

Animal Stories and The Readers' Dilemma

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Are you old enough to convincingly start a story with, "You know? When I was a child, I used to..."?

Surprisingly, when I was indeed a child, too many of my stories began with "You know? When I will grow up, I will...".

Those days, it seemed, all the stories worth telling would take place only in the future. Everything seemed too limited in the present. Too many rules, routines, prohibitions, too less power to do anything at all.

Maybe someday each of us would reach a point, when it would seem that all the stories worth telling took place only in the past. But then, there is not much difference between these, is there? Both ways, the stories travel in time – people to people, ghost to ghost, life to life. Sometimes it even feels as if the present is a slice of mirror which has two sides – past and future. Between the reflections, the undone gets done, the said gets unsaid, those which are unseen and unheard becomes so real that one can touch it. The real stories transform into dreams, or vanish into nothing, continuously.

Talking about stories, dreams and realities constantly interchanging, I recently reread a story of an ugly old tomcat, who dreamed of marrying a little swallow. And guess what! To everybody's surprise, disgust and fear (for the swallow, of course) the little bird actually liked him – although she teased the hell out of him pointing at his age and his ugliness! They hung around over open fields, in the cool midspring shadows of the pond-side trees, without giving a damn about how the ducks sneered, the hens gossiped, the cows disapproved and the cockatoo got absolutely enraged. After all, nobody could blame these animals for judging the tomcat, since cats were evil villains – as everybody knew without a shred of doubt, from the history taught to them by the all-knowing cockatoo, who always had the last say in all matters of that little farm. In spite of such severe disapprovals, the tomcat's dream came to reality. An untruth suddenly became a truth.

This is not my story. Well of course it is not mine, I'm neither a tomcat, nor a swallow – but what I mean is that it's not even written by me. Although, you know, when I read it as a child, I dreamed of it many times – I loved it so much! This was a story told by a Brazilian man called Jorge Leal Amado de Faria. Just in case you are giggling, let me remind you that we too have had famous men among us named Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam and Hardanahalli Doddegowda Deve Gowda! Nevertheless, boy, what a story it was! What a beautiful perspective of a little South American farm – possible just like the one Jorge himself was born in. I won't spoil the story for you by telling you the ending, in case you feel like reading it. But, I'm curious; what do you think happened at the end? Did the tomcat's version of reality remain a reality? Or did it transform back to a dream again? Did the cockatoo's version of the history win over the tomcat's version of the dream? Who was good? Who was evil? Who was telling the truth and who was lying?

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When I was a child, I also adored the story of Mowgli. Who is Mowgli? Why, the British-Indian writer Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book Hero? Who got lost in the forests of Seoni in Madhya Pradesh as a baby and was raised by a pack of wolves? Those of you, who have read it, or have watched some of the movies based on the story – do you remember how he was under the constant risk of being hunted down by Shere Khan – the Bengal tiger that we all knew without a shred of doubt was extremely evil? Shere Khan despised the man-cub in the forest with all his heart.

So many nights I have had dreams about those irresistible forests of Seoni! As if I was Mowgli himself. I too jumped from one tangled creeper to another, flying over the top of my wolf-pack – Tarzan-style! Yoo-hoo! A jungle. A strange place, which was at the same time mine, but not mine.

But say, if I'm Mowgli, was that MY wolf-pack, MY jungle? Was the wolf-pack Mowgli's, or Mowgli the wolf-pack's? You see, if I raise a pet dog, I call her my dog. But then, if I'm raised by a pack of wolves, should I still call them my wolves, or would then the wolves call me their man-cub? The more I read the story of Mowgli, the more I was confused – let me discuss with you why:

We, as readers of this story, are standing between two opposing sides. Man invaded the forest – building localities, burning trees, killing animals, being killed by them too, but always winning in the end. Shere Khan – wounded earlier by a manmade fire – saw Mowgli as an enemy. If we think of Jungle Book from his point of view, what do we see? Some dangerous two-legged animals surrounding my land, killing my kin, hurting me, and finally planting a cub of their kind in my territory? So who is good in this story? Who is evil?

As we grow up, we learn from our books that invasion is bad, don't we? Or that, at least, some invasions are bad. But how do we decide which one is bad and which one isn't? We learn that we should never steal what is others', that we should be just and fair. Is Mowgli – as a human – stealing what does not belong to him? The jungle?

