A Study on the Anthropocentric Impact on Wildlife Habitat in Jeyamohan’s Forest (Kaadu)

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study how the wild animals are malevolently trapped by human beings, whose thinking is ideated by anthropocentric notions in order to have a complete control over Nature and all other organisms in forest. Anthropocentrism, in the words of Lawrence Buell, is nothing but the assumption or view that the interest of humans are of high priority than those of nonhumans. A forest is regarded as a place where innumerable organisms and species live harmoniously with each other and with their physical environment. But human beings’ indomitable conquering nature has not left any organism to enjoy its space even inside the forest. This anthropocentric attitude of human beings cause disturbance and danger to wild life forms and the human interference in animal’s territory involuntarily push them away from their habitat and pose survival agony. The threats caused to the animals affect not only its behavioral pattern but also the freedom of movement from one place to another place. As a consequence, the essential components of animal like source of food, shelter, space, and water are obstructed from their access. Jeyamohan’s novel Forest (2003) presents how wild animals, especially like Mila, a variety of deer family, and elephant, are on the verge of extinction due to various threats caused to them by other wild animals and anthropocentric-minded human beings. This paper examines the impact on the habitat of certain wild animals, particularly Mila and elephant as projected in Jayamohan’s Forest owing to the strong anthropocentric perspective and the bitter consequences.

Forest is the home for non human beings-tiny birds to mammoth animals, small plants to huge trees, and many other organisms. All of these beings co-exist in the forest sharing the place and space, food source, and of course the whole life. Therefore interdependence is the pattern of life. In this context, human, seen and felt as alien species by wild life forms, is the truest enemy. The invasion into forest and animal’s territory for various gains paves way to disharmony between animals and human beings, which in turn leads to various issues like habitat destruction, diversity of organisms, and loss of species. Jeyamohan’s Forest, the English translation of Kaadu, grapples with an enthralling experience of immensity of forest-based life forms, its habitat, and the threats caused to them by the anthropocentric-minded human beings. Forest is the only place where innumerable organisms and species find their food and shelter for survival. But Man’s avarice has not left any place untouched in this Earth. The surrender of
commonsensical and ecological attitude against the understanding of intrinsic value of life forms in the planet Earth pose great danger to different life forms is undeniable. The novel, *Forest*, at one level describes how the young chap Giridharan, the protagonist, enters the forest to support his uncle’s culvert contract works and eventually falls in love with the forest girl named Neeli. Approaching this novel from a regional perspective directs one to explore the manner, dress, dialect, cultural pattern, and traditional beliefs of people living in the forest region Nedumangadu, the setting of the novel. At another level, Jeyamohan presents the various forest-based life forms, their habitat, and the threats they face. This novel also focuses the intimate descriptions of people’s conversations about their mythical and cultural beliefs, their pattern of life, and predominantly the human interference with Nature. Jeyamohan explicates the atrocious nature of human beings in the light of developmental tasks carried out in forest regions. Among that, poaching of animals is one of the many commonly known destructive activities of human beings that cause threat to wild animals. The novel is self evident for human-animal interaction, consequent threats and challenges faced by the wild. Hence this paper examines how the very anthropocentric attitude of human beings and their interference raises a direct challenge against the habitat of wild animals.

To begin with, it is necessary to understand what a habitat is all about. Since different writers define the term habitat in different words, the researcher considers two most-cited definitions. According to Michael Allaby, the term habitat is defined as “the living place of an organism or community, characterized by its physical or biotic properties” (181), whereas for Odum and Barrett “The habitat of an organism is the place where it lives, or the place where one would go to find it” (311). So habitat is a place where an organism lives defined by its physical and biotic components as well as the place where it goes in search of it. Habitat study is helpful in understanding different life forms in any given area, impact of human actions on life forms, and how different animals and plants acclimatize to changes in their habitat. Having elucidated the term habitat, the four striking components of wild life are as follows: Shelter, water, food and space. But many a time, these essential components are absent or being vandalized by anthropocentric-minded human beings. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines the word Anthropocentric as “believing that humans are important than anything else” (55). This paper attempts to study the various threats faced by wildlife habitat owing to the anthropocentric perspective of man.

