Romanticizing the right to exploit: Speciesism in Jack London’s *White Fang*

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Since time immemorial, man has adjudged himself to be the supreme master. He conceives himself to be the best of all creations. Great men like Aristotle have considered man as the Maker or Creator. Even Sidney recalls the Romans and the Greeks, who had named poets as *Vates* or foreseers or prophets. As man is supreme, he has considered it his moral, social, religious, political or ethical right to keep others under his subjection. With the progress of time, man has changed his definition of exploitation. He has learned to put on the garb of civilization and has invented magnificent myths as a justification of his exploitative tendencies. In short, man has romanticized his concepts to create the illusion of a utopia.

In the middle ages, feudalism was the law of the land. The upper nobility exercised control over the lower classes by propagating the romanticized notion of ‘divine right’, according to which the king was the appointed plenipotentiary of God. The peasants or the serfs blindly adhered to the established notion and surrendered themselves at the altar of the king. Religion played a significant part therefore and even more powerful than the king was the Church. The church was the epitome of power and became a tool to justify the exploitations on man.

…the Church was firmly entrenched in the spiritual and practical lives of the medieval peasant. The Church had a great influence over many of the common folk. The peasants believed that the harder they worked, the more they served the church, the better the after-life would be for them. The Church also paid the lord to use the land, and this sort of symbiosis between the Church and the lord kept the both with an exceptional amount of money, while the peasants sometimes starved to death from overwork and exploitation. (“The Feudal Structure of the Medieval World”, web)

Though the peasants suffered and the Church authorities were loaded with money, strategically the romanticized notion of good governance and the pretext of law and security was propagated.

When Capitalist economy spread throughout Europe and insatiable thirst for profit and value became the keyword of development and progress, Capitalism became another name for inhuman exploitation. In a Capitalist society there was no place for the weak and they were brutally marginalized.

Capitalism, the insatiable expansion of value, with an insatiable drive for profits had generated on a hitherto unprecedented scale, massive deforestation, the transformation of ecologies into monocrop plantations, the despoliation of nature in the quest for raw materials, the destruction of wild life, rampant industrialization and all this alongside the exploitation and even elimination of many indigenous peoples and their ecological worlds. (*Conservation and Society* 3.1 243)

Sometimes writers promote the idea of benign capitalism as a justification of Capitalism. Rohan D’ Souza in his “Benign Capitalism by another Name: Understanding Collapse” points out while reviewing Jared Diamond’s book *Collapse: How Societies choose to Fail and Survive* how a magnificent romantic Utopian vision of benign Capitalism is created.

… Simply put, he [Diamond] would prefer an ecologically sound oil rig, judicious mining practices, responsible business behaviour, a market that runs
on profit but remain sensitive to social thresholds and a society capable of correcting mistakes. In effect, a plea for benign dictatorship of capital … (Conservation and Society 3.1 243)

Diamond, D’ Souza charges, “invents picture of the past and refers to the collapse of the Harappan society, to ‘advocate a notion of benign Capitalism for the future.’”

In a similar vein, at different times and across all cultures, the power magnets have created and promoted an illusion of just society under various garbs such as Socialism to escalate Communist empire throughout eastern Europe, Caste System in India and presently, the theory of Corporate Globalization in the contemporary world. To magnify all, is the romantic myth of law, order and welfare state; in other words, the state-level terrorism, latently implicated through the state apparatuses like the police or military.

With the passage of time, as civilization has progressed, man has conceived himself to be the superpower and has extended his boundaries from the human to the animal world. As a justification of man’s exploitation of animals, he has created many romantic myths. One such romanticized exploitation in contemporary times towards animals is “Speciesism”; man’s control over animals as moral and ethical rights.

In this paper I have tried to chow how “speciesism” operates in Jack London’s novel *White Fang*. Interestingly, though London is here presenting the voice of the animals, the animal realization basically comes to us through the voice of Man, London himself. So virtually animals do not have a voice of their own and their voice and realization is controlled by the superior species, Man.

