

The Whisper Getting Louder: Articulating the Posthuman in Select Animated Movies

Reshma P. K. & Nithin Lal

Research Scholars in English Language & Literature, Institute of English,
University of Kerala.

Abstract

What if Gaia had the agency to raze all the concrete jungles that dug deep into her system and stung like a bee? What if she uprooted all of humanity and whooshed them away? Human beings are likely to raise the question: How will the earth survive without us? The answer is simple- nothing will happen to Gaia, she will breathe blissfully, and live on; adapting to the changes. Umpteen narratives started to question the prevailing anthropocentrism and this comes under the broad burgeoning area of Posthumanism. According to Anthony Dungan the theoretical framework of posthumanism attempts to reimagine what a human is or rethink humanity's place in the society. It can be from the perspective of a world without humans, or by replacing the authority of humans as the supreme beings. Visual media plays a pivotal role in revamping such idealised notions. Through his thought-provoking visual animated short movies, stalwarts like Steve Cutts have questioned the notion of anthropocentrism, and his visual narratives have won international critical acclaim. The present study will focus on

the posthuman elements in portraying the non-humans in select animated movies in the light of Animal Studies and Ecology.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Non-humans, Animal Studies, Anthropocentrism, Ecology, Visual Media, Animated Movies.

“If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to the man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth.” –Chief Seattle.

From time immemorial narratives sprouted here and there purporting the importance of oneness among all-natural resources in our universe and thus thwarting anthropocentrism, the idea under the title “Posthumanism,” garnered much critical acclaim, recently as a promising field of study, a number of research works happen in the area and thus inviting the popular attention among such topics which is definitely the need of the hour.

While the term *posthumanism* seems to suggest life beyond biology, and sometimes more specifically human life beyond the current bounds of humanity, it also signals a renewed interest in the biological world, ideas of human animality, and our kinship with other creatures (as we see in the field of animal studies), as well as new integrations and manipulations of information and biological technologies. (Feder 226)

By replacing anthropocentric notions, such ecocritical assumptions (esp. Animal Studies) welcome a broader perspective where the very idea of naming something ‘non-human’ is questioned enormously. The relationship between humans and non-humans goes back centuries. The prehistoric cave paintings amply narrate the pre-occupation. But, non-humans are depicted in such narratives as something that is to be ‘controlled’ or simply ‘chained down’ and something that is to be consumed in order to satisfy human hunger. Novel literary-critical areas like human-animal studies address the voices of the under-representatives. These new arenas opened up new vistas and questioned the uniqueness of human beings. Like Animal Studies, Transhumanism too opened up

to think about human supremacy over the world. Sophia, the first robot to receive citizenship of Saudi Arabia, triggered a nightmare among the highest-ranking human beings proving that living in a highly technological world and controlled by artificial intelligence, being a mere human being counts for nothing.

Coming back to posthumanism and animal studies, Cary Wolfe through his *What is Posthumanism?* argues that “the posthuman challenge of this field is lost when ‘the anima’ becomes simply another ‘object’ of study (xxix). Thus, animal studies as a new field fill the less addressed gap, where animals are treated as being more than mere objects. Further, it thwarts the stereotypical binaries created by man to define what a non-human is. This posthumanist turn or thinking beyond the human created a wave in different domains. Like that, Environmental Justice stands to thwart the very idea of ‘one standard fit all.’ This widely accepted notion is spreading not only in the case of environmental justice but the very attitude of the Global North towards the Global south is also a good example, the white man dominates the world. Looking from the perspective of environmental justice,

“A large proportion of African Americans and Hispanics, compared to whites lived in air nonattainment areas for particulate matter, carbon monoxide, ozone, sulfur dioxide, and lead” (D. Wernette and I. Nieves). “Health effects such as high asthma deaths, increased infant mortality, and high rates of all forms of cancer seem concentrated in these urban centers” (National Center for Health Statistics).

Just a simple internet search would provide us with umpteen data regarding the issues faced by people of colour and protestors worldwide calling for action. The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines Environmental Justice as:

“Environmental justice (EJ) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

But what about the non-humans, as Jeremy Bentham, rightly pointed out,

“The question is not, Can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But, can

they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?” (309).