Through this novel *Forest*, Jeyamohan has problematized the habitat of various species, especially Mila, a deer variety, and Elephant. Entering the Forest as a young boy to find out his livelihood through his uncle’s culvert contract works, Giridharan passionately encounters an extensive variety of life forms like medicinal plants, flowering trees, fruit trees; and wild animal like forest dogs, tigers, deer and monkeys. His excitement knew no limit whenever he watched the movement of animals at the close quarters. His keen observation on the lushness of the forest is evident in these lines:

I began noticing signs of life everywhere in the forest. Green chameleons; small frogs; a thin green snake that looked like a length of brittle green glass; tree lizard with stripes on their backs….. Tiny sparrow sat on the dung piles trying to peck sustenance out of them. A gooseberry tree stood nearby, its branches completely leafless but covered by thousands of tiny green berries. (41)

Mila, a large wild species of deer, is the first of Giridharan’s notice among the array of wild animals in the forest as he acknowledges “In
fact a mila had been the first wild creature I had encountered upon entering the forest” (11). It is from this point his interest of watching the wild animals grew strongly and steadily. He meticulously observes the every possible movement of Mila’s in the forest to establish genuine rapport out of sheer curiosity. For any living creature water and food source are vital for their survival. Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in environmental criticism states that “Without water, no life” (243). Whereas the water source on most occasions gets defiled, also insufficient, due to natural and unnatural influences, and such miserable circumstances enable the deer to drink only “the surface of the water in the pond shifted, sending the underlying moss and weeds upwards” (11). Such unhealthy terrain not just affects the Mila’s hygiene but its habitat too.

Though human beings are naturally anthropocentric in attitude, innocent Giridharan tries to establish “a subtle relationship” (63) with Mila, unaware of human beings’ indirectly imposed threat on wild animals. However his kindness is witnessed on many occasions, at one instance he disgustedly stones at the Mila while it was quenching its ragging thirst from the near-by channel, where the protagonist had an evening walk near the culvert. His grace of power and domineering nature over the animal is well-evident from these lines: “I walked by the old culvert and saw the mila drinking water from the channel. A burning resentment filled me and I threw a stone at the animal, shouting for it to go… It looked once more at me and bent again to drink water. Go! I yelled at it once more and threw another stone at it”. (122)

This typical anthropocentric gesture of human beings directly and indirectly causes threat to the wild animal and their habitat in many contexts. Even one of the most noted writers of twentieth century D.H. Lawrence, in his poem Snake, regrets for his anthropocentric instinct dictated by educational implication when he meets a black venomous snake near a water trough “And voices in me said, If you were a man/ You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off” (85). This violent gesture against the animals apparently shows ‘our’ height of eccentric demeanor. Such is the way that most human beings are conditioned from the early years under the influence of anthropocentrically designed texts, behavior, and notions.

For an animal in the wild, the very sight of Homo sapiens is equated with the sense of fear as most of its source of food and shelter being vandalized by them. Greg Garrard agrees this proposition in his book Ecocriticism as “The ultimate concern about species is that they may become extinct due to human activities” (176). To keep themselves safe from such human interferences, wild animals fix a specified time for partially-satisfying its essential needs like food source. Giridharan acknowledges his subjective experience as “mila come to drink water near the culvert every evening at five. Perhaps the reason it came then was because no one was there at the site at the time” (64). Also another interesting fact is that these wild animals unlike human beings do not change their habit often “They are creatures of habit, can’t think of breaking a habit” (345); it goes to take water and grazing only in the place where it is used to, considering the threats its face from other species. Canadian Writer Yann Martel in his booker-winning novel Life of Pi has seconded the same idea of ‘animal habit’ as “The smallest change can upset them. They want things to be just so the same day after day, month after month” (16). Change of habitat causes Milas to fall into the traps created by the intruders and other wild animals, even. So considering the actuality discussed so far, it become palpable that constant barrage of external threat is high everywhere. In another instance, Giridharan cycles to the chief engineer’s house for submitting the accounts, where he is deadly
shocked at the sight of a deer’s corpse being hung on the branches of a tree: “Outside the courtyard, was a large tree from a branch of which hung the corpse of a spotted deer. A short, dark man flying it with such forces that with each of his knife’s strokes the body of the deer shuddered” (304). Poaching of the wild animals despite crossing the limits laid down by the Wildlife Protection Act not just causes a loss of species but spoils the diversity of non domesticated animals. The freedom of animals lies nowhere but in the attitude of the supreme beings (here, human) gifted with sixth sense.