But Mowgli is a 'good' human – he does not want to harm the forest. Instead, he wants to become a forest-dweller beast, who cares for it – thanks to his bringing up with other animals. And yet, he unknowingly ends up burning parts of the forest with the same manmade fire – the same fire that killed Shere Khan. What Shere Khan is doing here to the human child has two big names – a) stereotyping, b) racial discrimination. That means, he thinks that all humans are evil (racial discrimination), and since Mowgli is a human, he must be evil too (stereotyping). Now what do we do? Whom do we support? We are face to face with a reader's dilemma.

Stories and histories are a lot about power. One king winning power over another king, one species winning wars over another species, one race making another race disappear from the earth's surface. Whichever version of a story or the human history we read, whatever dreams we pursue, we cannot run away from dilemmas. When we are children, we feel, we have too less power. And it is true. But then, when our parents say, we should have less power than them, for a while, for our own good, that's not entirely false either, or is it? If you ask me, I'll give you a very honest, very annoying and very problematic answer – "I don't know! What do you think?"

So, we are taught that invasion is evil, but we are also taught, in order to improve (and become powerful), we must invade, we must win. And this conflict, leading to many dilemmas, becomes most obvious when we think of our 'animal stories', since a big chunk of human history was invested in winning over non-human animals. In the 21st century, we have managed to make most of other living beings extinct in our world, by hunting, taking away their habitations, inflicting diseases on them. We have killed them for consuming their bodies in many ways. You may have heard of the dodo bird in the coastal forests of Mauritius, or the sea cow from the North Pacific ocean – they disappeared this way. In India, we keep killing the rhinoceroses and tigers (especially Bengal tigers – the very species that Shere Khan belonged to) for skin and other body parts. We have also invaded for winning territories. Such as, the increasing human inhabitation has led to the extinction of Californian Tecopa Pupfish or the Japanese Honshu wolf, or various big cats such as tigers and lions. As you read this, animals are being provoked and chased out of their lands. And when they are reacting in order to survive, they are being killed – tantalizing the ecology in general. Many stories have been written on this topic. Some speak from the invader humans' perspective, some from the invaded animals'. We assume that non-humans cannot make histories or stories. If they did, how would that be? It is a tricky practice assuming such things though. Eventually, we even start assuming that it is us and only us who have the power to tell what the past really was, how our imaginations may work. This 'us' can be anything – a nation, a religion, a race, or even just an individual – a very narrow 'us', with a very narrow sense of reality and dreams.

Which way do we choose to go? What stories do we write? How do we read the stories that have already been written? For example, when we are reading Jungle Book just as Mr. Kipling had written it, we are reading the story neither from the viewpoint of Mowgli, nor the tiger, nor the wolves, nor the people, who ended up building their huts at the edge of the forest instead of nice and safe cities. Instead, maybe we are simply reading the viewpoint of none other than Kipling himself. It is Kipling, who is choosing human invasion over human empathy. Maybe, by presenting Shere Khan as the lone tiger's voice in his novel, by painting him in all possible colours of evilness, it is Kipling, who is stereotyping the tiger, just like the all-knowing cockatoo did to the tomcat. It is like what a fellow writer once wrote: Shere Khan has no other way than losing the battle in this story. He is tied to this role by the writer, and he remains tied there by the later film-makers too.

I feel bad saying all this, not having the opportunity to have met Mr. Kipling (it would have been quite odd if I had met him, since he died close to half a century before I was born). But forget me! I am easily confused. There are so many other clever people who think that in this book, the jungle is an image of India, and Mowgli is an image of the British ruler, who in Kipling's eyes is innocent and well-meaning, yet more intelligent and hence, more powerful than the jungle! The evilness and insecurities of the tiger are an image of the conservative native, who tends to challenge these benevolent rulers, to stop them from helping them. Thus, as if Mowgli has no other choice than saving the jungle for its own good from the clutch of the tiger by killing him. The tiger is against Mowgli, hence he is against 'Mowgli's forest'.

No wonder people didn't like Kipling. After all it was him, who wrote a long poem called The White Man's Burden, in which he wrote that the poor white-skinned ruler must take up the responsibility of

keeping the world in order. He actually called – and I'm not joking – the ruled races as “new-caught sullen peoples/ half devil and half child.” No wonder his Indian readers were sullen at him!

But then, is that all we read into a story? Like an American actor once wrote: although it is true that we cannot read a story just by believing everything it says (the writer is after all, a human, be it Chetan Bhagat writing novels, or Yajnavalkya writing Vedas), we cannot also turn a story into what WE want to say. For example, Sikov writes, after all Mowgli was an Indian boy, not British – not even a half-British one like Kipling himself. Not only that, Kipling does not always try to lead Mowgli to a happy ending, even though he is the hero of the story. At some point, he gets exiled from the forest, but he also does not feel at home in the human-village; at that point, he almost becomes what we call a tragic hero, whom we cannot easily decide whether to call good or bad.