In every single case when the ‘harmed community’ or the ‘marginalised ones’ is identified there is a tendency to bracket down within the spectrum of human beings, it is high time to shift to broader perspectives. Literature and visual media provide a shift in the ‘perspective’, especially through anthropomorphized animal characters they are trying to voice the voiceless. A number of daring attempts were made by documentary directors to spread light on the hellacious attitude and arrogance of the anthropocentric attitude towards non-humans, viz. *Earthlings* (2005), *Kangaroo: A Love-Hate Story* (2017). Animated movies through the portrayal of anthropomorphized characters entertain and educate a wide range of audiences and encourage them to think and empathise with the non-humans. Through animated movies like *Pocahontas* (1995), the viewers are taken into a completely new world where humans and animals cohabit peacefully. Pocahontas has a hummingbird and a raccoon, they are presented as her siblings, just like the vision of Chief Seattle, and the wise old willow tree spreads words of wisdom. The movie urges its viewers to live in harmony with natural resources instead of plundering them. Eduardo Kohn in his much-acclaimed work, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013), questioned the ubiquitous

“posthuman critiques of the ways in which we have treated humans as exceptional—and thus as fundamentally separate from the rest of the world—by developing a more robust analytic for understanding human relations to nonhuman beings”, and he called this approach as an “anthropology beyond the human” (7).

The select animated movies for the present study, *Back to the Outback* (2021), *Ferdinand* (2017), and *The Ant Bully* (2006), envisaged the idea put forth by Arne Naess through his pathbreaking article titled; ‘*The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects*,’ that is,

“The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes” (49).

Instead of a shallow approach, where the emphasis is upon resources for humans, he called for a 'deep approach,' where the concern is with resources and habitat for all life forms for their own sake. The select movies portray the paradigm shift that happened in the genre of animated movies. Animated movies starting with *Cinderella*, the genre tried to marginalize animal companions as mere supporters of the protagonist or the titular hero or heroine, but the genre introduced a shift from movies like *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942) onwards, where the story centers around the emotions or plainly from the point of view of non-humans.

Kenneth Shapiro's *Society and Animals* (1993), is considered to be one of the first journals dedicated to Animal Studies, and he elaborated on 'the main purpose' of the journal as: "is to foster within the social sciences, a substantive subfield, animal studies" (1). Animal Studies critically analysed the concepts of Anthropomorphism, Framing, Dehumanisation, and Language & Reason. According to Volpato and Luca Andrighetto, the dehumanised people are seen as: "irrational, immature, coarse, unlearned or lacking self-control" (31). When a human being is dehumanised he/she feels like they are treated badly and the same goes for an anthropomorphised being when it is dehumanised.

"OVER the last decade, ecocritics have insightfully addressed the representation of ecological issues in film and have also begun a vital environmentalist critique of the political economy of the audio-visual media by assessing the ecological effects of their production" (Ingram 459).

Among them, visual media, especially animated movies, tried to portray animal stories with a different perspective, where the animals have their own stories and viewers step into their shoes and empathise with them. Animated movies like *Ratatouille* (2007), *Madagascar* (2005), *Charlotte's Web* (1973), *Turbo* (2013), *Open Season* (2006), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *Epic* (2013), *Khumba* (2013), *The Good Dinosaur* (2015), has aided to widen the audience's perspective. *Turbo* (2013) narrates the story of a snail named Theo, who dreams to become the world's fastest snail and in *Khumba* (2013), there is a zebra named Khumba, who is half-striped and for the same reason ostracized from his community. *The Good Dinosaur* (2015) even goes further by portraying the dinosaur

with ‘the so-called human attributes’ and the human child in the movie as a ‘dog’, the director of the movie, Peter Sohn himself stated: “It’s the story of a boy and his dog—only in our story, the boy is a dinosaur and the dog is a boy” (“The Good Dinosaur”) thus the movie brilliantly questioned the ubiquitous human, non-human binary.

Chaz Hunt and Chazzie (*Back to the Outback*), Juan, Nina and El Primero (*Ferdinand*), Lucas Nickle and Stan Beals, The Exterminator (*The Ant Bully*) are the human counterparts in the selected movies. Chaz Hunt, El Primero, and Beals represent the anthropocentric masculine/representatives of ‘shallow ecology’; whereas Chazzie, Juan, Nina, and Lucas represent the objectives of ‘deep ecology.’ This distinction can be seen in the case of animal counterparts in the movies too, say for example, in *Back to the Outback*, Pretty Boy, the koala, simply copies the shallow ecologists.

By imprinting a ‘disanthropocentric gaze’ the paper tries to bring the attention of fellow readers to what Elena Past put forth in her *Italian Ecocinema : Beyond the Human* (2019),

“Such attention to the vast nonhuman ‘periphery’ of human experience can help us to reconsider human responsibility – and perhaps even rewrite our human narrative – in the Anthropocene world that we are precipitously reshaping” (15).

