

Embodying the ‘Animal’: Beyond Metaphor and Allegory in

Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone*

Sambuddha Ghosh

Assistant Professor

Chapra Government College

Nadia, West Bengal

India

Abstract

In the history of Western intellectual thought the category of the ‘animal’ has been always a liminal one which has simultaneously generated and thereby sealed off the domain of civilisation’ against itself. It has persisted as a Visceral Other, often haunting civilised imagination. The post-Enlightenment celebration of universal reason in the European consciousness and the Cartesian split between the mind and the body merely served to intensify this difference, serving further as an effective tool of justification for colonising the rest of the world.

However, what had begun along the familiar Enlightenment trajectory of suppressing the latent and recalcitrant strain in the reasonable mind ended at the turn of the 19th century through the new realisation of a fast disappearing store of ecological resources across the world. While the representation of animals in fiction has largely restricted itself to two identifiable strategies—either through the *fabula* (Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*) or the allegory (Orwell’s *Animal Farm*)—Barbara Gowdy’s novel, *The White Bone* (1998) is built upon this peculiar tension of imparting to animals which are, strictly speaking, ‘characters’ in the most loose sense of the term. Gowdy keeps the elementary structure of the ‘beast fable’ intact, while ‘humanising’ elephants on a quest for the mythical White Bone, a sacred relic that would secure their lives from the range of the poacher’s rifle forever, in order that she can summon an effective—if only provisional—resistance in the order of language against the layered silence which is generally born out of a crisis in representing animals who are themselves by-products of an inescapable anthropocentrism in the history of Western literature. This paper hopes to explore the novel’s exposition of this crisis through an ecocritical reading that is also persistently problematized by a half-ironic resolution of its postcolonial concerns.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Animal, Barbara Gowdy, Canadian Literature

In the history of Western intellectual thought the category of the ‘animal’ has been always a liminal one which has simultaneously generated and thereby sealed off the domain of ‘civilisation’ against itself. From its critical difference ‘from the category of the civilised, it has also helped the construction of civilisation by virtue of the selfsame difference. However, the category of the animal has always persisted as a Visceral other, often haunting civilised imagination. The post-Enlightenment celebration of universal reason in the European consciousness and the Cartesian split between the mind and the body merely served to intensify this difference. At the heyday of European colonising enterprise, tropes of animality dominated the European consciousness, serving as an effective tool and justification for colonising the rest of the world, especially Africa. But what had begun along the familiar Enlightenment trajectory of suppressing the latent and recalcitrant strain in the reasonable mind ended in a new realisation ended at the turn of the 19th century through the realisation of a fast disappearing wilderness across the world.

On the level of metaphor, animality was exploited at various levels, the most obvious and widespread of which is the racism and general miscegenation meted out to the slave. But animality has also haunted the Western mind in terms of its ‘inner unreason’, a perilous calamity in which the Colonial—and therefore by extension the inhuman and the wild other makes its return. What the Enlightenment agenda of sovereign reason had managed to extricate outside the domain of civility can be seen in terms of a repression and thereafter, a resurfacing from the primordial Heart of Darkness.

In terms of the major interests of postcolonialism—racial hatred, miscegenation and otherness, tropes of cannibalism and the literary representations of otherness—the rethinking of where animals belong vis-à-vis human society serves as a readily available entry point. However, there are many forms of exploiting the category of animality to serve the purpose of the dominant in any hegemony. For example, to deride, dehumanise large sections of human populations or to carry out mass genocides as large as the Holocaust the category of animality may be easily used. More sophisticated forms of ideological domination can be attempted by vilifying the object of empirical enquiry, with a view to satisfying the desire of knowledge and dissection. But the creative use of the category of ‘animal’ in aesthetic representation can also be used in the purpose of ideological resistance. Resistance here can be conceived in terms liquidating the conceptual parameters of the ‘animal’ category; simply speaking, metaphor can be literalised and instead of functioning as mere rhetorical tropes, an ecocritical rendering of animals might as well try to conceive of them as embodied beings. Of course, the familiar conflict between the anthropocentric and

biocentric being will come to dominate the discussion, pitted against each other on the question of priority. And any ideological project that conceives of dealing with such a problem must conceive of animals only in so far as they are fitting in a relationship of relationality with the ‘human’.