The English philosopher Dr Richard Ryder coined the term “Speciesism” in the 1970s and subsequently popularized by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Ryder used ‘speciesism’ to mean “the oppressive tendencies, the practice of treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species, also the belief that this practice is justified.” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online, web)

Ryder vehemently attacks such tendencies and views that such justification is irrelevant:

The word speciesism came to me while I was lying in a bath in Oxford some 35 years ago. It was like racism or sexism – a prejudice based upon morally irrelevant physical differences. Since Darwin we have known we are human animals related to all the other animals through evolution; how, then, can we justify our total oppression of all the other species? (Richard Ryder, “All beings that feel pain deserve human rights”[guardian.co.uk; The Guardian, Saturday Aug 6, 2005, Web; Aug 14 2012])

Man intrudes into the natural habitat of the ‘wild’ as we see in the beginning of *White Fang*. Two men, Bill and Henry, who are out for the Klondike gold rush, reach the ‘savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild’ (85). The clash between man and wild is aptly introduced by Jack London. Along with Bill and Henry and a sled of six dogs, there is a third man whose toil was over – a man who had been conquered by the Wild never to rise or move again. He was diminished to a lifeless block by the stranglers of life – the Wild:

… It is not the way of the Wild to like movement; and the Wild aims always to destroy movement. It freezes the water to prevent it running to the sea; it drives the sap out of the trees till they are frozen to their mighty hearts; and most ferociously and terribly of all does the Wild harry and crush into submission man – man, who is the most restless of life, ever in revolt against the dictum that all movement must in the end come to the cessation of movement. (86)

This is the law of the Wild in the eyes of Man. But Man, vibrant with the rhythm of life, intrudes into the life of the Wild. He is always in an unending quest, a ‘puny adventurer
bent on colossal adventure, pitting themselves against the might of a world as remote and alien and pulseless as the abysses of space.’ (86)

Wild is, as Man sees it. Wild is ‘silence’ pressing upon with ‘tangible presence’. The perception of man has changed from time to time and perception differs. While Rudyard Kipling sees a friendly association and bondage of love and compassion between man and beast, Jack London presents them in an eternal combat. No doubt, London sharply condemns the speciestic tendency of man, but he also nowhere disagrees man’s superiority.

With no man around, the Wild follows its own law of struggle and survival. It is the law of the Wild to kill and destroy for survival and sustenance. In *White Fang* we see this in the animal kingdom. The she wolf and her pack together hunt their food and interestingly when it comes to courting the female, there is a tension and a determination to outrun and defeat among the suitors:

> And all the while the she wolf sat on her haunches and smiled. She was made glad in vague ways by the battle, for this was the love making of the wild, the sex tragedy of the natural world that was tragedy only to those that died. To those that survived it was not tragedy, but realization and achievement. (115)

So the animals live, fight and breed their own way and human intrusion into their lives is not at all desirable. Dr Richard Ryder vehemently stands against the inhuman treatment of animals and considers it an irrational prejudice as any other. Jack London, before presenting man’s romanticizing and justification of the right to exploit, explores into the animal world to give a view of their pattern of life.

Tom Regan argues that ‘at least some animals are “subjects-of-a-life” with beliefs, desires, memories, and a sense of their own future, who must be treated as ends in themselves, not a means to an end’. (“Animal Rights”[en.wikipedia.org, Web; Oct 20 2012]). The she wolf therefore gives birth and protects her young one from all sorts of hazards and odds till human intervention occurs. Young White Fang enjoys the pleasures of the Wild and goes out on hunting expeditions when one day his first encounter with humans take place. Jack London very carefully enhances and establishes man’s superiority presenting him as a member of a superior species through the difference that White Fang realizes as he sees man:

> It was his first glimpse of mankind. But at the sight of him the five men did not spring to their feet, nor show their teeth, nor snarl. They did not move but sat there, silent and ominous.