First, the study will look at *Back to the Outback* (2021), the animated movie is all about a group of Australia’s deadliest creatures who plots a daring escape from the zoo to the Outback. Australia is noted for its unique fauna, they have a wide variety of deadly spiders, kangaroos, and cute koalas in the beautiful land. Most of the outsiders are worried about the so-called ‘deadliest creatures’ in Australia, they ask: “But how did you deal with all the spiders and snakes? And the truth is, most people don’t come across any” (Williams). One need to think twice before naming something as ‘weird’ or ‘deadliest’. The role played by language in ecological issues and environmental problems is really important. Linguists like Matthias Jung uses text corpora from newspapers and investigated changes over time in environmental vocabulary. As Goatly (Following J.R. Martin) rightly pointed out, the ‘nominalizations’ used in environmental texts put less emphasis on the affected beings and he

cites some examples: *a slaughtering operation, killing methods, killing techniques, a humane death*. These compound nouns may ‘reduce and downgrade the affected to modifier status, for example: *‘the seal hunt, the whitecoat harvest.’* (Goatly 555). One should give more importance to such language problems too. Arran Stibbe in his “*Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories we Live By*” delve deep into such language issues and suggests nine forms of story, the eighth one ‘Erasure’ is really important where Stibbe talks in detail about the patterns of language which fail to represent a particular area or which distort it.



Fig 1 & 2: Representation of Cuteness: Children crowd to take pictures of the 'cute' koala Pretty Boy, and a boy holding a 'cute' kangaroo and posing for a photograph. (Source: Back to the Outback).



Fig 3, 4 & 5: Representation of Horror: Horrific representation of the 'deadliest creatures.' (Source: Back to the Outback).

The movie has strong similarities with *Madagascar* (2005), both narrate the story of captive animals, and the central protagonists' ultimate desire to get back to their natural habitat, or simply a world without chains. Both Marty (a zebra in *Madagascar*) and Maddie (a venomous inland taipan in *Back to the Outback*) slip into their beautiful reverie staring at the mural hung in the center of their cage. The mural represents their hunger for freedom. When the visitors share a loving gaze at the cute bilbies, koalas, and squirrels, they spare a hatred 'look' at the so-called 'deadliest reptiles.' Jackie, the saltwater crocodile, Frank, a funnel-web spider, Zoe, a thorny devil, and Nigel, a marbled scorpion are portrayed as pacifists throughout the movie. Thus, the movie tries to assert the fact that it does not matter what you look like on the outside. It is what is on the inside that counts. Stacy Alaimo, too ventured into the less discussed area of 'representation of nature' in movies, she opined that: "representations have material consequences" (279) and add, how "monster movies vilify nature, justifying the slaughter of creatures we construct as repulsive" (280), through *Back to the Outback*, Clare Knight and Harry Cripps revamped the notion of 'deadliest creatures,' and the movie gives an answer to what McFarland argued worriedly about the representation of non-humans in movies, she asserts: "have real consequences for the actual living being and breathing beings" (90).



Fig 6: Maddie, the inland taipan gazing at the mural. (Source: Back to the Outback).

The second movie, *Ferdinand* (2017), takes its viewers to the harsh realities and the uncouth attitude towards the bulls in Spanish bullrings. "Over the centuries, bullfighters have found countless ways to rig the

“fight” in their favor. Bulls have been weakened with drugs or by having sandbags dropped on their backs. Their horns have been shaved to keep them off-balance, or petroleum jelly has been rubbed into their eyes to impair their vision” (PETA). The movie daringly opens up the hellacious attitude of the matador (bullfighter) through the character El Primero; he is psychotic and merciless. At the same time, Ferdinand the bull is a pacifist who loves flowers. He respects the natural resources around him and sinks into melancholy if someone crushes any flowers; again, one can compare El Primero as a shallow ecologist and Ferdinand as a deep ecologist. The movie is notable in many senses because it is one of the rare stories where the bull is left unhurt after the fight.

Arran Stibbe in his *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by*, discusses in the chapter titled *Erasure*, how advertisements use external discourses or simply ‘mask,’ ”where animals and plants have been erased and replaced with a distorted version of themselves (the stock of biological resources)” (152) he adds that “the ‘speaking animal’ here is a ‘mask’ – a distorted version that erases the reality of the animals themselves and the conditions that they are kept in” (153). Movies like *Ferdinand* unwrap such “masks” and portray the real life of a bull, after the bullfight they are taken to a slaughterhouse and not to a rehabilitation centre.



Fig 7 & 8: The Masked Ones: Anchor Butter Ad and Britannia Winking Cow Ad. (Source: Anchor Butter Ad/YouTube, Britannia Winking Cow Ad/YouTube).