Katherine E. Young explores the representational category of the animal in her essay ‘Deleuze and Guattari: The Animal Question’, employing the basic principles of ‘deep ecology’ and ‘surface ecology’. Here, she says that as a subset of the environment, the animal rights question can be seen in two important ways, both of which use and exploit the theoretical underpinnings of Western legal thought:

- (1) We have an *a priori* obligation to uphold the natural rights of animals not to be harmed. (deontology)
- (2) Animal rights are created by the law to maximize social happiness for all sentient beings (utilitarianism). (Young, ‘Deleuze and Guattari: The Animal Question’, 245)

Both of these positions force animals into the ethico-political space traditionally set aside for humans and force us to question why we value the interests of humans over that of animals. However, as Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* expressed through his spokesperson Elizabeth Costello, the mistreatment of animals over the historical continuum is “inseparable from the arrogant belief in sovereign reason, a belief that has historically been used to legitimize dominion over the entire animal kingdom, as well as over large numbers of allegedly “inferior” members of the human race”. (J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* , 29-30)

Therefore, the dominant Western episteme of reason has resorted to a whole litany of excuses, and indulged freely in the mistreatment of animals, justified only in the name of ‘sovereign reason’ and looked at the ‘natural world’ as a “historically replenishable human resource”. And yet, the precise problem that lies in Elizabeth Costello’s disavowal of reason is that she cannot conceive of a position outside reason from where she can direct her disavowal. In other words, Costello has to come to terms with the painful acknowledgement that “reason will [always] validate reason as the first principle of the universe.” Yet Coetzee’s creative invocation of the ‘fable’ seems a particularly enabling way to look at the human-animal relationship. Firstly, it draws attention to the entire body of literature in which the beast fable has been used—such as Swift’s *Gulliver Travels* or Orwell’s *Animal Farm*—as the vehicle of man’s moral truths that might be of use in action.

In drawing upon the etymology of the word, we find that ‘fable’ could have been derived from falsehood, pretence or at least, storytelling in deceit. Therefore sovereign reason is temporarily suspended within the domain of the fable in place of which there takes place a speculative form of moral discourse.

However, as Huggan notes, Coetzee’s objective in *The Lives of Animals* is not merely to challenge or point out the inadequacies of sovereign reason but also to undermine those discourses of power that claim reason for their own. The logical consequence of sovereign reason is teleological thinking:

“Anthropocentrism emerges as one of these discourses; colonialism is a second; “phallogocentrism” is a third” (Derrida, quoted in Huggan, “‘Greening’ Postcolonialisms’, 711).

But there is also the added difficulty of pretending to speak for animals—the disempowered ones—who, as Elizabeth Costello describes, “have only their silence left with which to confront us”. There is another danger imminent in trying to replicate their discourse, one which bell hooks explored in trying to examine the veracity of the academic in ventriloquising the subaltern:

“No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk.” (hooks, ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’, 54)

How then to confront or resist the overarching anthropocentric concern that lies at the heart of most literary representations of animals, placing the burden of moral truths or human qualities on their shoulders? This is the dilemma which invades any creative visualisation of animals and animal life in fiction. Steve Baker uses the theoretical paradigms of natural representation in Kate Soper’s book, *What is Nature?* There seems to be, Baker suggests, a distinction in ideas regarding ‘nature’ and natural representation through the conflicting concerns of ecocriticism and postmodern enquiry: “The former is concerned primary with the —nature that we are destroying, wasting and polluting; the latter —with the ways in which relations to the non-human world are always historically meditated.” (Soper, quoted in Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 2009, 8)

