



‘Animals’ in the Novels by Yann Martel

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Abstract:

Yann Martel has four novels to his account *Self* (1996), *Life of Pi* (2001), *Beatrice and Virgil* (2010) and his latest work *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016). Since time unknown ‘animal’ characters have caught the imagination of creative writers. Be it oral epics, fables or the modern fictional narratives in recent times. Martel, our contemporary, surprisingly comes up with ‘animal’ characters in all his works. Our preoccupation with the things around us (WIGO) keeps our abstraction process mostly at verbal levels; GS tries to make us aware of silent levels. Experiencing of these silent levels could be done through keeping one’s senses open for events to happen but labeling of these events should be delayed as far as possible, because language is not well equipped to convey all. Animals abstract at lower level and thus are at these levels. This paper will also attempt to study how Martel incorporates extended scenes on how human could become aware of sensual levels.

Keywords: General Semantics, Anthropomorphic, sense, WIGO



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Let me begin this paper with the headlines which ‘Jallikatu’ has made in past few days. It’s an ancient bull game played during Pongal in south India. In which a bull is terrorized in the name of culture. On a demand of PETA (People for Authentic Treatment of Animals), Supreme Court had put a ban on it keeping with the animal right. But huge public demand along with the celebs like chess-master Anand, Rajnikant, A. R. Rehman and chief minister of Tamilnadu himself gave their opinions against this ban and in favor of public demand. They see this event as a cultural symbol and neglect the torture on animals. Similar kind of scene is depicted in *Self*, when the character of the novel witness’s *fiesta taurina*. As compared to the debate between culture and animal rights, Martel takes a clear and a strong stance against this festival by calling it ‘barbarity in village’. Anything against the rights of the other should not continue even if it might be age long tradition.

In *Self*, Martel also portrays the character of dog. Central character in *Self* attempts to write a novel, in which role of the narrator is given to a dog. She wanted to begin her novel as: ‘The bulk of the novel would be narrated by this dog. She would greet us (“Hello” would be the first word of my novel), would shit in the middle of the street (“ohjustonemorepeice! Ahhhhhhhhhh such rapture. Amen!”)’ (*Self* 174). Through such an opening by an animal character Martel draws our attention to the limitations of human communication. We are embarrassed to talk about matters like pleasure one gets while excreting. Like gratification of eating, excretion is also dealt with same naturalness. Due to multi tasked life style and over thinking human being is taking himself/herself away from these normal and natural experiences of life.



Life of Pi, the popular work by the writer, has an animal character of Richard Parker as central as Pi Patel. GS defines animals as space binders. And when we call them space binders, we very naturally will reject the idea of zoos, because as Martel says: ‘Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are “happy” because they are “free”’ (*Life of Pi* 15). We think that capturing of animals and putting them behind bars is a cruel in-human act. Martel gives a whole new idea by defining animals as ‘territorial’. He says that they are neither free in space nor in time. Animals are conservative and reactionary; even a small change in their routine can upset them. Martel gives interesting insights as:

An animal inhabits its space, whether in a zoo or in the wild, in the same way chess pieces move about a chessboard—significantly. There is no more happenstance, no more “freedom” involved in the whereabouts of a lizard or a bear or a deer than in the location of a knight on a chessboard. Both speak of pattern and purpose ...A biologically sound zoo enclosure –is just another territory territories in the wild are large not as a matter of taste but of necessity. In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small space what in the wild is spread out.... would be rather be put up at the Ritz with free room service and unlimited access to a doctor or be homeless without a soul to care for you? But animals are incapable of such discernment. Within the limits of their nature, they make do with what they have. (*Life of Pi* 18).

A zoo might also be looked through such perspective. After putting forward his ideas, Martel is not asserting his definition of animals being ‘territorial’ as a final statement. Further, he suggests that; ‘think about it yourself’ (*Life of Pi* 18). Korzybski states something similar in *Manhood of Humanity*: ‘If the humanity had only the capacity of ape, depending exclusively on wild fruits and the like, they would be confined to those comparatively small regions of globe where the climate and the fertility of soil are especially favorable’ (*Manhood of Humanity* 84). This awareness should be on the part a human, not to mix the capacities. Because of certain illusions zoos are not in good grace in eye of general public. So based on observations and experience individuals should have the freedom to revise their premise.

Martel also shows the negative side of humans by portraying them as sodomizing animals. Pi’s father kept a sign outside the zoo asking ‘DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain.... Behind it was a mirror’ (*Life of Pi* 31). Humans if they think of themselves as higher than animals, this hierarchy leads to the question of centre and margin. Martel calls this human behavior as ‘*Animalus*





Anthropomorphicus, animals as seen through human eye' (*Life of Pi* 31). Animals are labeled "friendly", "cute", "loving", "vicious", "bloodthirsty" etc thus we look at animals as we look at mirrors.