Fig 9 & 10: HP Sauce Ad and The Lactaid Milk Ad.
(Source: HP Sauce Ad/ YouTube, The Lactaid Ad/
YouTube).



The movie *Ferdinand* gained worldwide attention, even PETA Kids promoted the movie through its page by announcing:

“The story has a kind animal rights message. And we love that it’s an animated movie, meaning that no real animals were used. Sometimes, animals are mistreated on set or abused during “training” so that they’ll act the way the moviemakers want them to. Off set, they typically live in awful conditions. Movies like Disney’s 2016 film *The Jungle Book*—which used computer-generated imagery—prove that you can make an awesome movie about animals without hurting them!” (Why We Can’t Wait To See The Movie ‘*Ferdinand*’).



Fig 11 & 12: Built to Fight, Born to Love: Ferdinand in a flowery meadow with his family, El Primero leaving the bull unhurt. (Source: Blue Sky Studios/ Ferdinand).

The Ant Bully (2006), set in suburban Las Vegas, follows the story of Lucas Nickle, a ten-year-old, destructive boy. Everyone bullied him so he sublimated his anger and found peace by destroying ant hills. Zoc, an ant, uses a magic potion and shrinks him down; once he is shrunk, he understands that like him, the ants too are outcasts; they have to suffer a lot and are under surveillance of tarantula hawks and are under constant fear of the appearance of an exterminator named Stan Beals. Ants are crushed to death by human beings without caring about their important role in their ecosystem. “Ants are ecosystem engineers, which means that they create and modify their habitats... They also aerate the

soil- essentials for soil health and crop production through this process. Ants likely turn more soil than earthworms. In addition, they participate in decomposition and disperse the seeds of plants. Many species of plants rely entirely on ants to disperse their seeds. Without ants, the world would not be a perfect place to live” (Das). The ant queen during the trial addresses Lucas as an “unusual guest, a human who threatens the very



Fig 13 & 14: When the Shallow Ecologist meets the Deep Ecologists: Lucas’ first encounter with the ants and Lucas sublimates his anger by destroying the anthill. (Source: The Ant Bully).



Fig 15 & 16: Lucas in the Ant court and Stan Beals, the exterminator. (Source: The Ant Bully)

existence of our colony”(0:14-0:19) and he replies arrogantly: - “Wait a second. How am I supposed to know ants had feelings, family, they are just a bunch of stupid ants!” (0:20-0:29) Zoc, shocked by the reply, retorts back:- “We are not mindless savages” (like humans) (0:35-0:38).

“Animals in most human societies are virtually powerless; we can do as we please with them – exploit, enslave, murder or vivisection to improve *our* lot in life. And, like Achebe’s District Commissioner in *Things Fall Apart*, we can also represent animals as self-servingly as we please, in ways that rationalise or justify their continued subjection” (Huggan and Tiffin 169). But in *The Ant Bully*, Hova (an ant) advises Lucas “to discover the ant within,” (1: 21) the words were powerful and filled with an array of meanings. The ants turn Lucas into a deep ecologist from a shallow ecologist, by the proclamation: - “We could change the nature of this human and perhaps create a brighter future for all ants. I, therefore, sentence this human to live and work in the colony” (1:03-1:59). The movie thus urges its audience to rethink their attitude towards the non-humans and even to the microorganisms which we consider as menial ones.

The realization that the human animal is one of many life forms engaged in the interwoven (indeed, co-creating) processes of nature and culture (or naturecultures) is the first step toward a posthumanist multiculturalism, an ecocultural materialist practice—toward concepts of subjectivity and knowledge, and knowledge itself, transformed by interconnected social and ecological worlds. It is a step toward a political sensibility in cultural theory and analysis attuned to anthropodenial as well as anthropomorphism, one willing to explore the messiness of

needs and our responsibilities to similarity and to difference. (Feder 235)

All in all, the select animated movies, spread light on the less-discussed area of posthumanism and animal studies, mainly focusing on the issue of ‘habitat.’ Through the select animated movies, the study analysed the performative shifts and the “deanthropocentred” notions, which are the underlying meanings imprinted in the movies. In an increasingly urbanising world, it is hard for non-humans to co-exist with the emerging concrete jungle! Raccoons, monkeys, and elephants visiting the city are harmed and sometimes even battered down by the ‘supreme human beings. Thus co-existence is the only apt solution for this, like Arne Naess rightly purported, the deep ecological movement tries to clarify the fundamental presuppositions underlying our economic approach regarding value priorities, philosophy, and religion, and attempts to question homocentrism.

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reshmapk8@gmail.com, nithin.lal93@gmail.com