> [...] A great awe descended upon him. He was beaten down to movelessness by an overwhelming sense of their own weakness and littleness. Here was mastery and power, something far and away beyond him. (148)

As already stated towards the beginning of the discussion, one of the romanticized declarations of man is that he is superior and therefore always morally and ethically right. This is the principal tenet of the concept called ‘Speciesism’ and this is observed in the man-animals of Jack London’s *White Fang*. Unwittingly and without any hindrance or obstruction, man proclaims master over other animals:

> His fangs be white and White Fang shall be his name. I have spoken. He is my dog. For was not Kiche my brother’s dog? And is not my brother dead? (151, emphasis mine)

Peter Singer in his book Animal Liberation states that ‘the basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical treatment, it requires equal consideration’. (“Why Animal rights?”[www.peta.org, Web; Oct 20 2012]) But man’s sense of superiority blinds him as he deems fit. The animals also fail to offer a resistance and London shows how White Fang accepts man’s dominion:
He could do nothing to defend himself. If this man-animal intended harm, White Fang knew he could not escape it. How could he spring away with his four legs in the air above him? (151)

Speciesism is therefore a concept devised by man to justify his exploitative tendencies. Just as benign Capitalism was promoted to justify Capitalism or the feudal system promoting the king as the divine representative of God, Speciesism emerged as an idealistic concept. Though Richard Ryder vehemently protested against man’s brutality and coined this term, it is after all a romantic theorization justifying man’s power over animals. The animal voice is once again rendered through the voice of man, the animal virtually remaining silent:

And though there was no reason in his brain for a clear conception of so abstract a thing as justice, nevertheless, in his own way, he felt the justice of man-animals, and he knew them for what they were – makers of law and executors of law. Also he appreciated the power with which they administered the law. Unlike any animals he had ever encountered, they did not bite nor claw. They enforced their live strength with the power of dead things. Dead things did their bidding. Thus, sticks and stones, directed by these strange creatures, leaped through the air like living things, inflicting grievous hurts upon the dogs. (152)

In the above lines it appears there is a kind of celebration of the strength and power of man. White Fang appreciates the power of man. He wonders at it and accepts the power with which they administered the law. True, the power of man cannot be denied, but the almighty status given to him by an animal is after all again the voice of man, the narrator, who cannot deny his superiority. Here is romanticism, where brutality and power is masked under the veneer of appreciation and awesomeness.

Man infringes upon the freedom not only of his fellow beings, but also the freedom of animals. After White Fang and his mother Kiche encounters man, they are instantly dominated and White Fang realizes that their freedom is curbed:

Freedom to roam and run and lie down at will had been his heritage; and here it was being infringed upon. His mother’s movements were restricted to the length of a stick, and by the length of that same stick was he restricted, for he had not yet got beyond the need of his mother’s side. (153)

It does not take long for Fang to realize that the man-animals before him are superior creatures and they are his ‘gods’.

They were superior creatures of a verity, gods. To his dim comprehension they were as much as wonder-workers as gods are to men. They were creatures of mastery, possessing all manners of unknown and impossible potencies, overlords of the alive and the not alive – making obey that which moved, imparting movement to that which did not move, and making life, sun-colored and biting life, to grow out of dead moss and wood. They were fire-makers! They were gods! (157)

Matthew Scully in “Dominion: the power of man, the suffering of animals, and the call to mercy” states that humans can be expected to be kind and just to animals in a society where there is no threat from them:

I can imagine that Singer would agree with me on a second-order point, which is that concern with the suffering and exploitation of animals can be expected to arise only in a fairly advanced and complex society where human beings are thoroughly in charge, and where they no longer fear daily challenges from other species. (The Atlantic 112)

But Scully cannot be wholly agreed. The basic principle of man is domination and this is evident in White Fang as well. Here we find the animals principally brought under
subjugation to serve the interest of man himself. They are uprooted from their wild habitat and brought to the service of man even without any kind of threat or ‘daily challenges from other species’.