Another dimension of threat is inflicted by predators like tigers, cheetah and kurukkan, a wild dog. Kuttappan, a wonderful cook who regularly prepares scrumptious gravy made from animals like treed dogs; wild fowls; or small reptiles (17), shares his first hand experience about bloody Kurukkan as: “Of course! God created Kurukkan to eat the mila. It will not let go of even the hooves. Every part of mila is eaten clean. Cursed animals!” (39). The description clearly explicates the threat faced by the mila from its predator kurukkan in forest. Alongside, the insensitive attitude of exorcist whose thinking is purely irrelevant and pseudo scientific, causes severe damage to innocent wild life forms at a massive rate. Jeyamohan literally describes the act of killing as ‘sacrifice’ from a regional context: “A hundred and eight animals and birds and seven humans were then sacrificed to propitiate the Neeli, who was then installed by the force of mantras into a large brass nail” (61). This shows that how animal sacrifice is strongly believed to be the rightful way to attain the salvation by the natives. A clear lack of ecological sense influenced by illiteracy and irrational mythical belief are also reasons for such threat on species.

It has to be noted that when the serious minded environmentalists, activists and research scholars raise their voice against such atrocities in forests, their voice is considered to be “absurd”, until it creates some serious and direct impact on the daily life. Also, the voices addressed for the struggles of these voiceless creatures are mostly considered to be unattractive in the political agendas and meetings conducted by officials as it does not fetch any monetary benefit to them.

Construction works carried out in forest like building of roads, culverts, government offices are another indirect way through which human beings could pose danger to a habitat. As the canal water is considered to be one among the essentials for wild animal’s survival, the same is being utilized for construction works and left to animals, which rely only on canal waters, with dusts and debris. Consequently, this affects the birds and animal health and their habitat. When Giridharam revisits the forest where he spent his early days, he observes: “The canal was a thin stream and chocked with piles and of garbage; the embankment was cracked in many places. On both sides of the canal rose the concrete dwellings painted with yellow distemper and with TV antennas crowding the terraces. On the antenna sat crows, but no other bird was visible” (Jeyamohan Forest 19). Driven by the idea of ‘growth’, such malevolent encroachment in forests push the animals and birds from their habitat, and sometimes it leads to the entire destruction of a various organisms, their habitats, natural resources and what not. Here an anthropocentrist may argue that the amount of loss is less since the growth and development is not intended for a mass destruction. Garrard counters this argument as “The death of an individual is also death of its kind”. (177)

Human mind is dominated by self centric attitude since those thoughts are instilled or conditioned by previously conditioned human minds. Yann Martel bemoans at this predatory human attitude as “In a general way we mean how our species’ excessive predatoriness has made the entire planet our prey”. (29) The
developmental tasks at the cost of forest encroachment are taken lightly down the decades, without bothering the lives of animals, plants, and their habitat. Every act of a human being is a threat to animals. Without understanding this sine quo non in wildlife conservation, people enter the forests, parks, sanctuaries purely to seek pure entertainment. The fear of birds on the sight of human beings becomes clear “As the bird sighted me, it rose, surprising me with the length of its wing span. Then, the entire flock of birds rose and was gone”. (75)