D.H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake' states, 'Voice of my education told me, that it must be killed'. Similar kind of 'education' is given to Pi and his brother Ravi by their father. He takes his sons to Mahisha's (their Bengal tiger) cage to teach them that tigers are 'very' dangerous. He kept the tiger hungry for three days to show his sons that how tigers behave in such a condition. He did this because, as he says to them: 'I want you to remember this lesson for the rest your lives' (*Life of Pi* 34).

What we call anthropomorphizing education is nothing but labeling animals according to our prejudiced idea of them. After showing them 'dangerousness' of a tiger, the lesson was not over, he one by one led them to series of animals telling stories of their viciousness. Even if the situation changes, we think of domination over them. But beyond this Martel gives another perspective of animals behaving differently from their so-called prey predator relationships. He gives couple of examples of vipers co-habiting with mouse, dogs with lions etc. This kind of animal behavior might seem strange because we have preconceived wrong notions about them which have led to labeling of some animals as friendly and others as vicious. Such wrong notions and labeling of animal might be the reason for enigma attached to them. Because they cannot speak for themselves, we take the liberty to make presumptions about them. This misuse of language needs to be avoided. Which is possible when we see animals as animals, just another creature like us. In similar vein, Martel in his 'Nashville Reads' talk comments that he looked at animals on their own terms not how they could serve him, not how their projections comforted him or scared him. In 'The Black Swan of Pain' a keynote address given by David B. Morris; he states:

The classical syllogism runs like this. All swans are white, X is a swan, therefore X is white. The nineteenth century discovery of an actual black swan, in Australia, stands for Taleb as the touchstone example of what he calls "the severe limitation of our learning from observations or experience. (Morris 40).

Similarly, if we label snakes as venomous, lions as killers, swans as white than our knowledge is limited to an extent. Taleb is not rejecting the existing knowledge, swans are white comes from the observation of majority of them being white but GS is skeptical even about the proven facts, rarity has to be respected and given space.



Pi spends 227 days in a life boat with a tiger, which according to his education was supposed to be an animal that kills. Pi applies every single technique which he had learned as a zoo keeper's son. For first few days he thinks of killing the beast but he lacked the strength of combat. Now that he cannot kill, he thinks of taming Richard Parker and applies various tactics. After few weeks comes the realization that 'It was not the question of him or me but him *and* me' (*Life of Pi* 164). Writer himself stresses here on 'and', GS also teaches one to go from either/or orientation to thinking in terms of co-existence. Our higher dimension does not give us the right to think of ourselves as superior. When we will start thinking in terms of co-existence instead of dominance there is a hope for saner a world.

The term 'being in present' is first used by Martel in *Life of Pi* while narrating the flying fish episode. Richard Parker was able to catch the flying fish swiftly with mighty and speed. But, what amazes Pi is Richard Parker's pure concentration and 'being in present', that he thought might be a subject of envy even to great 'yogis'. Martel in his Apple Salon interview replies in this context that, religious figures like Jesus or Buddha tell us to live in present. Do not be pre occupied with past or the future. So, when we read his gospels and see how when Jesus is talking to some leper or some elderly person, he is so engaged in them, totally engrossed in whatever is at present, animals too are live in present, 'right here right now'. May be animals don't have such higher capacity of abstraction but they do have memory. When you leave your home and come back at the end of the day your dog recognizes you, but it didn't spend whole day thinking about you, they have utilitarian memory. They have no capacity to entertain future. Thus, we majority are in between dogs and Gods i.e. animals and prophets.

This aspect of 'being in present' is further developed in *The High Mountains of Portugal*. The novel is divided into three chapters: *Homeless*, *Homeward* and *Home*. Last chapter has a character of chimpanzee named Odo. Peter Tovy, central character of this chapter, after the death of his wife losses interest in life. At his random visit to Institute for Primate Research he is mesmerized by Odo's eyes and comes to the decision of adopting him. Peter is disturbed by the condition they are kept in. Odo was caught from African Jungles and from then on went from one experimental unit to another. Martel questions this enigma on human part regarding animals, that how the same human curiosity becomes a torture for animals, he remarks on this as:

'Peter lingers on certain words "medical"... "biology"... "laboratory"... "research"--- and especially "experimental medicine and surgery." *Experimental?* Odo was



shunned from one medical Auschwitz to another, and this after being taken from his mother as a baby' (*The High Mountains of Portugal* 250).

Peter was surely 'amazed' and filled with 'wonderment' on living with a not so domestic animal. But what one does with this enigma is the matter of discussion. According to Martel: 'Does it bother him that the essentially unknowable? No it doesn't. There's reward in this mystery, an enduring amazement. Whether that's the ape's intent, that he be amazed, he doesn't know---can't know---but a reward is a reward. He accepts it with gratitude' (*The High Mountains of Portugal* 288).

At Institute for Primate Research, chimps were taught human language. This makes one question on the aspect of language, that when we call our language advanced to that of animal language is it really advanced. Main purpose of language is to communicate. Destructions occur due to our faltering in communication. We as humans have time-binding capacity and thus the capacity to advance in language aspects also. World wars happen because of our not being conscious of such capacities. Martel in one of his talks says that when one looks into the eyes of a chimpanzee it will be very troubling. There is some intelligence there which puts into question our own intelligence, why are we so much intelligent and have we done anything good with it. Apes will never destroy the planet as we do.