This difference between the ‘nature-sceptical’ and ‘nature-endorsing’ positions is reused by Baker in the context of representations of animals in postmodern art, though

admitting that this does not necessarily project any simplistic antithesis between ‘green’ and ‘postmodernist’ politics. Animal-endorsing art "will tend to endorse animal life itself (and may therefore align itself with the work of conservationists or . . . animal advocacy)"; the latter "is likely to be sceptical not of animals themselves (as if the very existence of nonhuman life was in question), but rather of culture's means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human" (Baker, 9)

Barbara Gowdy's 1998 novel, *The White Bone*, is constructed on this peculiar tension of imparting to animals, which are, strictly speaking, ‘characters’ in the most loose sense of the term—their ‘real’ selves in order that they are made credible for what they are, and not as vehicles of a moral fable. Avoiding the ‘allegory trap’ is the foremost among Gowdy's objectives, and given that she was drawing upon Kipling's extremely popular animal fables, *Just So Stories* (1980) and *The Jungle Book* (1894), her task was not an easy one. However, as Huggan notes, Gowdy keeps the basic frame of the beast fable unaltered; her characters—who are elephants—are capable of communication among themselves, engaging in discourses, constructing a stratified society and harbouring a quasi-Biblical framework of religious beliefs as well as harbouring a cosmological myth of creation. But this is the extent to which they are ‘humanised’, for these elephants are too self-conscious and know for a fact that their hope of surviving in the world is painfully contingent upon the will of their human ‘others’. Gowdy also incorporates elements of the Judaeo-Christian Quest Story, which is at the same time the toilsome and uncertain search for the desired relic that will relieve the elephants of their imprisonment to the wills of human poachers who threaten their survival and also a reconstruction of how they see themselves in relation to and within an increasingly hostile world.

The novel tracks an elephant herd's quest across the dry African savannah in their search for the mythical White Bone, the rib of a newborn elephant calf, which is fabled to lead them to The Safe Place, the promised land of survival and security. Gowdy employs a number of intelligent textual manoeuvres through which the story is narrated via the emerging selfhood of the young elephant Mud, who passes from her calthood to be initiated as a member of the Elephant fraternity. Moreover, unlike Kipling's jungle characters, Gowdy's elephants are trapped among hostile humans and uncooperative fellow animals. This is the dreaded —time of darkness‡ in which whatever help was available from the jungle ecosystem has disappeared. But these times had already been prophesied in Elephant mythology:

“The emergence of humans did not, as is widely assumed, initiate a time of

darkness. On the contrary, in the first generations following the Descent, The Domain was a glorious place, and this is partly because humans back then were nothing like today's breed. They ate flesh, yes, and they were unrepentant and wrathful, but they killed only to eat, and very few of them had a taste for she-ones. There weren't any massacres or mutilations. There was plenitude and ease, and between she-ones and other creatures was a rare communion, for... all she-ones were mind talkers, and the minds of all creatures were intelligible." (p. 42)

After the Fall of elephants, water and grazing disappeared, —various species grew wary of each other, and the minds of humans, snakes and insects became impenetrable. (p. 43). But this was preceded by the creation of human beings themselves from elephants. The Descent which took place ten thousand years ago, occurred when —a bull and a cow ate a gazelle and in so doing broke the first and most sacred law: "You shall eat no creature, living or dead" (p. 7). After the event, the miscreants' bodies shrank to human size and being enraged by the loss of their bodies, they declared themselves carnivores. Thus by inverting the primacy of humans in the elephant universe, Gowdy displaces them from the centre of the Creation myth and instead privileges the elephant.