The case is not just for the birds or milas, but even for the gigantic creature like an elephant, which is not left undisturbed. When an animal notices any human, first it raises its voice to ensure its safety. This is a very common behavioral pattern of an animal. This essential knowledge is not easy to catch for a non-environmentalist like Giridharan. The following quote demonstrates the reaction of an elephant on noticing the two human beings Neeli and Giridharan near the river bank: “Below us, downstream, Ripped Ears, the elephant stood in water, squirting trunk full back bone seemed prominent. When the wind shifted, he seemed to smell us and raise his head and made that muted trumpeting sound”. (257) Knowing the threat of its habitat, sometimes such circumstances compels the animals to leave the place immediately to safeguard it from other animals and humans.

It is known to everybody that the area of land covered with pastures serve as food source to many wild animals like deer, cow, elephants and many. But what happens sometimes is inadequate rainfall in forest region due to human induced deforestation leads to poor supply of water and food source. So the animal whose regular habit is disturbed, its habitat is destroyed, and ultimately its health condition gets deteriorated. Kuttappan talks about drought-hit situation, which once prevailed in the forest in the following lines: “We were going through a drought at the time. There was no grass to feed the hares and the deer, which had all left the area for the greener pastures. Without their usual prey the kurukkans were going hungry…only because they cannot find anything else to eat have they attacked a human”. (38) It becomes apparent that the human-induced deforestation causes threat gesture not just to wildlife habitats but at last it returns as a threat to oneself is the unpleasant fact. Perhaps this is the reason why many wild animals like elephant, crocodiles, snakes, and tigers come out of its habitat and attack the people, who reside near the forest region. The illegal poaching of most endangered species like elephants cause severe damage to its diversity. Rather than the natives, it is people who hunt animals for their entertainment, especially big shots, building developers, contract workers, and of course climatic changes are other reasons for the loss of species. But down the decades, elephants are massacred for two reasons. One, it is ruthlessly slaughtered for its ivory trade. Second, it is being killed by poachers in order to demonstrate their masculine power and showcase its head in the drawing hall to symbolically represent their valor in forest. In Forest, Engineer Menon felled the elephant (Ripped Ears) with a single bullet to flaunt his influential power over the wild animal so as to signify his heroism and the same has been greatly talked by the locals. The following lines from the novel clearly exemplify the locals’ conception of heroism: “It was Menon the engineer, who had shot Ripped Ears as he stood on the other side of the flooded river in the forest, having been separated from his herd. He had felled the elephant with a single shot to the forehead. There was much admiring talk about this feat among those who camped in the forest” (387). Similar attitude on celebration of heroism reflects in one of the classical works of Tamil literature Parani, categorized under Sittrilakkiyam. This magnum opus work by Jeyamkondar celebrates the bravery of chola king
Kulotunga who had slain the heads of thousand elephants in a war against Kalinga, the enemy kingdom, during the 11th century A.D. So the conceptualization of such cruel anthropocentric heroism is deep rooted in the historical narratives of Tamil literature. It is because such theorization of heroism in historical as well as literary texts, people continue to assume themselves as a dominant species. Hence such textual representations are also a reason for instilling anthropocentric attitude in a human mind.

In this line, the novel Forest clearly shows how certain wild animals and their habitats are under threat caused by various factors. American Physicist and Ecologist Barry Commoner puts it clear “Everything is connected to everything else- humans and other species are connected/dependent on a number of other species”(136). All life forms are in one way or the other dependent on other organisms; by the virtue of scientific bent, nowadays one is not dependent rather dominate. Well-informed human beings through their influential nature may create and even recreate everything but cannot restore peace alone. Gone are the days where the harmony between animals and human beings disjointed. Channels like National Geography and Animal Planet may evidentially prove human knowledge over animals but not at the will of animals. So to conclude, “Let animals live like animals; humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence” (Adiga, 276).

WORKS CITED

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