Rather man encroaches upon the peaceful and wandering life of the wild and binds them to the rules and regulations devised by man:

In the Wild the time of a mother with her young is short; but under the dominion of man it is sometimes even shorter. Thus it was with White Fang. (162)

The man gods do not consider it an injustice to animals and very proudly and determinedly exhibit their power:

But gods are accustomed to being obeyed, and Gray Beaver wrathfully launched a canoe in pursuit…. Holding him [White Fang] suspended with one hand, with the other hand he proceeded to give him a beating. And it was a beating. His hand was heavy. Every blow was shrewd to hurt; and he delivered a multitude of blows. (162, emphasis original)

London shows that man gradually makes animals his pet; the animals accept man’s mastery. Gray Beaver thrashes White Fang, but also plays the role of protector as Beaver later negotiates in a fight between White Fang and another dog Lip- lip. As White Fang is Beaver’s dog, he smashes Lip- lip and London shows that White Fang looks upon it as an act of gratitude from his master. So inspite of being maltreated earlier, Fang decides to be subservient to his master.

Man wants to be obeyed and his power to be feared and respected:

Obedience, rigid, undeviating obedience was what was expected of him; and in return he escaped beatings and his existence was tolerated. (164)

Rudyard Kipling in his animal tales presents an association of love between man and animals as he shows “Mowgli, a boy raised by wolves, whose teachers were other wild animals that communicated their thought in articulate language”. (John Seelye “Introduction” to The Call of the Wild and White Fang ix)

Kipling presents an emotional bonding between man and animals ignoring the power hierarchy that characterizes their relation and existence. London however, does not take recourse to a fable and his story is far from being an animal tale. His work is an exhibition of man’s exploitation towards animals and a protest against such unethical attitude.

David Perkins in his critical essay “Human Mouseness: Burns and compassion for animals” has pointed out the change in attitude and outlook:

Since heartless treatment of animals had been immemorially part of English life, one may ask why protest became widespread and effective only toward the end of the eighteenth century…. The new sympathy for animals was part of a broad, civilizing, modernizing transition in eighteenth century life and thought. (Texas Studies in Literature and Language p1)

London’s animals are endowed with human- like qualities. The animals are capable of feeling pain, love care and are capable of feeling loneliness as well. So when White Fang manages to sneak out of Gray Beaver’s camp and escape to the Wild, the Wild is no longer appealing to him. In London’s other work The Call of the Wild, Buck returns to the Wild to lead a new and free life, but in White Fang loneliness soon presses upon White Fang. The air in the Wild does no longer give him the feeling of liberty; it becomes stifling to him. So he returns to man and his fire:

… White Fang lay at Gray Beaver’s feet gazing at the fire that warmed him, blinking and dozing, secure in the knowledge that the morrow would find him, not wandering forlorn through bleak forest- stretches, but in the camp of the
man-animals, with the gods to whom he had given himself and upon whom he was now dependent. (175)

One significant thing observed in man-animal relation based on brute strength is that the bond is not one of love, but of fear and instinct:

He had no affection for Gray Beaver. True, he was a god, but a most savage god. White Fang was glad to acknowledge his lordship, but it was a lordship based upon superior intelligence and brute strength. There was something in the fiber of White Fang’s being that made this lordship a thing to be desired, else he would not have come back from the Wild when he did to tender his allegiance. (180)

When an animal comes under the tutelage of man, the right to exploit and dominate belongs to the man who owns it and it is a privilege denied to others. So White Fang realizes the human rules and understands that as Gray Beaver is his master, he is subservient to Beaver alone and not to other gods.