In order to create a credible elephant universe for her novel, Gowdy has undertaken the painstakingly arduous task of documenting in detail the lives, practices, society, belief systems and values for the elephant universe. The She is the all-powerful mother of elephants who had been created all in her image, and therefore they are called the She-ones. All animals excepting elephants and human beings were created by the fickle and deceitful Rogue, son of the Great She. The society is a matriarchal one which accepts the ascendancy of the females over the males. A Cow is therefore more valued than a Bull (though Bulls do have their own uses) in an elephant family, and generally has access to powers that the Bulls do not have—such as being a Visionary (being able to envision the future, across spatial distances as well as the 'now time') or a Mindtalker (being able to engage in telepathic communication with ones of her own kind as well as other forest creatures, except snakes and humans). The cow-calf has to be initiated at an appropriate age into the order of the matriarchy, in failure of which she is denied port to the Kingdom of the She and ends up in The Eternal Shoreless Water, the site of Oblivion, where the souls of deceased bulls, calfs and tuskless cows go. There are several leading elephant families in the region, all named after their matriarchs, such as the She-S's, the She-D's, the She-M's and the She-B's-and-B's. Forms of elephant communication is generally carried out through speech as Mind talking is something not every elephant is entitled to, besides the fact that it

is generally discouraged, since it bears the indelible imprint of deceit which resulted out of the Primal Sin.

The elaborate network of imaginings Gowdy creates for her elephants also extends to the peculiarities of their language and diction. Elephant-language is built upon the founding principle of ‘difference’ from humans (as indeed, all Elephant institutions are) with peculiar turns of phrase. A few examples will illustrate this better. When elephants find themselves ‘upwind of an odour’, they say “The air is theirs”; when they are downwind and can catch the odour they say “The air is ours.” (p. 17). Likewise, an expression akin to “pulling the wool over someone’s eyes” in human speech that describes hoodwinking would translate in elephant language as “throwing a hollow pod” to someone. (p. 249).

Gowdy creates an entirely new language artfully constructed from the recesses of elephant-subjectivity and their envisioning of the world as enunciators. An entire glossary is devoted to elephant speech. Thus, to the elephants a human is a ‘hindlegger’, the Earth is the ‘Domain’, soulfulness or depth of spirit is ‘Trunk’, a cheetah is a ‘Longbody’, oestrus is ‘Delirium’ and the period of heightened sexual activity in Bulls is ‘Musth’. Depictions of animal-language and communication in the manner of humans have been used for a long time in children’s fictions and animal-fables, but their purpose is different from Gowdy’s. In fact, in *The White Bone*, representations of elephant-language is necessarily subject to problematisation, as any rendering which ‘humanises’ them is dangerously susceptible to either infantilism (as talking animals in children’s fiction) or becoming the vehicle of an allegory. The act of rendering voices to the elephants is not done in a manner which is

anthropocentric (that is, dependent for its very existence on human speech) but anthropomorphised (constructed in the manner or likeness of human speech acts). (Huggan and Tiffin, ‘Ivory and Elephants’, 153-154). This is essential in a novel with elephant protagonists if it has to develop a form of dramatic intimacy of its characters to the reader. But Gowdy realizes that an over-indulgence in trying to construct a relationship of affect with the reader might border on sentimentalisation. Therefore, the tale is narrated from the perspective of elephants but is yet kept linguistically distant from the reader by using a third-person narrative (a fact which I found overlooked interestingly in the back cover of the book which claims that the tale is —told from the perspective of a young elephant named Mudl, while the tale is actually told from perspectives of several elephants in the novel, notably Date Bed, Tall Time the Link Bull, She Snorts, She

Soothes and Mud). Using nominal verb changes from human narration in the course of enunciation, Gowdy approximates the speech of elephants:

“He turned away but Torrent bellowed, “I’ve been wanting to talk to you!”

...The big bull folded his ears and rumbled something menacing and then threw up his great head in which his eyes flew, mad and murderous. Tall Time ran.

“Stop!”, Torrent roared. (p. 62)

...

“I dare say”, Tall Time rumbled.

