oh here I am) right next to you

(Oh here I am) and suddenly the world is all brand new

Here I am

I'm gonna stay

There's nothing standing in our way

Oh here I am (*Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*)

Spirit's words echo the feelings of the entire herd of horses in the valley. The words "here I am" signifies Spirit's enthusiasm to establish an identity for himself. Thus DreamWorks *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* serves as a perfect example of a post-colonial text since the protagonist becomes the subaltern hero.

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