But whether you go for a pro-Kipling toss or an anti-Kipling toss, do you agree with me that I have good reasons for falling into dilemmas while reading animal stories? But tell you what, thinking about stories, getting more and more confused about them, is good fun. Who wants a life, where everything takes place in order, and one never has to worry about anything!

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Don't all these discussions about humans and other animals and who owns whom remind you of all the animal 'vahanas' of the Hindu gods? Since we are talking about cats and giant cats, i.e. tigers, lions etc. being evil or not, at least let's think of our revered goddess Durga's vahanas – varying between a lion and a tiger. In fact, let Durga be, for she is only a young Aryan goddess – appeared only around AD 400-600 in Markendeya Puranam, whereas think of the few thousands of years older, ancient Mohenjo-daro seals. Some of these seals showed men and women riding tigers, or battling with them. Several of them have been considered as tiger-gods and goddesses, some of whom are possibly still worshipped in various forest areas of India – the rituals being handed down for generations among farmers, fishermen, honey-collectors, woodcutters, Adivasis, who dwell close to the forests. If you look closely, there is quite a difference the way these ancient tiger-gods are treated, and the way we look at Durga's 'vahana's. In the case of Durga, the show-stealer is the goddess herself. We do enjoy looking at the 'vahana', but in spite of knowing many stories about the goddess herself, we hardly know anything about the history of the giant cat fighting alongside her.

It is not the same with the Adivasi goddesses. For example, let me tell you the story of the Kollong and Ullatar tribes of Kerala. Do you think it is necessary to kill tigers to keep yourself safe? But then, do all these discussions about invasions being good or bad confuse you regarding this matter? Then think of these tribes. For them, this dilemma is real – an everyday matter. And this is how they look at it:

They believe that a tiger is a son of the goddess Parasakthi, so they strongly avoid killing a tiger. Even if they have been forced to kill one, they become sad, they repent – almost like having killed a brother. Similarly, in the forest area of South Bengal, the local residents whose lives revolve around the forest strongly believe that they can very well coexist with the tigers – with the nature in general. All they need is a faithful submission to the forest deities, like Ban Bibi, Dakshinraay, Asan Bibi et al. They accept that, as they are sometimes forced to hurt the animals and the trees, they too must be open to the fact that

such hurts would fall upon them, when the nature wills. That a necessity would arise within the natural system for their own body and soul to be absorbed by it. Such stories of truly internalizing the animals are different from owning a 'vahana'. These stories are not about ownerships and judgements, don't you think? How do you think they are different? To me, at least, such stories give some sort of an answer to the invasion question that we were worrying about. Somehow, they attempt to say: winning is not everything in life, that every life, every death must come from a very basic, honest, natural necessity. What we take from nature, we must give back, and we must never take more than the bare necessity: strange things like that...

As for the 'vahana'-dependent gods, they are happy battling or blessing around, while sitting on the backs of their owned pets. What if these 'vahana's decide to shake their backs one fine morning and refuse to carry the gods around? A man named George Orwell wrote a very interesting story with a similar beginning. It's called Animal Farm. Have you read it? No? You must read it someday. It is a story based on another farm, where one day the animals just come together and decide they will take over their human owners.

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Animals stories are so interesting and so full of beautiful, terrific, painful dilemmas, that writers, artists, film-makers keep going back to them for creating new narratives. There is a Japanese animation-film-maker called Hayao Miyazaki, who is in love with the nature. All his narratives speak about how the human civilization – in spite of being so technologically advanced, knows so little about nature. Some of his stories are beautiful and sweet, like My Neighbour Totoro. It narrates how a friendship grew between two little girls and a massive bear-like animal named Totoro, who could only be met by children who were sad, alone and in desperate need of a friend. It was Totoro that took care of the forest, next to which these girls lived; he protected it, nurtured it. Totoro's love for these girls was not different from Totoro's love for the trees, the grass, the moon and the wind. It is Totoro that led these girls to some wonderful adventures.

But the same Miyazaki created movies which are ominous and terrifying. In his movie named Princess Mononoke, we meet another Mowgli-like child living with the wolves, although it is a story very much unlike Jungle Book. Here, Mononoke – the wolf-bred jungle-child – does not suffer from a lack of belongingness. Her sole effort is into saving the forest from human violence. The city-people come to win over the forest with guns, but with every act of violence committed by the humans, the forest gets polluted. The anger of loss and pain gets accumulated within the bodies of the forest gods – the wild boars, who so far lived in peace with the humans. They start falling sick – thousands of biting worms of hatred wriggling around their bodies – they become destructive, demonic. Once humans and the forest – both go mad with violence, devastation knows no stopping. Who is good? Who is evil?