Martel is of opinions that, instead of making them learn our language we have something to learn from them. Peter contemplates on this human and Odo's animal status and states:

What strikes him isn't the blurring of boundary the animal and the human that this meeting implies. He long ago accepted that blurring. Nor is it slight limited movement *up* for Odo to his presumably superior status. That Odo learned to make porridge, that he enjoys going through a magazine, that he responds appropriately to something Peter says only confirms a well-known trope of the entertainment industry, that ape can ape---to our superficial amusement. No, what's come as a surprise is his movement *down* to Odi's so called lower status. Because that's what has happened. While Odo has mastered the simple human trick of making porridge, Peter has learned the difficult animal skill of doing nothing ...just to sit there and *be*. (*The High Mountains of Portugal* 300).

This idea of co-existence again appears in *The High Mountains of Portugal* when Peter is adopting Odo. Peter asks the trainer at the centre, Bob, on how to restrain such a big animal, to which Bob asks Peter: 'how did you restrain your wife' to which Peter says: 'I didn't'. And thus, Bob says: 'Right. You get along. And when you didn't, you argued and you coped. It's the same here. There's very little you can do control him. You will just have to cope.' (*The High Mountains of Portugal* 247). This reminds one of Dhruv Bhatt's *Akubar* in which it is shown that a lion will not harm you, even though being much stronger than a human, unless we disturb them. He will respect your space if you do the same.

It is very interesting to note that Martel chooses animal characters to accompany human character in their loneliness. One of the reasons behind this could be as Peter feels in the company of a chimpanzee that:

The members of his own species now bring on a feeling of weariness in him. They are too noisy, too arrogant...He much prefers the intense silence of Odo's presence, his pensive slowness in whatever he does ...Even if that means that Peter's humanity is thrown back in his face every time he is with Odo, the thoughtless haste of his own actions, the convoluted mess of his own means and aims (*The High Mountains of Portugal* 297).

Being in present, experiencing the moment at hand is not a simple exercise to practice. Because of our conditioned behavior we fall to anxieties of past and future. Peter also finds 'nothing to do' a difficult task. Peter, once a senate member had a life full of 'solid nouns', 'countless subordinate clauses', 'scores of adjectives', 'bold conjunctions', 'adverbs' and 'unexpected interludes' has now come to an end a 'a quite full stop'. Initially he frets about this change but after months of 'non-activity' he realizes its naturalness.

In *Beatrice and Virgil*, Martel uses animals allegorically to depict the horrors of holocaust. There are two major human characters one is an acclaimed writer and a taxidermist both named Henry. Taxidermist sends a short called *The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator* by Gustave Flaubert along with his own play containing the characters of a howler monkey and a donkey, to the writer. The short story by Flaubert narrates the tale of a prince who in his early life is obsessed with killing animals 'again and again he drew his cross bow, unsheathed his sword and thrust with his knife, thinking of nothing, remembering nothing' (*Beatrice and Virgil* 35). This obsession came to an end when a stag cursed him of killing his own parents. After this episode he forsakes 'hunting' and becomes a mercenary.



Even in his missionary days he was violent but this violence was within a moral framework. 'He liberated nations. He rescued queens held captive in towers' (*Beatrice and Virgil* 39). Thus, by the end of story sinner is saved because human violence is directed by a moral compass but the murder of the animals made no sense. 'It found no resolution, no reckoning, within the framework of the story.... the slaughter, a wished for extinction of animals, is a senseless orgy about witch Julian's savior has not a single word to say' (*Beatrice and Virgil* 41). Same is the case with world wars or any other human violence; we give such wars the labels of nationalism or terrorism and under such labels we try to make sense of violence. Violence on animals is also given labels of hunting. In animal world killing is killing, it's done for survival and self-defense. While human violence is senseless, that is often justified with un-reasonable labeling.

When asked by an interviewer on why did he choose a monkey 'Virgil' and a donkey 'Beatrice' for his novel, Martel replies that Beatrice the donkey is like Jews who are stubborn and have endured. Jews are also stubborn in the sense that they held on to their culture in spite discrimination. Monkeys are clever like Jews have been. In one way Martel is anthropomorphizing human characteristics on animals and fixing the labels of cleverness and stubbornness to monkeys and donkeys. Thus, an attempt to present the unspeakable horrors of holocaust with the enigma of animals.

We can conclude by saying that enigma of animals cannot be overcome by the labels of language. Let the mystery remain a mystery, only to be experienced rather than communicated. While describing the zoo at length, ultimately Pi states: 'The reward for the watching eye and the listening ear is great...It is something so bright, loud, weird and delicate as to stupefy the senses.... language founders in such seas better to picture it in your head if you want to feel it' (*Life of Pi* 15).

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