“By the She!” Torrent bellowed. He made another test of the air. Shut his eyes. But he stayed where he was.” (p. 66)

The quoted sections reveal what Gowdy aims at while describing elephant conversation. By using verbs such as ‘rumbled’, ‘bellowed’ or ‘trumpeted’, she tries to bring the diction as close as possible to elephant speech without alienating her (human) readers completely. At the same time, she does not speech the only form of elephant communication. Other methods, such as smelling, sending ‘infrasonic rumbles’ that can travel along great distances, singing, choral hymns sung by elephant groups for mourning the dead, touching or caressing each other with their trunks as a gesture of formal greeting are certain other forms through which elephants communicate which adds to their credibility in the novel.

Elephant consciousness is endowed with an extraordinary capacity for memory, one that exceeds human memory easily. Quite early in the novel Gowdy tells us that,

“...every odour they have sucked into their trunks, every flicker of sunlight they have ever doused with their tremendous shadows is preserved inside them as a perfect and instantly retrievable moment. They rarely ask, Do you remember? The remembering is taken for granted.”

(p. 1)

But in rendering elephant memory prodigious Gowdy also circumvents the Cartesian split between the body and the mind which has been held for long as the cultural construct that enables human beings to transcend animality. Dreaming, reflection, the need for quiet as well as metaphysical explanation is rooted in elephant memory only through

sensory experience. Sense of smell, touch and taste populate their memories. Only when elephants grow too old does their memory begins to drain out of them. But this process of memory leakage is never allowed to happen as Gowdy remarks with suitable irony:

“Most of them don’t live that long. Nine out of ten are slaughtered in their prime, decades before their memories have started to drain. I speak of the majority then, when I say it is true what you’ve heard; they never forget.” (p. 1)

But memory is not only significant to the present; it is also indelibly etched onto the landscape the elephants have inhabited since eternity. The history of a glorious present burdens the elephant mind in a fallen world where their hope for survival is made excruciatingly difficult with the worst drought in living memory. All precious links to that prelapsarian past have been destroyed. Even the links that relate “everything to everything else” (p. 67), visible to Tall Time the Link Bull seem devoid of meaning. The cynicism of the present is a result of the afflicted cosmos of hostility which however is all of the more burdensome because of its link with an ancestral, heroic past which promised divine certitude:

“Everything has been ordained by the She”, , she [She Demands] goes on in her soft, battered voice. —Therefore everything must already have been imagined by the She. We live only because we live in her imagination. Your life, as you experience it, it is the She recollecting what the She has already imagined. We *are* memory. We are living memory.” (p. 83)

But the burden of memory is also the impending sense of loss of the community and well as a heralding of death. This overarching pathos that invades elephant memory is hinted at in the epigraph of the novel, quoted from The Eighth Elegy of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*:

“Yet in the alert, warm animal there lies
the pain and burden of an enormous
sadness. For it too feels the presence of
what often overwhelms us: a memory, as
if

the element we keep pressing toward was once more intimate, more true, and our communion infinitely tender.” (quoted in Gowdy, n. Page)

Rilke’s poem is instrumental in reversing the hegemonic domination of human consciousness over the animal, as it privileges the animal with regard to its access to the real. The classical determinism of the human animal as the primal Being whose rationality is regarded as the unique source all possible knowledge is regarded by Rilke as flawed, as humans, unlike the animal, fail to have that unmediated access to what ‘is’. This is expressed at the beginning of ‘The Eighth Elegy’:

“With all its eyes the natural world looks out
into the Open. Only our eyes are turned
backward, and surround plant, animal,
child
like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.
We know what is really out there only from
the animal’s gaze; for we take the very
young child and force it around, so that it
sees objects—not the Open, which is so
deep in animals’ faces. “

As Calarco states, Rilke portrays rationality and human consciousness as flawed means of accessing what *is*. Human knowledge ‘mirrors’ and ‘arranges’ what is but is never able to see the open in an unmediated manner, a capacity that is unique to animals.