It is the instinct of animals to remain faithful to their masters and sacrifice their lives rather than betray. Jealousy and betrayal are things reserved for gentler climes, the superior species Man, but sentient beings never betray their gods. White Fang is also no exception. In order to protect his master’s property, he sacrifices his own liberty. He stops meddling with the other dogs and he was encouraged in his task of guarding his master’s property by Gray Beaver. ‘One result of this was to make White Fang more ferocious and indomitable, and more solitary’. (183):

For the possession of a flesh-and-blood god, he exchanged his own liberty….
In return he guarded the god’s property, defended his body, worked for him, and obeyed him. (183)

The nature of exploitation varies from man to man and London shows that though Gray Beaver was not an adorable and caring master, even worse awaited for White Fang:

It was at Fort Yokun that White Fang saw his first white man. As compared with the Indians he had known, they were to him another race of beings, a race of superior gods. They impressed him as possessing superior power, and it is on power that godhead rests. (196-197)

Very soon White Fang is brought under the tutelage of the ‘mad god’ Beauty Smith, one of the white men lures Gray Beaver and tactfully takes possession of White Fang but treachery is not a thing that animals understand so White Fang believes he still belongs to Gray Beaver:

… he turned and trotted back to beaver’s camp. He owed no allegiance to this strange and terrible god. He had given himself to Gray Beaver and to Gray Beaver he still belonged.

But once sold, the man owes no allegiance to White Fang, and so, for the trust and faith in Gray Beaver, Fang receives brutal punishment. Man is principle and man is justice. This is Speciescism – pain and agony, man believes, is only to be felt by man alone, and not animals. Peter Singer though vehemently opposes this notion and firmly asserts that both man and animals are capable of feeling pain and therefore have an interest in avoiding it.

Ultimately, White fang realizes that there is no reservation for his whims and desires and that he must surrender himself to the new merciless and mad master.

The extremity of brutality occurs as Beauty Smith starts earning upon the anger of White Fang. ‘He was kept chained in a pen at the rear of the fort, and here Beauty Smith teased and irritated and drove him wild with petty torments’. (209) Every now and then a ferocious and mad dog was flung at him and Smith delighted and earned as a brutal fight ensued between the other dog and White Fang. This torture made White Fang even more
ferocious than ever and this continued till two gentlemen, Matt and Scott, arrived at the scene.

Jack London never just presents the seamy side and just as in The Call of the Wild a kind man John Thornton comes to relief Buck of his tortures, similarly, here comes Weedon Scott and Matt. They take upon Beauty Smith compels him to hand over and sell White Fang to them. Thereby begins the first effort to tame a wild wolf with love and care. Earlier, even for the slightest mistakes, White Fang received thrashings and beatings from the masters, but now he was under the tutelage of his ‘love master’:

He had learned control and poise, and he knew the law. He achieved a staidness and calmness, and philosophic tolerance. He no longer lived in a hostile environment. Danger and hurt and death did not lurk everywhere about him. In time, the unknown, as a thing of terror and menace ever impending, faded away. Life was soft and easy. It flowed along smoothly and neither fear nor foe lurked by the way. (263)

So ultimately Fang becomes part of the Scott household and though initially Scott’s father, the retired judge, was of the opinion that a wild wolf can never be tamed and that in time White Fang may prove dangerous, Fang in the end becomes the celebrated ‘Blessed Wolf’ as he saves the judge’s life by killing the escaped convict who had come to take revenge on the judge.

In The Call of the Wild, Buck responds to the ‘call’ of the wild, but here White Fang is happy to be under the subjection of man and quite gladly accepts man subservience. The Call of the Kind is ultimately the call of the kind ‘god’ and Jack London has consciously or unconsciously asserted that man is a ‘god’, whether kind or unkind. Though man’s speciestic tendency is vehemently criticized throughout the text, in the end though Fang ids well-treated and tended with love and care, we can not deny that Speciesism operates here as well, because the Wild is uprooted from its own habitat and its own surrounding and made to subscribe to the will of man-god. Just as throughout the ages, man has man has in various pretexts justified his power exhibition, this taming of the wild is also a version of the same culture.

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