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Of course, it is one thing to empathize with characters in stories and another to deal with them everyday. But as far as I understand, when I read stories, they sometimes make me think, and later when I need to make a decision, sometimes, somehow, those thoughts which were disjoint and floating

here and there, come back to me in a string to help me out. Likewise, maybe some of you, after thinking about the differences between invasion to nature and borrowing from nature, will actually find it odd, if you see some of your friends catching a frog and kicking it around, or tearing the wings of cockroaches and flies. By the way, that reminds me of another story about a girl who used to tear the wings of cockroaches and flies, and how, when she once fell into a large pit and got stuck at its bottom – all those cockroaches kept crawling on her face. They had to crawl, you see, since they did not have their wings anymore! Scary, no? Could this have really happened? Or like Jungle book was an image of India versus Britain, this is also an image of something? A good image? An evil image?

When we read or write an animal story, we mostly try to reflect human images in them. This too can be thought of as some kind of invasion, you may feel. And it indeed is. But that is a kind of invasion that one may sometimes agree to be lenient with. After all, even if we are reading a story about other humans, we feel strongly about them only when we are able to see ourselves in them, isn't it? We identify with one or more characters and start looking at the rest of them from their, that is, our points of view. This is a bit like playing a video game, where you become the adventurer in the screen, but books – unlike video games – are open ended. We don't read a book to achieve a goal, to win, we just read them anyway, like we go on living day-by-day, anyway. As we live, we try to learn many new truths, face many new dilemmas. Sometimes, books help.

Some days, I think of all those open spaces, where I roamed around at my own will, but cannot anymore. A playfield that has turned into a multi-storied building, a close-friend who don't hear from anymore, a book that I read a hundred time but suddenly lost... Those days I feel more like an animal than ever. You may have heard the phrase: "like a caged animal". A writer uses this phrase to give the reader an image of someone who was free to do something, but cannot anymore. Such days, I get this feeling of a caged animal. After all, a cage does not always mean a real cage. If you have read King-Kong, you know how the humans invaded the land of this giant gorilla, how they provoked him to come out of his habitat, and how they finally killed him after cornering him (if you can call the tip of a tower a corner, that is). He was caged – not just when he died, but the moment the human invaders entered the island that was his own space to roam around freely. Likewise, when in Tintin in Tibet, Tintin rescued his friend Chang from the abode of the Yeti, the Yeti, who loved Chang, was caged within the last frame of the comics book – a circle closing in around him, as he was watching from a hidden place his loved one being taken away by some strange, dangerous animals. Caging comes as the next step of invasion, in many ways.

There is a strange streak of cruelty within human civilization – not only we always choose to invade and cage, we actually celebrate that process. It is a dangerous thing because, as we know, our recklessness slowly leads to our own extinction too. First the other animals go one by one, the trees, the water, the sun, and then at some point, none of us remains to tell histories or stories anymore. Many animal stories are images of such cruel celebrations – posed to us falsely as blessings, but we must never forget that they are nothing but a specific version of a story that has infinitely many heads. Take for example the story of Nian – the Chinese monster. Like Shere Khan, like Mononoke's boar-gods, like the Yeti in Tintin's story, he lived freely in a forest. Then the humans came, the eternal battle for territory began. The gods and the humans worked hand-in-hand to scare him with the things he feared – fire and loud noise – and caged him inside a mountain – chained all alone. And that is one of the spectacular Chinese animal-

effigies that you might have seen in photos during the celebration of the Chinese new year. Who was Nian? Maybe he was really one of the giant prehistoric animals somehow surviving in the Chinese forests. Did he die chained, stuck under the hilly rocks – wounded and alone? Maybe this is yet another story of extinction that instead of repenting we are encouraged to celebrate. Instead of addressing our dilemmas, we are encouraged to bury them altogether.

Human history is made of such truths, such untruths, dreams and realities. It is like a living animal – a juxtaposition of many histories – many other animals – that keep changing their forms. These many histories too have pasts, presents and futures of their own, depending on who wrote them, for whom. In many ways, a history is just like a story. In fact, in old French and English from a certain period, history and story meant the same thing! It was only much later history started being somewhat falsely posed as an absolute truth with no dilemmas. But stories remained as a space, where people could still be free to play around with the dilemmas, see them from various angles, through various lenses. Animal stories cover some such angles and lenses. We read them, and write them in our constant effort to fight against those who tend to invade and cage this space too.