It is in this sense that the ir- or a- rational animal is superior to the rational human of Western metaphysics in Rilke’s elegies. (Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, 35)

An interesting reading of *The White Bone* has been put forward by Graham Huggan who feels that in spite of Gowdy’s mythification of the landscape the elephants inhabit, its description recalls much of the East African plains where, after the implementation of the ban on the ivory trade in Africa in 1989 via the CITES agreement, elephants are supposed to have an ‘officially’ protected habitat while under rapidly

increasing pressure of human habitation they are compressed into smaller and smaller spaces and “pushed into relatively protected enclaves of wildlife parks and sanctuaries”. (Huggan, “‘Greening’ Postcolonialisms’, 715-716.)

This is all the more ironic in view of Gowdy’s description of The Safe Place the elephants try to reach, where peaceful ‘hindleggers’ who have got back their memories from the Descent “gape at the she-ones” all day in hope that in doing so, “they will inflate back to what they were.” (p. 74) recalling a protected wildlife park where they are destined to be ‘safe’ within a limited habitat. This parodies the movement for conservation, which is at best a provisional solution against rapacious human greed for ivory which has resurfaced even after the CITES ban.

In writing *The White Bone*, Gowdy seems to have been retrospectively looking back at one of the paradigmatic texts of colonial contact: *Heart of Darkness*, where the European greed for ivory is the motive that spurs the officials of the Company to slaughter African slaves and elephants alike in the Belgian Congo. Marlow’s discerning of ‘a taint of imbecile rapacity’ at the meaning that the word ‘ivory’ might hold for the Company is crucially devoid of any mention to slaves or elephants who are replaced with ‘ivory’ and ‘corpse’. Thus ‘ivory’ and ‘corpse’ serve as metonyms for slaughtered elephants and slaves in the novel. Though slaves are present in the

Heart of Darkness, elephants are the crucially ‘absent referents’ in them. (Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 144-145). Gowdy thus makes it a point to ‘embody’ the African elephant. Writing of the novel in *The Boston Book Review*, Nick LoLordo also reaches the same conclusion.ⁱ

In the broader context of the human-animal question, *The White Bone* might also be harking back to the essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ by George Orwell. Despite his exposition and particularly vivid understanding of the hollowness of the position of the ‘Sahib’ in the subcontinent, Orwell measures the value of the murdered elephant’s life strictly in terms of human counterparts—the Coringhee coolie who was killed by the elephant in its state of ‘musth’, for example—and by the end of the essay concludes that “...[he] was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put [him] legally in the right and it gave [him] a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant.” (Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’). Gowdy inverts this equation by showing in her novel that hostility resides entirely within the ‘hindleggers’ whose motives for shooting the elephants down (or sawing off their tusks)

is incomprehensible to the elephants themselves. This inverts the familiar categories of civilisation of barbarity which justified the overall European venture colonisation from the elephant perspective. The thought of Date Bed's death during the slaughter makes Mud furiously kicking shovels of dust, "something *humanely barbarous* fermenting within her" (p. 93, italics added).

Thus, *The White Bone*, by locating and embodying the African elephant tries to reconstruct imaginatively what 'survival' might mean to the vast category of those non-human others whom anthropocentric bias has managed to delineate over centuries. With its concerns over the use and abuse of authority it certainly qualifies as a text which raises significant issues relevant to the overlapping fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Yet the path is dangerous, since it can give rise to certain misreadings that depend upon evoking and mobilising unwanted human sympathy. In other words, it seems to echo the opinions of American ecofeminist Linda Vance that narratives that purport to give voices to animals do not appeal to human sympathy on the plea that elephants deserve to survive because they are like humans; but that they deserve to survive because they are themselves. With some of the novel's inclinations towards anthropomorphisation, Gowdy also metafictionally dwells on the very impossibilities of her aim. Hence the novel is able to accomplish what it does, because Gowdy is only too aware of the problems inherent in representing animals not in relation to human beings.

Notes

i. Gowdy, *The White Bone*, n. Page. LoLordo writes "Brilliant...Gowdy's elephants are astonishingly *embodied*, their world made up of vivid sensory particulars and depicted with precise naturalistic realism...The pathos of their condition, its recognisability, is, in the end, the book's most lasting effect."

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